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Understanding Assets: Teaching Senior Leaders How to Identify and Engage Stakeholders

by Lieutenant Colonel Alex L. Carter, U.S. Army Reserve

Introduction

Throughout the war, U.S. units suffered from a limited understanding of the operating environment in Iraq . . . The United States also did not understand the relationships and rivalries among the various Iraqi factions, political parties, communities, and tribes. As a result, U.S. units found it difficult to discern the enemy's strategic and operational intent throughout the war—and to discern the motivations of the factions and individuals that comprised the post-Saddam Iraqi Government and security forces. As a result, U.S. units' actions sometimes exacerbated preexisting conflicts among Iraqis, especially in cases in which Coalition forces inadvertently sided with one party against another in a long-standing local struggle.¹

— U.S. Army, *The U.S. Army in the Iraq War 2: Surge and Withdrawal 2007–2011*

When the U.S. Army released its long-awaited critique of the Army's successes and failures in the Iraq war, many wondered how honest the Army would be with itself. A review of the documents, however, revealed an unflinching account of both successes and failures of Army operations from the tactical to strategic levels of conflict. One conclusion was that the Army failed to fully understand, throughout the invasion and occupation, the operating environment with Iraq's totalitarian government structure, tribal allegiances, underlying ethnic tensions and aged infrastructure.² What is also clear is that the Army's most senior leaders failed to adequately identify, account for and engage with parties of sufficient power and interest to develop and shape what it did there. This lack of effective stakeholder identification and engagement created deleterious effects in planning and execution—from the tactical to operational to strategic levels. One must, therefore, ask: How can military leaders get better at identifying and engaging with their stakeholders?

This paper seeks to close a gap in senior leader education by recommending that senior service colleges offer an elective devoted to the art and science of stakeholder identification and engagement. This elective would help develop senior military leaders as critical thinkers and thus better equip them to produce well-informed and comprehensively developed policies, strategies and plans. This paper also discusses the link between critical thinking and the associated need to synthesize information from myriad sources, including stakeholders, and introduces the concepts and practices of stakeholder engagement, borrowing heavily from techniques employed in the private sector.³ The paper concludes with benefits that would accrue by instituting formal, disciplined and comprehensive stakeholder engagement among senior leaders and throughout the joint force.

Senior Leaders, Critical Thinking and Stakeholders

Much has been written about strategic military leaders and the need to develop their critical thinking skills. Instruction from the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJIS) in 2015 directed that senior service colleges instill leader attributes centered on critical thinking, including collecting and synthesizing information.⁴

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Moreover, CJIS directed that senior service colleges develop and teach content around key learning areas. As one reviews the CJIS instruction and considers the different elements of critical thinking, it is clear that senior leaders must identify, ingest and analyze large amounts of data and feedback from myriad sources to develop strong approaches and coherent narratives that address problems, especially at the strategic and operational levels.

W. Michael Guillot, elaborating on the link between critical thinking and information sources, wrote that critical thinking could be better understood through eight separate but supporting elements. One element, information, is best collected and understood through defined standards of clarity and relevance.⁵ Information should be regularly monitored and received “from a wide variety of sources, and sensing how circumstances are perceived and how values might be changing on the part of an array of constituencies continues to go on in between active rounds of strategic planning.”⁶ One theory supporting stakeholder engagement asserts that an organization has relationships with different constituents that affect and are affected by the organization’s decisions. Stakeholders can, and often do, influence an organization’s planning processes.⁷ Many successful companies have embraced the theory and supporting practices of stakeholder engagement. These practices or techniques may be instructive to senior military leaders and their staffs. Such practices must begin with a baseline understanding of what a stakeholder is and what it means to effectively engage with a stakeholder.

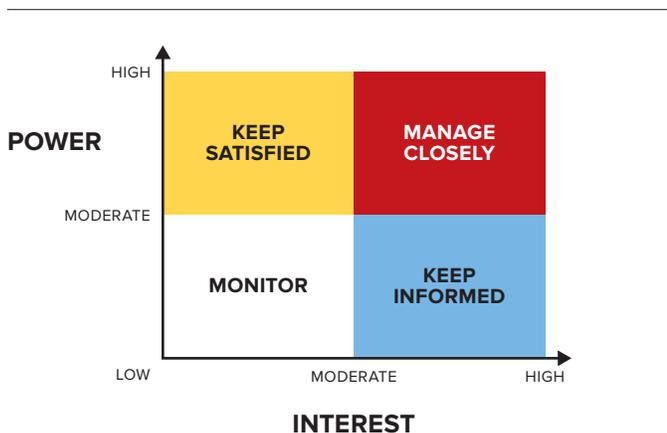
A stakeholder is “any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization’s objectives.”⁸ In the military context, a stakeholder’s influence can impact military strategies and plans at all levels. For example, when senior leaders devise strategies, they are better served by incorporating input from a broad set of stakeholders, whose interests and insights may challenge, enrich or support underlying planning assumptions. The term *stakeholder engagement* can be used to describe the process of identifying, mapping, prioritizing, assigning, engaging and reporting on interactions with a stakeholder. In developing plans, a senior leader must be careful and deliberate when determining from whom to solicit advice and information.

One must identify all relevant stakeholders with influence and then prioritize which are the most important ones with which to engage. There are numerous ways to identify and categorize such stakeholders to assess the amount, frequency and scope of engagement that should be planned and executed. One technique, widely taught in the business world, is through the use of the power/interest grid.⁹ As figure 1 shows, the power/interest grid has two axes—power and interest. Stakeholders are plotted on any one of four quadrants based on a collective assessment of their relative power and interest. The degree of power for each stakeholder is assessed subjectively considering various types of power sources, such as legitimate, informal, referent, expert, coercive, connective, etc., that may be associated with an individual stakeholder.¹⁰ On the other axis, the degree of interest reflects the perceived level of interest that the stakeholder has on the outcome of the strategy or plan. Stakeholders that fall in the high power/high interest quadrant are candidates for deliberate outreach and engagement. All stakeholders are different, though, and need to

be managed differently based on their relative authority (power) and level of concern (interest).

Figure 1

The Power/Interest Grid



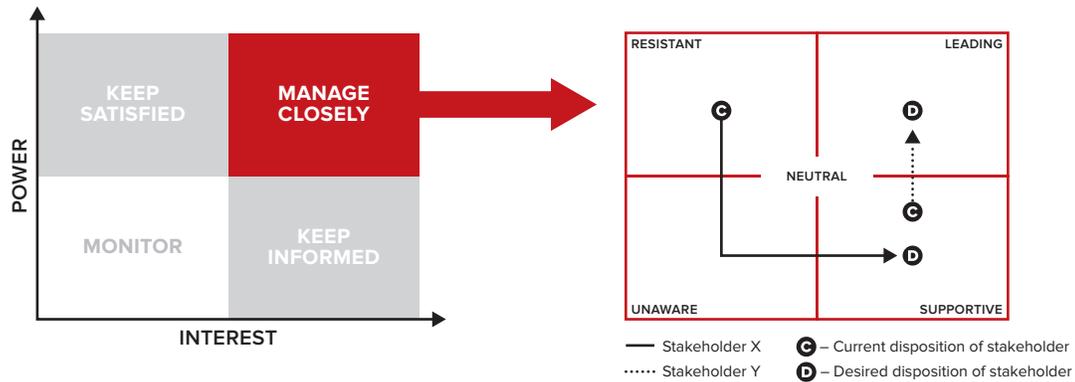
Source: Colin Eden and Fran Ackermann, *Making Strategy: The Journey of Strategic Management* (London: SAGE Publications, 1998).

From Identification to Engagement

Once stakeholders have been identified and categorized, senior leaders are able to allocate resources to engage with stakeholders deemed critical for solicitation. In this way, stakeholder engagements would be calendared and reported through existing leader-led meetings. Engagements would be planned with supporting goals and objectives for each long-term stakeholder relationship and short-term stakeholder engagement. With structure and process in place, senior leaders could gauge stakeholders’ sentiments, thoughts and feelings toward a command’s developing or existing actions and plans. Stakeholders assessed as having high interest and high power (“Manage Closely”) should be further assessed to

Figure 2

Stakeholder Planning with “Manage Closely” Stakeholders



determine their current and desired dispositions toward such plans.¹¹ As seen in figure 2, two such stakeholders have been assessed differently in terms of their current and desired dispositions. Following this assessment, senior leaders assigned to these two stakeholders would seek to influence or move the current disposition toward a desired disposition relative to the command’s efforts. From such deliberate relationship planning, senior leaders would be structured and incentivized to build stronger and more fruitful stakeholder relationships. Results from such efforts would likely lead to more comprehensively developed strategies with supporting assumptions that had been more thoroughly tested from different sources.

One would think that these skills are a regular part of a curriculum on leadership and management at the senior service colleges—they are not. Such knowledge and skills in stakeholder identification and engagement are not found in any formal curriculum at the institutions meant to train and educate current and future senior leaders of the U.S. military.¹² While it is true that each of these institutions have varying degrees of material and time dedicated to the study of critical thinking, they stop short of diving deeper into its sub-elements, specifically the value of critical thinking in the context of information collection and synthesis from stakeholders. This knowledge gap between what is needed by our senior leaders and what is taught is glaring, alarming and in need of correction.

Rethinking What We Teach

Considering this knowledge gap, senior service colleges must introduce stakeholder engagement as an elective offering within an existing leadership program track. Such an elective might be configured along the lines of the stakeholder engagement framework that considers the logical progression of stakeholder management from identification to prioritization/mapping to engagement to management, including the feedback loops of stakeholder engagements with senior leaders. This elective would be modeled from material commonly taught in business schools that addresses customer identification, marketing and account team planning, concepts readily transferable to military classrooms. This elective would ideally be conducted weekly using four methods of instruction: Socratic method, informal lecture-discussion seminars, case studies and even offsite visits to leading practice organizations in the private sector, where stakeholder engagement is commonly practiced.

The purpose of the elective would be to refine student critical and creative thinking skills by exploring the subject of stakeholder relationships with a focus on stakeholder identification, mapping, engagement and management. Senior leaders must navigate complex environments in developing effective strategies and plans that effectively link political aims or ends with military ways and means. In an academic setting, senior officers would review relevant theories and practices focused on stakeholder identification and engagement from the business world and apply this knowledge to their own environments. The elective would address key questions around the subject of stakeholder engagement: Who and where are my stakeholders? How should I categorize them and for what purpose? What type of information do I need from them and what do they need from me? How does one manage a stakeholder relationship and to what end? Why should senior leaders enter into stakeholder relationships? How can I coach, train and mentor my subordinates to practice this skill in their areas of responsibility?

Such an elective would position the value and benefit of stakeholder engagements in the larger toolkit of critical thinking skills for our senior leaders. The elective would provide a forum for senior service college students to explore and discuss the value of relationship management in today's operational environment.

Addressing the Critics

Some may question whether senior military leaders can or should learn from other professions and industries. Critics argue that military culture and environment is unique and that the business world, with its focus on profits and customers, can contribute little to the problems that military leaders confront. However, there are many recent examples, particularly with U.S. military experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan, that show that a failure to adequately understand key stakeholders can and does adversely impact strategies and plans. Additionally, some of the more successful multinational corporations have faced similar challenges, albeit not identical, in terms of how they adapted their strategies based on feedback from their stakeholders. Also, while there are many situations in which business practices would not mesh well or translate easily into military culture and practices, engaging with stakeholders to solicit information that informs planning processes is a competency that does translate well into the military with its emphasis on collecting facts and generating assumptions in the joint planning process.

Others may argue that such material is already taught, if informally, at the senior service colleges and question the utility of formal stakeholder identification and engagement. Although these are understandable criticisms, they are not valid or supported. First, anecdotes and war stories are not enough to educate and convey the level of quality and rigor in a practice that requires full comprehension and military implementation. Second, senior service college academic curricula are regularly revised and updated, which speaks to the constant and ongoing nature of educational development for senior leaders. Adding new content, such as a new elective, is a common practice in the senior service college educational system.

Why This Matters

Senior leaders who are educated in stakeholder engagement would realize immediate benefits as they put their education into practice. Informed views from stakeholders would be collected and considered in ways previously not considered, increasing the quality of strategic and operational plans.¹³ A higher standard of professional behavior would emerge as senior leaders and staffs hold each other accountable for owning, managing and reporting on engagements from their assigned stakeholder relationships. The benefits from teaching this subject to senior military leaders, and the results that would follow, would improve how these leaders seek input from stakeholders and instill the importance of establishing and maintaining relationships with those of influence and power typically outside of military channels and whose advice can positively influence the development of strategies and plans.

If taught correctly at the senior service colleges, senior leaders would have opportunities to introduce stakeholder engagement concepts and practices within their commands and, by doing so, reap tremendous rewards. This education, which exists widely in the private sector, must be formally taught and codified in the curricula of the senior service colleges. The risks of not including stakeholder identification and engagement in a senior leader's intellectual toolkit are not acceptable. Strategies and plans must be developed through active, deliberate engagement with stakeholders of all varieties, inside and outside military circles. Stakeholder engagement must be part of what we do as leaders, and we must learn how to do it early enough in our careers to make an impact when we serve at the highest levels of command and staff.



Lieutenant Colonel Alexander "Alex" L. Carter, U.S. Army Reserve, is an Army strategist and currently works at the Office of the Chief of Army Reserve at Fort Belvoir, Virginia. He is a veteran of several combat deployments to the Middle East and is a 2019 senior service college graduate of the U.S. Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island.

Notes

- ¹ U.S. Army, *The U.S. Army in the Iraq War Volume 2: Surge and Withdrawal 2007–2011* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College Press, 2016), 625.
- ² U.S. Army, *Army in the Iraq War Volume 2*, Chapter 17.
- ³ The author was employed for 13 years, domestically and abroad, in various management consulting roles to Department of Defense organizations and for-profit concerns, with IBM Corp., KPMG LLP and PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP, utilizing stakeholder engagement techniques relied upon within the consulting industry to advise executives and other senior leaders.
- ⁴ Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Chairman of the Joint Chief of Staff Instruction 1800.01.E: Officer Professional Military Education Policy* (Washington, DC: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2015), A-A-A-1.
- ⁵ W. Michael Guillot, “Critical Thinking for the Military Professional,” *Military Intelligence Professional Bulletin* 32, no. 3 (2006): 38–39, https://fas.org/irp/agency/army/mipb/2006_03.pdf.
- ⁶ Theodore H. Poister, “The Future of Strategic Planning in the Public Sector: Linking Strategic Management and Performance,” *Public Administration Review* 70, no. S1 (2010): 250, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6210.2010.02284.x>.
- ⁷ Thomas M. Jones and Andrew C. Wicks, “Convergent Stakeholder Theory,” *Academy of Management Review* 24, no. 2 (1999): 1, <https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.1999.1893929>.
- ⁸ R. Edward Freeman, *Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach* (Boston: Pitman, 1984), 31.
- ⁹ While employed by IBM Corp., the author was introduced to the power/interest grid while supporting private and public sector clients in various consulting projects requiring strategic and corporate planning skills; Paul A. Smith, “Stakeholder Engagement Framework,” *Information & Security: An International Journal* 38, no. 38 (2017): 35–45, <https://doi.org/10.11610/isij.3802>.
- ¹⁰ William E. Turcotte, William M. Calhoun and Cary Knox, “Power and Influence,” research paper, U.S. Naval War College, 2018, 2–3.
- ¹¹ *A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge*, 5th ed. (Newton Square, PA: Project Management Institute, 2013), 13.2.2.3.
- ¹² The author conducted independent research from 18–19 December 2018 with each of the senior service colleges by reviewing their curriculum and electives through each colleges’ academic catalog.
- ¹³ Aregbeshola R. Adewale and Munano M. Esther, “The Relationship between Stakeholders Involvement in Strategic Planning and Organisations Performance: A Study of the University of Venda,” *International Business & Economics Research Journal* 11, no. 11 (2012): 1178, <https://doi.org/10.19030/iber.v11i11.7366>.



**Institute of Land Warfare
Association of the United States Army**

2425 Wilson Boulevard
Arlington, VA 22201

703.841.4300 ★ www.USA.org