Air Advising in Afghanistan

Building an Organization in Flight

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Background

It is well-known that since 9/11, the US military and its coalition partners have worked with the Afghan government and its military forces to battle an insurgency. At the end of 2014, the majority of US and coalition military forces left Afghanistan. What may be less known is that, for the last several years, a small contingent of American and coalition air advisors have been helping the Afghans rebuild their air force from the ground up. These advisors work daily with Afghanistan Air Force (AAF) leaders to help them build and implement effective organizations, capabilities, technologies, programs, and processes.

Challenges Soar

During the past four years, US and coalition personnel have largely transitioned from "doing" the mission to "training, advising, and assisting" the mission. Air advisors are responsible for helping Afghan leaders develop the AAF into a professional, capable, and sustainable organization. Advisors are working to stabilize an AAF that was pushed to the forefront of the conflict at a time when its leaders, air platforms, and infrastructure were ill-equipped to take on full responsibility for the future of a quickly growing and changing organization.

Given this situation, the air advisor role can be highly complex and dynamic. Advisor duties are akin to building an aircraft in flight while it's getting shot at. Constantly changing mission requirements, an influx of new technologies, and the potential severity of failure drive the requirement for constant management "innovation." In many areas, advisors must encourage the type of innovation that alters organizational structure, policy, and processes to adapt to ever-changing conditions and improve AAF performance.

Courtesy of Nathan Lipscomb

An Afghan maintenance technician marshals an A-29 Super Tucano. The AAF received 12 A-29s since 2016 and is scheduled to receive 8 more by the end of 2018.

However, in this environment management innovation can sometimes seem like a far-fetched objective. Many AAF leaders, particularly in fleet sustainment areas, such as aviation maintenance and logistics, were trained under the Soviet (and later, Russian) system and are not used to or necessarily accepting of Western management and sustainment concepts. Challenges to the status quo are not common in this environment. Therefore, typical innovation diffusion approaches that rely on grass roots initiative and implementation, as encouraged in Western cultures, are often infeasible. Consider other challenges such as a language barrier, vast cultural differences, undeveloped leadership skills, corruption, a paucity of human capital, and a lack of a clear mission end state, and one begins to understand the situation air advisors face in helping the AAF develop and implement new programs and processes in their organization.

From Dependence to Empowerment

Actions by US and coalition personnel and advisors in the last 16-plus years created dependence. Essentially, the Afghans are wholly reliant on outside entities for resources (money, equipment, training, logistics, and so forth), and likely will be for the foreseeable future. All of this "giving" behavior has been well-intentioned. However, future efforts need to focus on helping the Afghans develop critical sustainment capabilities so they can eventually succeed of their own accord.

Advising efforts inherently create the impetus for management innovation, as advisors try to encourage their counterparts to resist the status quo to improve performance. However, as is standard in any context, management innovation efforts often fail. During our time in-country, we identified a typical cycle that often led to failure. First, advisors encourage an initiative, and often fall short of convincing their counterparts to implement the initiative. Their AAF counterparts often tacitly resist because they don't have the capabilities/resources to implement the initiative on their own, or they don't have the desire to implement a new initiative (that is, they have their own—perhaps more lucrative—way of doing business). The innovation implementation process languishes, usually causing other issues that need to be resolved. Normally, in the advisors' eyes, the issues need to be resolved urgently. Frustration ensues, and the advisors employ what we commonly refer to as *coalition override*. That is, advisors "fix" the issues themselves, with little input or buy-in from their Afghan counterparts. The override often results in a quick (not enduring) solution, and it further encourages the counterparts' dependence on outside resources and solutions. Little learning occurs, and the process usually ends up back at step one with little to no performance improvement.

This outcome often leaves many advisors wondering, "How can we break this cycle?" In our experience, successful advisors often relied on a few principles to help AAF leaders implement initiatives and, as a result, become more empowered in the process. These success factors are nested under the umbrella of commitment. Unequivocal commitment by the advisor to the counterpart's initiative and success is necessary for any innovation to occur, and endure.

Persistence

Setbacks are frequent. Misunderstandings are constant. New ideas often die on the vine. The successful implementation of a new practice or process is often the result of persistent teaching, mentorship, and adaptation. We saw advisors achieve counterpart independence in certain areas through persistence. Advisors in the successful cases persistently increased their counterpart's understanding of the initiative itself and focused on the positive results (both potential and realized) of the initiative. Ultimately, their Afghan counterparts took responsibility for task completion and achieved incremental performance improvement. For example, the successful implementation of a new budgeting process necessitated persistence. Initial implementation attempts were characterized by misunderstanding, errors, duplications, and omissions, which required significant advisor intervention. However, persistent mentorship, adaptation, and a deliberate, staged, goal-focused approach to transition responsibility to the AAF counterparts eventually resulted in a more self-sufficient process that is consistent with the competencies of our AAF counterparts.

Courtesy of Dr. Jonathan Ritschel

An AAF officer teaches fellow officers about the requirements development and budgeting process.

Patience

Related to persistence is advisor patience. Constant failure can take its toll on an advisor's psyche, but successful advisors patiently persist until eventually, they break the negative cycle. On that note, advisors tend to want to make their counterparts look good (which, in turn, makes the advisor look good). It's human nature. However, in that light, one of the most difficult challenges for advisors is to have the patience to let their AAF counterparts come up with their initiatives. At least two issues arise here: time and quality. As previously mentioned, advisors want things fixed "now," and they want high-quality solutions (often to advisor standards). When their counterparts are learning, advisors shouldn't expect the highest level of quality in an initiative or solution. Moreover, advisors shouldn't expect their counterparts to get things done as quickly as expected. We learned that an advisor's lack of patience, followed by an "I'll just do it myself" attitude, hurts more than it helps.

Success that isn't advisor-dependent can build counterpart confidence and lead to empowerment. Aviation maintenance provides a cogent example. For instance, the transition of aviation maintenance responsibilities from civilian contractors to AAF maintenance personnel at one operating location resulted in an initial decrease of operational performance. Advisors were patient and resisted the initial urge to intervene and employ "coalition override" to improve mission performance at a faster pace. Afghan-initiated improvements slowly multiplied, and AAF personnel began to take more ownership of aviation maintenance planning and tasks. Eventually, mission performance began to improve, albeit incrementally.

Proximity

In this context, green-on-blue incidents have impacted trust and resulted in enhanced security measures for advisors. Barriers to close working relationships, both literal and figurative, exist. Advisors are required to keep their body armor and weapons close when participating in advising sessions, training, and meetings while in noncoalition-secured areas.

Our assessment is that advisors and counterparts who can overcome this lack of trust thrive. Physical and temporal proximity are large factors in overcoming a lack of trust. When advisors and their counterparts work in close physical proximity to one another, they see more frequent innovation and progress in applying new practices, processes, and procedures. Moreover, when advisors are in direct contact more frequently with their counterparts, they see more frequent success. These assertions seem obvious, but many advisors fall into the "FOB" mentality, rarely leaving the forward operating base, and achieving little progress toward initiatives. Advisors must make a deliberate effort not to let the barriers get in the way of their efforts to make a difference. Together, physical and temporal proximity can improve the advisor-counterpart relationship and increase the chance for success. Such was the case in the previous aviation maintenance example and is a big factor behind the successes achieved in aircrew training and combat capability.

Courtesy of Dr. Jonathan Ritschel

Coalition and their AAF counterparts pose for a photo after sharing a meal at a cultural awareness event designed to strengthen relationships and understanding.

Courtesy of TSgt Robert Cloys

Afghan maintenance technicians tow a Mi-17 into the hangar for inspection. AAF personnel are largely autonomous in performing many flight-line and inspections tasks for their Mi-17 fleet.

Air Advising: Success is Hard Fought

We're not naïve to the conditions and history in trying to push Afghan autonomy over the years. We acknowledge we still have a lot of work to do. Given the typical air advisor only has 6 or 12 months to make a positive impact on the AAF, it is imperative that we learn from experiences and impart that wisdom to future advisors. Thus, we argue advisors can, and should, encourage initiatives even when counterparts aren't necessarily open to change and improvement. The principles above—persistence, patience, and proximity—can help advisors as they encourage initiatives, particularly while dealing with the complex cross-cultural and contextual issues that exist in Afghanistan. If nothing else, the principles may provide some perspective and make an advisor's time in country a little more satisfying. By developing and encouraging initiatives with persistence and patience, while gaining trust through close and frequent proximity to counterparts, advisors may be able to encourage innovation and achieve enduring *Afghan* solutions. Ultimately, the implementation of initiatives that aren't advisor-dependent can lead to empowerment and, hopefully, one day, to a more professional, capable, and sustainable AAF. ✪

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Colonel Douglas (BS, Angelo State University; MS, Air Force Institute of Technology (AFIT); PhD, University of North Texas) is the dean of students, AFIT Graduate School of Engineering and Management. He is directly responsible for student services, registrar, and admissions functions in support of more than 600 US and international students enrolled in graduate engineering and management education programs. He is a career aircraft maintenance officer, with assignments in flight-line and back-shop maintenance, air mobility operations, and executive administration. He has led deployed aircraft maintenance, air mobility, and mission support teams in support of multiple joint/multinational contingency operations and exercises. During his last deployment, Colonel Douglas served as an air advisor and director of maintenance for Train, Advise, Assist Command–Air (TAAC–Air), Kabul, Afghanistan, responsible for advising Afghanistan Air Force leaders on the aviation maintenance enterprise, sustainment, and related training.

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