

Chapter 2 – RESULTS OF SUBJECT-MATTER EXPERT FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS

by

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2.1 BACKGROUND

As part of its regular meetings in October 2008 and June 2009, the NATO HFM-163 RTG team organised two focus group discussions with Subject-Matter Experts (SMEs) from the NATO School in Oberammergau, Germany, and from the NATO Allied Command Transformation (ACT) in Norfolk, Virginia, USA, respectfully.

The goal of these group discussions with the SMEs was three-fold:

- 1) To help define the term “organisational effectiveness” of NATO coalition operations;
- 2) To identify barriers to organisational effectiveness within NATO HQs at the operational level; and
- 3) To offer some suggestions for improving organisational effectiveness within multi-national NATO HQs.

2.2 METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The primary leading criteria for the selection of the SMEs to participate in the focus group discussions were:

- 1) Commissioned officers from diverse national background; and
- 2) Officers with extensive experience in multi-national NATO operations.

The SME group that participated at the NATO School in Oberammergau was comprised of commissioned officers from the Netherlands, Spain, UK, and the U.S. who had experience in Provincial Reconstruction Teams in Afghanistan as well as from Joint Forces Command Brunssum, Netherlands, responsible for International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) missions. The group discussion carried out at the NATO ACT was comprised of commissioned officers from the Netherlands, Italy, Spain, UK, and the U.S. (OF-3 to OF-4) who were selected because they all had operational experience with Iraq and Afghanistan missions.

During the group discussions, the SMEs responded to a set of pre-defined questions about their experiences. The questions and the information collected during these interviews were captured and summarized in the meeting minutes and are presented in Annex A and Annex B.

2.3 RESEARCH FINDINGS FROM NATO HFM-163 SME INTERVIEWS

It should be noted that, in the beginning of the discussions, the SMEs did not distinguish clearly between the broader term “operational effectiveness”, which represents factors external to an organisation, and the term “organisational effectiveness”, which targets internal capabilities of an organisation. As a result, they focused much of their attention on external preconditions for successful cooperation, namely political-military decision making regarding planning and participation in NATO coalition operations that covers operational effectiveness. However, as the interviews progressed, the “confusion” between

operational effectiveness and organisational effectiveness was rectified and the SMEs were able to concur on the characteristics of organisational effectiveness, which will be discussed later.

2.3.1 SMEs' Evaluations Regarding the Factors that Influence Organisational Effectiveness of Coalition Operations

The evaluations of the SMEs regarding the factors influencing organisational effectiveness of coalition operations that act as barriers for successful cooperation were organised within four groups. The first group contains factors, related to *political-military decision making* regarding participation in NATO coalition operations. Among the most frequently mentioned problems are “unclear and unstable goals, changing tasks and lack of common understanding of goals and mission end state” among coalition partners. Additionally, the SMEs’ indicated that a “lack of a comprehensive approach to doctrines and concepts” is a major problem concerning organisational effectiveness of coalition operations. Next, the SMEs noted that “different national and NATO education and training systems, along with differing levels of experience in multi-national operations” hinder organisational effectiveness. The SMEs agreed that “there is still a lack of NATO pre-deployment training”. Moreover, a traditional barrier to organisational effectiveness of coalition operations is the capabilities and technological gaps as well as “lack of adequate resources allocated to implement the mission” among the coalition partners. Among many other important challenges the “lack of technological interoperability” in national systems hampers information sharing and creates difficulties for cooperation among the different troop-contributing Nations in the coalition. Last in this group, the SMEs consider “nation-centric politics, related to imposing restrictive caveats to employ the troops during the operation” as a major negative influence on coalition operation’s effectiveness. The problem is that “the troops are forced to work around these political barriers, which at times increases the immediate risk to the people on the ground and undermines the trust among coalition partners”.

The second group of factors is related to *process management* in the organisation, with emphasis on NATO HQ. Among the most frequently discussed factors were “different rotation timeframes among national positions in the HQ and the lack of synchronisation of national rotations”. In this regard, the SMEs concur that “different rotation cycles hurt organisational effectiveness” because it creates difficulties in the adaptation among the national representatives and development of social networks. In addition, some of the SMEs identified “rapid turnover of leadership and personnel” as a hindrance to the learning process. Some of the SMEs consider “the tour length too short (typically 4 – 6 months)” noting that “learning and the development of social networks take a long time to develop and by the time these things are established the coalition partners are getting ready to come home”. Conversely, some of the SMEs mentioned that “most of Nations prefer comparatively short periods of rotation because the high intensity of the operations contributes to high stress levels for the military personnel”. Obviously, this is a problem which deserves particular attention and additional study. Another important barrier to organisational effectiveness according to the SMEs is the “lack of organisational knowledge because lessons learned are not systematically passed on”. This is related to the organisation of the process of the handing-over of positions in the HQ and the willingness of the representatives from different Nations to share information with their successors. From a national point of view the SMEs consider this to be problematic that “there is no debriefing for many personnel returning from a NATO assignment”. A third and particularly important barrier to effectiveness of coalition HQs according to the SMEs is related to a “lack of communication and poor information sharing process”. The problems here are multi-dimensional, both technological and human in nature. Some of the typical explanations are “people not wanting to share information, lack of social networking opportunities, lack of info sharing systems, and lack of understanding of team members’ information needs”.

The third group of identified factors affecting organisational effectiveness is related to the *people* in the organisation. One of the most important barriers, according to the SMEs is the “lack of adequate manning”. The SMEs shared the opinion that “frequently, individuals are not qualified for their assigned

role” and that “some Nations never contribute, but merely ride out their time”. This situation generates problems with respect to reasonable distribution of tasks and responsibilities among coalition partners as well as the development of internal social networks in the HQ. A second factor identified as a hindrance to organisational effectiveness is the “lack of cultural awareness training” of the personnel, participating in NATO multi-national operations and the development of intercultural competences. Directly related to this factor is the problem with “the quality of English language communication”. The problem is certainly multi-faceted. On the one hand, “non-native English speakers often do not comprehend the meaning or context of English speech”. On the other hand, “native English speakers also have difficulties with non-native speakers and therefore, sometime assume incompetence on the part of non-native English speakers. Moreover, there is the basic problem with the use of NATO abbreviations and so-called “NATO slang”, which adds to linguistic confusion across the various languages in the NATO HQ.

Finally, the fourth group comprises factors that are related to the influence of cultural differences on organisational effectiveness and the process of formation of unique organisational cultures within the NATO HQ. The SMEs view the organisational culture of a NATO HQ as a mixture of different national military and service cultures that affects the organisational effectiveness of the HQ. A particular example of this is “the different mental models of coping with uncertainty and the process of overcoming uncertainty”, which is related to culturally based biases in the need for information to make a decision. This process may affect the unwillingness to make a decision if the person needs more information or cause the fear of making an incorrect decision, both of which can undermine organisational effectiveness of the HQ. Another essential factor is “the effect of different leadership styles” (for example: direct vs. indirect) which can lead to misunderstandings or misperceptions of the intention of the leader. The SMEs were unanimous about the role of the leadership as a factor that shapes the organisational culture in the HQ and thus influences effectiveness of coalition operations. The role of the leader and specific leadership capabilities in a multi-national environment are critical factors regarding the establishment of shared vision and shared awareness with respect to goals and tasks. In this regard, the SMEs recommend that the “leader be committed to the mission, not to the Nation”. Another factor which deserves attention, also influenced by different national cultures, is “task orientation vs. the need to spend time building and maintaining relationships”. A final factor in this group that the SMEs identified as a potential problem is the “lack of individual, organisational, and national trust”. The issue of trust among coalition partners deserves particular attention because it is related to information sharing and the coalition operations’ effectiveness as a whole.

2.3.2 SMEs’ Evaluations Regarding the Enablers of Organisational Effectiveness of Coalition Operations

What are the primary enablers of organisational effectiveness according to the SMEs? According to the SMEs, these enablers are focused on process improvement in the HQ and on strategic decision-making when a NATO operation is planned and implemented.

The first group of factors that the SMEs identified as enablers of organisational effectiveness of coalition operations is related to the introduction of process improvement strategies in NATO HQs (see Table 2-1).

Table 2-1: Basic Characteristics of an Effective Coalition HQ.

Political-Military Decision Making	Internal Process Management	People	Cultural Differences
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Able to achieve its goals • Establishes priorities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning organisation • Facilitates information sharing • Willing to adapt its structures to the ever-changing conditions where necessary • Implements process improvement strategies implementation to facilitate information sharing, social networking and Commander’s commitment to achieving HQ goals • Makes efficient use of the available resources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Able to take initiative • Leaders make fast and timely decisions • Flexible human resources management system to guarantee high motivation, cohesion, organisational and interpersonal trust 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Openness to diverse cultures; develop intercultural competencies • Use common language and terminology • Use common formats/standardization of different procedures • Use common doctrine and concepts

The SMEs were unanimous in their view that information sharing is an enabler of organisational effectiveness within a coalition HQ. In order to improve information sharing within the HQ, the SMEs indicated the need for a strategy for changing people’s minds and attitudes of “reluctance to share information” and to provide full-spectrum technical interoperability among coalition partners. Another important enabler of organisational effectiveness in coalition operations cited by the SMEs is related to the development of the HQs as a learning organisation. The SMEs suggest “introducing Standing Operating Procedures (SOPs) for the transition of positions in the HQs in order to avoid gaps of handover” and to transfer lessons learned. In addition, the SMEs considered the introduction of an “effective mentoring program to support handover procedure so you don’t start from scratch every time” and to “learn from the mistakes” of the predecessors as an important way of achieving this goal. Furthermore, the SMEs considered the “process of social networking” and the development of “informal networks” as a key factor for successful task accomplishment. In this regard, the SMEs suggested the organisation of “ad hoc meetings in open environments within multi-cultural settings”, as well as to “create the opportunity for people to talk to each other informally” through ice-breakers/social events or the use of the officer’s club for social networking. Moreover, the SMEs rated among the most important factors that influence coalition HQs’ effectiveness is “an unreserved commitment from the senior leadership in the HQs”. They agreed that “the HQs will be effective only if the leader is not there to serve his/her Nation but rather to serve the goals of the HQs”. Having in mind the complex character of current NATO operations, SMEs identified the need to have “leaders who make decisions to be able to prioritise conflicting items”.

The second group of factors put forth by the SMEs relates to the improvement of strategic decision-making processes for planning and implementing a NATO coalition operation. Among the most discussed factors was the need to introduce “NATO standardisation for education and training for coalition operations”. The SMEs postulated that the “HQ staff has to have prior experience working together as a

group”. Moreover, they considered “pre-deployment training on how to work in NATO/coalition environment as a necessity”. Finally, the SMEs deemed the “elimination of national political caveats for mission execution” is a priority task because “such caveats challenge trust among Nations”.

The third group of factors discussed by the SMEs is in respect to those structural factors that influence coalition operational effectiveness and focused on the format of cooperation (lead Nation – framework Nation – multi-national formation). The SMEs gave priority to multi-national cooperation which is characterized by the statement “no single Nation has to be predominantly represented on the HQ staff”.

Finally, the fourth group of factors focused on organisational culture as a factor for successful coalition cooperation. The SMEs suggestions were aimed at the improvement of cross-cultural education and training, and building intercultural competencies among the NATO HQ staff. As well, the SMEs considered the development of “NATO HQ culture, pushing for development of NATO identity, and to be more NATO-oriented than Nation-oriented” as a priority factor for achieving this aim.

2.4 CONCLUSIONS

The SMEs defined organisational effectiveness as *the ability of an organisation, in our case coalition HQs, to achieve its goals*. They described an effective HQ as an organisation which:

- Facilitates information sharing;
- Is able to make fast and timely decisions;
- Establishes a common understanding of its tasks and responsibilities;
- Is adaptable to change and can adjust quickly to changing situations;
- Is able to go beyond task description and taking initiative;
- Is able to learn from mistakes; and
- Is open to diverse cultures.

In summary, the feedback from the SMEs who volunteered to support the HFM-163 interviews contributed significantly to our understanding of NATO HQs organisational effectiveness and toward HFM-163’s recommendations for improving the organisational effectiveness of NATO’s culturally diverse teams. The SMEs stated that the main goal of NATO HQs is to support the troops on the ground. In order to achieve this goal, NATO HQs should implement the following primary operative goals:

- a) Effective and timely sharing of information;
- b) Quick and timely decision making; and
- c) Improved shared awareness of tasks and responsibilities.

Following this approach, NATO HFM-163 established a working definition of organisational effectiveness of NATO HQs as the degree of fit or alignment among various dimensions of organisational effectiveness such as organisational structure, processes, people, and culture towards goal achievement.

