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## THE CULTURE AND CONFLICT REVIEW



### Engaging Afghans: KLE Keys to Success

Capt Don Moss, 11/1/2009

A pillar of Coalition Force/United States Government (USG) efforts in Afghanistan is to separate the people of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan from insurgent groups such as the Taliban, Haqqani Network and Hezb-e-Islami Gulbuddin (HiG) and unite the same populace with their fledgling government. In order to do this, the men and women undertaking this effort have access to the latest in information, training and high-tech equipment. But possibly the most important asset any soldier, airman, marine, sailor or civilian can possess is the ability to engage. Not the enemy on the field of battle but the Afghan civilians he or she encounters on a daily basis.

It is through mastering the art of the Key Leader Engagement (KLE) that strong relationships, which are the cornerstone to victory in COIN operations, can be truly fostered. Believe it or not your time in Afghanistan is short and the quicker you can establish a strong relationship with the populace of your area the greater the results you'll see in a shorter period of time. Your actions during the longest of meetings or the shortest of convoy stops will leave an impression that will last much longer and spread much farther than you can imagine and may be the key to success or failure for you or other units during future encounters.

#### What is a KLE?

While normally reserved for meetings with senior officials, for the purposes of this perspective, a Key Leader Engagement (KLE) is any interaction with an Afghan national. It may be face-to-face (F2F), a phone call, an email or just passing by on a convoy. All of these interactions shape the way the Afghan people view not only you and your unit but CF/USG in general. If you say to yourself "well it was only one person during that one time" then you're wrong. Because of the tribal structure of Afghanistan and the reach of word of mouth throughout the country, what you do, say and suggest, even in the shortest of meetings, will reach more Afghans than you can imagine.

**Note:** While the majority of the tips below pertain to F2F encounters, as many as possible should be considered during any type of interaction you may have. With that said, below are suggestions of who to engage and how to engage them when conducting any KLE:

#### Who to Talk to?

**Established religious/governmental/ANSF and tribal leaders.** The order in which you engage these individuals is important as well. (Example: My unit made a concerted effort when we first arrived in Paktya to engage the provincial religious leaders (who were overlooked by the previous PRT) and it has paid HUGE dividends. The religious figures, because of their place in the Paktya community, have facilitated security discussions with people that we never would have met or even known to have existed. This was a direct result of constant and continuous engagements with religious leaders.)

**Suggestion:** Take the time very early on (preferably through a pre-deployment turnover with your predecessor) to identify the true power players in your province and engage them early and often. If the senior Mulawi (higher than a Mullah) of the province is the individual that the majority of the populace heeds and he is the last one you engage you're already fighting an uphill battle because of the loss of face he has suffered. The more engagements you have with different Afghans the more you'll be able to pin down who truly has the pulse of the populace and should be engaged more often.

**GIRoA/provincial officials** : These figures will be evident and some of the first you meet upon your arrival. They represent GIRoA so in order to establish any legitimacy for GIRoA (one of our end goals) it is very important for the populace to see CF/USG working closely with elected/appointed Afghan leaders.

**Note:** Working with leaders may become a dilemma when dealing with those who are corrupt. The best course of action is to report incidents of corruption to the appropriate Afghan authorities and make your reservations known. However, until that official is removed by GIRoA you still have to deal with them. If you refuse to deal with a corrupt official you are subverting GIRoA's authority and decision-making. It's not an easy situation but something that must be dealt with from time to time.

**Tribal/village elders (or "white beards" as Afghans call them).** Sometimes easier said than done. We have had multiple engagements where villagers have said we're talking to the wrong elder/tribesman. That is usually because those parties were the first to come and identify themselves to when a convoy stopped in their village. If someone is willing to immediately help you and seems to have knowledge when you're out on patrol you attach authority to that person because he made your job easier. Anyone dealing with tribes must be VERY careful that they not give the wrong people too much power. You'll get an individual's perspective on issues/solutions rather than the tribes. Try to deal primarily with the elders/leaders when discussing issues that will affect the tribe/village as a whole.

*Villagers from Jani Kheyl District. Photo by Fred W. Baker III*

Villagers from Jani Kheyl District



**Note:** The key is identifying the TRUE village and tribal leaders in the area. This can be done through talking with multiple villagers to see if they all identify the same leaders or actually attending a village/tribal shura. The shura members will know and identify influencers.

Talking to the right people (i.e. the aforementioned leaders) is critical. You can talk to any villager all day long but he may not have the ability to sway the village or tribe and help in the overall mission. It is the Village/Tribal leaders that will win you the most support. Should you take the time to talk to as many Afghans as possible? Certainly. But make sure you focus your engagements where appropriate depending on the time you have.

### **Keys to the KLE**

**Show Respect.** This is a constant theme that will be noted throughout this paper. Most Afghans feel that, throughout history, they have been disrespected and looked down upon.

Showing respect, when dealing with anyone from the Provincial Governor to a local villager, is essential. If anyone you deal with feels they are being disrespected they will be less willing to help you and more willing to harm you or allow you to be harmed. "Respect" doesn't mean giving everything or even anything requested during a KLE. It means treating the other party with a good "do unto others" attitude during the scheduling, execution and aftermath of a KLE.

**Note:** Some Afghans, especially those from rural areas, rarely have the opportunity to engage CF/USG. The amount of respect you show them has an equal if not greater effect on perceptions of the populace.

**Set the tone of respect early.** If meeting on a CF/USG installation, the party will have to run the gauntlet of security measures just to enter the base or compound. Once a meeting time has been established, ensure that the Entry Control Point is aware of their arrival and the proper respect, security permitting, is exhibited by the installation guards. These are individuals who represent hundreds, if not thousands, of people in some cases. They should not be yelled at or disrespected by a disgruntled E-4 manning the gate.

A good practice is to meet your party at the gate or send a representative. You want to avoid leaving a party waiting at the gate for an inordinate amount of time. Think of it as welcoming someone to your home. You don't want them standing on the doorstep for a half hour waiting for you to answer the doorbell.

**It's not all business.** Engaging leaders with early discussion on daily topics (health, family, recent travels, etc) prior to getting down to business is very important in showing respect and that you care about them as individuals vs. a means to an end. From time to time, invite leaders and villagers to your base just to have lunch and talk about life in general. It is not a waste of time. Personal engagements such as this help cement a deep relationship with these figures that continues to pay off in information exchange and rallying support for CF/GIRoA efforts.

**Very small things make very big differences when dealing with Afghans.** Placing your hand over your heart after shaking hands shows respect. Learning basic phrases (hello, how are you, nice to meet you, thank you) in the language of the area (Pashto or Dari) will INSTANTLY break away layers of ice as well as earn you respect for taking the effort to learn their language (this can't be overstated).

**Taking the time to learn 3-4 phrases and it will make a world of difference.**

*The author with ANP and villagers in Shwak District*

The author with ANP and villagers in Shwak District



**Take every opportunity to engage.** Our unit has had several cases where elders have shown up at the gate unannounced. If there is an opportunity we've brought them onto the FOB, served them chai and discussed issues as if they had arranged a meeting. In the Afghan culture hospitality (melmastia) is one of the pillars of Pashtunwali (it is strongly urged that anyone who will be conducting missions/business in Pashtun areas know Pashtunwali. It's a cornerstone of their culture).

You should try to be hospitable at any time in any place. If you're unable to entertain a party that drops unexpectedly, still make the time to go out to the gate to at least talk to them face-to-face and get initial ideas on their issues as well as POC information for a follow-on call. Afghans realize that when they show up unannounced there is the possibility they won't get the time they'd like but make the time if at all possible. If nothing else, they will certainly appreciate the respect shown by meeting them at the gate vs. having ECP get a number and asking them to leave.

*Villagers greet a CF convoy. Photo by Fred W. Baker III*

Villagers greet a CF convoy. Photo by Fred W. Baker III



**Note:** Impromptu KLEs are common.

Sometimes it takes hours to get from place to place in a convoy. During those trips the convoy may stop once or twice. Depending on where you stop, you will almost immediately be surrounded by local villagers. Security permitting, you should use this opportunity to engage locals. All convoys travel with a Host Nation Linguist or two. Request assistance from one and start talking. Many villages are secluded and cut off from most national news. Use the time to talk to them about national events, tribes and villages in the area and local issues.

You can both give and receive a lot of information in a short period of time. It's always wise to bring a healthy supply of ISAF newspapers, which discuss national events in English, Dari and Pashtun, with your convoy. Usually, the only thing villagers will see of CF in some places is the trail of HUMVEES or MRAPs as they pass by. Jump out, security permitting again, smile and engage whomever is willing. You can make a huge difference in a very little period of time and leave a lasting impression.

**Be Patient.** The majority of Pashtuns in RC-East rarely get the opportunity to speak with CF/USG leaders. When they do they may have a litany of issues to discuss. Be prepared for a long meeting and allowing several members of a tribe, village or group to talk at length. At times there may be one individual who mainly speaks for the group. At other times it may be several members of the delegation who take turns to bring up specific problems. This sometimes translates into a lot of listening and very little talking for a CF/USG member.

**Keep your composure.** Some issues will generate heated discussion. For instance, we had Gerda Serai District villagers come to the PRT to address recent CF operations which had detained members of their village, suspected IED emplacers. The leaders of this group were very emotional in their opposition to operations without their knowledge as well as how long the suspects had been detained. One elder was especially vocal and visibly angry.

Be prepared to weather these outbursts. While some are heartfelt, others are mainly displays for the rest of the group. If a village asks their leaders to address CF/USG about a "hot" topic, reports will come back to the village on how forcefully the leaders tried to get their point across. Leaders, in private, usually do not get as aggressive in their discussions as they do in front of their peers/followers. This is the way of public speaking in most countries, not just Muslim. The face a leader portrays when attempting to address an important topic is a factor in how his group/village/tribe perceives him.

*Text Box: Maj Kim Riggs and an Afghan contractor. Photo by Fred W. Baker III*



If he is passive when addressing or negotiating a critical issue for a village, he will be perceived as weak, which is a poor trait to be attached to as a Pashtun leader. Withstand the barrage, keep your composure and speak professionally and intelligently to the issues addressed. This will both serve to mitigate any escalation in tensions which may derail the conversation entirely as well as earn you respect for keeping your "cool".

**Note:** In most cases, after the issue is initially addressed, the discussion will continue in a more subdued manner. If, however, the speaker becomes belligerent and overly volatile then it is certainly appropriate to ask them to leave without addressing their issues. If the group is coming to make a demand or request they will certainly return, and usually in a much more cooperative manner. In addition, the group will respect the fact that your tolerance for outbursts is limited and will conduct their negotiations more professionally.

**Follow through:** A simple phone call to an Afghan with the current status on a project or issue that is being worked goes a long way and shows the proper respect. In follow-on meetings, even on other topics, if you bring up previous issues it reflects that you're both listening and actively working to solve issues.

**Things Happen:** Anyone who has been to Afghanistan can tell you how dynamic the daily schedule can be. At any time an event can arise which trumps your scheduled KLE. If this happens, immediately make every effort to contact the party and reschedule. This happens as much on the Afghan side as it does for CF/USG so they will understand. If unable to contact the party (which in mountainous Eastern Afghanistan is quite possible), ensure that you designate a stand-in for the conversation that is properly briefed on the topic and can engage appropriately. Some visitors drive for hours to attend these meetings so making every effort to minimize their inconvenience or maximize the effectiveness of a KLE you're unable to attend will show respect and help maintain or even foster the relationship. The last thing you want is to have a party drive for two hours only to be turned away at the gate.

### **Keep Your Promises**

When speaking with any Afghan, be certain of your words and intentions. If you say things like "I think we can do that" or "that sounds like a good idea" and you don't caveat it with "but I have to check before I can promise anything" they will take that as a promise to do something. If you don't follow through with that promise then you've lost credibility and one of the bricks in your "relationship wall". You would prefer this wall not get shaky. The Afghans have had years of broken promises laid upon them. Don't add to that pile.

If you're certain that you can do something and know with a 99% probability that it will happen then go ahead and promise. Once you keep your promise you will gain respect and it will drive those you interact with to keep their promises as well.

### **Do:**

- **Show Respect.** To each Afghan, regardless of placement within the government, tribe or village
- **Seniors first.** Serve chai or food to the senior Afghans first.
- **Know names.** You'll possibly meet hundreds of Afghans during your stay. Afghan and Taji names are foreign sounding and sometimes difficult to capture. While difficult, do your best to take down names of those you've met, even briefly. Forgetting someones name in a follow-up meeting is just as embarrassing in Afghan culture as it is in Western.
- **Respect Islam.** Depending on when you are meeting leaders, have prayer rugs and a quiet place nearby where they can pray if need be. This is another HUGE sign of respect for them as well as Islam as a religion.
- **Smile.** The Afghans are naturally warm and welcoming people. A large portion of the populace view CF/USG as cold and businesslike. Break that perception early. It's one of the first steps to shaping a lasting, beneficial relationship.

### **Don't:** (Some of these are well-known. Some, not so much.)

- **Lose focus.** If you have the opportunity to meet multiple Afghans you may very well meet the same groups who bring up the same issues over and over. These groups may also show up at the most inopportune times. Regardless of the inconvenience, show them the same amount of respect and attention as if you were talking with the provincial governor. Showing Afghans a lack of respect during a meeting is a slap in the face and is multiplied when they are surrounded by their peers. Once you engage in a meeting, engage. Bring you're A game and focus on what they are saying. During any meeting with any Afghan a valuable piece of information could be passed relating to a security threat, tribal conflict, or governmental issue.
- **Flatulate or blow your nose** during a meeting (this is considered exceptionally rude to Afghans).
- **Show the soles** of your feet.
- **Talk down** to anyone in the delegation (anyone in the group at some point could become invaluable or be the next leader of that delegation)
- **Rush to close.** If you won't have the time to conduct a proper meeting then ask to meet them

again. Inviting someone in for a meeting and then shooing them out after 15 minutes is rude. Be prepared to discuss the topic at hand without checking your watch every 5 minutes.

*Paktya Governor Hamdard and PRT Commander Lt Col Dan Moy*

Paktya Governor Hamdard and PRT Commander Lt Col Dan Moy



**FINAL THOUGHTS:** It is always said but can't be said enough. Afghanistan is not Iraq. The overwhelming majority of interactions are with individuals from small cities or smaller villages. Many CF come to Afghanistan from Iraq and believe it is the same environment, there will be multiple bombings and attacks and the majority of Afghans are nothing but future terrorists. This couldn't be farther from the truth. The people of Afghanistan have a rich, dynamic history that is incredibly interesting. The people themselves, after 30 years of warfare, want little more than a safer village, district, province and country. They are looking for our help and, if engaged engaged in a respectful manner and treated as equals, will respond in a positive manner.

The impression you make in any engagement will be a lasting one. How you respected or disrespected someone in your words or actions will be mentioned far and wide. Stay professional, respectful and alert and the road to success in your meetings with the Afghan people will be much improved.

#### **About the Author**

Capt Don Moss is the Chief of Intelligence Operations for Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) Paktya in Eastern Afghanistan and a 19-year veteran of the United States Air Force and the intelligence profession. A graduate of the Naval Postgraduate School and Defense Language Institute, he has led or participated in over 40 KLEs and compiled summaries of over 400 more with Provincial Governmental/religious/tribal and village leaders.



*The author with Sekhander Kheyl Villagers.*

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