Bridging the Collaboration Gap

Moderator: John Reiners
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John Reiners: Hello, my name is John Reiners from IBM’s Institute for Business Value. I’m joined today by Alan Baldwin from the Global Defense team who has over 20 years experience in the U.S. Marine Corps to discuss IBM’s latest defense white paper, “Bridging the Collaboration Gap,” which is a global defense study into the effectiveness of coalitions.

We worked on this study with a large cast of IBM defense experts and external commentators on defense matters which included Fred Stein, the Royal United Services Institute in the U.K., and the Hague Center of Strategic Studies based in the Netherlands.

In this conversation, we want to take you through the main findings of the study and the implications for defense forces, but first Alan, can you please provide some background explaining why this subject is so important?

Alan Baldwin: Certainly, John. First of all, military operations have become increasingly executed as coalition operations for almost all defense forces. This is a relatively new development.

In the latter half of the last century, we saw defense forces moving towards joint operations and this required huge strategic organizational and operational changes; however, these changes could be mandated mostly because they could be managed within a country’s own defense forces.

The complexities of coalition operations are much more difficult to appreciate. We see relatively few studies about what makes coalitions work effectively; plus, they’re much more difficult to do something about. Its actions span the entire breadth of a country’s defense forces.

As a consequence, we saw that examining coalition operations was a great subject for a global study, and we could do that using IBM’s wide network of our defense experts and contacts and our defense forces around the world to carry out a survey into how effective coalition operations really are and the reasons for the level of performance as well as some actions the defense forces could take to improve coalition effectiveness.

John Reiners: Thank you, Alan. Let me first say a little bit about the survey. We interviewed people with direct experience of a wide range of military operations so including combat operations, for example in Iraq and Afghanistan but also other types of missions such as nation-building or disaster relief.

Over 100 respondents came from 12 nations commenting on some 340 coalition partners. The collaboration gap referred to in the paper refers to the gap between the needs of the mission and the combined capabilities of the coalition.
We aimed to understand why there could be a noticeable gap or a drop in coalition effectiveness. We identified that this may be down to the nature of the operation - for example the length or complexity or the type of mission - or the makeup of the coalition.

We then looked into what defense forces could do to close this gap in three main areas: improving coalition ways of working including training, organization, structure, processes, for example; secondly, improving information sharing; and finally, exploiting technology. Alan, can you share the main conclusions?

**Alan Baldwin:** Absolutely. Interestingly, the first finding that grabbed their attention is that there appears to be very little improvement in the effectiveness of coalition operations over time.

As you look at operations from 1994 until 2008, the average effectiveness score that we got from our respondents is noticeably stable; not at all what we expected, especially given the huge investments in technology, coalition exercises and the growth of networking across the forces, the concept of organizing how the forces organize for combat.

You know, one would really expect that defense forces would naturally get better over time as they learn from their experiences, but that’s not what the statistics are telling us at all.

Our initial investment of that rather surprising finding is that military operations are really increasing in complexity. So, while the force is essentially getting better, it’s only improving at about the same pace as coalition operations are getting more complex and more difficult. Nonetheless, an alarming finding all the same.

Another rather interesting headline that came out of this survey is that larger operations scored as less effective is shorter operations. Now, we believe that might be the case because the operations of longer duration are also much more complex.

This complexity leads to more procedures, need for more complex technical infrastructures, etc., etc. But there may be other factors involved here such as a loss of focus on longer operations or perhaps more importantly, the impact of team rotations as countries rotate forces in and out and this is certainly an area that’s worth looking into a bit more over time.

**John Reiners:** How about the makeup of the coalition?

**Adam Baldwin:** Well, as you might expect, countries with a similar cultural background and experience of working together generally scored better, so the four and five ICE countries - the U.S., the U.K., Canada, Australia and New Zealand - they have a background of cooperation, common language in joint exercises; they tend to score better in the eyes of the respondents.

But then again, so do countries with cultural similarities, especially those in the Pacific area and some of the four and five ICE coalitions can frankly score pretty badly, so there are many more complex factors at work here.
Interestingly as well, the survey revealed to us that the respondents viewed that the Canadians and the Brits were the most effective coalition partners. The US surprisingly scored noticeably lower. It’s interesting to consider why that might be the case.

Clearly, the U.S. is invested far more in its defense forces, so it really makes for an interesting question to ponder and that factor is certainly recognized by the partners in coalitions is the U.S. is the technology leader.

So perhaps people foster some resentment at the U.S. for always assuming that the U.S. is going to assume the leadership position. Perhaps it could be that the U.S.’s leading role in almost all coalitions makes it a little bit less accommodating as a coalition partner.

Then again, the results may reflect what really is a pervasive culture among U.S. officers to almost always view themselves harshly in the belief that they’re never as good as they could be or should be and consequently, very harsh in reviewing their own coalition performance.

But again, this is just an absolutely fascinating issue that we want to investigate further. It’s also fascinating to compare how other countries rate themselves or how their partners rate them.

The respondents tended to rate themselves higher for information sharing than their other coalition partners rated them, with the Brits being the notable exception and there are some rather large gaps, for example, where respondents from the U.S. rate themselves much lower in technology effectiveness than their partners rated them.

**John Reiners:** And where are the main areas where improvements can be made?

**Adam Baldwin:** Well, John, we saw that there were three areas where improvements could logically be grouped. The first was in the collaborative ways of working amongst the coalition, second was in the way they share information, and the third was in exploiting technology.

These are all important and improvements were needed frankly in all areas from what we saw in the surveys. Now we had lots of suggestions from the respondents and, you know, while we don’t have time to go over all of them right now, I’d like to give you a bit of a flavor for what some of those things might be.

Within the collaborative ways of working, not surprisingly leadership was seen as crucial. The key from what we saw from the respondents is that the right way to develop collaborative skills is to focus that in the future leaders.

Improvements can also be made in simplifying and standardizing the ways of working and identifying collaboration champions, an interesting concept not often thought about in the military and then moving towards flatter and network organizations and encouraging joint exercises and training as well as training in the staff colleges.

Now, within the area of information sharing is a need for better information management so that reliable and accurate information is delivered on time and in the right format for the decision-maker.
Now language translators can also help. Longer term, there really needs to be more progress on common standards as well as resolving security concerns across the force.

Now as far as information sharing is concerned, not surprisingly trust in your coalition partner is of utmost importance. In the area of technology, it’s important to get the basics right and establishing a reliable, common, technical infrastructure with sufficient bandwidth is always a difficult challenge, especially the issue about bandwidth.

Then there are common battle space applications. Also interestingly for communications, respondents preferred well-established means such as telephone, e-mail and chat.

There are some advocates of the latest collaborative technologies, particularly among some of their younger respondents, yet there’s a way to go before these become established tools as the common everyday standbys are the ones that people relied upon.

**John Reiners:** Thank you, Alan, and any more general conclusions?

**Adam Baldwin:** Well, first of all, we can’t pretend that we have all the answers from this survey. Nonetheless, it does raise some very important questions. First of all, it’s certain that coalitions will only grow in importance so I don’t want to imply that the survey is all doom and gloom.

You know, one could certainly look at it that way but frankly, it’s quite the opposite. There are clearly a great many excellent examples of effective coalitions in very difficult circumstances.

The respondents were almost all positive and many had very specific and pointed recommendations about what needs to be done. However, defense forces have still got a lot to learn about how to get better and the survey provides some useful indicators on what those might be.

We think it’s important that they do more systematically to understand what makes coalitions succeed, how they’re performing especially as rated by their partners so that they can set out their own plans to improve their collaborative and collaboration effectiveness.

They’re going to need to invest in some new capabilities and we discuss many of those in the report. Some of those are technologies but also improved ways of working, common standards, improved trainings and so on.

Thirdly, we think the coalition planning can improve through dynamically understanding the demands of operations and matching capabilities to operational needs, in essence bridging the gap, so to speak.

Finally, we point out that the importance of senior sponsorship and support. You know, you’ve got to have support from the top and this is a particularly difficult area as it may need elevating to the priority of collaboration capabilities when there’s more obvious sponsorship for investment more immediately tied to one’s own force or service.
John Reiners: Alan, thank you very much. Please find out more by reading IBM’s white paper "Bridging the Collaboration Gap" which can be found at ibm.com/gbs/collaborationgap.