Empathy: The Key to Bridging the "Ops-Intel Gap"

by

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Oh wad some power the giftie gie us
To see oursel's as others see us!
It wad frae monie a blunder free us,
And foolish notion.

To a Louse.

- Robert Burns

As I was getting ready for work yesterday morning, I wondered what the weather would be like. Rather than use the age-old Kansas method (look out the window at the upwind horizon, which, if you're from Kansas, you know means look West for a six-hour head's up on the coming storms,) I flipped on "The Weather Channel." The talking head smiled as he said "Those of you in the Gulf Coast states had a really chilly day yesterday... [cut to video of a cold day in Louisiana]." I thought to myself, "Self, this is really useless information. I know darned well it was cold yesterday! Why is this guy wasting my time and an expensive satellite communications link telling me this? I just want to know if I should take my field jacket or rain coat!"

My mind raced back to the last morning intelligence briefing I'd sat in on. "China's historic claim to the Spratley Islands and Taiwan blah blah blah blah.... President Yeltsin's pickled liver can't take another boilermaker blah blah blah.... Imagery of the empty field at Tripoli yesterday revealed the field was still empty blah blah blah.... HUMINT reports the eighteenth hole at Saint Andrew's is still water-logged blah blah...." It had absolutely nothing to do with our unit's mission. It was just fifteen minutes of regurgitating the week's traffic, coughed out someone who would obviously rather be surfing the INTELINK for ball game scores. The intel guy didn't want to brief; the audience didn't want to hear. The Weather Channel had just reminded me of that guy.

"DING!?!" The small bell at the base of my cerebellum told me I'd just experienced one of those rare events we refer to in technical terms as "a thought." Is this what people mean when they talk about the ops-intel gap? Is that the reason the operators cease to listen whenever intel says something?" Is this gap what's holding us back from becoming "information operators?" This led me to the next question: What do the guys in green bags really need from us? How can we become an accepted part of the operational community?

It's a Pentium world, and I have a PC-XT brain. The more I thought about it, the more my head hurt. All my training came back to me.... All the intelligence disciplines ran around in my head... MC&G... HUMINT... SIGINT... IMINT... MASINT... OSINT... and my personal favorite, RUMINT (rumor intelligence -- the most reliable of all)... Would it be strategic, operational or

tactical? What imagery resolution do they need? What AFSCs should I pick? How much bandwidth... T-1 or T-3 comm trunk? Which databases? Where in the intelligence cycle... national centers... areas of responsibility.... Then, all of a sudden, it hit me. Again, I thought to myself, "Self, they don't *care* about all that! They don't care whether it came from a barometer or a meterological satellite.... They just want to know what the weather will be like!" Could it be that simple? Have we been giving them history and processes, when all they really want to know is, "do I need my coat?"

So, what do I think it would take to become an "information operator?" What makes that operational commander -- the air component commander -- happy and successful? What types of information does a pilot, or missileer, or planner, or "information user" need to perform his or her mission? My experience leads me to believe that operators want three things from us:

1. Predict the enemy's future activity -- the threat;

2. Tell them about their objective or target;

3. Give them the background to understand their operational environment.

Let's look at each of these in a bit more detail. When I use the term user, I mean anyone who has a mission assigned, and needs information from us to carry it out. This can mean a pilot, a computer programmer who will insert a virus into an enemy system, a planner... everyone from the loftiest decision maker down to a security policeman guarding a gate. Heck... let's get crazy. Even a budget planner for the next generation weapon system. If they need our information to do their job, they're a user. What do they need from us? Here's how it sorts out in my noggin:

1. Predictive (Threat) Information: This is information a user needs to stay safe while carrying out a mission. The information operations goal should be to understand the mission, and provide courses of action that will minimize the threat's impact on that mission. It must be *tailored to the mission being performed*. Courses of action can include attacking, exploiting and defending enemy information, thus reducing the enemy threat. Information on enemy air defense activities is important to a Viper (F-16) driver who will soon drop 4000 pounds of Pittsburgh steel and tritonol on "soft pudgies" in a chemical weapons plant. A Combat Controller might need to know the vertical obstructions within 200 yards of his drop zone. But air defenses and vertical obstructions don't make a lot of difference to an AFOSI agent who's responsible for advising the Joint Forces Air Component Commander on the terrorist threat at the Happy Bottom Riding Club. The JFACC might care about information the local police have on a radical student group at the local university. The threat to the Local Area Network (computer) Manager's operations is on an entirely different technical plane. Threat information helps the user think through possible courses of action and plan for mission success in spite of enemy activity.

2. Objective (Target) Information: We're talking about an objective in (forgive me for saying this) "quality management" terms here, not as a semi-detached

thought process. The information operations goal here is fairly simple: A user needs to know what s/he's expected to do, and why s/he's doing it. What is expected of the user? What is the significance of this mission relative to the overall allied effort? What will the result be on the enemy? What are the consequences if the mission doesn't succeed? To accomplish the mission, the user needs to know everything *relevant* about that objective. A weaponeer may need to know the thickness of the walls in the communications room of a command post, as well as the walls of the civilian hospital next door. A pilot needs a Designated Mean Point of Impact to pickle bombs on. Later, a targeteer will need a combat assessment of the damage to that target. An information warrior may need to know a computer password, Hypertext Transfer Protocol (that little "http:// thing on your Internet link) and programming language for a target computer system. An airlift planner might want to know the condition of all runways over 3000 feet within 25 miles of a planned non-combatant evacuation operation. When dropping MREs to Bosnians, it might be good to know Muslims might get upset if it's BBQ Pork. Again, this information must be *tailored to the mission being performed*. Information on the objective helps the user accomplish his/her assigned mission.

3. Perspective (Background) Intelligence: This information helps a user understand the overall environment in which they'll operate. The information operations goal: educate the user about the mission environment. How will it affect the mission? Provide information on anything which could impact the mission. A soldier of the NATO Implementation Force (IFOR) will perform his mission better if someone explained why the Serbs, Bosnians and Croats want to slit each other's throat. The tank platoon commander may care a bit about the built up or mountainous terrain and destroyed bridges along the unit's planned route. Terrain Elevation Data might help you predict locations of enemy forces. The commander of a Ticonderoga-class, AEGIS-equipped cruiser cares a great deal that the narrow confines of a strait will limit his radar horizon and ability to maneuver. The Joint Forces Air Component Commander cares a great deal how many precision-guided weapons exist in-theater. The space user cares that there will be a solar eclipse, and a satellite will switch from solar power to batteries. City maps; the weather; day and night conditions; availability of water; flora and fauna; demography; 120 volts or 220 for electrical outlets... all these factors make up the environment in which operations will be conducted. Perspective information helps the user adapt to this environment in order to function successfully.

Don't get caught up in the three categories, though. An SA-12 battery in the operational environment might represent such a threat that it becomes a target.... The three categories I've discussed are simply a frame of reference for looking at information needed to carry out a military activity. Whether attacking an enemy database, planning a convoy from Dharhan to Al Kharj, or briefing a BUFF crew about to launch ALCMs, you should make sure you cover all these bases when you're practicing your art. How you "categorize" the information isn't

important. What is important is getting the information to the person at the "pointy end" in a useful format.

How do you do this? One word: *empathy*. It's that simple. Most users don't care where you got the information. They do care that you do your best, provide them everything you know so they can get in, get it done, and get home safely. Have empathy with the user, whoever that user is.

Get to know your users on a personal level. Seek them out -- don't wait for them to come to you with "requirements". Put yourself in their shoes for a minute. Ask yourself, "Self, if I were a [insert user career field here], what would I need from my information operator?" You've just shown empathy. Now, you just have to educate yourself about their needs. Find a pilot or electronic warfare officer. Have lunch with that planner, or play golf with him/her. You can build empathy at the O-club bar, just talking shop with that guy or gal who just returned from a mission. Next time you get to the main gate early, you might pull over and shoot the bull for ten minutes with the gate guard. Talk with the fellow who programs ECM pods. You could just as easily build empathy and knowledge bouncing around in the back of an MC-130, sharing bouts of nausea with a special tactics team at 0300 some balmy Mildenhall morning. You might even build empathy at the coffee pot in your next local STEM council meeting. Bottom line: the answer is all around you.

Next time you take off the headphones at Medina Regional SIGINT Operations Center, ask yourself "Who would be interested in what I just heard?" Next time you're about to turn out the lights at Langley, ask yourself "Would anyone want a copy of this picture?" Next time you're about to omit something from a briefing because of high-level classification, ask yourself "how can I share this information with the user without compromising the source?" Before you get up to brief that next user ask yourself the three simple questions on page nine of Tongue & Quill: *Is it necessary? What is my purpose? Who is my audience?* It may mean you'll have to do a bit more work.... blow the dust off some old slides, or even make a new slide. But you're getting the user what they need.

How do you know if you've succeeded? You may never know. But one day, you might saunter up to the bar. Maybe a user will hand you a beer and say "You know, that information you gave me was just what I needed, and didn't waste my time. Why are you in intel? You'd make a good [insert desired user label]." In user feedback terms, you've just been told you're empathetic. You may even be awarded the honorary title: "operator." "Oh, Sergeant Jones, the intel NCO? He's not an intel puke... he's more like one of us!" All because you took a little mental trip, put yourself in their shoes, and tailored your product to their needs.

And when the wing commander looks at you and says "Intel?" All the daily intelligence traffic will become a blur in your head. Every foreign country, the brushfires.... But you already engaged your filters and asked yourself, "If I were the boss, what would I need?" You will say, "sir, aside from the latest you've seen on CNN with Bosnia, Iraq and Korea, the international scene looks pretty quiet for the coming weekend. However, local law enforcement told me that there may be some protesters at the air show next week. Oh, and it's supposed to get cold tonight... you all might want to take your jackets when you go home for the weekend."

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