

Action Research

A Systematic Approach to the Social Component of the Human Dimension

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Deployments can often make a person feel as if he or she is living the 1993 movie *Groundhog Day*. In the movie, an arrogant weatherman named Phil (played by actor Bill Murray) finds himself reliving the same day over and over again in soul-crushing repetition until he develops a sense of humanity and compassion through the daily reproduction of myriad personal interactions.¹

While many of us have used the movie as a recurrent theme to describe the unpleasant day-to-day monotony in the pattern of our own activities and personal interactions while deployed, this article proposes that the multinational partners of U.S. military forces likely have similarly discouraging “Groundhog Day” experiences when U.S. forces work with them in a manner that may be perceived as careless or even disdainful.

In today’s operating environments, individuals and units that allow themselves to lapse into patterns of careless indifference with regard to the duty of developing personal relationships with partners place their mission effectiveness in jeopardy. Ignoring the need

to develop personal relationships as an important dimension of a deployment can, at best, result in partner relationships remaining static; at worst, it will become destructive with regard to accomplishing the mission. The partner whom a soldier does not engage on a personal level begins to see that soldier as just another uniform in an endless line of uniforms. This results in little incentive to make progress toward established partner objectives. Individual friends and allies whom soldiers treat in an impersonal manner eventually see no reason to waste time and effort being committed partners because in a few months a new uniform will be starting the entire “Groundhog Day” process again. This shortcoming

in how soldiers conduct operations will have serious implications in any rapidly changing operating environment where forces increasingly rely on mutual support from multinational partners and local populations. Good relationships with those individual partners and members of communities are critical to mission success.²

Some members of the U.S. military already possess—or, through experience, are able to develop—the self-awareness necessary to engage effectively with multinational actors to achieve mission success.

“Individual friends and allies whom soldiers treat in an impersonal manner eventually see no reason to waste time and effort being committed partners.”

These individuals endeavor to improve the quality of their social interactions with local or multinational partners, to learn from them, and to refine relationships with them throughout the duration of their deployments. While soldiers and leaders of this caliber are invaluable, they remain too few. To achieve success in both the cognitive and social components of the human dimension in current operations, it is necessary for the U.S. Army to empower soldiers with systematic tools and skills that will help them improve how they interact on a personal level with critical partners.³

The Problem of Social Continuity

Consider the information typically discussed between two units during a relief-in-place/transfer-of-authority operation (when one unit replaces another and assumes control of a specific operational area). It is standard for an outgoing unit to brief the incoming unit on combat lessons learned and enemy tactics, trends, and procedures.

A record of social interactions. Now imagine that, as part of your predeployment workup, you simulate real-world scenarios, based on a careful log of interactions developed by the unit you are replacing. The log chronicles key social interactions between soldiers and local people with whom you will be working. Additionally, during the handover process, the outgoing unit presents the incoming unit with further in-depth records of social interactions pertinent to the unit's area of responsibility, including a journal full of observations and analyses recorded by key leaders and others you are succeeding. The records detail interactions with specific local individuals.

Better handovers. Such a systematic approach to developing personal relationships through deliberate and documented social interactions by members of the U.S. military would foster more efficient and productive unit-to-unit handovers. Furthermore, it would greatly flatten the learning curve of incoming units adjusting to the new area of operations by facilitating more focused and rapid acculturation. This would enhance the compatibility of the new unit with local partners and, ideally, limit partners' "Groundhog Day" experience that would impede relationships and mission success.

Action Research as a Solution to the Problem of Social Continuity

This article recommends *action research* as a potential solution to the specialized problems associated with social interactions between U.S. military personnel and multinational partners and local communities. Action research has the potential to do the following:

- ◆ Improve how soldiers respond to ambiguity in complex social situations
- ◆ Create a systematic means for self-improvement along with improved self-awareness
- ◆ Increase the probability of operational success when operations depend on social interactions
- ◆ Provide for better transfer of information during unit turnover
- ◆ Increase the realism and accuracy of predeployment training scenarios

To paraphrase a well-known proverb, action research does not give soldiers fish, but instead it teaches them an effective method for catching fish.

"The experiences of teachers mirror the problem of discontinuity experienced by soldiers during extended deployments."

The problem of social continuity in the field of education. The concepts underlying action research originate from the education field, where teachers work in complex and often-ambiguous environments. In some ways, the experiences of teachers mirror the problem of discontinuity experienced by soldiers during extended deployments. Teachers are required to adjust to cyclical changeovers of new classes and different students every nine months, while soldiers are expected to adapt to new areas of responsibility and local partners in rotations of six to twelve months.

An approach to social continuity developed by educators. Educators' success, much like that of contemporary soldiers, largely depends on enticing individuals over whom they have relatively little coercive

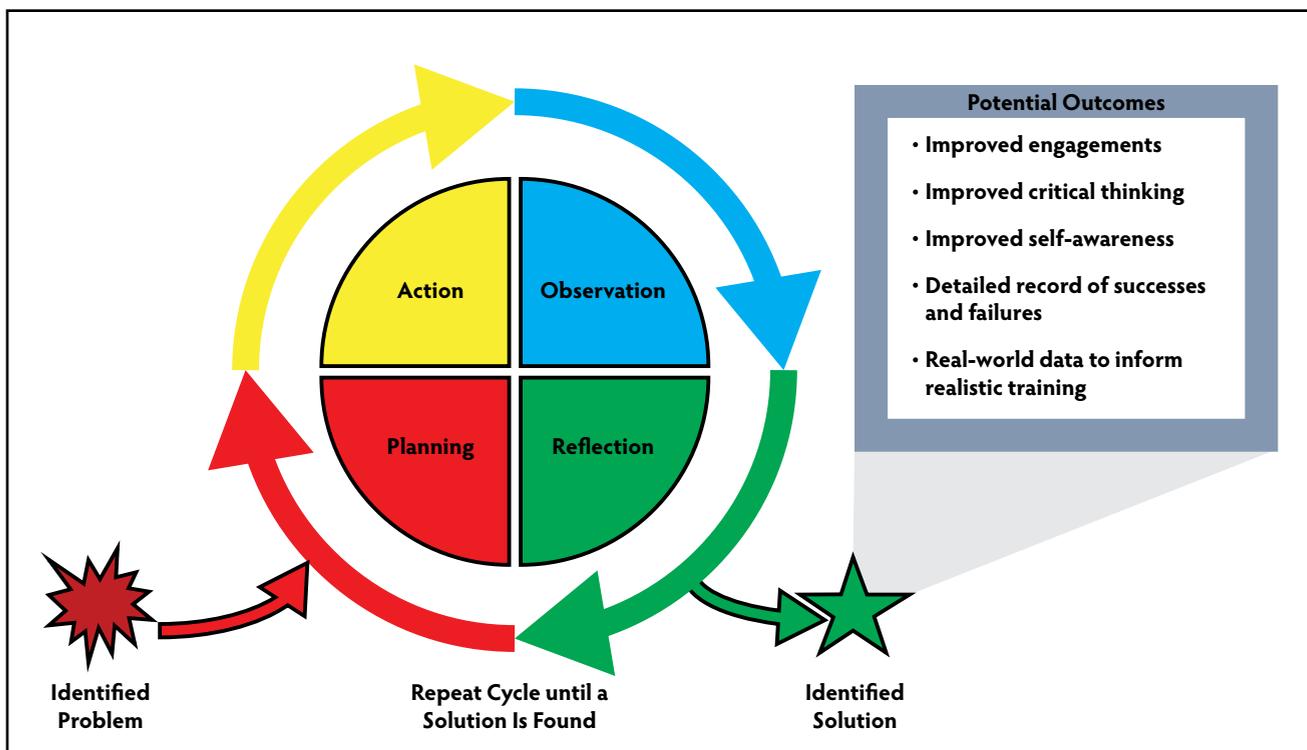


Figure 1. Action Research Cycle Model

control to take specific actions toward a goal. In the case of teachers, this often means helping students acquire knowledge and modify behavior; in the case of soldiers, this might mean convincing partners to cooperate with former adversaries. These similarities suggest that it may be instructive for the U.S. military to look to the education field for lessons about the human dimension relevant to fostering and stimulating desired behaviors through personal relationships, in situations that do not require violence.

The Concept of Action Research

Kurt Lewin, regarded by many as the founder of social psychology, developed the concept of action research in 1946 while teaching at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Action research is generally defined in two ways: (1) research initiated to solve an immediate problem, and (2) a reflective process of progressive problem solving that focuses on initially improving the way issues are identified and addressed.⁴

Action research was developed with practitioners, rather than researchers, in mind. It was designed to be simple enough to conduct while still focusing on a primary task, but flexible and scalable enough to be

applied in as complex a manner as the practitioner chooses.

Simplified, action research is a systematic form of everyone’s favorite problem solving technique: guess and check. In social interactions during deployed operations, many soldiers and leaders already employ this strategy, but in an unsystematic manner. Action research provides a framework for military personnel to more methodically and effectively apply a strategy they are likely already familiar with.

To keep action research methodology simple, it can be expressed in four steps—*planning, action, observation, and reflection*. In some ways, action research is comparable to steps within retired Air Force Col. John Boyd’s “OODA [observe, orient, decide, act] loop” or Dr. W. Edwards Deming’s “PDSA [plan, do, study, act] cycle.”⁵ However, while the OODA loop and PDSA cycle represent, respectively, a rapid decision-making tool and a quality-control measure, the action research process (depicted in figure 1) focuses on social interaction and acts primarily as a problem-solving tool for informing a decision-making process.

The steps of the action research process are simple, and they continue in a cycle until a solution is effective.

Once practitioners identify a problem, they can enter the action research cycle at whichever step makes the most sense for the situation and progressively repeat steps until achieving success. The steps the practitioner takes are as follows:

Planning. Identifies and limits the scope of problem, then gathers background information and develops a course of action. The course of action selected should have a specific and achievable end state.⁶

Action. Implements concrete steps of the selected course of action.⁷

Observation. Makes detailed observations (mentally or in writing, depending on the situation) concerning the consequences and reactions to the course of action. This step can occur simultaneously with the “action” step.⁸

Reflection. Reflects upon the observations and decides to continue the previously identified course of action or to plan a new course of action if the initial action did not solve the problem.⁹

Action research is a deliberate and methodical examination of a practitioner’s actions within the context of a specific environment. It is valuable not only for achieving situational awareness and understanding but also for increasing the ability to influence the actions of others. The practitioner can develop appropriate actions, based on better understanding, to improve social influence efforts.

Sometimes one can plan and take an action, immediately observe the results, reflect on the consequences, and then plan and implement a new course of action, as appropriate, during the course of a single conversation. At other times, the observation step may last several days or even weeks before the results become evident.

Examples of action research can range from interactions with a single individual to large-scale projects such as changing and testing the format of an information operations campaign in order to influence an entire community. As one might expect, the wider the scope, the longer it may take to progress through the steps of the cycle.

Action Research Applied in Afghanistan

A real-world example of action research conducted by one of this article’s authors, William Hardy, is detailed below. During Hardy’s 2013–2014 deployment

as a social scientist with the Army’s Human Terrain System, he had the opportunity to directly support a district stability platform (DSP) in southeastern Afghanistan for almost ten months, during Operation Enduring Freedom. DSPs were small bases established by the U.S. military within local communities. U.S. special operations forces would conduct village stability operations from DSPs in partnership with Afghan National Army Special Forces and local security elements such as the Afghan Local Police (ALP) or organized anti-Taliban militia fighters. While supporting a DSP, Hardy became the single point of continuity during near-simultaneous relief-in-place transitions between two Navy SEAL (sea-air-land team) platoons and two Army civil affairs teams.

Similar to most DSPs, the primary mission included promoting security and cooperation between government officials and civilian entities at the local level. The bureaucratic structure of the Afghan Uniform Police (AUP) in the area compounded numerous challenges, particularly in the case of a certain AUP lieutenant who controlled the flow of supplies to nearly all local security forces.

Complex and precarious relationships. To fully appreciate the complexities of working with this individual, some background information is needed. Members of the local community reported to DSP members that during the Afghan-Soviet War, individuals in the lieutenant’s family had ties with, or were members of, the communist regime’s secret police force, Khadamat-e Aetla’at Dawlati (KHAD). According to members of the local community, KHAD was responsible for a number of atrocities in the area during the communist era. While conducting research, the team encountered locals who claimed that during the 1980s, KHAD facilitated the massacre of over two hundred men and boys suspected of being mujahedeen, and that in the early 1990s, before the fall of President Mohammad Najibullah, KHAD was thought to have contributed to the disappearance of countless members of the community who opposed the communist government.

As the communist Afghan government fell, it was believed that members of the local mujahedeen groups caught the lieutenant’s father trying to flee, and they burned him alive in his vehicle. At the time of Hardy’s deployment, the younger brothers and sons of the mujahedeen allegedly involved in killing the lieutenant’s

father made up the ranks and leadership of the local security forces. These events ultimately led to a precarious relationship between the AUP lieutenant and the men he was tasked to coordinate and supply.

Complex behavior. Among the many personal attributes the lieutenant displayed was a penchant for being easily provoked and becoming quickly angered and threatening. However, the DSP observed that this penchant for anger may have been carefully calculated for effect. The lieutenant appeared to use displays of anger and interpersonal drama as a tool for intimidation and a means to exercise control. For example, he would often storm out of meetings following the formal greetings and introductions, presumably to highlight his importance and, presumably, to demonstrate to all present that the meeting could not occur without him. On one occasion, he punched a senior district official in the face; on another, he angrily brandished his pistol in a room full of district officials, waving it around in a threatening manner before setting it on a table.

To complicate matters, he also controlled the flow of supplies (including uniforms, ammunition, rations, and water) to nearly all local security forces. The organizational chart in figure 2 illustrates the degree to which this individual's cooperation (or lack thereof) could influence wide-ranging district security coordination.

No end in sight. Unfortunately, seemingly erratic and menacing behavior did not result in his dismissal. Family ties to senior government officials prevented him from being fired. After failing to get him removed from his position, the local officials changed their tack and were able to get him promoted to a position in the provincial capital. However, this promotion lasted only a few weeks before he was able to get himself demoted and placed back into his previous position at the district level (the "AUP officer in charge of ALP" shown in figure 2). The DSP members believed he preferred this because his position at the head of the district ALP had the potential to be more personally lucrative than the provincial post with only nominally higher rank.

Consequently, it was clear to the DSP members that they were stuck with him. Moreover, the DSP members were resigned to accepting that no matter what they did, they would never be able to control the AUP lieutenant's actions. The unit was faced with either having to find a way to work through him or having to risk failing one of its primary missions—promoting local security.

How the DSP built a cooperative working relationship. Upon analysis, the DSP members determined they could only control their own actions while trying to understand the AUP lieutenant's responses. They decided it would be necessary to keep a record of his responses over time to inform future personal engagements. This determination presented an excellent opportunity for utilizing action research.

Subsequently, the DSP members defined the problem as "How do we influence a man over whom we have no control?" With this, they began to review and assess their actions. They also began to record the AUP lieutenant's interactions with other Afghans. The unit initiated the process with *reflection*, and dissected its previous interactions. On careful study, the DSP noticed small details that were as simple as the time of day an interaction took place. The DSP also noticed the lieutenant's intense focus on perceived status. For instance, any time someone he perceived as beneath him was in the room, he would actively seek to establish his superiority—even if that person's official position was above his. In such circumstances, he would use aggressive body posture—and even violent gestures—to impose his dominance over those around him.

Additionally, the DSP members noted that the lieutenant never missed an opportunity to demonstrate his influence in front of a group of local police or anti-Taliban militia commanders. To his subordinates, he portrayed himself as someone who always fought for their cause as long as they supported him. Whether he intended to follow through is of little consequence; instead, the DSP concluded that he was very concerned with how he was perceived by others. Consequently, the unit began to notice that in every interaction he aimed to amplify his influence. He was keenly aware of opportunities to reinforce his status, while at the same time he was hypersensitive to perceived insults for which he was unforgiving and even vindictive.

After careful *reflection*, the DSP developed plans for future interactions. One of the initial decisions was never to enter a meeting in an emotional state that might antagonize the lieutenant. This made it less likely that members of the DSP would come into direct and open conflict with him during a meeting. Even if members of the DSP had reason to be angry with him, they would not allow themselves to show their anger, on the well-grounded assumption that doing so would

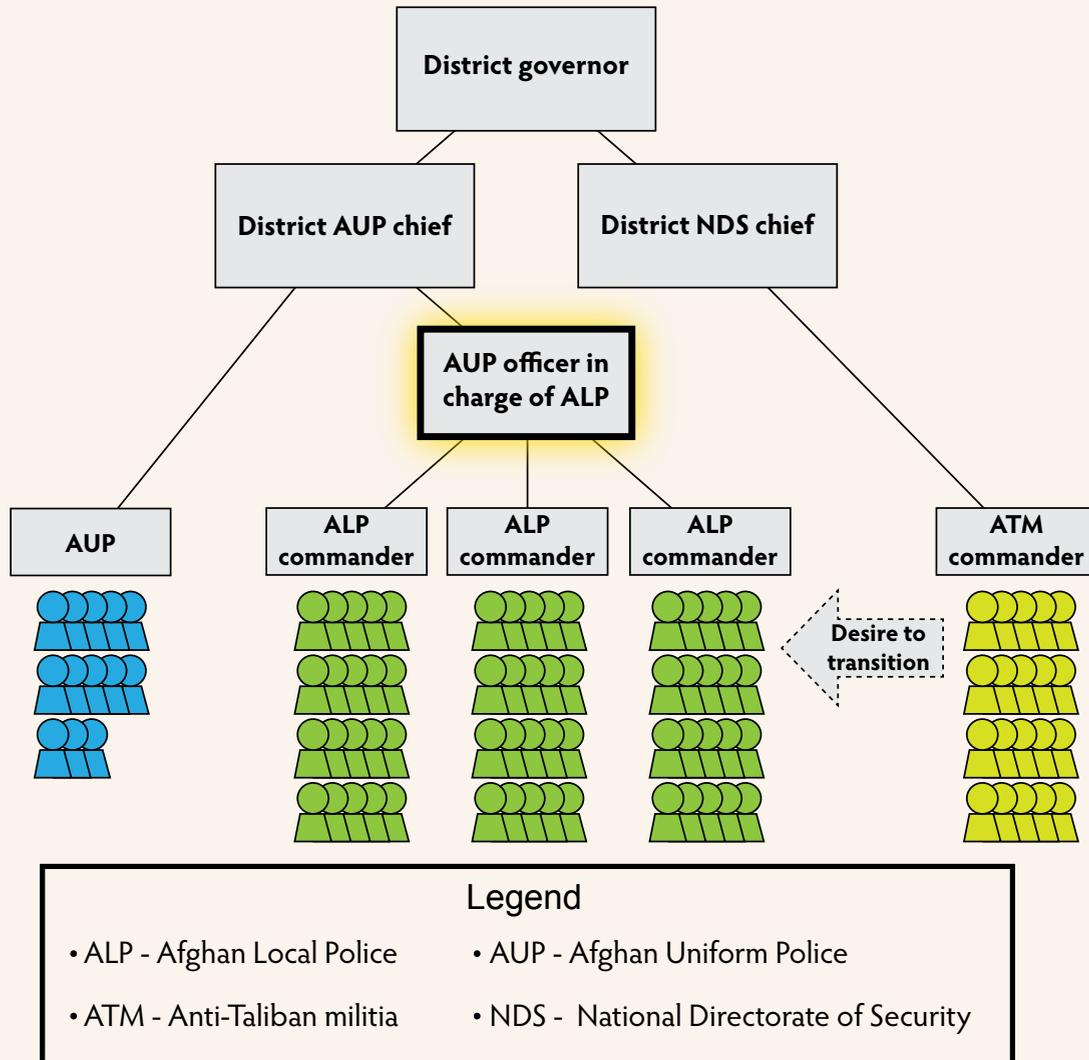


Figure 2. District Security Power Structure

only escalate the situation. Additionally, the DSP *took action* to present its members as open and empathetic, as much as possible, to his point of view.

The DSP also began experimenting with scheduled meeting times. It *observed* that he was often busiest in the mornings, and if the DSP scheduled a meeting with him in the morning, he would rapidly become impatient and blame members of the DSP for interrupting his day and slowing his work. The DSP also realized that late afternoon meetings were equally ineffective because he considered afternoons an important personal time—for certain recreational diversions. Thus, if DSP members wanted to have a successful meeting with him, it would have to be scheduled in the evening

after dinner, when he would most likely offer his full attention. By evening, he had usually regained his mental focus and concentration while retaining a sense of composure, presumably from his afternoon indulgences.

Over several months, and numerous setbacks, the DSP members developed a sophisticated understanding of the AUP lieutenant's self-perception and motivation. This understanding, ultimately, helped the unit develop a method aimed at influencing him by accentuating the role the unit could play in helping him achieve his aspirations.

Eventually, based on *reflection* through many iterations, and failed actions, of the action research cycle, the DSP members perceived that he loved the rush

of adrenaline that accompanied an argument. They also determined that he respected and formed a bond with others who enjoyed engaging in lively arguments. Thus, the DSP members came to recognize that their relationship with the lieutenant needed some measure of friendly conflict to be productive. In contrast, if the DSP members engaging with him were overly deferential and anxious to please, he would become less cooperative and more prone to anger. Eventually, the DSP members found a balance between what they considered the substance, as opposed to the social displays, of their interactions with the lieutenant.

Consequently, members of the DSP unit learned to manage their own emotions during arguments. Regardless of what happened during meetings, they would end them with a firm handshake, and both parties would say, “we have had a good argument today, and we look forward to arguing again tomorrow.”

Members of the DSP also began to realize they could play a relatively small but significant role in helping him appear influential, which appeared to be one of his goals. If the DSP members did their part, he would,

typically, reciprocate and use his influence to help the Americans. For example, as the spring turned into summer and the days grew hotter, the DSP began giving him extra bottles of water, which he would then distribute among the local

security forces. The DSP quickly learned that while the idea of giving him water was theirs, it was important that everyone else, most notably his colleagues and subordinates, understood he had arranged for the exchange (and, by inference, had the influence to do so). He would then deliver the water to the various ALP checkpoints, as well as to families living around the checkpoints. This small act not only improved the unit’s relationship with him but also improved his fragile relationship with the ALP leaders.

As the months went on, the DSP developed a practical and predictable working relationship with the lieutenant. He no longer viewed his American counterparts as adversarial. Instead, if they ever needed his

cooperation, they had a reasonable chance of achieving positive results because of the relationship they were able to develop with him through action research. This is not to assert that the unit’s relationship with him became perfect, but compared to the starting point, it became in some measure cooperative, predictable, and manageable as the lieutenant and the DSP members came to know each other.

Outcomes of Action Research in Operations and in Training

In this example, the learning processes derived from action research greatly facilitated the DSP’s relief-in-place/transfer-of-authority operations even as the events mentioned were unfolding during transitions. Irrespective, the incoming SEAL platoons and the civil affairs teams benefitted from the lessons learned by their predecessors. Throughout the transitions, the DSP continued the action research process, attempting to make even more progress toward mission success by cultivating other relationships.

Lessons learned from these experiences with a DSP

could also be applied to training scenarios for the U.S. Army. In how many training events have the role players, at best, come from the region where soldiers were to be deployed, but the role players lacked experience performing the

jobs they were role-playing? Alternatively, how many times have role-players merely been other soldiers dressed in costume and pretending to be sheikhs or tribal elders without having any real understanding of the culture they were supposed to be simulating? Notes taken during the action research process from a given area of operations could inform and help shape realistic training scenarios in both such cases that would help accurately reflect the environment into which a unit would be deployed.

Such a methodology should be applied to pre-deployment preparations for units designated as regionally aligned forces. Units conducting an action research process to chronicle the development

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of social relationships with host-nation personnel could improve unit transitions by having role players portray the specific individuals that soldiers would encounter on their deployment. This would further the goal of realistic training, one of the pillars of the Army's human dimension goals.

Conclusion

As U.S. Army forces prepare for anticipated operating environments of 2025 and beyond, one thing will likely remain true: success in operations will become increasingly dependent on the ability to understand the social complexities of partners and populations with whom U.S. forces will be working. Consequently, future operating environments will need soldiers who can do more than just recall information, understand functions, or apply doctrine.

Operating environments of the future will need soldiers at every level who can analyze and evaluate unfamiliar, dissimilar, and changing social surroundings.

As such, the Army must, through appropriate training and tools, provide soldiers with a systematic intellectual framework for developing this capability. As illustrated here, one possible tool to address some of these challenges is action research. Providing soldiers with material solutions rather than cognitive processes to solve problems may answer certain challenges, but it will not solve the root problems causing those challenges. Solutions such as action research, which address the underlying issues that perpetuate ongoing challenges in the field, can help soldiers develop the cognitive mechanisms needed to not only cope but also to thrive within complex and ambiguous operating environments. ■

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Notes

1. *Groundhog Day*, directed by Harold Ramis (Columbia Pictures, 1993).

2. Army Capabilities Integration Center, *Army Vision-Force 2025 White Paper* (Fort Eustis, VA: Army Capabilities Integration Center, 23 January 2014), accessed 9 September 2015, http://www.arcic.army.mil/app_Documents/USArmy_WhitePaper_Army-Vision-Force-2025_23JAN2014.pdf.

3. Department of the Army, *The Army Human Dimension Strategy 2015: Building Cohesive Teams to Win in a Complex World*, 2015, accessed 1 October 2015, http://usacac.army.mil/sites/default/files/publications/20150524_Human_Dimension_Strategy_vr_Signature_WM_1.pdf. This report provides an in-depth description of the three human dimension lines of effort.

4. Kurt Lewin, "Action Research and Minority Problems," *Journal of Social Issues* 2(4) (November 1946): 34–46.

5. John Richard Boyd, "Destruction and Creation," *A Discourse on Winning and Losing*, prepared for the U.S. Marine Corps, 3 September 1976; W. Edwards Deming, *The New Economics for Industry, Government, Education* (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Center for Advanced Engineering Study, 1993).

6. Craig Mertler, ed., *Action Research: Teachers as Researchers in the Classroom* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2009), 32.

7. *Ibid.*, 39.

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*, 40.