



Dynamics of Interagency Teams

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ORGANIZATIONS AND INDIVIDUALS habitually align themselves with others to achieve some purpose they could not otherwise attain alone. Whether to gather food, create shelter, obtain wealth, or defend against enemies, human beings frequently require the assistance of others to achieve their purpose. But aligning with another is never simple. Between two individuals, deciding with whom to align and determining the purpose of the partnership and maintaining it over time are difficult tasks. The process increases in complexity when more individuals or groups become involved, and when the process involves multiple federal agencies or even nations, the complexity is nearly unfathomable.

This article addresses that almost unfathomable complexity. It examines interagency teams and the dynamic forces that operate within these teams and attempts to identify major forces that draw and bind parties together or tear them apart. Humans and the organizations they create frequently cooperate to achieve some otherwise unattainable goal, yet the forces of nature work against them. Newton's Second Law of Thermodynamics states that the entropy—or the degree of disorder—within a system will always increase unless we purposely inject order into it as a counteracting force. We understand this intuitively. We recognize that centripetal and centrifugal forces are constantly at work in any team to bind and tear it apart. This article examines the most significant of these dynamic forces.

The term “interagency team” can be confusing, with multiple definitions and distinctions derived from the types of agencies and number of actors included, interests at play, official mandates imposed, and authorities involved. Although these distinctions are important in some cases, this article concentrates on the more general dynamics of collaborative situations. In this article, the term “interagency team” describes two or more actors representing their parent agency who have agreed to coordinate actions to achieve an outcome preferable to that obtained if each were to act alone. The broad definition applied here covers bilateral and multilateral cooperation in the political, military, and economic spheres.

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PHOTO: U.S. Army CPT John E. Hill, a staff officer for Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa, and Djibouti Army SGT Hassan talk following a graduation ceremony for Djibouti military members who completed a counterterrorism training course, Arta, Djibouti, 27 November 2006. (U.S. Navy, MCC(NAC) Philip A. Fortnam)

Numerous theories, hypotheses, and propositions of coordinated or cooperative behavior have been put forth. One 1973 study, attempting to canvass the body of knowledge on the subject, even listed 347 individual propositions affecting team formation, structure, purpose, and duration.¹ Many scholars see multiparty teams, coalitions, and power politics as social-psychological interactions where relationships are important but never subject to empirical mathematical models. However, some have attempted to create models to prove or discount various hypotheses and identify determinate or dominant factors. These models include using the smallest team possible, minimizing resources committed to the effort, optimizing expected rewards, desire for control, and common ideology. The list is long. What, then, should we focus on to best understand interagency team dynamics?

Four major dynamic forces run through the many extant propositions and theories: interests, power/influence, rewards, and decision making. By examining interagency teams from these perspectives, we can better understand the forces that affect team members as they pursue their objectives.

Although some of the discussion in this article mentions national interests and relationships between nations at the strategic level, the forces I examine and principles I discuss apply at the operational and tactical levels as well. Leaders at these lower levels confront the same dynamics but apply them in a necessarily different context.

Motives for Cooperation

By nature, man cooperates to achieve a purpose when it is in his interest to do so. In a team setting, the number, nature, and clarity of interests an actor brings to the situation are critical. These factors will dictate team formation, organization, decision making, maintenance, and ultimately, success.

Affiliation theorists see coalitions and teams as the political reflection of common culture, ideology, values, and institutional systems. They describe them as homogeneous.² Implicit in this view is that a common culture, ideology, and so on implies a commonality of interests. One study of 36 war coalitions, from 1821 to 1967 concluded that the closer two states' ideologies and cultures, the more likely they were to enter into a coalition arrangement.³

However, considerable evidence suggests this factor of homogeneity is not as strong as its proponents suggest. A second study examining 130 political, military, and economic alliances concluded that although similar ideological and cultural characteristics do aid in initial team formation, the similarities are not strong enough to predict teaming behavior, have minimal impact on maintaining an alliance over time, and do not ensure success.⁴ An example of this is the plethora of law enforcement agencies working security issues along the U.S. southwest border and the unilateral "Fast and Furious" program. For the interagency team leader this means that while it may be easier to form a team with like-kind agencies, we cannot assume that homogeneity will hold the team together or ensure unity of effort in a cooperative endeavor.

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Since heterogeneous groups do form teams, it is reasonable to ask what forces operate within the team and why. The theory of expediency, which is a central element of the realist view, proposes that actors are primarily concerned with security and attaining sufficient power to achieve their objectives.⁵ It recognizes that ideology and culture aid in coalition formation, but considers their influence minor. Interests emerge as the major dynamic operative force. As an example, while DOD and the State Department—with clearly different cultures and outlooks—wrestled for policy control in Washington in the aftermath of the invasion of Iraq, provincial reconstruction teams composed of civilian and military members collaborated successfully in the field because it was in their mutual interests to do so.

The number, type, and intensity of interests affect team formation and maintenance. The least complex situation occurs when team members share a single common interest to handle a clear and substantial challenge or threat; however, this situation seldom



(U.S. Air Force, A1C Asha McMakin)

U.S. soldiers of the 10th Cavalry Regiment, 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division, simulate assisting Iraqi soldiers with transporting a possible terrorist at the National Training Center, Fort Irwin, CA, 9 November 2009.

exists. Usually, each actor will possess several interests that are not exactly the same as those of other team members. However, agreeing on a single, common purpose is crucial to team success, even though this purpose will usually not satisfy all disparate interests involved. As Clausewitz tells us, “One [agency] may support another’s cause, but will never take it so seriously as it takes its own.”⁶

One of the strongest bonds a team can create is the will to sustain the team’s existence so it can achieve its principal collective purpose or interest. Achieving national policy goals is an interagency team’s single greatest purpose. Simply forming such a team implies that the team can only marshal sufficient capabilities to attain these goals through collective action. Therefore, the preeminent interest is maintaining the team until it either achieves the goals or changes them. The interagency team leader must remember that maintaining the team is critical.

Having team members with a common purpose or interest does not negate the importance of identifying

and attempting to satisfy the individual member’s multiple interests. All members understand that by joining a team they may operate to achieve another member’s interest. So long as this interest is not in direct conflict with other team members, the team will not collapse. However, the interagency team leader should recognize that the presence of multiple individual interests is a disintegrating force, and must resolve any problems arising from that presence during team formation and look out for such problems throughout team operations.

To deal with this disintegrating force requires attending to two issues. First, divergent interests need not collapse a team’s efforts. The team can survive as long as members recognize this, look for the differences, and respect them, while emphasizing the commonality of purpose. Take, for example, the work of joint terrorism task forces. The law enforcement elements of these interagency teams want to procure and preserve evidence to use in judicial proceedings because their interest is gaining

criminal convictions. The intelligence elements of these teams are interested in gaining information leading to threat sources and disrupting, dismantling, or destroying those sources. That the elements' specific interests are not identical does not have to result in the team's collapse. Emphasizing their common purpose of defeating terrorism allows them to respect their differences and look for ways to accommodate them.

This issue informs the second issue. Communicating interests is critical to forming and maintaining unity of effort and coordinated effects. Inability to communicate effectively with other team members, either generally or selectively, hinders sharing information and strategies to achieve common interests. Finally, while maintaining the national policy goal, interagency team members must recognize that interests usually shift over time, especially in teams where individual members, agency leadership, plans, and policies are dynamic. Thus, communication becomes increasingly important the longer a team endures.

Power and Influence of Cooperators

In all systems, power is sought, contested, and employed to determine outcomes and courses of events. Power plays a central role in forming cooperative teaming arrangements and maintaining them as the teams pursue their interests and disburse their rewards. Some scholars note that power is the *sine qua non* of politics, because many individuals and groups participate in teams only to attain, maintain, or increase their power.⁷ Others expand this notion about the quest for power into social psychology and suggest the basis for all social interaction is the attempt to enhance one's power relative to that of another.⁸ Still others view team membership simply as a means to attain an interest and nothing more. The issue is not settled. Regardless, power is a critical and dynamic force—both positive and negative—of any team arrangement.

Three aspects of power are important to the study of multiparty team dynamics: influence, as the dynamic aspect of power; the influence that size and the distribution of power have on team formation; and the affect power has on stability. There are two types of power in every interagency team: authoritative and influential. Authoritative

power is the formal structural aspect of power and refers to the sanctioned right to make final decisions. It is unidirectional, flowing from higher to lower. Deriving its source from legal frameworks and team structure, its limits are clearly delineated and static in nature.

However, even in highly structured teams, all actors and the established authority are subject to influence—the informal aspect of power. Sources of influence are personality, expertise, and opportunity. Its basis is knowledge or information. Influence is multidirectional and can flow upward, downward, and horizontally. Not being sanctioned, influence is informal and implies no organizational rights. By its nature, influence is ambiguous and dynamic, often shifting over time and circumstances as the basis for innovation and change within the team.

Whether or not we subscribe to the idea that it is the root of all group dynamics, the impact power has on forming an effective team cannot be dismissed. The “size principle” initially developed by William Riker encapsulates the essence of power's impact. Riker asserts, “Participants create coalitions just as large as they believe will ensure winning, and no larger.”⁹

Size is important because it directly affects the distribution of power and rewards. Stated otherwise, power and reward distribution is a function of the number and type of members joining the team.

According to the “size principle,” actors consciously attempt to minimize team membership and resources (or capabilities) to only those that ensure effective power over other competing groups. By so doing, team members maximize rewards while reducing the complexity of team formation and maintenance.

This theory has limitations in practice. First, it relies on zero-sum game theory, where the winner takes all. Second, it assumes the actors have perfect communication and, therefore, knowledge of costs and rewards involved in all potential teaming combinations. Although it never happens, to the degree the situation approaches this condition, the principle is operative. In the case of interagency teams, where a winner-takes-all situation rarely occurs, these limitations also include the desire of teams to include as many capabilities as possible to achieve its aims, while simultaneously trying to manage the distribution of power.

The “size principle” is least applicable in the area of war and conflict. Teams involved in hostile situations tend to be larger than those in a low-risk environment. Because these situations are extremely complex with a high degree of uncertainty, determining the minimum size for success is difficult. In addition, communication among numerous team members dispersed over extreme distances is never in perfect order as the principle assumes.

Although the foregoing discussion somewhat discounts the “size principle,” we cannot entirely dismiss it. There is merit in its general thrust. Smaller teams offer each team member a greater share of rewards—*influence on outcomes, advancing an agency’s agenda, credit for success, budget resources*—and are easier and take less time to form. The smaller the team is, the greater the visibility and influence over decisions affecting team interests each team member has.

Influence is another force that affects team stability. If the sum total of all members’ influence within a collaborative team is equal to one, then one member increases his influence at the expense of some or all the others. Therefore, within the team, the shifting influence—that dynamic aspect

of power—can create episodic periods of instability. A realist view of interagency team dynamics sees conflict and instability as inherent in relationships among members and their agencies absent the presence of a single, overwhelmingly powerful member. However, when a single member has too much power, the team gravitates toward a zero-sum attitude. The hegemonic member forces individual interests to be subordinate to the collective interest. Over time, lesser members view this subordination of individual interests as a loss, and cooperation exists only for short periods. Unless the team can accommodate change by shifting influence, a zero-sum attitude feeds discontent and leads to greater instability and the potential to collapse the team as the tendency to defect increases.

If a team is to endure, its leaders must recognize and accommodate influence as a natural and positive aspect of power. A hegemonic member may facilitate forming a coalition by the sheer force of its power, but eventually situations change, and the longer the coalition is in place, the more likely it will lose its controlling power. When this occurs, that initially powerful member must live with the good or ill will his influence has created.



(U.S. Marines: Cpl. Cullen J. Tieman)

1LT T.A. Dana, commander of the Armed Forces of Liberia Disaster Response Company, updates U.S. Marine BG Paul W. Brier, commander, U.S. Marine Forces Africa, representatives from the U.S. Department of State, and other military members on Operation Onward Liberty, Monrovia, Liberia, 9 September 2010.

Small, seemingly weak team members can wield great influence. A member with a moderate or central position along the spectrum of team power and interests will usually possess a degree of influence that exceeds his resource contribution, because his preferences can determine decisions. Similarly, coalition members who control critical resources will command influence beyond that which their size or their place in the structural hierarchy might suggest. Such is often the case with Justice Department representatives on interagency teams. Their legal findings or determinations influence decisions. Within multiparty teams, the quest for influence by control of central positions or critical resources is dynamic and never ending.

One final aspect of power and team stability deserves mention. The more dangerous the threat, or serious the situation, or dire the consequences of inaction, the more stabilizing the effect has on the team. As Henry Kissinger once stated:

As long as the enemy is more powerful than any single member of the coalition, the need for unity outweighs all considerations of individual gain. But when the enemy has been so weakened that each ally has the power to achieve its ends alone, a coalition is at the mercy of its most determined member.¹⁰

Although Kissinger often refers to international coalitions, the concept also applies to national interagency situations such as interagency teams responding to Hurricane Katrina and the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. Multiple federal, state, and local governmental departments and agencies, along with numerous corporations and nongovernment organizations, created countless multiparty teams when first responding to help affected regions recover from these devastating events. The teams quickly united into stable groups, subordinating many of their individual interests for the common purpose. As the response shifted to recovery, these separate interests became more pronounced and injected instability into the teams' operations.

Cooperation's Expected Rewards

Many theorists believe that the desire to maximize rewards—or the “What's in it for me?” view—is the overriding dynamic in team behavior. Whether

one's efforts are to minimize size, maximize power, or control decisions, the intended effect is to aggrandize rewards.¹¹ A focus on rewards has some not so surprising effects on the decision to join a multiparty team. In general, the greater the certainty and immediacy is of a reward, the greater the pressure is to join a team. Moreover, the likelihood that a team's efforts will win or succeed affects an actor's decision to join in the endeavor. The prospect of winning and the expectation of reward is a stronger determinant of team formation than size alone. It is better to gain something by participating in a successful effort than to maximize the potential for gain by joining a smaller team with less assurance of winning or by not joining the team at all. This does not entirely obviate the “size principle” discussed earlier, as team members still attempt to minimize the team's size to protect their interests and increase their power, but it does place the probability of reward and size in perspective.

In political arrangements, if the probability of winning is equal among alternative teams, actors tend to choose the one requiring the least effort or contribution of resources as determined by a cost-benefit analysis. Therefore, the decision to join a particular team is a function of expected rewards based on both the probability of success and the net value of what may be achieved.

Once a team forms and achieves its objectives, how does it determine the appropriate distribution of rewards? Historically, three models have been employed: battle losses, community, and contribution. The battle loss model is limited to war coalitions and determines reward distribution based on losses a nation sustains, such as casualties or the loss of industry, territory, or other national resources. This model posits that the greater a state's losses, the greater the share of spoils it will receive. Interagency and intergovernmental teams working with or within conflict coalitions should be mindful of this dynamic expectation.

The community model relies on an idealistic view of team behavior, which holds that when actors form coalitions based on shared values and friendly relationships, they distribute rewards on an equity basis. The degree of equity is equal to the degree of friendliness and ideological similarity. This model is seldom used in practice, although when a team is formed based on similarity of culture and ideology, it can apply.

The final model of reward distribution is based on participation and degree of contribution. Stated succinctly, this model bases the distribution of rewards on the amount a team member contributes to the achievement of team goals—the greater the contribution toward attaining the objectives, the greater the share of rewards a member receives. In political teaming, the contribution model does not distribute rewards—such as budgets, power, influence, staffing—in a rigid, mathematical manner. Participants with greater contributions get a larger reward but not necessarily in amounts proportionate to their resource contributions. This is a reflection of the inherent dependency nature of such teams. Although such members expect greater rewards, they cannot attain their objectives without the assistance of the other, smaller members. As a result, smaller members usually command greater influence and a larger share of rewards than is commensurate with their absolute contributions.

Whatever the model used in determining reward distribution, each team member views the reward received relative to satisfying his or her interests.

Interests and rewards are sides of the same coin and cannot be separated.

Interests and rewards are sides of the same coin and cannot be separated. The most prevalent model applied in interagency teaming situations is the contribution model. It assumes that the amount and type of resources a member contributes to the team is commensurate with his interests. Unfortunately, interests are not always communicated in a clear and precise manner, are hard to quantify, or are not always heeded by those deciding on reward distribution. When this occurs, and there is a mismatch of interests and rewards, animosity or resentment results. The interagency team leader must understand this dynamic and consider its implications.

Decision Making

How a team makes decisions tends to either facilitate or disrupt the team's cohesion and performance. In an interagency setting, organizational

and a decision-making structure leading to cooperation can come from either existing agency policy or negotiated interagency agreements. When this occurs, the ability of the cooperating team to structure its own decision-making regimen diminishes. For example, if legislation or interagency policy specifies a lead agency, the structure of cooperation is asymmetrical. However, in many interagency teams, the power to make decisions is a shared one.

The first imperative of decision making—beginning with the decision to form or join a team—is communication. Unless one clearly communicates interests and roles supporting those interests during team formation, all subsequent decisions may offend one or more members. In addition, future decision making flounders because members do not know resident interests. This degrades team performance and may eventually frustrate members. Once a team is formed, communicating interests does not become less important. To the contrary, over time leaders must adjust and refine interests in response to both internal and external events and conditions.

It is unrealistic to expect perfect communication among team members. Communication must be continuous through multiple and redundant means. This is especially true in interagency teams where members often have to communicate within their agency before committing themselves within the team. Open communications tend to bind members together by reducing suspicion, misunderstanding, and feelings of distrust. In short, communications within an organization should be ongoing to make it easy to maintain the team and achieve objectives.

Institutional structure can facilitate communication. Some examples of structures that contribute to effective communication and decision making are multiple working groups specializing in well-defined areas of interest to the team, joint or interagency bodies sitting in permanent session, matrix multiparty committees formulating policy recommendations, a dedicated secretariat with a permanent staff, and liaison groups. However, an organization's structure and the communication it facilitates are only two aspects of the decision-making process.

For a team to pursue its goals effectively, it must decide how it will make decisions, understand the established rules, and then follow them. Methods of granting decision authority include resource



(U.S. Army, SGT John Stimac)

U.S. soldiers provide security for U.S. Department of State officials following a meeting at Baghdad University in Baghdad, Iraq, 17 January 2010.

contribution, functional contribution, unanimity, and majority. These methods are not necessarily mutually exclusive. For instance, resource contribution—power and influence—can have significant effect on majority votes and even unanimity. However, regardless of the rules selected mutual consultation with all parties is critical so that no party feels others take its membership for granted or that it does not have an opportunity to voice a position.

Historically a favored decision-making method, resource contribution is a simple proposition: a member's weight in decision making is relative to the member's contributed resources. The member who contributes the most to the team has the greatest say on the outcome. This method is not without its dangers. If other team members do not feel the decisions made complement their interests, or at least reconcile their concerns regardless of the level of contribution, the tendency to deflect or derail the effort can become irresistible.

Related to the above is the functional contribution method in which team members have the greatest influence over those areas in which their contributions are most significant. If the members' contribution is to provide transportation or intelligence, they would be expected to have the greatest influence in those areas even if their influence on the team's overall approach toward goal achievement is limited.

The functional approach clearly increases team cohesion and enhances long-term relations among its members. Its greatest application is in large interagency teams operating in complex environments and trying to satisfy a multiplicity of interests. In combination with other decision-making methods, the functional method can enhance coalition maintenance and performance; without it, the animosity of smaller members can grow.

The two most pervasive methods of decision making are unanimity and majority. There is an important practical need for unanimity within the

team, even where formal decision-making rules permit hierarchical, chain of command situations and majority decisions. Although we often discuss unanimity and majority decision-making methods as counterpoints to each other, there is a dynamic toward consensus building in both.

Unanimity is the predominant decision-making method used in international coalitions. Unanimity requires the agreement of every member to approve a decision. This has several positive effects on the team. It promotes a spirit of consensus, minimizes opportunities for outside actors to exploit differences among members, and ensures that no member has to accept an outcome it deeply opposes. It determines objectives, policies, operational approaches, and reward distribution in at least a minimally acceptable manner, so no member feels decisions are forced upon him. Unanimity also encourages the implementation of decisions by ensuring that every member shares ownership of the decisions, which precludes members from withholding cooperation in future decisions or withdrawing from the team.

There are negative impacts to unanimity. It is the most time consuming decision-making method, leads to minimally acceptable decisions, and relies heavily on the desire of members to maintain the team. These points are important because they imply that team leaders must expend a considerable amount of energy to broker agreements so the team can sustain its central purpose. This can be difficult in a dynamic environment, so unanimity is not necessarily the best decision-making method for all teams.

The effects of majority voting are nearly the converse of unanimity. Decisions can be made quickly, which facilitates crisis action and issue resolution. More issues and interests are voiced and acted upon. Decisions are not limited to those only minimally

acceptable to all. Moreover, it better represents the contribution larger members provide the team. However, majority decision making encourages dominance by a single large member or subgroup, risks disenfranchising some members, and fosters noncompliance by dissenters.

Interests affect Rewards

Collaborative and cooperative behavior is a complex subject. Numerous forces that are not well understood nor easily subject to empirical study affect interagency teams. Four major categories of these internal forces impact team behavior: interests, power and influence, rewards, and decision making. Each force acts upon the others and is, in turn, acted upon. Interests affect rewards, which are influenced by power, which is a reflection of decision making, which is largely determined by interests. Appreciating and understanding the sinews of these dynamic forces facilitates their management while pursuing common objectives.

Crosscutting influences affect these four dynamic forces. Agency ambitions, leadership styles, individual personalities, past experience, and long-term strategies all affect forming and maintaining a successful interagency team. Nevertheless, the major dynamic forces of interest, power, rewards, and decision making remain constant in all teaming arrangements. Properly understood and managed, these forces are key to achieving the team's desired aims.

Individuals, private organizations, and governmental departments and agencies have always endeavored to form teams to advance their interests and achieve otherwise unattainable ends. This will be no less true in the future. By understanding the dynamic forces that bind and tear apart these teams, leaders will be better equipped to manage them and fulfill their responsibilities. **MR**

NOTES

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