

---

# Understanding Soldiers in Training- Afghanistan

---

Cultural understanding that is critical to effectively train and mentor Afghan National Army (ANA) soldiers.

---

MPRI ANA-RCC  
Route Clearance Company Training Program  
1 June 2011

---

## ***Introduction:***

This program constantly seeks to deliver training to Afghans whose way of viewing the world is completely different from our own. We must fully understand how that influences his ability to learn. In order for us to be effective trainers in this environment we must be trusted, believed, valued and above all else in tune with this nation's cultural dynamic. This concept is completely divorced from one's own religious preference or beliefs.

This information is presented in two parts. First is a brief description of basic Afghan Cultural Principles. This should help the reader begin to understand the environment in which our duties are performed. Second is a synopsis of tools for effective training and mentoring that have proven effective over two years of experience with the Afghan National Army. This list is by no means all-inclusive. In time, you may develop new and more effective approaches. It is of the utmost importance that positive developments and valuable experience allows us to update this material as warranted.

## ***Purpose:***

These materials are designed to inform and stimulate thought. The combined effort of coalition forces over the last 10 years has proven both costly and largely ineffective. Our assertion is that if we continue to force western ideas and methods upon a resistant Afghan populace, we will continue to be ineffective. By understanding the differences between our cultures, we hope to make great strides in the improvement of training delivery through positive reinforcement and infinite patience.

## ***Scope:***

This information is presented for use by all RCC trainers and leaders. While some assert that Afghans should embrace western ideas, Coalition failures demonstrate that it is we who need to re-think our approach. While this material was developed for RCC use, it is our belief that other programs and Coalition partners can benefit from the implementation of techniques that embrace these ideas.

## ***Basic Principles of Afghan Culture-***

Many fail to acknowledge that Afghan society is completely different from the West, and Afghan priorities and thoughts are foreign to us all. If Western values are projected onto the Afghans, they will be expected to behave in a Western manner. However, they are not Westerners! The Afghan mentality coupled with four decades of violence and warfare that is beyond our ability to comprehend has resulted in a society vastly different from that with which we are accustomed. Our American military culture and "Drill Sergeant" conditioning applies exactly the wrong tool when correcting an Afghan, humiliation. Included here are simple ideas that everyone who interacts with Afghans must have a complete understanding of in order to cooperate successfully with these tribal people.

A unique form of tribalism that is regulated by its own code governs the numerous tribes comprising the Afghan people. Though not specific to the Pashtun tribe in particular, the Pashtun-Wali Code, is loosely understood by anthropologists as the "way of the Afghan man". It is critically important to understand that, completely unlike Western Civilization; an Afghan does not think of himself as a citizen but rather thinks of his tribe as the basic unit of their social system. The tribe always comes before the individual in every

decision. Westerners should be cognizant that this Afghan tribal concept is how they perceive us as well; they see the collective "Westerners" not the individual with whom they interact. The code is simply based on four tenants that are not necessarily interpreted exactly the same as in Western thought:

1. Courage- based upon a concept of loyalty and honor in order to protect the tribe and its reputation. Close family and friends who encourage the individual to seek revenge (there can be a time lag between incident and reaction) will generate and facilitate their courage.
2. Shame- any form of "losing face" whether individually or collectively (they are the same to an Afghan, and they expect it to be the same for us as well.)
3. Revenge- can be instigated by something as simple as a perception of challenge to the tribes honor, name, or reputation.
4. Hospitality- an egalitarian social system of mutual respect based on reciprocity, collective responsibility and civility to others. A man is judged by how much hospitality he demonstrates to others.<sup>i,ii,iii</sup>

---

***Afghan's always think collectively, not the individual thought of Westerners.***

---

<sup>i</sup> Gant, Jim. *One Tribe at a Time*. Los Angeles, CA: Nine Sisters Imports: 2009.

<sup>ii</sup> Kilcullen, David. *The Accidental Guerrilla, Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One*. New York: Oxford Press, 2009.

<sup>iii</sup> Ronfeldt, David. "In Search Of How Societies Work, Tribes -- The First and Forever Form." Prepared for the RAND Pardee Center, 2006.

There are many critical considerations to understand when building relationships with Afghans, particularly young soldiers and NCOs. Foremost, these men have no education; they often did not even attend the equivalent of kindergarten when recruited from remote villages. These facts are relevant for the trainer or mentor's situational awareness and understanding. Background knowledge of this nature assists in the development of effective and positive relationship as well as preventing failures of the same.

1. Humiliation will destroy relationships and disrupt peace more than any other action. It is the absolute worst act a Westerner can practice.
2. The entire tribe receives an insult directed at an individual; it is always regarded as directed against the collective group regardless of circumstance, and is collectively delivered by the opposing group in all cases as well. If you insult me, your whole tribe has insulted my entire tribe; Afghans always think collectively, not the individual thought of Westerners.
3. Any humiliation or insult can be alleviated only by compensation or revenge. Either the individual who initiated the insult must make reparation, or the individual insulted is obligated to seek revenge. The individual that initiated the confrontation generally chooses a person, who is mutually respected. If agreed by the other party, he will then mediate a peaceful resolution. These are the primary forms of conflict resolution. Justice is not perceived in the Western sense; it is the restoration of honor to the tribe and its reputation.
4. Afghan's display tremendous willingness to cooperate when asked respectfully, but can un-equivocally refuse if ordered or threatened by force.

5. Always remember that an Afghan's patience is endless. They typically have very little too lose besides their honor, particularly the young soldier recruited from a remote village. Consequences are insignificant compared to the loss of courage they would demonstrate to their tribe if they fail to defend the tribe's honor. This can lead the tribe to many forms of retribution, the least of which is being ostracized. It is impossible for a Western person to wrap their mind around the last four decades of life in Afghanistan. The history has made tribalism and tribal code more important than any other influence. Certainly much more important than any individual Afghan, he will always put the code and his tribes honor or reputation first.



*Mentor providing After Action Review Comments to the ANA Platoon Commander, so that he can conduct the AAR.*

6. Your body language is perceived constantly. Afghans can read you like a book. The language barrier is much less significant for them and they understand your true intentions. This stems from many facets of their society and they have practiced these skills since their childhood. In the world from which they come, knowing and understanding people is critical to survival.

7. If you are not genuine, they will know it almost immediately. Because of their skill at reading and judging people, they will recognize an act, and will know that your intentions may be different from what you profess.
8. The Afghans are intensely polite. If they do not like you, you would never know it. Additionally, regardless of their personal feelings towards you, they truly respect your sacrifice in being here for them and their country.
9. Authority does not work the same way in the ANA as in most other armies. Remember, every man is considered equal and any form of organizational structure has historically been decentralized. Rank and chain of command are much more loosely structured for them. Additionally, a commander does not have the unquestionable capacity to order subordinates; they might just quit or in their

words “run away”. A commander in the ANA must coach and justify why they are doing things. He is required to demonstrate the greater necessity in order for subordinates to understand and support his objectives. If you listen closely, following an dressing down he will probably apologize to his soldiers, and will certainly explain why it was necessary. Support and reinforce his chain of command. If a leader is telling you whose responsibility something is, he is politely telling you to go see that guy.

10. Afghans are communal. If you share living or office space with them, then what is yours will be theirs, and vice versa. They may use your things without asking. They are not stealing; this is how their society functions. Their concept of personal space is also different from ours in the West. Being close, holding hands or other contact is normal to them. If you shy away, it will be disruptive, rude, and easily perceived by the soldiers.<sup>i,ii,iii</sup>

i Gant, Jim. *One Tribe at a Time*. Los Angeles, CA: Nine Sisters Imports: 2009.

ii Kilcullen, David. *The Accidental Guerrilla, Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One*. New York: Oxford Press, 2009.

iii Ronfeldt, David. “In Search Of How Societies Work, Tribes -- The First and Forever Form.” Prepared for the RAND Pardee Center, 2006.



*Soldiers conduct rock drill rehearsals while the ANA Company Commander, mentor and interpreter observe in the background.*

## ***Tools for Effective Training and Mentoring-***

Having identified some of the challenges faced with training the ANA effectively, here are some solutions and thoughts that have enabled the RCC program to be more effective.

1. Each morning, as you plan your training day, do not set expectations for yourself or the soldiers you are working with. Develop goals. Things move slowly in Afghanistan. When you have an expectation that is not achievable, you will become frustrated and perhaps even angry. This will cause your relationship to deteriorate and will reflect negatively in everything you attempt thereafter.
2. Never correct or scold ANA leaders in front of their soldiers. This is highly disrespectful and humiliating to the individual as well as counterproductive to empowering his leadership.
3. Remember that only 50% of everything you communicate is understood. The rest is lost in translation. The same rule applies to the soldiers you are training. You are only getting half of what they are trying to tell you. Even the best interpreter can only achieve a limited level of success. Failure to recognize this can often result in either condescension or frustration, neither of which is going to make the training event successful. When your point is not communicated effectively, try a new approach. Additionally, never base any expectation on communication alone. Build on each idea, and add something new to each positive result. Do not try to express a complex idea in a single conversation.
4. Use the same interpreter all the time. Both you and your counterpart will become comfortable working together and he will become acquainted with the issues you are addressing. You will also begin to recognize

his capabilities and tailor your use of language accordingly. Take time to coach your interpreter before training that requires complex ideas, if he understands the idea you are trying to convey, it will translate much easier. Take the time to position him where he will be most effective during meetings, he is critical to everything you do. LN interpreters can provide you with a tremendous amount of situational awareness beyond simply translating the words of your counterpart. Be cautious of Cat I interpreters from the U.S., depending on how old they were when they left Afghanistan, they may not understand or recognize the cultural aspects of conversation with ANA soldiers.

5. Sometimes, it is good to observe without interfering. The ANA might be young as an army, but there is a lot of experience within their people. There are things going on that you are probably not aware of and they have requirements you have not considered.



*Platoon Commander conducts training with his NCO's while the mentor listens to the interpreter's translation.*

6. Make time to socialize. Westerners move at a pace with which Afghans are not comfortable. If you are too intense, it will negatively influence your relationship, as your counterpart will consider you abrasive.
7. Make an effort to learn their names. This is a sign of respect and a significant demonstration that you are being polite. It will have an immediate effect, as they have probably never known a Westerner make the effort in the past.
8. Stay calm. Remember the code that Afghans have lived by for a long time. If you act like the stereotypical army drill sergeant, your counterparts will not respond in the manner, which you desire. Many incidents involving ANA violence against their coalition trainers can be attributed to revenge for humiliation or disrespect.
9. Build on small success. When you find something that works, keep using it. If what you tried today does not work, it is not going to work tomorrow either.
10. ANA soldiers learn by doing. They work exceptionally well in small groups and will facilitate the advancement of one another's knowledge. Classroom training and power point presentations are not effective with these soldiers. Remember, they have never learned in that type of environment and more than 70% cannot read the slides regardless of the language. Put their hands on the equipment and help them figure it out. As a general rule, three soldiers to one piece of equipment. This is counter-intuitive, however when together once one soldier understands the next step; he will ensure the others achieve the same learning objective. Culturally they are more effective this way than typical Westerners.
11. Rock Drills work! You will always have enough rocks here, and this is how the

soldiers played as children. They will understand if you keep it simple and do not try to make things too fancy. Elaborate models will not impress them. Leave them alone to rehearse together some more as this is when they will really learn the drill.

12. Show them what right looks like. If you can demonstrate a correct procedure while they observe you, they will get it right on their first try. If you talk to them about it, they might not ever know what you expect. Talking is not doing. If you are talking for more than two minutes, no one is learning anymore.
13. The most effective methodology to achieve training objectives includes the following:
  - a. Apply short duration efforts with a particular task.
  - b. Plan rotations between different tasks to avoid boredom and inspire learning.
  - c. Revisit tasks often, frequent repetition stimulates retention.

---

*If you are talking for more than two minutes, no one is learning anymore.*

---

14. Listen to what they are telling you. If you have a positive relationship, and they say they need a break, then they probably do. If they are adamantly recommending something, then it is because they know something of which you are not aware.
15. They are very proud of their experience. When you begin a lesson, have them demonstrate what they already know how to do. This will give you a starting point, and they will appreciate that you are advancing their knowledge. Additionally, you will maximize efficiency by not repeating tasks for which soldiers are already proficient.

16. Look for the small systems that support larger goals. Often, the ANA cannot accomplish something you wish to achieve because of a minor limitation you have failed to consider. We often take for granted the subsystems that are implied in our organizations. The ANA often does not have these foundations, or are not familiar with their purpose and effective employment.



*Coalition Partnering Team observes while the Platoon Commander briefs the Corps Chief of Engineering on the unit training.*

17. Be cognizant of what they are doing. Do not intrude on their internal progress unless invited. If an ANA leader is working with soldiers to achieve training objectives, just listen and observe. Interrupting their effort is counterproductive, and you will never know it happened. They will always stop what they are doing and listen to what you are saying as their first priority. That is their culture, anything less would be rude. Encouraging and empowering their leadership is a critical component of the strategic objectives here.
18. Always listen when they are talking. When an ANA leader is addressing the soldiers, you should be listening to what he is telling them. Anything less is extremely disrespectful and rude. He knows you are not interested in what he has to say, if your interpreter is not translating for you!

19. Follow through on any commitment you make to the soldiers. If you tell them you are going to do something, you must get it done, and it should be timely. The coalition makes a habit of promising things that never materialize. Of course, this means you have to ensure you never make promises you cannot keep. If you tell them something, they expect it to happen as you said it would.

20. Always acknowledge the experience of ANA leadership. Their experience is essential to their sense of self; to ignore it is terribly detrimental to your effective relationship with that individual. It is equally important to remember that this is probably not his first experience working with Westerners. Those previous relationships were very likely not founded on coalition members respecting him or treating him as an equal.

21. Remember, this is a counterinsurgency. Every action and communication that you perform in the vicinity of any Afghan soldier, civilian, and interpreter influences their perception and opinion of Westerners. This perception will be communicated to their family and friends who may not have personal interaction with Westerners.

---

***He knows you are not interested in what he has to say, if your interpreter is not translating for you!***

---

22. Reinforce the nature of training to empower them to sustain themselves. It is important to remind the soldiers that your mission is to give them the knowledge that they need to operate independently. Thus, the Westerners will be able to leave Afghanistan for the Afghans. Every opportunity to remind them that we are not occupiers is important COIN doctrine.

23. Watch soldiers, and ask your interpreter to help watch soldiers who demonstrate indications of problems, internal or personal issues. Take time to ask him questions regarding his problem. It is probably not something you can influence, but by showing concern, you will garner respect from the soldier and the rest of the unit.
24. Avoid discussions about religion. Enemy information operations have effectively influenced Afghan public opinion that the

West is disdainful of their religion. This has been reinforced by Western comments and reactions to Islamic traditions over the previous 10 years. Any effort you make to discuss their religion will probably result in a negative impression. However, a brief but positive comment can be a huge influence to dissuading their perception. As an example, when you hear the call to prayer from the mosque, a simple comment that it is a nice tradition would be highly influential.

The most effective measure of your effort at working with the ANA will be the observation of your local national interpreter. If he tells you that you have “**good behavior**” with the ANA, you are doing well. If he advises you to change a technique or try something different, you should consider his recommendation valid. The local national interpreter intuitively knows things you will never understand.

---

*I would like to give special thanks to the following individuals for providing support and experience in the development of this document in an effort to enhance the effectiveness of training and mentoring the Afghan National Army.*

*Sayed Azam Sadat and Haroon Mohammad Yousafzi, local national interpreters who have worked with the MPRI Route Clearance Company training program and other Coalition efforts previously. Without their dedication and honesty, none of this would have been possible.*

*CPT Ahmad Shah and 1LT Sayed Bahadur of the 2<sup>nd</sup> BDE, 203<sup>rd</sup> Corps, Route Clearance Company. After a year of training, partnership and friendship their candor and Afghan perspectives for effective relationships and training were of immense insight to the development of this product and the implementation of more effective training for the Route Clearance Training Program.*

*Jason Vergne, MPRI-RCC Subject Matter Expert. Jason’s natural gift of understanding and effectively communicating with ANA soldiers is truly incalculable. Without his input, experimentation and efforts day in and day out these ideas would not have come to fruition. He is truly the “Rock Star” of ANA training.*

---

For recommended additions or questions regarding this discussion, please contact Leo Clark at the following email address: [Leodclark1@gmail.com](mailto:Leodclark1@gmail.com) .

## ***References and Recommended Reading List-***

### ***History of Afghanistan:***

Coll, Steve. *Ghost Wars, the Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001*. New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2004.

Feifer, Gregory. *The Great Gamble, the Soviet War in Afghanistan*. New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2009.

Oren, Michael B. *Power, Faith and Fantasy: America and the Middle East: 1776 to the Present*. W. W. Norton & Company, 2008.

Rashid, Ahmed. *Descent into Chaos, How the War against Islamic Extremism is Being Lost in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia*. New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2008.

Tanner, Stephen. *Afghanistan, a Military History From Alexander the Great to the War Against the Taliban*. Revised Ed. Philadelphia, PA: Da Capo Press: 2009.

### ***Tribal Society and Afghan Culture:***

Gant, Jim. *One Tribe at a Time*. Los Angeles, CA: Nine Sisters Imports: 2009.

Dobbins, James. "Your COIN Is No Good Here" *Foreign Affairs.com* (October 26<sup>th</sup>, 2010) [http://rand.org/commentary/2010/10/26/FA.html?ref=homepage&key=t\\_soldiers\\_patrol\\_afghanistan](http://rand.org/commentary/2010/10/26/FA.html?ref=homepage&key=t_soldiers_patrol_afghanistan) accessed November 3<sup>rd</sup> 2010.

Gannon, Kathy. "The Art of Afghan Alliance Building, Winning Hearts and Minds, Eight Years on." *Foreignaffairs.com* (October 13, 2009) <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/65441/kathy-gannon/the-art-of-afghan-alliance-building> accessed 10 November, 2010.

Kilcullen, David. *The Accidental Guerrilla, Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One*. New York: Oxford Press, 2009.

Kabalan, Marwan. "Arab Tribalism and Western Intelligentsia." *Special to Gulf News*, 28 December 2007.

Nasr, Seyyed Hossein. *Islam Religion, History, and Civilization*. New York, NY: HarperCollins: 2003.

Ronfeldt, David. "In Search Of How Societies Work, Tribes -- The First and Forever Form." Prepared for the RAND Pardee Center, 2006.

Ronfeldt, David. "Today's Wars Are Less About Ideas Than Extreme Tribalism." *The Christian Science Monitor*. March 2007 Edition.

Said, Edward W. *Covering Islam How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*. New York: Vintage Books, 1997.

Salzman, Philip Carl. "The Middle East's Tribal DNA." *Middle East Quarterly*, Winter 2008, 23-33.

Tariq, Mohammad Osman, Najila Ayoubi, Fazel Rabi Haqbeen. "Afghanistan in 2010, a Survey of the Afghan People." The Asia Foundation (2010) <http://www.asiafoundation.org/country/afghanistan/2010-poll.php> accessed November 15, 2010.

U.S. Congress. Senate. Senate Armed Services Committee. *Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan*: Testimony presented by James Dobbins (Rand Corporation) February 26, 2009. <http://www.rand.org/pubs/testimonies/CT318/> Accessed November 10, 2010.