



(Image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)  
*Scheherazade and Sultan Schariar* (1880),  
oil on canvas, by Ferdinand Keller.

# INTERPERSONAL ENGAGEMENT

## The Indispensable Warrior Skill

Lt. Col. Robert M. Hill, EdD, U.S. Army, Retired

**T**he story of *The Arabian Nights: Tales from a Thousand and One Nights* is as simple as it is timeless.<sup>1</sup> In it, a Persian king, betrayed by an

unfaithful wife, swears that the only way to ensure complete devotion is to marry a virgin every night and kill her the next morning. After killing three thousand wives, he

marries the daughter of a trusted advisor who believes she can end his reign of terror. Her name: Scheherazade.

The night of the wedding, Scheherazade's sister begs the king to let Scheherazade finish a story she had started the night before. So, in his presence, Scheherazade commences in telling her sister the rest of the story, unraveling it so that its climax occurs just before dawn, the time set for her execution. The king is so enthralled that he spares her with the caveat that she finish the story that evening. She follows the same pattern for 1,001 nights, holding the king rapt through the night and leaving him begging for more each morning. Hers is, in essence, the ultimate information operation, in which she averts death through the use of powerful narratives that change the king's attitudes and perceptions, and, ultimately, his behavior.

After more than four thousand nights of war in the lands of Scheherazade's tales, we have learned much about the power of informing and influencing or, conversely, the consequences of not employing synchronized information-related capabilities effectively. These lessons have been hard-won, and we are still learning. One critical lesson is how essential face-to-face, interpersonal engagement is to mission success. Despite this realization, we are not doing nearly enough to develop interpersonal engagement skills and to make soldiers and leaders experts at them. In truth, we never have.

## The Human Domain

In their preface to the white paper *Strategic Landpower: Winning the Clash of Wills*, Gen. Raymond Odierno, Army chief of staff; Gen. James Amos, Marine Corps commandant; and Adm. William McRaven, commander, U.S. Special Operations Command, argue that national objectives cannot be achieved through technical and technological solutions alone. The white paper states, "time and again, the United States has undertaken to engage in conflict without fully considering the physical, cultural, and social environments that comprise what some have called the 'human domain.'"<sup>2</sup> The significance of the human domain is only becoming more pronounced in an increasingly complex, interconnected, asymmetrical, multipolar world, and it drives the need to achieve human objectives as well as physical ones. As the senior officers say in their white paper—

As important as the military's lethal power is to coerce within the international arena, it is

not the only or often the most effective way the United States has to deter war and meet the nation's other strategic goals. If one accepts that the capacity to avoid or prevent a conflict is at least as important as waging war, then it is easy to see that the use of military power across a wide range of situations does not fundamentally weaken or imperil the nation's security. Rather, it strengthens it.<sup>3</sup>

Given this premise, the paper asserts that "the success of future strategic initiatives and the ability of the United States to shape a peaceful and prosperous global environment will rest more and more on our ability to understand, influence, and exercise control within the 'human domain,'" ideally by shaping conditions through proactive and persistent engagement at all levels, including one-on-one, face-to-face engagements between individual soldiers, sailors, Marines, and airmen and indigenous populations.<sup>4</sup>

The white paper raises an important question: are our soldiers and leaders sufficiently skilled in engagement, especially of the interpersonal variety, that they could decisively change the outcome of conflict or even prevent it in the first place?

## Nonlethal Marksmanship

An essential task of every soldier, sailor, Marine, and airmen is the ability to qualify with his or her assigned weapon; in other words, to engage targets with lethal accuracy. Yet, the parallel task of engaging nonlethal targets, especially other humans, does not get the same emphasis. Qualifying with one's weapon results in a badge, medal, or ribbon and, possibly, promotion points; in contrast, a common qualifying process to train and test interpersonal engagement, negotiation, or diplomacy does not exist. Perhaps such formal recognition is deemed unneeded because it is tacitly assumed that either soldiers and leaders already have developed competence for engaging with others as a natural extension of having discharged their regular duties, or that such training is subsumed within the Army's normal progression of developmental leadership training and practice in general. Such assumptions fail to account for the complex and challenging nature of truly effective human engagement, which requires mental deftness and intelligence, the capability of observing and understanding nuanced expressions of voice and body language, and the



ability to respond in unambiguous ways—all skills necessarily honed by practice and scenario rehearsal.

Interestingly, if you Google “interpersonal” or “social” engagement, the top results typically include topics on ways to enhance social engagement for those diagnosed with autism. One way to explain this outcome is that social engagement effectiveness is presumed innate among the general population. However, the practical experience of the Army reveals that such effectiveness is elusive for many.

These faulty assumptions have resulted in a glaring lack of initial and sustainment training for this increasingly essential skill set. The central premise of this article is that interpersonal engagement is *sine qua non* for all members of the Department of Defense and must be taught, cultivated, practiced, and assessed continually throughout our careers because our lives, the lives of others, and mission success will increasingly depend on it.

The evolution of mission command strengthens this assertion, but only if there is universal acceptance of the idea that interpersonal engagement is not solely the unit commander’s responsibility. Instead, there needs to be cultural acceptance within the military that informing and influencing diverse audiences, internal and external to the unit, is a universal duty that requires everyone within the command to become highly proficient at interpersonal communication, just as each soldier must be proficient with a rifle or a pistol.

## A Culture of Engagement

It is important to understand what interpersonal engagement means, and what is expected of those who practice it habitually. This understanding will enable the Army and, more broadly, the Department of Defense to formulate the education and training necessary to produce nonlethal engagement experts.

Field Manual (FM) 3-13, *Inform and Influence Activities*, codifies soldier and leader engagement (SLE) as an information-related capability that commanders and staffs can employ in integrated fashion—along with



(Photo by Staff Sgt. Shane Hamann, 23rd Infantry Regiment PAO)

Capt. Troy Yoho, the commander of Company B, 2nd Battalion, 23rd Infantry Regiment, 2nd Infantry Division, exchanges greetings with an Afghan farmer while his unit conducts a dismounted presence patrol near Forward Operating Base Spin Boldak, Kandahar Province, Afghanistan, 2 June 2013.

military information support operations, public affairs operations, civil affairs operations, and cyber electromagnetic activities, among others—to shape the information environment to operational advantage.<sup>5</sup> Defined as “interpersonal interactions by soldiers and leaders with audiences in an area of operations,” SLE has the value of being the most readily available and often most potent tool in a unit’s quiver of information-related capabilities, particularly at the tactical level.<sup>6</sup> What FM 3-13 makes

clear, however, is that SLE cannot, or should not, be left to chance.

The FM states that SLE is characterized by six principles:<sup>7</sup>

- ◆ Consistency. SLE must communicate the same essential meaning as other operational activities.
- ◆ Cultural awareness. SLE is conducted in the context of local customs, beliefs, and ways of communicating.
- ◆ Adaptability. SLE must shape conditions and respond to a changing operational environment with appropriate, flexible, and timely actions.
- ◆ Credibility. Successful SLE requires the trust and confidence of the population in the Army forces with whom they interact.
- ◆ Balance. Soldiers and leaders must balance their engagement efforts between the inclination to achieve the desired effect and the requirement to actively listen and understand another's point of view.
- ◆ Pragmatism. Soldiers and leaders must accept the unpredictable, often opaque, nature of communications and operate with realistic expectations of message formulation and control.

While logical, these principles are not necessarily intuitive. Conducting SLEs that reflect these characteristics requires more than the presumption that soldiers and leaders are SLE-ready merely as a consequence of their career progression, their education, or other training, or even as a result of deliberate planning; it requires ongoing practice, reinforcement, and refinement.

Ultimately, interpersonal engagement proficiency requires a shift within the Army that creates a pervasive culture of engagement, not just within a given command but also, just as importantly, across the Army, the Department of Defense, and the Nation. As will be explored later, the benefits for creating and nurturing a culture of interpersonal engagement where skills are practiced daily are vast: from diminishing the potential for soldier suicides, to thwarting extremist behavior, or to improving the social enterprise that undergirds human progress and achievement.

## Rules of Engagement

Those who have taken the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator personality inventory, or similar psychological test instrument gain an understanding that humans have innate behavioral preferences or patterns derived

from four dichotomies.<sup>8</sup> The first of these dichotomies is extroversion-introversion. It seeks to explain the preference for focusing one's attention outwardly or inwardly when making decisions or forming judgments. While extroverts may have an initial advantage when it comes to interpersonal engagement, they are fundamentally no more likely to succeed at it than are introverts.

Success at interpersonal engagement depends on knowing one's strengths and weaknesses, as well as one's innate preferences, and learning to adapt them to the present moment. The value of Myers-Briggs Type Indicator or similar instruments is the forced realization that one is not doomed to innate preferences; one may learn to act "against type" when it benefits the situation at hand. The ability to shift between extroversion and introversion, forcefulness and calm, bold action and methodical implementation, does not mean that one abandons core values or principles in the name of expediency. SLE demands that all engagements be highly principled; otherwise, they cannot be either consistent or credible.

In other words, SLE demands that soldiers possess the ability to adapt their presence, posture, and profile nimbly in order to inform or influence with maximum effect. This simple requirement is not easy to achieve, however. While soldiers are not doomed to innate preferences, they are sometimes enslaved by them. Identifying and learning to master their habits, preferences, and styles of interpersonal interaction requires a conscientious and willing mindset. Mastery begins with the realization that effective communication operates on three levels simultaneously: physical, emotional/rational, and spiritual/conceptual.

**Physical.** Engagements occur in real time and space and affect real lives. They are ritualistic in nature and involve visible protocols, procedures, and practices. Effective communication is enhanced when engagers are mindful of—and shape—the reality in which engagements occur.

**Emotional/Rational.** Engagements affect the hearts and minds of those engaged and engaging. Mastering the ability to appeal to one, or the other, or both is essential to effective engagement.

**Spiritual/Conceptual.** Engagement, communication, and dialog occur between and among individuals rooted in specific ways of believing and knowing. Ultimately, engagement is a shared process of constructing meaning among all involved. The ability to inform and influence effectively requires the engager



to appreciate and acknowledge the foundational belief system of those being engaged, as well as his or her own, and to navigate skillfully through those systems to construct bridges of meaning that support the commander's intent and operational and strategic objectives.

Engagement mastery also requires the development and refinement of the following traits: authenticity, presence, openness, and discernment. These traits can, and must, be repeatedly practiced.

**Authenticity.** To be authentic is not only to be perceived as the “real deal” but to be in fact genuine. It is vital to become comfortable in one's own skin so that engaging others is not forced or contrived. Rather, authenticity is an effortless and genuine extension of concern for others' well-being. One might be tempted to believe that it is an innate quality reserved only for a few, but it is not. One becomes authentic by practicing being authentic, to the point that it becomes second nature.

**Presence.** Think of any number of recent encounters you have had. How often did you find yourself wondering if you were essentially talking to yourself? How often were you or your target audience distracted by other things, such as your phone?

Engagement, by definition, requires active involvement and listening as well as commitment on both sides. For this commitment to be meaningful, however, engagers must be fully present in each and every moment of the engagement.

**Openness.** There is often the mistaken notion that engaging audiences, particularly foreign audiences, requires a guarded, selective, self-interested, or even cagey approach. Such approaches invariably backfire. Guardedness and selectiveness are likely to be misjudged as distrust, self-interest as arrogance, and caginess as manipulation. Certainly, measured caution and principled calculation are appropriate when entering into new or uncharted engagements, but developing confidence in one's ability to engage others translates into openness, honesty, and trustworthiness.

**Discernment.** This trait results from heightened awareness. It is the ability to differentiate one actor or audience from another; to understand subtle undercurrents shaping a given engagement; to read between the lines of a conversation; and to reconcile physical or facial gestures with spoken words to understand what is really being said. Most important, it is the ability to see each person being engaged as a unique individual worth one's time and attention. This last point is especially important when dealing with any actor or audience outside the engager's comfort zone, such as those encountered in foreign areas of operations.

Of course, these four attributes continually interact and interweave. The more authentic one is, the more present and open one becomes. The more present and open, the more one is able to discern and, as a result, the more authentic one becomes, and so on.

In early 2013, a short video titled *This is Water* made a splash on the internet. It was based on a commencement speech by writer David Foster Wallace to the graduates of Kenyon College in 2005. Due to rights issues, it was removed, although it has been restored, and the text of Wallace's speech remains in print and online.<sup>9</sup> It is worth reading because it discusses the power these attributes provide for navigating existence and human interactions with empathy and compassion. These may seem odd, even counterintuitive, terms to use when discussing military operations; but, after



(Photo by Spc. Samantha R. Ciaramitaro, Joint Combat Camera Iraq)

Soldiers from the 1314th Civil Affairs Company, 17th Fires Brigade, meet with a sheik 10 September 2009 in Karmat Ali, Iraq, to inform him that the Al-Hajrat grammar school in his village was chosen to be refurbished.

centuries of conflict, we are discovering (or rediscovering) the ancient truth that all activity is fundamentally human-centered. The more we maneuver successfully in the human domain, the more likely we are to positively affect the outcomes of lethal and nonlethal conflicts. In fact, so critical is this truth that one more attribute is added to the list above: *humanity*.

Wallace concludes his speech by saying that we possess great freedom to choose what we think about. Either we can be “lords of our tiny skull-sized kingdoms, alone at the center of all creation,” or attentive, aware, and disciplined enough “truly to care about other people and to sacrifice for them over and over in myriad petty, unsexy ways every day.” In other words, humans are the water that surrounds us: so obvious and pervasive that they become “hidden in plain sight.”<sup>10</sup>

The power of effective engagement is the ability to re-see the people around us and to recalibrate our thinking about what is important and what is not. Ultimately, unless we live alone on an island, everything involves interpersonal relationships. We simply must be more conscious of, and conscientious about, this reality and its implications.

## Engagement Development, Education, and Training—A Way Forward

Becoming more conscious and conscientious about engaging others starts with a more proactive, explicit, and deliberate approach to educating and training the force on interpersonal relationships and engagement. Authenticity, presence, openness, discernment, and humanity are learnable traits that can only be realized through repeated, rehearsed application, reflection, and reapplication. The Army, through its enlisted, warrant officer, and commissioned officer training and education programs, needs to increase both the study and practice of interpersonal communication and to make it a mandatory subject area that does not get squeezed out by other priorities.

In terms of subject matter, the professional military education system, as well as unit and individual training, needs to address the following topics, among others, iteratively and developmentally:

- ◆ Self-awareness
- ◆ Awareness of others

- ◆ The information environment in which communication occurs

- ◆ Communication art and communications science, to include intracultural and intercultural communication, and the means or media through which distinct audiences receive information

- ◆ Attitudinal-based versus behavioral-based influence techniques and the role motivation plays in changing behavior

- ◆ Conflict resolution

- ◆ Diplomacy

- ◆ Strategic communication

To engage successfully, one must know oneself: one's own strengths, weaknesses, and behavioral preferences. Armed with this knowledge, soldiers at all levels are better able to make informed decisions about how to reach out to—and how to inform or influence—specific actors and audiences. At the same time, key audiences can better anticipate how they might be engaged and adjust the way they receive others, listening and responding so the ensuing conversation becomes more meaningful and productive. In addition to a range of tools such as Myers-Briggs, Clifton StrengthsFinder, emotional intelligence assessment, and the Dominance-Influence-Steadiness-Conscientiousness profile, which assess how and why we act and react the way we do, simpler and less costly ways are available, such as facilitated or guided journaling, which asks individuals to reflect in writing on a range of issues or hypothetical situations. Reflective journaling enables individuals to record their behaviors and preferences and then, guided by an instructor's or leader's questions, analyze them in such a way that they achieve breakthrough insights that lead to more competent and nuanced communication.

Awareness of the information environment is cultivated chiefly by placing soldiers in a variety of actual and virtual environments and asking them to observe, analyze, and synthesize what they see and hear. Because every area of operations will have its unique attributes, soldiers must learn to see their operating environments through both external and internal lenses—and to view them as do members of the indigenous populations.

More than a decade of conflict in Iraq and Afghanistan has taught us much about the need to engage foreign and indigenous audiences in culturally nuanced ways, ideally by integrating native communicators



into operational planning and execution efforts whenever feasible.<sup>11</sup> This important lesson explains, in large part, the creation of regionally aligned brigades. All soldiers must be trained in ways that enhance their appreciation and understanding of other cultures through research, studious observation, and ongoing dialog. It is important to recognize, however, that engagement training must go beyond noting differences and, instead, focus on commonness. The more that soldiers recognize the common humanity between them and those they engage, the more successful they will be in their efforts to inform and influence.

The remaining subject areas should be integrated into programs of instruction at the intermediate and advanced levels, such that mid- to senior-level soldiers and leaders can continue to refine their engagement skills and apply them to ever more complex scenarios and situations. But even as these advanced skills are being applied and developed, the basic skills need to be reiterated and practiced to ensure the attributes undergirding them become what the Italian Renaissance writer Baldassare Castiglione termed *sprezzatura* (practiced grace)—the ability to accomplish difficult tasks or actions while hiding the conscious effort behind them.<sup>12</sup> The end goal is to create expert practitioners completely at ease when engaging others, who are understanding of their environment, genuinely caring of those they are engaging, and wholly focused on achieving outcomes that accomplish the mission at hand while also promoting the common good.

### ... And World Peace

In the film *Miss Congeniality*, FBI agent Gracie Hart, played by Sandra Bullock, is asked during the question-and-answer portion of a beauty pageant, “What is the one most important thing our society needs?” She replies, “That would be harsher punishment for parole violators, Stan,” (pregnant pause) “and world peace.”<sup>13</sup> Of course, the humor here is that every other contestant has also answered “world peace,” which, like “solving world hunger,” pokes fun at our very human tendency to want to solve the unsolvable.



(Photo by Sgt. Jaime Deleon, Combined Joint Task Force 82 PAO)

Cpl. Jonathan Irwin (left) and Staff Sgt. Dwaine Hood, both with the 71st Cavalry Regiment, 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 10th Mountain Division, relax with local mullahs (religious leaders) and villagers 16 September 2009 at the Baraki Barak District Center while they wait for the last of the mullahs to arrive. The soldiers of Task Force Spartan delivered mosque refurbishment supplies and humanitarian aid packages to the mullahs to distribute to local families.

While we do not claim that enhanced interpersonal communication skills will lead to world peace, we do believe they can go a long way toward solving many of the challenges that we—as an Army and a society—face. For example, take the issue of soldier suicides. Those at risk for suicide sometimes feel socially isolated and unable to share their thoughts or feelings with others. Even if they are socially connected, they tend to withdraw as ideations of suicide grow stronger.<sup>14</sup> Accordingly, the Army’s intervention, Ask-Care-Escort, essentially requires interpersonal engagement as the means to thwart possible suicide.<sup>15</sup> The intervention to prevent sexual harassment or assault, Intervene-Act-Motivate, similarly depends on direct, person-to-person engagement.<sup>16</sup> In each case, the ability and willingness to engage others requires a level of competence and confidence that many find daunting. The verbiage that accompanies the act of intervening states, “I will have the personal courage to intervene and prevent sexual assault.”<sup>17</sup> Personal courage is definitely required, but such courage can be greatly facilitated when one is highly practiced at engaging others, just as the courage to jump out of an airplane is dramatically enhanced when one has one thousand jumps under his or her belt instead of just one.

If there is a contemporary cautionary—and extreme—example about the consequences of not creating a force of expert interpersonal engagers, whether across cultures or within one’s organization or team, it is found in the book

*Black Hearts: One Platoon's Descent Into Madness in Iraq's Triangle of Death*, by Jim Frederick.<sup>18</sup> Essentially left to its own devices, a platoon spiraled out of control, and several of its members committed an atrocity as brutal as it was callous. More than a century earlier, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* captured the same kind of insidious consequences of disengagement and isolation, among them the myopic inflation of one's self-importance and the dehumanization of others.<sup>19</sup> Bad people will do bad things, but the chances are significantly lowered when the individuals are routinely engaged eye-to-eye, looked after, and are themselves trained in the skills and traits of interpersonal engagement, especially the ability to recognize the humanity and cultural uniqueness of those they engage. At the very least, such training will help reveal antisocial behavior and enable leaders to take appropriate corrective action.

## Conclusion

The chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Martin Dempsey, said, "We've been reminded that wars are a fundamentally human endeavor and always require interaction with a broad range of actors and potential partners."<sup>20</sup> In a complex world with complex problems, these interactions demand that soldiers be experts at interpersonal engagement. To become experts, they must qualify in a manner akin to qualifying with their weapons. With those, they are not allowed to just say, "I shot a lot growing up," or "Trust me, I'm really good at shooting," to become qualified. Rather, they must learn, zero, practice, and demonstrate proficiency on a qualification range annually. The same must be required of interpersonal engagement. Otherwise, unlike Scheherazade, they might wake up one day and find it their last. ■

Lt. Col. Robert M. Hill, EdD, U.S. Army, retired, is a military analyst and doctrine writer with the Information Operations Proponent Office. After twenty years on active duty in field artillery and public affairs assignments, he worked in the private sector for a decade in broadcasting and education. He holds a BS from the U.S. Military Academy, an MA from Duke University, and an EdD from the University of Missouri-Columbia.

## Notes

1. Richard Burton, trans., *The Arabian Nights: Tales from a Thousand and One Nights* (New York: Random House, Inc., 2004).

2. Raymond Odierno, James Amos, and William McRaven, *Strategic Landpower: Winning the Clash of Wills*, U.S. Army, U.S. Marine Corps, and U.S. Special Operations Command white paper (28 October 2013), 4, accessed 28 May 2015, <http://www.tradoc.army.mil/FrontPageContent/Docs/StrategicLandpower-WhitePaper.pdf>.

3. *Ibid.*, 6.

4. *Ibid.*, 5.

5. Field Manual 3-13, *Inform and Influence Activities* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office [GPO], January 2013), chapter 8.

6. *Ibid.*, 8-1.

7. *Ibid.*, 8-1 and 8-2.

8. The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator personality inventory is a tool used to measure psychological preferences and perceptions, and to classify individuals into one of sixteen personality types.

9. David Foster Wallace, "David Foster Wallace, In His Own Words" (video of commencement address at Kenyon University, 2005), accessed 28 May 2015, <https://vimeo.com/68855377>; text of commencement address, accessed 28 May 2015, <http://moreintelligentlife.com/story/david-foster-wallace-in-his-own-words>.

10. *Ibid.*

11. Robert M. Hill, "Building Credible Voices: Traditional Communication in Afghanistan," *Joint Force Quarterly*, 61 (2nd Quarter 2011): 56-63.

12. Baldassare Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, trans. Charles S. Singleton (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2002).

13. "Beauty Pageant Question and Answer Scene," *Miss Congeniality*, directed by Donald Petrie (Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2005), DVD.

14. I acknowledge the assistance of John W. Stump, licensed marriage and family counselor and director, Psychological Health, U.S. Marine Corps Reserve for Illinois, Iowa, and Missouri, in developing these statements concerning soldier suicides.

15. "Suicide Prevention Training," Army G-1 website, accessed 11 May 2015, <http://www.armyg1.army.mil/hr/suicide/training.asp>.

16. U.S. Army Sexual Harassment/Assault Response & Prevention (SHARP) website, accessed 28 May 2015, <http://www.sexualassault.army.mil/index.cfm>.

17. *Ibid.*

18. Jim Frederick, *Black Hearts: One Platoon's Descent Into Madness in Iraq's Triangle of Death* (New York: Broadway Books, 2010).

19. Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 4th Ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2005).

20. Martin Dempsey, "Mission Command," *Army* (January 2011): 43-44.