Facing an Impossible Situation?

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Introduction

Stop the log jam! That was my objective. I had to convince Colonel Farhim, an Afghan military officer, to immediately sign the permits I needed for my instructors to come on the air base to conduct the training programs that were my responsibility. I knew that due respect should be given to a higher-ranked officer, but my training efforts had been delayed for nearly a month and Colonel Farhim was to blame. To complicate things, I was a low ranking member of the U. S. Army who needed to convince a high-level Afghan Air Force officer to cooperate with me or the program would suffer and I would be likely to receive a very poor performance appraisal.

My name is Mike Dawson and I am currently a captain in the United States Army Reserve. As a first lieutenant, I deployed to Afghanistan for a year in support of Operation Enduring Freedom as an engineer advisor under the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Training Command. Under NATO there were two separate but equal Training Commands, the Air Training Command and the Ground Forces Training Command, to which I reported. However, although I was a U. S. Army officer, I was attached to an Air Force advising unit.

Advisors were NATO military personnel who were paired with Afghan military officers and whose primary task was to train and provide support to the Afghan military. It was the job of the advisors to mentor and teach the Afghans how to lead and do their assigned jobs. For example, a NATO infantry officer would be paired with an Afghan infantry officer to teach him military tactics. Senior ranking Afghan officers would have senior NATO officer counterparts. A NATO colonel would advise an Afghan general, and a NATO lieutenant colonel would advise an Afghan colonel. A NATO major, captain, or other junior officer would advise an Afghan lieutenant colonel. Figure 1 depicts the relationship between the advisors and the advisees.

The on-the-job-training (OJT) program for which I was responsible had stalled. Afghan Air Force engineers were not getting their training because the program instructors were not being allowed on the air base. Colonel Farhim had suddenly decided to stop signing the permission forms needed to admit the program’s instructors, so it had been over a month since the engineers had attended any classes. They were hanging around their barracks with nothing to do. With the deck already stacked against me and training falling behind schedule, I was expected to solve the problem and break the log jam. Program failure meant a subpar efficiency rating and decreased chances for promotion. Therefore, success was paramount, especially since the Army was
moving to a new system of promotions where any failure would put me further down the promotion ranking.

I had thus been dreading my scheduled meeting with Colonel Farhim, which was about to take place. He had a reputation for not being the easiest to work with and for being uncooperative with the NATO partners. For instance, there was a rumor that on one occasion Farhim accused some American Air Force advisors of human trafficking by charging they were smuggling people from the Afghan base to the American base to work. On another occasion he allegedly pressured a contractor to make a name plate for his door or face being arrested and thrown in jail. After talking with several of his direct reports, it became clear to me that Colonel Farhim had a history of being unreliable and overpromising and under-delivering. He cared more about future endeavors than current issues.

Figure 1
Organizational Chart of Advisors and Afghan Counterparts

American Air Force Advisor
(Colonel)

Afghan Air Force Base Commander
(General)

Afghan Intelligence Officer
Colonel Farhim

American Air Force Advisor
(Lt. Col.)

Afghan Facility Engineer
(Colonel)

Other Air Force Departments

1st Lieut.
Mike Dawson

Solid lines represent chain-of-command relationships.
Dashed lines represent advisory relationships.

Background

The OJT program was a nationwide training program funded by United States taxpayers and executed by a United States contractor. The nine-month program, at a cost of several million dollars, was designed in three phases, with each phase lasting three months. Successful completion would likely result in the contract getting extended for another six months. The program had high visibility, and many people were watching its progress very carefully. My
training site was one of the first Afghan air wings to host this training program, so I had extra incentive to get things right. My position in the organizational structure is depicted in Figure 1.

I was assigned as an engineer advisor to an Afghan Air Force facility engineer. The facility engineer was a colonel and commanded a force of over 100 military and civilian workers. My duties entailed helping the Afghan Air Force engineer unit become self-sufficient and self-sustaining. This included training in the management of personnel, resources and materials, and procurement.

Aside from my normal duties as an advisor, I served as the overall program manager for the OJT program at my location. Part of my job as the program manager was to ensure OJT had everything it needed to be successful. If the local Afghan instructors needed anything, it was my job to make sure they received those resources. In this role, I acted as a liaison between the different Afghan Air Force departments on the base to ensure smooth execution on the training contract. For example, if a department wanted to build a shed to store equipment, I would assist the Afghan engineers in fulfilling that request.

Finally, I was also the liaison to the Army Corps of Engineers for the operations and maintenance contract with the facilities that were being constructed on the base, up to and including trash pickup and disposal. Once the facility was built, it would be placed under the contract and would be removed from the contract once it was turned over to Afghan control. This meant United States taxpayers would fund repairs to the building until the turnover, after which the Afghans would be responsible for any and all repairs or modifications to the facility.

The Political Scene

The Afghan military structure seemed a bit like a feudal system. Factors such as family status and political connections seemed to be more influential for promotion than merit. I was dismayed that many of the officers from affluent backgrounds appeared to buy their way into influential positions rather than earning their rank based on performance and years of service. As such, most of the personnel within the Afghan military were used to a highly politicized environment, which made things a bit tricky. To a large degree, this politicized environment made sense as the country had spent many of the past two decades moving from one major war to the next, likely causing Afghan military officers to become experienced at dealing with shifting conditions and alliances.

I also noticed that the Afghans felt they were not being listened to by NATO. Afghan officers told me that since the war involved their people, they wanted a say in how the war was being fought. They viewed the NATO allies as people who ordered the Afghans to do whatever NATO wanted. They took offense to a relationship in which they did not have any real power to fight back. Hence, I began to notice that any Afghan who resisted or acted against the thinking or orders of the NATO allies was seen as a hero by his compatriots.

The more time I spent in Afghanistan, the more I perceived Afghan culture condoning a very relaxed, almost lazy (through the eyes of someone from the United States) standard of work. The Afghan officers and civilians I worked with had a saying that translated “If Allah wills it,”
which was interpreted to mean that if the job needs to be done, Allah will provide the willpower to the person to complete the job. If Allah does not provide the will power, then the job will not be done. This was difficult for me and many of the NATO officers to accept because Western culture makes internal attributions, based on the belief that one’s internal drive compels a person to do something. Many advisors came to believe the Afghans were simply making excuses for not doing anything.

Dealing with more junior Afghan military personnel was also not easy because most had achieved only low educational levels and because of their inexperience their actions were not as predictable as the more seasoned personnel. Complicating my job as a manager, I had a hard time reading the emotions of the Afghan personnel with whom I worked. Their facial expressions often appeared impassive and betrayed little about their feelings or intentions.

During the OJT program, the Afghan engineers were taught basic skills and maintenance procedures including painting, woodworking, welding, and the skills of a locksmith. The OJT instructors, who were Afghan civilians, were required to obtain weekly passes to be allowed onto the base. The Base Intelligence Officer, Colonel Farhim, personally signed all the pass cards. Instructors submitted their national identification papers to the intelligence officer each Friday and received their cards the following Sunday. Saturday was considered their rest day and the base was closed for business.

The Program Stalls

Colonel Farhim was often gone on long vacations, but usually still managed to somehow have the passes signed. Before the program reached the end of its first phase, the colonel decided to go on vacation for an extended period of time. The problem had begun when Farhim did not sign the passes after returning from a prior trip, resulting in the rejection of a sufficient number of my instructors that I had to suspend training. My Afghan advisee was well aware of the situation, but at his level he felt powerless to do anything. Colonel Farhim’s American advisor attempted many times to push the issue, but had been unsuccessful. His deployment was coming to an end, and since the training affected my advisee’s personnel, it fell to me to solve the problem.

I suspected Colonel Farhim was playing some political game with me. However, I could not prove it nor could I flatly accuse him of deliberately preventing the instructors from gaining access to the base. If I were to accuse him of any wrongdoing and those accusations proved to be something I could not support with specific evidence, I would be placed in an embarrassing position. I was, of course, not able to reprimand or remove a military officer from a foreign country. I had to decide what my limited options were to get Colonel Farhim to sign the papers to get the OJT program back on track.

Alternative Options

The way I saw things, I had three alternatives at my disposal to try to convince Colonel Farhim to sign the forms. I could try: 1) coercion, 2) rational persuasion, or 3) a goal alignment approach.
Coercion
Coercion seemed like the simplest of the three alternatives. With some effort I might have been able to coerce Colonel Farhim into taking action. For example, by threatening to use any leverage I could think of, I might have been able to pressure the colonel into complying with my wish that he sign the papers. One threat I had considered was to stop the base trash pick-up if Colonel Farhim did not comply in a timely manner. I was prepared to follow through on the threat because I had resources at my disposal and could deliver on my threat.

As the program manager, I had the added ability to coerce Colonel Farhim into complying with my wishes by recommending that my superiors cut back on the amount of money the base received for maintenance and operations. This action would mean that existing base facilities would not be maintained and new construction on the base would stop. Based on how the Afghans maintained their equipment, it would not take very long before the buildings would fall apart. Soon they would be living in a pigpen. I could also inform the base general of my actions and tell him Colonel Farhim’s lack of action forced me to do it and let all blame fall on Farhim. I would paint him to be the “bad guy.” The goal of this strategy was that eventually the general would apply pressure to Farhim to sign the papers and allow work to continue.

However, coercion seemed like an option that would present numerous problems. First, the Afghans might not even care if the services were not performed. They might simply fight back by engaging in a battle of wills. Eventually their complaints would make their way up the NATO coalition’s chain-of-command and I would have to order the cleanup. Second, Colonel Farhim may have simply ignored the threats because he was a colonel and I was a lieutenant. Since he was of much higher rank, I worried that he would view my actions as a scare tactic and see right through them as empty threats. Even if I succeeded in making the base general aware of Colonel Farhim’s refusal to sign the forms, the general still might not have done anything. He might consider it a trivial matter that Colonel Farhim and I should resolve between the two of us.

Rational Persuasion
While preparing for the meeting, I considered explaining to Colonel Farhim that this was an important program for the partnership between the U. S. military and the Afghan military. After all, our goal was simply to train the Afghan military so that they could perform the duties needed to take care of the facilities that were being built to be turned over to the Afghan people. Why on earth would Colonel Farhim not support a program that was only beneficial for the Afghan military? I needed to clearly explain how important the program was and how I needed his support for such an important program. It just seemed logical that Colonel Farhim would want to support a program that was training Afghan personnel and thus expediting the process of transitioning the base facilities from American to Afghan ownership.

However, as I planned for the meeting with Colonel Farhim, I began to doubt that simply presenting logical arguments to him would help me solve the problem. In fact, I was quite concerned that using rational persuasion alone was doomed to fail. Many Afghan officials saw the partnership between them and NATO as a master-to-servant relationship, with NATO dictating its will to Afghans who were powerless to refuse. As a people who pride themselves on being strong-willed and independent, Afghans lived according to their traditions and any outside
intrusion was seen as a threat. Thus, any individual Afghans who refused to comply with outside dictates could be seen as heroes by many fellow citizens.

The saying “As Allah wills it” kept repeating itself in my mind. Afghans tended to respond with this phrase when considering NATO requests, meaning if Allah wanted something to be done, then He would empower the person to do the task. Thus, I was really worried that if I appealed to Colonel Farhim’s logic and goodwill, he would be likely to tell me that only Allah could allow things to happen. Furthermore, I had learned from colleagues with prior experience that Colonel Farhim’s interpretation of Islamic doctrine permitted Muslims like himself to lie to non-believers to further pragmatic interests. Therefore, it was not inconceivable that Colonel Farhim might tell me that he would sign the documents when, in reality, he had no intention of signing anything.

**Goal Alignment**

The third alternative I considered was to try to align my goals with those of Colonel Farhim. To do this, I brainstormed how I might explain to him how my goals of getting the forms signed aligned with Farhim’s own goals and objectives. Since the on-the-job training program was very important to all parties and Colonel Farhim’s willingness to participate was essential, if he were convinced to cooperate, he would stand to gain visibility and credit. I could propose working with him to develop a new method for background investigations to bring instructors to the base that could be implemented across the entire Afghan Air Force. He could be asked to teach the other intelligence officers his program by traveling to different bases. This might be appealing to him as he could treat these trips as vacations and also could meet with other high-level officials all across the country during the trips, which would likely enhance his own professional standing. Since ours was one of the pilot programs, we had the opportunity to fine-tune OJT to make it better for the future training sites.

Focusing on goal alignment seemed like an appealing alternative, but I expected that it would be difficult to find a way to appeal to the colonel’s self-interest. Those who were in the Afghan military tried to gain more power and influence and I assumed that Colonel Farhim was no different. His position in the organization would determine his future. Promotion through the military ranks was not easy and only the best connected were selected for the next rank. Therefore, every task was considered important regardless of how minuscule it was. Any success, no matter how small, would still considered to be important. If Colonel Farhim could add this success to his resume, it might put him at an advantage for promotion consideration. But given the cultural barriers between us and his history of distrust of U.S. military personnel, persuading Farhim that he could be seen as taking the initiative to meet and exceed expected military standards would be challenging.

**The Dilemma**

As I thought about the upcoming meeting with Colonel Farhim, I thought to myself “How did we arrive at this situation?” In the past, the passes for entry on the base had been signed and the instructors were allowed to go about their business. Signing passes was not a difficult task, but Colonel Farhim had made it difficult. I figured all he had to do was review the information submitted and then apply his signature. The instructors he was vetting were the same people he had been reviewing since the training program began. His behavior was simply hard to fathom.
As the meeting started in Colonel Farhim’s office, my mind raced. Should I threaten to withhold services if he doesn’t comply? Could I just convince him that this is really important to me and ask for his help? Could I really convince him to champion the program nationwide and thus boost his power, influence, and promotion potential? Which approach should I take?