

## PRACTICE NOTE

# Civilian Stabilization Team Leadership Success: Perceptions for Iraq Provincial Reconstruction Teams<sup>1</sup>

Brett C. Doyle\*

---

Team Leaders were a crucial element of Iraq Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs), and they dramatically impacted the performance of a team, both positively and negatively. This review examines PRT members' perspectives of Team Leaders (TLs) and the roles leaders played in PRT successes, as well as the particular challenges that leaders faced. This review is based primarily upon interviews of PRT members ending their tours. Beginning in the latter half of 2009, the Center for Army Lessons Learned (CALL) and the Center for Complex Operations (CCO) conducted lessons learned interviews with departing Iraq PRT members. Over 100 interviews from this process were examined for this review (initially completed in October of 2010).

Though derived from feedback on Iraqi operations, the examples and insights found here should also be applicable to other or future reconstruction and stabilization operations. It is likely that similar leadership challenges or roles will be required in similar circumstances, when operating in hostile conditions, and with teams composed of members with a number of different organizational perspectives and goals.

---

Team Leaders were a crucial element of Iraq Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs), and they dramatically impacted the performance of a team, both positively and negatively. This review examines PRT members' perspectives of Team Leaders (TLs) and the roles leaders played in PRT successes, as well as the particular challenges that leaders faced. The Iraq PRT program was unique in a number of respects, and in particular this was true for its team leadership. While both Iraq and Afghanistan PRTs were combined civilian and military efforts, as was their spiritual forefather the Vietnam era CORDS (Civil Operations and Rural Development Support) program, the Iraq program was distinct in that it was led

by civilian personnel from the Department of State, rather than by military officers. In the Iraq PRT case, understanding the roles of a Team Leader in the complex and evolving Iraqi theater was an evolutionary process. A multitude of challenges were faced by each PRT, and no two PRTs faced exactly the same set of problems. Thus, the Iraq PRTs provide a wide range of examples of challenges that could arise and a multitude of examples of both leadership success and failure.

Led by the State Department, PRTs in Iraq were established in November 2005. Growing from an original number of 10 to over 20, most of the PRTs were located on U.S. military bases and relied on the military for security and logistical support. Iraq PRTs operated at the provincial level in Iraq, partnering with local Iraqi provincial leader-

---

\*George Mason University, United States  
[brettc.doyle@comcast.net](mailto:brettc.doyle@comcast.net)

ship. Two exceptions to this rule were the Regional Reconstruction Team in Kurdistan, which had responsibility for the three provinces of the Kurdish autonomous region, and Baghdad PRT, which focused on its namesake city. In the 2007 time frame, approximately 10 Embedded PRTs (ePRTs) were formally activated in selected areas to operate at sub-provincial district or municipal levels. These were located in and around Baghdad and in Anbar province. PRTs provided a U.S. civilian presence in areas that would not be reached otherwise during the conflict.

Iraq PRTs were task organized, which is to say that they were uniquely staffed and structured to meet their local needs. As a result, no two Iraq PRTs were the same. They ranged in size from approximately 20 personnel to over 100 for the largest team in Baghdad. These staff could consist of military personnel, including Deputy Team Leaders, civilian staff including State Department Foreign Service Officers (FSOs), and staff detailed from other civilian agencies such as the Departments of Justice or Agriculture. Iraq PRTs were also comprised of limited term civilian staff hired from outside of the government (known as '3161s') who were often specialists in a particular field, and contractors from the State Department, U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and the Department of Defense who served as interpreters and translators, cultural advisors, or sometimes also as subject matter specialists. Though staff and specific tasks could vary widely, PRTs conducted activities in common areas of activity, such as supporting the rule of law, the full range of economic development and infrastructure rehabilitation, Iraqi governance institutions, and the political reconciliation in their areas of responsibility. As the PRT program and Iraq environment evolved, the focus changed from directly implementing services and physical construction to building local Iraqi government and civil society capacity to implement and manage their own activities.

A number of articles and commentaries have been made about team leadership in

Iraq PRTs. These range from the scathing, such as Blake Stones' 'Blind Ambition' (2012), and Peter Van Buren's *We Meant Well* (2011), to the supportive, such as in Stephen Donnelly's rebuttal to the latter 'We Did Mean Well' (2011) and Howard Van Vranken's 'Interagency Team-making – Lessons Learned From the "Surge" in Iraq' (2010). Other pieces fall somewhere in the middle, such as Shawn Dorman's 'Iraq PRTs: Pins on a Map' (2007), Eric Whitaker's 'Working and Living in Iraq' (2008), and Bernard Carreau's 'Lessons from USDA in Iraq and Afghanistan' (2010). However, these have largely been based off of individual experiences in the Iraq PRT program, a program for which experiences could vary widely from province to province as well as from year to year.

This review seeks to move beyond individual accounts, and examine the Iraq PRT experience more broadly and systematically. Thus, this article looks at a large collection of interviews conducted with Iraq PRT staff members and in several cases, PRT Tls themselves, ending their tours. Beginning in the latter half of 2009, the Center for Army Lessons Learned (CALL) and the Center for Complex Operations (CCO),<sup>2</sup> which is part of the National Defense University, conducted lessons learned interviews with departing Iraq PRT members. Over 100 interviews from this process were examined for this review (initially completed in October of 2010). Of these interviews, 66 interviewees specifically addressed Tls, with a mix of criticism and praise, and often noting their critical importance to team performance. Additional inputs have been synthesized from State Department cables, other interviews of PRT members, the articles listed above, and additional sources.<sup>3</sup> However, even a large body of field personnel perspectives cannot provide a fully complete picture. This is particularly true for the complex and challenging nature of the program. What this review does not necessarily include are the U.S. Embassy leadership perceptions of Tls, nor could it capture the views of the military or Iraq partners of PRTs

and TLs. With this framework, the roles of TLs are illustrated as seen by PRT staff with a view toward what made leaders successful, as well as a review of challenges specific to stabilization team leadership.

Further, though this review discusses many of the challenges of Iraq PRT leadership it does so in recognition of the dedicated service of TLs in a hostile environment. Most Iraq PRT TLs were successful, and a fair number were outstanding. Even a successful TL may have had weaknesses in one or more areas below while still performing well overall. And in fairness, the role of civilian leadership in PRT was a new mission for the Department of State and its personnel. Even the operation of PRTs themselves was a relatively recent development, having only been operating in Afghanistan for three years by the time they were formally activated in Iraq in late 2005. The State Department did make greater efforts to screen and prepare its PRT leaders as the program developed and until its cessation in September 2011.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, as TL performance was not an express topic of inquiry in the interview process many of these comments were volunteered by interviewees with strong views, either positive or, more commonly, negative. As anyone familiar with exit interviews or lessons learned efforts could attest to, the process lends itself to focusing on failures rather than successes. The examination of challenges below should be viewed in this light.

Though derived from Iraqi operations, the examples and insights found here should also be applicable to other or future reconstruction and stabilization operations. It is likely that similar leadership challenges or roles will be required in similar circumstances, when operating in hostile conditions, and with teams composed of members with a number of different organizational perspectives and goals. While the details of the situation may change – such as local cultures, the size and scope of missions, military partnerships – many of the lessons will doubtless be broadly applicable to any complex stabilization activity. Due to the newness of the civil-

ian PRT leadership mission, the Iraq PRT program was developed without the benefit of a body of supporting knowledge. Ideally, this review can serve as such a building block for understanding stabilization team leadership and for helping to prepare leaders and policy makers for the ‘next time,’ whenever and wherever that may be. It is with this in mind that recommendations for fostering stabilization team leadership success are derived from this review.

### **Perceived Team Leader Roles and Responsibilities**

A number of critical roles for PRT TLs were identified in the interviews. These consisted of:

#### ***Role 1. Team Vision and Guidance***

A key role cited by interviewees for the TL was that of providing priorities and guidance for team members. TL strategic guidance or vision, and subsequent operational guidance and priority setting on that vision, was further seen as important for overall PRT mission success. This included a vision for overall team goals, but it also included vision for individual contributions as well. In this regard, TL vision entailed linking operational efforts to strategic goals. The Iraq environment created a number of challenges for TLs in this respect. The rapidly changing environment and evolving mission of the PRT complicated guidance development. Further, TLs often found themselves operating without a sufficient overarching strategy to ‘nest’ their visions and guidance.<sup>5</sup>

TLs who succeeded in imparting vision and guidance supported the PRT’s focus on the mission as a group, while the absence of vision and guidance hindered group cohesion. This was also cited as particularly important in the environment of short tours and significant turnover rates. In this regard, a successful TL’s team vision provided a contextual framework for individual goal setting and activity planning over the span of multiple tours. Part of this vision and guidance expectation was the ability to see beyond a one year tour time frame. Frequent radical changes of TL visions,

often caused by TL replacements, was seen as disruptive to PRT continuity. When there was an absence of TL guidance, PRT members sought guidance from peers, sometimes with limited or mixed results. Rapid changes to TL vision due to personnel issues or administrative restructuring, such as the case of team mergers,<sup>6</sup> also fostered confusion about PRT goals. Disruption or absence of TL vision in some cases led to confusion of mission and strategic objectives, disunity in the team about the means to achieve them, or lack of individual understanding about what their role was in the larger effort.

### **Role 2. Expectation Setting and Accountability**

*'The Team Leader gave me a lot of initial readings on the Maysanis [a province of Iraq], but he expected you to go out and find out, so I went out and found out.'* – Interviewee quote

The TL role also included setting expectations and holding individual team members accountable for meeting objectives during the course of their activities. The TL was seen as the interlocutor for the team with the Embassy and with the partnered military unit in determining such strategic objectives. This relationship often worked in both directions, as TLs became a key source of input on what and how much guidance was needed from senior leaders. TLs were also looked to as a source of feedback on performance or activities. Interviewees saw this role as including tracking of individual PRT personnel activities, which could involve reporting on activities at team meetings, or in other settings.

The TL's encouragement and incorporation planning and accountability efforts, such as the PRT Work Plans, Maturity Model or Unified Common Plans,<sup>7</sup> were cited as necessary for wider support and employment by the teams. Conversely, interviewees noted that lack of TL support for these tools con-

tributed to their limited application by PRTs. Limited use could often result in reduced planning and coordination, and in some cases fostered a perception of them as 'paper drills' without substance. It should be noted that TL planning skills themselves were not cited as being as critical as was their endorsement of the planning tools and process. This was due to the view from interviewees that although TLs may not possess strong planning skills themselves, the skills were often found within their teams or even from military partners.

When it occurred, interviewees remarked that a lack of objectives or accountability by TLs set the stage for team members 'floundering' as well as doing what 'they wanted to do,' rather than what needed to be achieved. Laxness in individual goal setting could also allow team members to focus on lanes of activity in which they had a strong personal interest but which were not necessarily the areas of greatest expertise. It also led in a number of instances to duplication of efforts. However, this involvement in PRT members' roles and activities should not have been permitted to reach the point where it interfered unduly with team members' abilities to perform their functions. The freedom to function needed to be balanced with the needs for accountability.

### **Role 3. Fostering Teamwork**

*'TL is the key player in setting the management tone and providing a collective focus to the PRT mission, otherwise you have a bunch of people all heading out in different directions'* – Interviewee quote

Interviewees described the TL as essential in setting PRT priorities and managing them across all lines of activity. TLs successful in their coordinating role were seen as critical for fostering overall mission success. They were also critical in countering any tendencies toward stove-piping and the flourish-

ing of individual ‘pet projects.’ To achieve this, TLs needed to ensure linkage of various PRT lines of operation and complementary efforts to maximize team effectiveness. In at least one case, the perception of reporting directly to the TL was seen as eliminating the need to individually coordinate with other team members, presumably if not directed by the TL.

Interviewees cited that TL understanding of what each team member did was essential to ensure proper coordination. Though a technical understanding of team members’ areas of expertise was not required – and not necessarily desired by team members – understanding members’ roles and responsibilities enabled successful TL performance. This included understanding the time frames for individual achievements in their lines of operation, which can vary from shorter term to the longer term. For example, in the case of agricultural assistance it could require one or more annual growing cycles to demonstrate progress in farming sectors. This was in contrast to other projects with shorter timelines, such as infrastructure rehabilitation or small scale economic development programs which could produce tangible results in months or even weeks.

When PRT members cited an absence of this coordination, the effectiveness of the PRT was reported as suffering due to duplicative lines of effort and missed opportunities for synergy among team projects. Cooperation among members may not have occurred naturally or may have faced resistance from independent-minded team members; however, the TL was seen as having the authority and responsibility to create environments or to plan structures that enabled inter-team cooperation. At least one interviewee indicated that PRT members could self-organize as a stop-gap measure to mitigate these issues, such as having informal meetings or working together on the basis of interpersonal relationships. However, such self-organized cooperation was less than what could be achieved through consistent TL

guidance, as the TL could direct it regardless of individual preferences.

#### **Role 4. Interpersonal or ‘People’ Management**

*‘We were lucky in that as an entire group we got along with each other. I think a great deal of that is due to the leadership, the person at the very top, who worked and tried to create a structure whereby people would work together and not opposite each other. It was a tribute to her leadership, as well as to the fact that we just had a group of nice people.’ – Interviewee quote*

The personnel or ‘people’ management role of a TL was also seen as critical by interviewees.<sup>8</sup> TLs were expected to manage and work with a diverse set of individuals on a PRT and with the military. Interpersonal skills were cited as key to doing this effectively. PRT interpersonal management was described by interviewees as fostering strong and collegial internal group dynamics among PRT staff. The ability to engender respect and foster team environments was also valued. Elements of the interpersonal skills required also seen as enabling leadership roles previously discussed, such as being able to set expectations and manage accountabilities, the ability to push or motivate people, and the ability to develop action plans.

Interviewees cited the hostile, austere, and difficult working conditions in which PRTs operate as reinforcing the need for strong people management and interpersonal skills. In particular, the environment was frequently characterized as high stress and emotionally charged. Further, PRT environments often lacked personal ‘space,’ with personnel usually working and living together in confined spaces seven days per week. This increased the disruption that can result from interpersonal issues, such as an inability to work cooperatively or even the development of hostile work environments. Issues which in

normal working environments could be negative but manageable – such as failed office romance – became magnified in the harsh environment, as one interviewee noted.

Hands on leadership experience, or potential leadership training, was seen as something to look for in a TL's background which may better prepare them for the role. Several interviewees also noted that management of large staffs or groups of people were not standard to the Foreign Service Officer (FSO) career background. One source suggested that Deputy Chief of Mission (DCM) experience would be a good source of staffing experience in senior FSOs. Moreover, strong interpersonal and management skills were also perceived by interviewees as not being standard or typical among State Department FSO skill sets. However, exceptional individuals were noted as excelling in the role.

#### **Role 5. Staff Management**

*'TL perceived his role to be the reporting agent for the PRT, and as a result was not the person in charge, his solution was to pass problem people off to other PRTs or recycle them to other jobs within the PRT instead of addressing the issues' – Interviewee quote*

As alluded to in the brief description of Iraq PRTs in the introduction, staffing for Iraq PRTs was complicated. The various types of military, civilian and contractor staff each had differing rules for how they could be managed. As career foreign service officers, few, if any, TLs would have had managerial experience with full range of personnel that formed their teams. This complexity was no doubt at least part of the reason why many interviewees cited the need for TLs to take a more active role in the staff management of their PRTs. This included reviewing and interviewing new hires and weeding out marginally performing members of the PRTs. The allowance of marginal or even non-performing personnel was cited as having an

opportunity cost for the PRT. This was due to precluding the PRT access to additional expertise that a better qualified and able PRT member might have provided to the group effort.

Further, a number of interviewees described their TLs as unwilling to address difficult personnel issues or as lacking in training in expertise at managing them. At least one interviewee cited a perception that Embassy leadership might view a PRT TL as ineffective if performance problems were known. It was also seen as unclear if the Office of Provincial Affairs (OPA), the headquarters office of the PRT program, or the Embassy would support difficult personnel decisions. Other interviewees cited a perceived lack of authority on the TLs part to address personnel issues. The work involved in counseling and documenting poor performance was also seen as barriers to addressing the issue. In addition, TLs were cited as sometimes delegating staff management to Deputies, who may have had no better management skills than the TLs themselves. This practice was considered to adversely impact the effective PRT functioning.

#### **Role 6. Management Styles**

*'There were some Team Leaders that were exceptional, that worked hand in glove with our USAID reps, and it was really good to see. And you just want to see more of those.' - Interviewee quote*

Interviewee concerns about management styles were most commonly related to TLs being too hands-off,<sup>9</sup> or related to TLs having a very strong personality. Personally removed TL approaches were seen as resulting in most personnel operating in different directions and developing projects with very little collaboration or synchronization. This, again, often resulted in duplicative efforts or unnecessary scope conflicts. Some other TLs were seen as having a very strong personality or even dictatorial style of management. This

could be positive, since hostile work environments often preclude the kind of consensus-building approach commonly seen in less stressful situations. Therefore, strong TL personalities were seen as useful in terms of spurring action or achievement of objectives. However, such strong personal styles were not always endearing to subordinates and could themselves cause team morale problems. As a corollary, more popular TLs, with hands-off or little to no guidance approaches may have not have been perceived as effective leaders. Accordingly, the perceived lack of management 'superstructure' was seen as rewarding a strong personal style approach to leadership. A strong personal style was noted by interviewees as being able to facilitate success in the absence of other sufficient or robust management processes. Further, a strong leadership style was sometimes seen as being the only reliable means to enable a PRT to achieve progress.

Effectively and flexibly operating in an interagency environment was viewed as a needed strength by at least one former TL interviewee. The ability to work effectively within your own agency was necessary, but so too was an ability to interface and operate with other agencies' cultures. This could include sensitivity and support for interagency team members' career requirements, particularly the military Deputy TLs'. The need for such flexibility in being both a 'domestic diplomat' and an international diplomat was expressed in this excerpt from an interview:

'[M]ost PRT leaders have not already served as DCMs in embassies with multiple agencies. I realized that your effectiveness, whether as a TL or as a DCM, is directly affected by the perception that other agency heads in your mission have of you. "Are you my DCM?" In other words, are you as committed and as faithful and as diligent and understanding of that U.S. government agency's goals and objectives...?

Do they see you as just the senior State Department rep at an embassy or do they see you as their DCM? If they see you as their DCM, and if you are prepared to go out and work things for them, whether it is DIA [Defense Intelligence Agency] or [US]AID or on down the line, you have a much fuller and more effective relationship and it makes you a better leader. It makes you more effective in the long run. Likewise, if the military guys on the PRT don't view you as their leader or aren't made to feel that you are as interested in them as you are in the civilians and the State Department employees, you will just be in a different dynamic, and it won't be as fruitful.'

#### ***Role 7. Local Leader Relationship Management***

Another role interviewees described for the TL was that of the manager of PRT relationships with local partners, particularly with senior Iraqi leaders. TLs who succeeded in fostering strong relationships with local leaders set a positive tone for PRT interactions, solidified ties and forged further access for the team as a whole. Also, the PRTs' relationships with local leaders, when maintained by successful TLs, were viewed as key assets for understanding developments and the perspective of local Iraqi political actors. This information was of value to the Embassy as well as military partners. PRT relationships with local leaders were also critical for fostering and supporting reconciliation efforts between estranged or conflicting groups. Conversely, TLs with weak interpersonal or relationship building skills were seen as inhibiting PRT effectiveness.

Strong relationships with Iraqi leaders also played a key role in enabling agreement on common reconstruction and stabilization agendas. Local partner participation and mutual support for a given project was a critical enabler of its success. Projects or activi-

ties without sufficient local Iraqi support risked being abandoned after completion. They were also at greater risk of not being properly coordinated with local Iraqi government agencies to ensure utilization and enable Iraqi sustainment.

In many cases, local leaders may have been reluctant to build open relationships with U.S. leaders, largely for fear of alienating their constituent populations. These relationships often took repeated interactions and weeks or months of time to foster. A recommended approach by interviewees was to provide tangible inducements demonstrating the value of working with the U.S. For example, when restoring electricity or water to a neighborhood, those local leaders who can claim credit for that improvement would have been far more likely to support PRT and U.S. Government efforts. Such activities could even have resulted in new enthusiasm for partnering with the PRTs. However, in the case of turn-over of local officials, particularly when elections result in a change of parties, this enthusiasm was not likely to carry over to new officials and needed to be re-developed. Additionally, local language (Arabic) proficiency was cited by interviewees as valuable for fostering local relationships.

Looking out for the interests of Iraqi counterparts was often critical in building cohesion and confidence. In working with Iraqi counterparts, it was sometimes possible to reinforce each others' messages and priorities. This would have helped Iraqis understand U.S. goals. Local Iraqi employees were an asset in obtaining local context, and greater cohesion could have had the added benefit of access and mobility that the PRT would not otherwise have had in the hostile environment. USAID implementing partners, who were often local staff, were also a similar potential resource for the PRT and Team Leader. A concern noted by interviewees was that in some cases the interaction with senior Iraqis was managed exclusively by the TL, and junior PRT member engagement was restricted or prohibited. This access limita-

tion was viewed as potentially hindering PRT member performance, particularly by members working on governance issues. The management of access to local leaders with the needs of their PRTs in engaging them should be carefully considered by TLs.

### ***Role 8. Military Partner Relationship Building***

The relationship between PRTs and their military counter parts, most often the Brigade Combat Team (BCT) or equivalent unit, was vital to ensure necessary support functions.<sup>10</sup> This military support included day to day support, such as providing security teams for movement off the military facilities, provision of living quarters and work spaces, and general living conditions and logistical issues (e.g. office supplies, PRT vehicles for larger facilities, etc.). It also included critical functions such as awareness of security risks, access to military project funding (the Commander's Emergency Response Program), and coordination and synchronization of resources towards common goals. Strong working relationships between the military unit and the PRT often resulted in improved support provided in all of these areas. This was particularly true of PRTs who were embedded with or co-located on military facilities; more than just working alongside the military, these PRTs were *living in* the military culture.

The relationship between the TL and military commander was often the focal point of the PRT-military working relationship. The PRT-Military relationship could take months to cement, and it needed to be re-developed for every new military unit the PRT partnered with. Due to annual rotation cycles this would have been at least an annual responsibility for every TL. With reorganizations, a TL could even have been expected to foster as many as several new PRT-military unit relationships over the course of a year. A noted capacity of the TL to foster such relationships was the ability to communicate State Department operation methods and perspectives

to military partners. This was important, as military partners were often unfamiliar with the Department or the even principles of PRTs themselves.

The central role of the TL with regard to building strong relationships was commented on by interviewees, particularly when the TLs themselves were not cooperative with military counterparts. These relationships were often seen as personality dependent, and instances of TL 'personality' clashes with military partner commanders were noted by several of the interviewees. Either the TL or the military commander, or sometimes both, was seen as the source of difficult relationships or personality clashes. TL disinterest or disengagement from building a military partnership was considered by the interviewees as creating challenges for, or even directly limiting, PRT access to military resources and support. Further, disunity was noted as severely hindering PRT-military cooperation and coordination on goals.

When the TL was unable or unwilling to foster supportive relationships with military partners, the responsibility for doing so was often noted as being filled by the PRTs' military Deputy TL. Deputy TLs could be effective, though not in all cases, with mending or bridging gaps in the PRT-military unit relationship. Furthermore, even when not managing the PRT-military relationship themselves, the Deputy TL's experience and understanding of the military was seen as an asset. This allowed the Deputy to support the TL in building and sustaining relationships with military partners. This often occurred though Deputies providing the PRTs basic understanding of the military structure and processes, as well as providing context and insights into the military perspectives.

### **Challenges for Team Leader Effectiveness**

In addition to the roles discussed above, when discussing TLs interviewees also identified additional challenges to successful lead-

ership of the PRT. Each of these challenges were mentioned several times and seemed to arise independently across time and location. When they were mentioned, interviewees consistently described them as having significant negative impacts to team performance. Due to their importance to team success and their reoccurrence they merit examination. These challenges were:

#### ***Challenge 1. Leadership Changes and Short Duration***

*'Going through 5 TLs during the course of the tour impacted mission focus and collective continuity based achievements, fragmented priorities impacted overall success except for incremental and individual achievements on some LOAs [Lines of Activities].'* – Interviewee quote

A number of interviewees cited high TL turnover as detrimental to their PRTs effectiveness. This included exacerbating many of the challenges of PRT leadership as describe elsewhere. Effective Deputy TL continuity was seen as a means of mitigating these types of disruptions. However, a concern that can arise from this continuity advantage is the potential result of an inversion of authority between a Deputy and a TL. This could result from a longer term Deputy possessing an advantage in knowledge or simply just outlasting a short term TL. Stability in TLs was seen as an asset, with some interviewees calling for longer tours specifically for TLs to encourage continuity and coordination within the PRTs. Longer tours were also seen as valuable in providing an 'edge' in terms of experience and acquired knowledge, which could be particularly valuable for PRT leaders.

#### ***Challenge 2. Perceptions of Careerism and Entitlement***

A concern of some of the interviewees was the perception of 'careerism' among TLs and its negative impact on their performance.

Such TLs were seen as being overly concerned with career advancement and consequently distorting larger PRT goals toward that personal goal. Examples included preoccupations with reporting, viewing the Maturity Model as a 'report card' on TL performance, or simply just 'looking good' to the Embassy leadership. This was viewed as coming at the expense of overall PRT reconstruction or capacity development efforts, team interactions with local partners, or even team management functions discussed above.

A perception of TL self-entitlement was also criticized by some interviewees. In one example, perceived leadership arrogance, exemplified by chronic lateness to meetings, was seen as detrimental to fostering working relationships with the team. Such a perception was damaging to PRT morale, as well as how it affected interactions between the staff and TL. A TL sense of entitlement could complicate military relationships, particularly if a TL conveyed the expectation that they would be treated as a superior to the local military commander. Though often a technically correct assessment, such expectations could be highly detrimental to effective working relationships and were also unrealistic given the austere and hostile conditions.

### ***Challenge 3. Non-Responsiveness to Direction***

*'I think each PRT was at the whim of its PRT leader at the time.'* – Interviewee quote

Some interviewees noted a perceived disregard of OPA or Embassy direction by TLs. A contributing factor to this could be development of a 'perception of isolation' from the Embassy by TLs, which was cited by interviewees in some cases. Such a sense of isolation was seen to have fostered a sense that the TL is totally independent or their actions would not be noticed. The very senior or ambassador status of some TLs was also

perceived as an impediment to TL responsiveness to OPA or the Embassy. At least one interviewee noted that TLs could be technically senior to the OPA director. Such senior personnel were perceived as not necessarily being accustomed to, or particularly open to, taking direction.

A sometimes extreme degree of independence that could result was cited as leading to the pursuit of TL personal goals as opposed to strategic objectives. It was also seen as leading to arbitrary or personally determined management decisions. This could degrade team performance through impeded team management or execution of projects. It also often led to morale or interpersonal problems. In at least some cases, greater oversight of TL personnel management decisions was called for, when the TLs were perceived as arbitrary and detrimental to PRT effectiveness.

### **Insights**

Based upon this review, specific recommendations regarding TL responsibilities, desired traits to look for during recruitment, and leadership actions to potentially mitigate challenges in TL effectiveness can be derived. Though perhaps too late to be applied, if applicable, to current efforts in Afghanistan, they still can provide insights for other or future reconstruction and stabilization efforts.

#### ***Derived Team Leader Responsibilities***

Just as 'COIN (counter insurgency) is local', so is each team. As such, not every TL would necessarily be faced with the same challenges during their tour. However, TLs have a range of responsibilities which may be expected during the course of leading and managing a stabilization team. These responsibilities, outlined below, should be fully understood by all incoming TLs and considered as part of the selection criteria of a TL recruitment process:

*Organizing For Effectiveness.* TLs should lead the coordinating and de-confliction of roles and responsibilities among team mem-

bers. They should also be able to address and manage interagency concerns effectively. This would involve managing and leading in a multi-national, multi-cultural, multi-organization environment; supervising and leading diverse multi-cultural, interagency, and interdisciplinary teams; and working with the military, USAID, the United Nations, development NGOs, and other experts. Moreover, TLs should also be capable of ensuring synchronization with partners outside the team.

*Setting the Tone.* TLs should foster an environment of cooperation and collegial interaction among team members. This would include understanding styles of leadership and how to motivate themselves and others. TLs should be able to establish a habit or culture of accountability and planning among team members. TLs may also need to proactively address potentially difficult personnel issues to ensure team effectiveness and avoid potential disruptions. This would involve understanding the supervisory and evaluation requirements for staff (in Iraq this included FSOs, Civil Service detailees, '3161s', and other categories of employees); dealing with Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO), harassment, disciplinary, and other interpersonal issues in high-stress environments; and managing up and around, e.g. working with challenging peers, colleagues, bosses, and subordinates.

*Providing Strategy and Direction.* TLs should be able to serve as a focal point for strategic guidance for their team. This would involve communicating strategic objectives from Embassy and military leadership to the team. To facilitate this, as much continuity<sup>11</sup> as possible should be maintained between the TL's predecessor and between the TL and his/her successor. This can be achieved with express communication between incoming and outgoing TLs, and as part of overlapping or 'right seat/left seat' handoffs.

*Developing Strong Partnerships.* TLs should be capable of building strong relationships with local partners, particularly among local political leadership. This includes represent-

ing the team and the USG to local partners, the UN, and other foreign entities. Further, when partnering with the military, the TL should be able to ensure the development of a strong civilian-military relationship. This encompasses team support by military partners, as well as coordination of team and military reconstruction and stabilization efforts.

#### ***Desirable Stabilization Team Leader Traits***

Based on review of the roles, responsibilities, and challenges examined above, a number of traits that would be desirable in selection of stabilization TL personnel can be derived. They warrant at least brief mention here. These consist of 1) a strong background in organizational and staff management, 2) strong relationship-building and interpersonal skills, 3) the ability to operate effectively with interagency partners, particularly military partners, 4) the ability to set goals and manage accountability, and 5) the ability to proactively address and resolve difficult personnel issues. Selecting potential TLs with these traits should increase the odds of leadership success.

#### ***Further Leadership Steps to Support Success***

In addition to ensuring TLs' understanding of roles and responsibilities and seeking out desirable TL traits, further steps that future stabilization programs could take to mitigate some of the issues raised above are suggested. Programs should develop a robust incoming TL consultation process to ensure understanding and preparation for TL responsibilities. Headquarters and higher leadership should clearly communicate performance review criteria to TLs, to ensure that TL perceptions of them are in synch with strategic objectives. Further, expectations and responsibilities in regard to personnel and staff management should be expressly communicated to TLs. Higher headquarters and leadership should actively seek to foster

a sense of support and oversight to preclude a perception of 'being under the radar' or of isolation from Embassy or other leadership oversight. Lastly, particular attention should be paid to teams undergoing rapid TL transitions, with greater oversight and guidance of the teams.

## Conclusion

The importance of leadership in any endeavor cannot be understated in a hostile environment. This is especially true in that which was experienced in the Iraq PRT program. While leadership does often rely on innate qualities of an individual, the qualities can be cultivated and nurtured with the proper support in place. To that end, this review has sought to illuminate those qualities that enable success and those roles that leaders should be ready to carry out in stabilization environments. And as shown here, the roles and responsibilities that Iraq PRT TLs were expected to perform were wide ranging.

No one could have anticipated all of the leadership challenges that the Iraq theater of operations would present. And in the future, it is highly unlikely that all stabilization and conflict transformation leadership challenges can be prepared for in advance. Yet, through examination of leadership in Iraq a body of knowledge, which did not exist at the inception of the Iraq PRT program, can be built and retained so future stabilization leadership will be able benefit from it. Further, this type of reflection allows for the thinking through of issues in a way that was not possible during frantic official activation and operation of Iraq PRTs to meet immediate needs of the Iraq conflict. Such a body of knowledge could also inform broader research efforts, such as the examination of leadership roles in hostile environments in general, or of the differences between military and civilian leadership in stabilization activities. For while it is unlikely that the Iraq PRT program will be closely duplicated in the foreseeable future, the challenges of instability will undoubtedly continue to be faced by civilian and by

military leaders. Ideally, through studying the Iraq case, future leaders can be better identified and prepared to succeed at the challenges that they will face.

*The opinions and characterizations in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily represent official positions of the United States Government.*

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Brett Doyle supported the Bureau of Conflict Prevention and Stabilization Operations at the U.S. Department of State as a learned specialist. His professional background includes ten years of experience at the Pentagon and State Department, and was awarded a Meritorious Service award for a year of service at the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad. He holds a master's degree in International Policy Studies from the Monterey Institute of International Studies and is currently pursuing a PhD in Political Science from George Mason University.

<sup>2</sup> The CCO interviews were conducted by the Foreign Service Institute of the U.S. Department of State and through the United States Institute for Peace (USIP), and are retained by the CCO. Anyone who might be interested reviewing the interviews should contact the CCO, found on the web at <http://cco.dodlive.mil/>.

<sup>3</sup> These include: Center for Army Lessons Learned. 18 December 2009. 'Key Leader Interview, Ms. Lynne Platt, Deputy Director, Office of Provincial Affairs, US Embassy Baghdad, Iraq', U.S. Department of State Cable, March 19<sup>th</sup>, 2009. *09BAGHDAD757 SPECIAL LEADERSHIP TRAINING FOR PRT TEAM LEADERS*, and U.S. Department of State Cable, 23 October, 2009. *09BAGHDAD2846 PRT TEAM LEADERS CONFERENCE: MANAGING RELATIONSHIPS AND CHANGE*. This document was also reviewed by numerous Iraq PRT veterans in the Department of State Iraq PRT and Conflict and Stabilization Operations offices, the Foreign Ser-

vice Institute Stability Operations office, and the former Office of Provincial Affairs at Embassy Baghdad.

- <sup>4</sup> A discussion of the evolution of preparation and training for the PRT program is beyond the scope of this review, but some of the more notable efforts included greater, though informal, efforts facilitate informative meetings, or consultations in State Department parlance, between new TLs and more experienced staff and leadership, and in the later years of the program attempting to ensure that new TLs participated in military training exercises at the National Training Center with military units deploying to Iraq.
- <sup>5</sup> Though a detailed discussion of Iraq PRT strategy and planning is beyond the scope of this article, it was an evolutionary process which developed over the course of the program.
- <sup>6</sup> This occurred in the later stages of the PRT program as downsizing began, as teams were sometimes combined or subordinate 'ePRTs' operating at the district level, were subsumed by parent PRTs operating at the provincial level.
- <sup>7</sup> The Maturity Model was a quarterly subjective assessment of the province or district that the PRT operated in. The Unified Common Plan was an agreement on goals, roles, and responsibilities between the PRT and its partnered military unit, if it had one. Work Plans detailed PRT activities and short term goals, also on a quarterly basis.
- <sup>8</sup> Additionally, U.S. Department of State Cable *09BAGHDAD757 SPECIAL LEADERSHIP TRAINING FOR PRT TEAM LEADERS* asked for greater training for TLs this area, as well as areas broadly corresponding to roles 5. Staff Management, 6. Management Styles, 7. Local Leader

Relationship Management, and 8. Military Partner Relationship Building identified in this document.

- <sup>9</sup> However, there were a minority of complaints about the converse – of TLs being too micro-managing as well.
- <sup>10</sup> Further, U.S. Department of State Cable *09BAGHDAD2846 PRT TEAM LEADERS CONFERENCE: MANAGING RELATIONSHIPS AND CHANGE* details the importance of the military relationship for the Iraqi PRTs and TLs, as well as addressing working with local Iraqi staff.
- <sup>11</sup> For more on Iraq PRT continuity, see: Doyle, B 2012 Reconstruction and Stabilization Continuity of Operation: Insights from Iraq Provincial Reconstruction Teams *PKSOI Perspectives*.

## References

- Carreau, B** (ed.) 2010 Lessons from USDA in Iraq and Afghanistan. *PRISM*, 1(3): 139–150.
- Donnelly, S** 2011 We Did Mean Well. *Foreign Policy*, 5 October. Available at [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/10/05/peter\\_van\\_buren\\_iraq\\_prts\\_stephen\\_donnelly](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/10/05/peter_van_buren_iraq_prts_stephen_donnelly) [Last accessed 22 August 2013].
- Dorman, S** 2007 Iraq PRTs: Pins on a Map. *Foreign Service Journal*, 84(3): 21–39.
- Stone, B** 2012 Blind Ambition *PRISM*, 4(1): 147–158.
- Van Buren, P** 2011 *We Meant Well: How I Helped Lose the Battle for the Hearts and Minds of the Iraqi People*. New York: Metropolitan Books.
- Van Vranken, H** 2010 Interagency Team-making – Lessons Learned From the 'Surge' in Iraq. *PKSOI Bulletin*, 2(4): 6–9.
- Whitaker, E P** 2008 Working and Living in Iraq. *Foreign Service Journal*, 85(3): 35–40.

**How to cite this article:** Doyle, B 2013 Civilian Stabilization Team Leadership Success: Perceptions for Iraq Provincial Reconstruction Teams. *Stability: International Journal of Security & Development*, 2(3): 54, pp.1-14, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5334/sta.co>

**Published:** 28 October 2013

**Copyright:** © 2013 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Unported License (CC-BY 3.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>.

**]u[** *Stability: International Journal of Security & Development* is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Ubiquity Press

**OPEN ACCESS** 