Ready, Set, Go Anywhere:
A Culture-General Competency Model for the DoD

by Louise J. Rasmussen and Winston R. Sieck

Two click clicks. The other Marine was standing behind me. I felt his back up against mine and I felt the safeties click off our weapons. We talked about it later. We both thought, this is it; our bodies are going to get drug through the streets on the five o'clock news. That was the first day we went to the rebel compound. We were the first Marines out there since the Liberian Civil War had started. There was a huge gap in Intel. Nobody had any idea what the leadership of this group was like, what they were influenced by, what they wanted, what were their strengths. And there was really no other way to fill it than to go out there.

Someone had gone upstairs to get the "General" when we arrived. We stood back to back and we were literally surrounded in this compound. There must have been 300 of them. And this kid, he was probably 13 or 14 with an AK47 bayonet strapped to his bandoleers. He walked up to me and looked me right in the face. His eyes were glazed over and yellow. He looked at me and looked at all my gear and said "superpower." He said it twice. Then he pulled out his bayonet and said, "I am going to cut out your heart and eat it, so I can absorb all of your abilities."

Introduction

This U.S. Marine's narrative is dramatic. But it illustrates the universal conditions under which DoD personnel use cultural skills and knowledge. They have to think quickly, make decisions (with serious outcomes), take action, and accomplish a mission. When applied in a military context, cultural skills and knowledge supports those core functions.

Significantly complicating the task of preparing DoD personnel to handle such challenging situations in other cultures is the additional circumstance that they operate in multiple regions in the world across their careers. The Marine who had the experience described above had pulled into port in Liberia a week after leaving Iraq. In addition to working in the Middle East and Africa, his past and subsequent assignments had taken him to Eastern and Western Europe, South and East Asia, and South America. Even when organizations do their best, it will always be difficult to predict where an individual's next assignment will be. With this state of affairs arises the requirement that DoD personnel possess a special set of cultural skills. Skills that can help them learn, reason, solve problems, and make decisions in any new culture. In essence, these special cultural skills are advanced cognitive skills applied to cultural issues.

The Need for a Culture-General Competency Model

To foster the development of cultural skills that are widely applicable across regions, the DoD needs to know precisely what they are. In other words, a competency model is needed that prescribes the essential cultural knowledge and skills that enable personnel to successfully accomplish the tasks they are sent overseas to do; no matter what region in the world they are operating in. By *essential*, we mean those skill sets that are important regardless of organizational affiliation or occupational specialty. Because the focus is competencies that support operations in any region and culture, we refer to the model as *culture-general*. For the sake of simplicity, we will refer to the broad population for whom the model is relevant as *DoD personnel*.

This model of culture-general competence must be actionable from an operational perspective by recommending knowledge and skills that DoD personnel can realistically acquire and use–that is, they fit within the constraints of their preparation cycles, operating environments, and missions. It must also be actionable from an organizational point of view by supporting the development of learning objectives that can be met through instruction.

The best way to build an actionable competency model for a job is to develop it based on an investigation of individuals who do the job well. In this case that means studying DoD personnel who have worked in many cultures and who are regarded by their peers and supervisors as effective. In the following we will provide an overview of an empirical study aimed at doing exactly that. We will refer to the carefully selected group of DoD personnel who participated in the study as culture-general subject matter experts (SMEs). We will then describe the model that was developed based on the findings, and discuss approaches for cultivating culture-general competence.

The Cognitive Skills of Culture-General SMEs

We conducted a cognitive field research study to uncover the key skills and knowledge that cultural-general SMEs use to overcome challenges in foreign environments.

Twenty-six military professionals, primarily officers from the Army and Marine Corps, with recent and varied overseas assignments participated in semi-structured, incident-based interviews. All had worked overseas at least twice in their careers (75 percent of them three or more times), completing an average of 3.7 overseas assignments.[1] None of the participants had specialized language or culture training, but all had been assigned to jobs overseas that required

daily interactions either with members of the local populations, foreign coalition partners, or both. Their overseas responsibilities included, among others: mentoring, advising, planning for and managing provincial reconstruction, providing embedded training, collecting intelligence, and facilitating interactions with local government officials or civilian partners. All had been recommended to us by other professionals because they were effective in these culturally intensive missions.

In the two-hour interviews, participants were asked to describe personally experienced challenging intercultural interactions during their most recent overseas assignment. The participants' experiences were then used as a point of departure for asking more focused questions designed to elicit information about ways specific skills and knowledge allowed them to cope with intercultural challenges. These questions and the competencies they focused on were informed by a review of past literature.[2]

The Marine's narrative at the opening of this paper is an example of such an experience. To continue the example, the Marine responded to the young African rebel by clicking his safety off, bringing the muzzle up a little bit so it was pointed at the other's midsection, and saying "that wouldn't be a good idea." His assessment of the situation was the following:

> *"I think this kid was trying to project amongst his peers that he was tough. Here is the baddest guy in the room, here is an American, I am going to go cut this guy's heart out and then everyone will respect me. "*

The Marine had learned about the concept of face saving from a past experience with a Turkish officer while on assignment in Bosnia. He used his understanding of face saving in this situation in Liberia. Raising his weapon only slightly demonstrated to the rebel in front of him that he had power. But the motion was subtle, decreasing the likelihood that it was visible to the surrounding rebels. This gave the antagonizing rebel the opportunity to back off, while still projecting that he was in control.[3]

From transcripts of the interviews, we extracted all statements that revealed skills used to understand, decide, and take action during intercultural encounters. This means that we did not rely on the participants' reflections on what *they thought was important to do*; instead we analyzed the data to figure out which skills and knowledge they *applied*. Results of the analysis were synthesized into a set of themes and categories that were used for developing the model. Using this approach we identified twelve culture-general competencies.

12 Actionable Culture-General Competencies

The twelve competencies we identified speak to four broad challenges DoD personnel encounter each time they enter a new culture. These challenges relate to adopting a constructive mindset for working in a new culture, learning about the new culture, making sense of people and events in the new culture, and interacting with members of the culture. In the following we describe each competency in terms of the activities that personnel engage in when they enact the competency.

Diplomatic Stance

1. **Maintain a mission orientation.** When DoD personnel work overseas, building intercultural relationships serves a purpose. Having the general understanding that building intercultural relationships can be a direct means to achieve work objectives and understanding some of the specific ways building relationships can support the mission will motivate personnel to engage and learn more about a new culture.

2. **Understand self in a cultural context.** Thinking about themselves and the U.S. as having a culture keeps personnel aware that they see the world in a particular way and that people from other parts of the world may see things differently. DoD personnel should continuously seek information about how others view them and the U.S. This will help them decide how to act and what to say when they interact interculturally.

3. **Manage attitudes towards culture.** DoD personnel see and experience things in new cultures that challenge their values. They do not have to condone the decisions people in other cultures make. But personnel should be able to keep check on their reactions to values and customs that are different from their own. The first two competencies can help them manage their attitudes.

Cultural Learning

4. **Self-direct learning about the new culture.** No book or training course can give personnel the answers to all the challenges and dilemmas they will face in new cultures. Personnel should understand that cultural learning takes place while they are working overseas and should actively seek opportunities to increase their cultural skills and knowledge during overseas assignments.

5. **Develop reliable information sources.** Cultural learning is greatly enhanced if personnel identify and use a variety of sources such as web sites, books (even fiction), local informants, and colleagues for obtaining information about a new culture. Personnel should be aware that general information about a culture will not necessarily be true in all

contexts and circumstances. This means they should assess the credibility and bias in cultural information and sources by checking more than one source and comparing their answers.

6. **Reflect and seek feedback.** Personnel should continue to reflect on their experiences and interactions in new cultures after they occur. After an interaction personnel can personally reflect on whether actions or messages worked as intended, or they can seek feedback from a reliable information source.

Cultural Reasoning

7. *Cope with cultural surprises.* Personnel will always encounter people and situations in new cultures that are unexpected. When they do, they should try to find out why. Trying to make sense of the culture for themselves will often lead to new insights.

8. **Develop cultural explanations of behavior.** Personnel should try to explain to themselves why people act as they do in the new culture, differently from their own. Using things they know about the new culture to explain their behavior will help them build a deeper understanding of the culture overall.

9. **Take a cultural perspective.** Personnel should try to see things from the point of view of the people from the other culture. This can mean considering how their beliefs, desires, motivations, their immediate situation, or history influence their behavior.

Intercultural Interaction

10. **Plan cross-cultural communication.** In intercultural interactions, personnel should think ahead of time about what they want to say and how they want others to perceive them. They should use what they know about the culture to figure out the best way to get their messages across.

11. **Control self-presentation.** Personnel should be deliberate about how they present and express themselves, be it verbally, nonverbally, through their dress, actions, or mere presence. This can sometimes mean being themselves. Other times they have to adapt how they present themselves to the culture in order to make the intended impression.

12. **Act with incomplete knowledge.** Fear of saying or doing the wrong thing or general discomfort from having what feels like 'not enough' information can lead to paralysis. Personnel should focus on learning a few things about a new culture that fit their interests, and use those as a starting point for interacting and making connections with people and thereby learn more while abroad.

These 12 competencies were derived from studying activities experienced DoD personnel engage in, prior to and while they are operating in new cultures.[4] The activities are straightforward and they are powerful. Novice personnel could benefit from learning and practicing these strategies early in their careers.

The strategies are simple because they fit within the constraints DoD personnel have to contend with, such as time, resources, objectives, and uncertainty. They are efficient because by providing the tools to self-regulate their learning, they enable narrowing the learning focus to the skills and knowledge that are relevant for their typical overseas assignments. The strategies are powerful because they provide immediate and long-term benefits. They directly aid intercultural interactions anywhere, while at the same time fostering deeper acquisition of knowledge about a specific culture during an overseas assignment. They are also powerful because these strategies often provide more than one kind of benefit. For example, seeking information by asking members of a culture questions about themselves provides information, naturally. However, it also generates goodwill because it demonstrates interest in people and their culture.

Culture-general competence is fundamentally about cognitive adaptation. If a person is adaptable it means that he has the potential, and is ready, so to speak, to adjust to new or changing situations.[5] The 12 culture-general competencies provide personnel with thinking skills that will help them make sense of and make decisions in new intercultural situations. When applied over time these thinking skills will increase a person's repertoire of interpretations and responses they are able to bring to bear on new situations. In this way the 12 competencies provide a foundation for cultural adaptation.

Cultivating Culture-General Competence in the DoD

When culture-general competence develops naturally, it does so through socialization and experience. It is unclear whether in fact it could be developed without those ingredients. Given that, a useful role for programs aimed at promoting culture-general competence is an augmentative one. This means that the objective of such programs would be to prepare personnel to take advantage of learning opportunities when they arise. This will both accelerate their acquisition of culture-specific knowledge and the longer term development of culture-general competence. We will discuss two ways organizations can accelerate the development of culture-general competence–through formal

instruction and through leadership that creates productive social learning environments.

Instructing Culture-General Competence. There are two broad strategies for realizing culture-general learning objectives through formal instruction. The first is by creating courses or programs that focus specifically on the knowledge and skills that make up culture-general competence. The second is by embedding culture-general learning objectives within existing curricula that have a culture, language, or international relations focus. This could be as part of a pre-deployment package, course, or exercise that has a strong primary emphasis on a specific area of operation. Or, it could be as part of instruction aimed at building specialized competencies for jobs that entail developing and sustaining international relationships, such as a cross-cultural communication course or a security cooperation training program.

A number of things have to happen before either of the above strategies can be implemented. Those in a position to develop or deliver instruction need to:

✦ Understand what culture-general competence is.

✦ Know what specific culture-general skills and knowledge are important for students to learn.

✦ Have examples of how they can foster culture-general competence using their instructional medium of choice, be it classroom instruction, web-delivered courses, or field exercises.

✦ Understand how to merge primary course learning objectives with objectives relevant to culture-general competence (in cases where instruction has a regional or job-specific focus).

From an administrative point of view, leadership plays a critical role in ensuring that the lesson design that occurs within an organization includes culture-general learning objectives. This, at the minimum requires that the organization circulates information to instructors that helps them develop a common understanding of what culture-general competence is. A second step could include providing professional development for instructors on how to incorporate culture-general competence in course design.

The topmost requirement for formal instruction of culture-general competence is clarification of job- and mission-relevance. Instructors as well as learners must be able to see how culture-general competence not only relates to, but enhances the primary job or task they are accomplishing overseas. One Marine Corps major we interviewed described this requirement in particularly persuasive terms.

He said "Marines will shut down faster than anything if they don't think it's going to be applicable to their mission. They won't know why they're learning it." He went on to provide an illustration of how even a simple piece of cultural information can become significantly more useful if placed in the context of 'this is what it will help you do.'

"You're telling me that Karzai is Popalzai, who cares? Well, it matters if you meet someone from the Popalzai tribe and you can bring it up as an ice breaker. You're going to be able to open a conversation with him in a way that will gain you credibility. Now it makes sense." [6]

There have been a couple of major obstacles to making the relevance of culture-general skills clear to the broad population of DoD personnel who can benefit from them. A great deal of research over the last 50 years has uncovered many important ingredients to making expatriates successful.[7] However, one obstacle towards translating these findings into prescriptive recipes for success in specific applied work domains is that a number of the identified elements simply have not been defined with an eye towards instruction. Culture-general competencies have been suggested previously that relate to somewhat vague affective or even spiritual orientations that are difficult to connect to actual human activity. For example, one researcher describes "…transcending boundaries in regard to one's identity" as an important component of developing intercultural competence.[8]

Another obstacle has been that proposed conceptions of culture-general competence in some cases borrow specialized terminology from other work domains. For example, the field of anthropology has converged on a set of methods and associated skills that are required to be a good anthropologist. Some have suggested that these same skills can be used to define guidance for how DoD personnel should approach new cultures.[9] It may be useful for certain segments of DoD personnel who have achieved a high level of cultural proficiency to think through the similarities and differences between social science practices and the work they themselves engage in overseas. However, in an effort to make both instructional possibilities and job-relevance broadly apparent, we made it a priority to couch the elements of the culture-general competency model in terms and examples that make a clear connection to DoD missions and activities.

Socializing Culture-General Competence. The development of culture-general competence can also be accelerated by increasing the likelihood that social learning opportunities occur on the job. Social learning happens when a person is a part of a community of individuals who practice a set of

skills or a trade.[10] Several lines of research point toward the idea that "people develop habits and skills of interpretation though a process more usefully conceived of as socialization than instruction."[11] In other words, the capabilities that allow a person to adapt to new situations and challenges likely develop or are at least greatly enhanced through socialization.

Many communities of practice already exist within the DoD. Their primary function can center on any field of specialization, such as reconnaissance, intelligence analysis, or security cooperation. Members of these communities naturally support each other in becoming better at their requisite jobs. These communities also have the potential to support each other in increasing their culture-general competence. The key to creating the conditions under which this will happen is leadership.

Leaders at all levels are influencers. A leader's ideas, beliefs, and values directly and indirectly set standards for subordinates. This means that leaders have a platform for significantly accelerating the development of culture-general competence. They can do so by creating a day-to-day work environment that encourages its development and practice.

Interweaving cultural elements into daily activities does not have to be time consuming or expensive. There are a number of tactics leaders can employ fairly straightforwardly to create a community of practice related to culture that supports learning both during and between overseas assignments.[12] For example, leaders can enable ongoing dialogue within a unit about intercultural experiences, possibly in the context of debriefs or after action reviews or by encouraging informal discussions with interpreters. By listening for and responding to elements of subordinates' experiences that relate to culture, leaders can demonstrate that they value consideration of cultural factors, and learning about same.

Next Steps

The culture-general competence model presented here was developed based on analysis of the strategies culturally-experienced DoD personnel use to handle challenging situations in new cultures. We are currently taking steps to validate the model using a broader cross-section of DoD personnel. In addition to including both officer and enlisted personnel from all the services, the validation study also includes DoD civilians, and personnel with formal language and culture backgrounds, such as Foreign Area Officers, Special Operations, and Intelligence professionals. We expect that the model will accurately characterize this variety of specialities.

The twelve competencies in the current model have been identified as critical to military tasks that require face-to-face intercultural interaction. Because the new sample will also exclusively focus on such tasks there is reason to expect that the new data will provide support for the essential nature of these competencies. The validated model will demonstrate the relevance of culture-general competence to a broader set of DoD tasks and missions, and it can provide the foundation for clarifying the relationship between culture-general competencies and training and education standards.

Endnotes

1. Individual assignments ranged in duration from 6 months to 7 years. Overall, participants had spent an average of 5.1 years overseas. All had worked overseas in at least two different regions in the world. Most had worked in Iraq, Afghanistan, or both, but the final sample represented intercultural experiences all over the world including Europe, Asia, Africa, and South America.

2. See Rasmussen, L. J., & Sieck, W. R., "*A Cognitive Field Study of Professionals who Work in Many Cultures to Develop a Domain Focused Culture-General Competence Model.*" Invited paper for special Intercultural Communication Competence issue of the Journal of International Journal of Intercultural Relations.

3. This example illustrates at least 6 of the 12 competencies: *Understanding self in a cultural context:* The Marine understood that he represented the U.S. and the rebel saw him as powerful for that reason. *Coping with cultural surprises:* The Marine did not have time to think deeply about the reasons for the young rebel's behavior during the encounter. He did think about why the rebel may have acted the way he did afterwards. *Develop cultural explanations:* The Marine used information from a previous experience in Bosnia to come up with a possible explanation for the young rebel's behavior, mainly that he was trying to project power among his peers. *Reflecting and seeking feedback:* The Marine reflected on the experience afterwards, both personally and in discussion with the other Marine who was present. *Controlling self-presentation:* The Marine controlled the image he projected to the rebel, repressing the urge to make an overt display of strength. *Taking a cultural perspective:* The Marine thought about what he himself represented to the young rebel, and thought about what the rebel's motivations and goals in the situation could have been. Mainly, that the rebel wanted to project power and that he would be keen to save face in front of the other rebels.

4. Rasmussen, L. J., Sieck, W. R., Crandall, B., Simpkins, B., and Smith, J. (2011). "*Data collection and analysis for a cross-cultural competence model.*" Applied Research Associates Inc, Fairborn, OH. Retrieve from: www.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a588188.pdf

5. See Morrison, R. F., & Hall, D. T. (2002), Career Adaptability. In D. T. Hall (Ed.), *Careers in and out of Organizations* (205-234). Thousand Oaks, C. A.: Sage

6. This is a good example of how Competency 12, *Acting with Incomplete Knowledge*, can be connected to activities anyone working overseas can engage in.
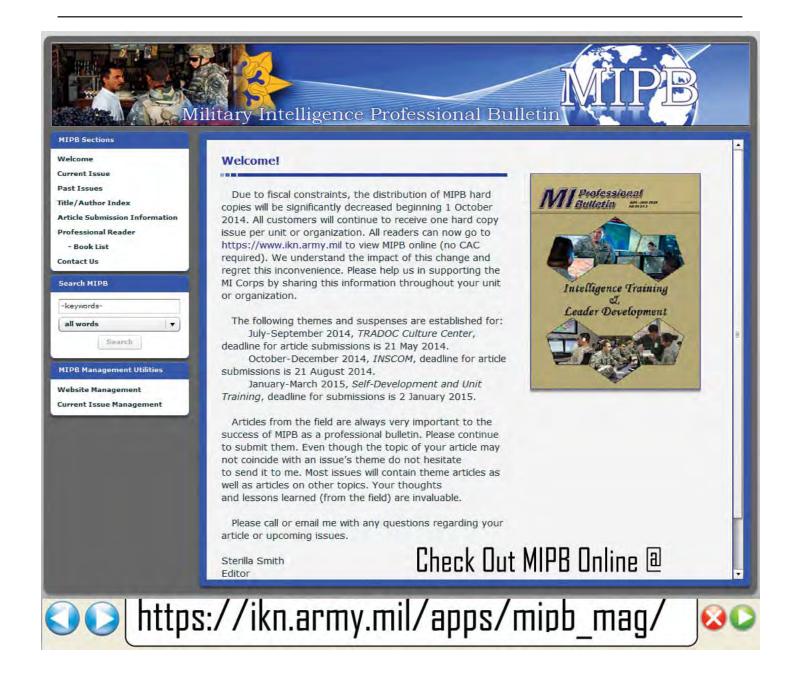
7. See Deardorff, D. K. (Ed.). (2009). *The SAGE handbook of intercultural competence.*

8. Ibid., vii, 267. Transcending boundaries entails "moving beyond the traditional dichotomous in-group/ out-group mentality to one that embraces and respects other's differences as well as commonalities and, in so doing, keeps the focus on the relational goals of engagement."

9. R. Greene Sands, "An Essay on Cultural Relativism and the Convergence of Ethnography and Cross-cultural Competence," *Military Intelligence Review Bulletin* (January/March), 2012: 13-18.

10. See Lave, J. (1993). Situating Learning in Communities of Practice. In L. B. Resnick, J. M. Levine, & S. D. Teasley (Eds.) *Perspectives on Socially Shared Cognition* (17-36). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

11. See p. 39 in Resnick, L. (1989). Treating Mathematics as an Ill-structured Discipline. In R. Charles & E. Silver (Eds.), The teaching and assessing of mathematical problem solving, 32-60. Reston, VA: National Council of teachers of Mathematics.

12. See Schein, E. H. (1996). Kurt Lewin's change theory in the field and in the classroom; Notes toward a Model of Managed Learning. *Systems Practice,* 9(1), 27-47.

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