

# Succeeding in Multinational Staff Assignments:

## Lessons and Reflections from the Experiences of U.S. Army War College Students and International Fellows

*Kristin Behfar (corresponding author)<sup>1</sup>*

*Michael Hosie*

*Jocelyn Levanthal*

*Silas Martinez*

*Richard Meinhart*

*Richard Sheffe*

*Christian Vial*

*Dale Watson*

*George Woods*

### Overview

In AY17-18, faculty in the Department of Command Leadership and Management (DCLM) were given feedback that USAWC students often felt less prepared than they would like to be for multinational staff assignments. In an effort to develop curriculum to address this gap, an interview study was completed with a group of 34 USAWC students (US Military officers and International Fellows) to better understand their experiences. They were asked questions focused on three areas of interest: 1) How did you prepare for your multinational staff assignment, 2) What did you learn while on that assignment, and 3) What advice do you have for officers taking a position on a multinational staff?

This document is an executive summary of their responses. It was prepared for the purposes of discussion and learning, not as a comprehensive documentation of the multinational staff experience. If you are interested in the study methodology please see Appendix A.

### **Question 1: How did you prepare for your multinational staff assignment?**

---

While most participants noted they did not arrive at their assignment as prepared as they would have liked, both the US officers and International Fellows noted several unsurprising themes in their preparation.

First, their militaries provided some form of relevant formal education and training:

- **General military education:** This included non-mission specific coursework to build skills and knowledge in military education, policy making, advising, or senior leader engagement.
- **Specific military training:** This included training specific to a deployment or assignment (e.g., an enduring, non-deployed staff).

---

<sup>1</sup> Contact information: [Kristin.j.behfar.mil@mail.mil](mailto:Kristin.j.behfar.mil@mail.mil); Department of Command, Leadership, and Management, U.S. Army War College, 122

Forbes Ave., Carlisle, PA 17013. *The views expressed in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the U.S. Army War College, U.S. Army, or Department of Defense.*

---

Alternatively, they received training from the staff or organization either in their home country prior to departure or on-site upon arrival:

- ***Multinational organizational training/onboarding***: This tended to be training courses specific to a multinational staff to help facilitate the transition to the staff.

Finally, several officers reported relying on informal sources of preparation such as mentors, self-study, or peers and predecessors:

- ***Mentorship (before arrival & on-hand)***: Many officers reported relying on experienced officers from both their own and other countries to help them prepare and execute responsibilities.
- ***Prior experience***: Many reported benefiting from lessons learned in prior overseas deployments and bi-lateral or multi-national staff assignments earlier in their career.
- ***Self-preparation***: Reading about regional history, current events, political issues, and doing self-directed study was commonly relied upon.
- ***No preparation/on the job***: Several participants reported they did not receive any formal preparation; all learning and preparation was done upon arrival while on the job.

It is worth noting that the International Fellows were unique in reporting that they often reached back to their countries for consultation and support. The US officers did not report doing this, most likely because they had a large number of American officers already on-site with them.

## **Question 2: What did you learn while on your assignment?**

---

There were two main lessons that the participants reported—often learned the hard way. These are elaborated below:

### **Lesson #1: Manage structural friction**

The structure of a multinational staff represents how coalition/alliance members have collectively decided to share power, align interests, divide resources, and coordinate efforts to achieve a competitive advantage. Participants in our study reported several sources of friction that were inherent in such structural decisions, including those related to:

- ***Different national interests (ends)***: Every nation had different interests in a given mission or region. For example, one country might want to deter aggression while another might want to defeat and remove a threat. As a result of the differing interests and/or prior involvement in conflicts, challenges manifested around authorities to share intelligence among member nations. While the coalition itself had a shared intelligence network, some nations had pre-existing agreements outside of the staff structure that allowed them to share more freely with one another, while excluding some nations from operational knowledge. This often interfered with operational planning.

- ***Different methods for problem solving and risk tolerance (ways)***: Differences in national interests and objectives also required navigation of national caveats that placed operational restrictions on militaries by their home countries. Caveats meant nations differed in their willingness to take risk in some missions. Some members were there to “show their flag” but would not tolerate casualties. Commanders had to navigate this difference between participation and contribution, and had to reconcile caveats in operational planning.
- ***Different national resources (means)***: Countries also differed in the degree of resources they were able to commit in support of multinational operations. These resources differed in the amount and sophistication of equipment, in the size of forces committed, and in the number, quality, or rank of the personnel assigned to fill staff or leadership positions. This was influenced partially by the country size and affluence: larger nations tend to have larger pools of officers who have been through professional education and who are available to serve in multinational staff positions. Some nations were not able to provide personnel of equivalent rank across nations (i.e., a Captain may be sent to fill a position other nations fill with a Colonel).

The effect of participating nations’ commitment to multinational staffs and operations across ends, ways, and means combined to create tensions that had to be managed carefully by leadership. Both the US officers and International Fellows noted that these tensions created a sense of power imbalance in the staff setting. Nations were not equally represented in numbers or status, differed in their interests and ability to influence decisions, and differed in their access to important information.

### **Lesson #2: Intervene (or learn patience) when there are cultural barriers to effectiveness**

While participants told us that the military culture in the multinational staff prevailed, they also reported that there were undercurrents of friction based on national culture. National culture carries a set of expectations about language, values, and behaviors that often interfered with writing doctrine, generating consensus, or maintaining respect across the chain of command. There were interesting differences between the US officers and International Fellows on this topic. While the International Fellows recognized that English language fluency was an important issue, the US participants brought up language fluency as a challenge much more frequently. The main issues around English language were:

- ***Issues with fluency***: US officers experienced frustration around poor fluency slowing the pace of work, inhibiting their counterparts from contributing in meetings, and from relying on lower-level officers who spoke better English than equal counterparts in the chain of command.
- ***Issues with translation***: US officers reported frustration with the time it took to work with translators to get the technical translations of words into the English language represented correctly. This often required a great deal of pre-preparation and a need for better language acquisition on the part of US officers.

- **Issues with vocabulary:** US officers reported issues with Queen's vs. American English in writing doctrine, as well as a need to carefully monitor how certain words and terms (e.g., Arabian vs. Persian Gulf) could trigger political sensitivities.

In contrast, the International Fellows focused less on language differences as sources of cultural friction and more on differences in norms and values. They were specifically concerned about a mismatch between their own actual and perceived competence in the eyes of the US officers. This concern can be categorized in three ways:

- **Militaries differ in competence:** Not all militaries train and prepare to the same standards. It becomes apparent in multinational staff settings that not all officers have had access to similar opportunities for training and education. Consequently, there is a wide variance in how prepared officers are between the different countries.
- **Rank does not equal competence:** Therefore, the relationship between competence and an officer's rank across militaries differs. It was reported that it often required care to navigate and demonstrate proper professional respect. In addition, because each member of an alliance represents a different size military, junior officers in smaller militaries often have more responsibilities or exposure to strategic level working and advising. At the same time, in larger militaries some senior officers might lack sufficient experience, education, or competence for the role they are assigned to perform. Therefore, in a multinational staff setting, officers should be measured on their actual competence in their role rather than an assumption or presumption of competence based on their home military's rank.
- **Fluency does not equal competence:** English language proficiency is difficult for some militaries to achieve across and within ranks to provide sufficient capacity for sustained manning within multinational staffs. However, many officers from English-speaking countries associated fluency in the English language to competence. Consequently, International Fellows advised that a lack of English fluency should not be equated with a lack of professional competence.

Finally, both the International Fellows and the US officers we interviewed noted that many members of their multinational organizations arrived at headquarters with preconceived notions, their own values and languages, as well as their own experiences and professional education. Arriving with these preconceived notions, informed by stereotypes, affected interactions and group and organizational dynamics. Natural, sub-conscious affinities for similar cultures within the headquarters due to language and other factors drove a natural gravitation towards others of similar ilk. These were sometimes comforting to those who felt out of their element, and tended to be described as positive ways of understanding and socializing with one another (drinking, socializing, tasteful joking). Leaders occasionally used national customs and holidays as events to "break the ice" between different groups and build understanding.

On the other hand, there were cultural affinities around common language, FVEY countries (Australia, Canada, New Zealand, United Kingdom, United States), history of ethnic or regional conflict, or

cultural proximity that tended to create exclusive sub-grouping rather than being inclusive. This created a dynamic, which participants reported as disruptive (thus, requiring intervention) because they perpetuated previously held stereotypes. The actions and narratives of leaders helped counter this. As an example, one commander reported never wearing his country flag—rather he only wore the NATO flag—repeating that his presence and actions had to be “more NATO than NATO.” Participants also reported that continuously updating their knowledge of each country’s political processes and reasons for national caveats was helpful in breaking stereotypes because it reinforced why some countries participated more in exercises and missions than others. In sum, the two main lessons that participants learned were to understand how the structure of the staff *by design* influenced the behavior and contribution of the individual members, given the interests of their countries and their previous professional experience. This helped to depersonalize attributions and to minimize in-group/out-group distinctions.

### **Question #3: What advice do you have for an officer taking a position on a multinational staff?**

---

When asked what advice they would offer, or what made officers successful in a multinational staff, the participants highlighted skills consistent with creating *unity of effort*. A common theme emphasized skills consistent with the American military concept of Mission Command. This concept in a multinational staff setting was described as a focus on aligning interests, following the practice of socializing rather than merely issuing orders, and using guidance as a way to start a conversation that would build toward a solution. These practices and skills tended to encourage mutual understanding and greater participation. They built trustful relationships resulting ultimately in less friction and better effectiveness.

There were four categories of skills that were specifically highlighted (primarily by the Americans as skills they wished they would have been better at) that contributed to building this type of unity of effort:

- **Individual self-awareness skills:** Officers who developed the skill of foreseeing the impact they had on others tended to be most appreciated by others on the staff. This included recognizing key stakeholders or influencers (not just “the long-time players”), paying close attention to body language, and soliciting all viewpoints prior to making a final decision. It also meant taking the time to learn the technical skills to navigate the systems and processes particular to the organization (e.g., NATO doctrine and processes) rather than force the methods of their home country on the staff. Second, participants reported this often meant undertaking self-directed study of relevant culture, history, interests, and constraints of participating nations to anticipate expectations and address tensions mentioned in the previous section. Third, it meant developing patience and the ability to adapt to a longer, slower process to accomplish outcomes. Empathy and

humility were also valued characteristics or skills. Participants reported gaining an appreciation that “one way did not fit all” and that seeing the situation from others’ viewpoint opened the door to collective perspective taking and mutual understanding, all of which added to one’s credibility and trustworthiness in the eyes of officers from other nations.

- **Group leadership skills:** “Embracing the multinational” meant having facilitation skills to find common ground, and to overpower the cultural, resource, and language differences that undermined cohesion. One tool participants reported using to this end, for example, was having a common enemy. This gave them the ability to build a superordinate identity, or a shared purpose that allowed each nation to serve the same purpose while also retaining its distinctiveness. This served a critical leadership function that built trust and “soldier to soldier” connections. This helped each country to build consensus by focusing on common interests, and to foster dyadic relationships with other members of the organization (thereby improving integrative negotiation skills to achieve mutually acceptable solutions). On the downside, it was also reported that this required patience due to the time it takes to build consensus: “NATO likes to talk!”
- **Management skills:** Managing in a complex staff structure meant that management skills were required and valued for those with responsibilities for others (i.e. a directorate or staff section). Management skills refer to skills within the categories of doctrine, organization, planning, and time management. Participants identified that knowing, supporting, enforcing, and executing the operating doctrine and procedures for a particular organization were also critical leadership activities. Since knowledge of these varied from military to military, these skills were critical for coalescing the staff into a unified effort. Organizing activities and communicating them through agendas, objectives, and frameworks helped to focus and synchronize the staff internally and synchronize it with the larger organization’s energy and activities. Planning referred to more collaborative and iterative approaches: those managers that clearly defined the problem and sought continuous input throughout the process to adapt a planning effort seemed to garner the highest praise and minimize misunderstandings. Time management referred to the use of deadlines and clearly communicating them to others. How much time was allotted and how deadlines were communicated can be culturally bound and create misunderstandings, since work pace, urgency, and expectation of deadlines differs widely between cultures. A common understanding of how to implement management responsibilities within the operating or established procedures (rather than merely following one nation’s way) led to greater effectiveness.
- **Leadership skills:** A set of insights from participants also emerged about how leaders should interact and be a steward of the organization as a system. One insight focused on the leader externally, while three others were a combination of an external and internal skills, and the last was entirely internally focused. Internally, leaders who created on-boarding processes and systems aided incoming staff officers the best. As mentioned previously, not all militaries prepared their officers the same way. Designing programs to welcome, orient, and assimilate new personnel worked well. The participants we interviewed advised to prepare locally (i.e., on the job) and to have carefully designed hand-offs between officers (e.g., one participant called this a HOTO or a

---

Hand Over, Take Over). Externally, leaders were advised to coordinate within the staff of how to stay apprised of key and influential external stakeholders who might influence policy that shaped intelligence agreements and national caveats with potential to impact their operational planning. Participants also advised becoming more involved in personnel management. They described a general hesitation in the multinational staff setting to report on an officer's poor performance to another country's military or embassy. From an external point of view, they thought the best leaders tried to be more influential in the selection and accountability process, but recognized that this was difficult. They recommended displaying patience in working with those assigned to the organization as effectively as one could (partially because of what is described in the Perceptions of US Officers section below). Finally, they advised better awareness of the inter-workings of informal organizational networks: learning to communicate and align different efforts within the organization was important in supporting tasks and providing clarity to those within and across the enterprise. The value of taking the time to have a cup of coffee was something that most Americans reported underestimating.

### **PERCEPTIONS OF US OFFICERS**

In conversations with International Fellows, some clear perceptions of US officers (both good and bad) emerged. Some of these fit the stereotypical image of U.S. military officers: Being mission-focused, working hard, being adept planners, and possessing a capacity for self-improvement. However, negative aspects of US behavior included: unwavering adherence to US-based structure, templates, or practices; a general lack of interpersonal skills (a lack of patience, empathy, and relationship building); a perception of discomfort in multinational settings; a perceived behavioral posturing as overly competitive and assertive; and being perceived as unwilling to exude trust in partners. Most of the US officers we interviewed were aware of this perception.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, most participants told us they did not feel as prepared as they would have liked to have been upon arrival for their multinational staff assignments. They did, however, learn a great deal from one another and from their counterparts. While most were familiar with basic leadership lessons such as self-awareness and the importance of trust from their military education, the multi-national setting put these skills into a new context: the *interplay* of organizational structure, the historical context of relationships, the influence of political agreements and constraints between member nations, the impact of cultural customs on officer behavior, and the social dynamics of a multi-national chain of command required nuance and agility in their leadership style that many had not anticipated.

---

## APPENDIX A

### Study Methodology

This section describes the methodology used to conduct the qualitative assessment and analysis to support answering the research questions for the US Army War College Multinational Staff Officers study. The study's purpose was to identify challenges in serving on a multinational staff, some of the things that worked well or did not, and how US officers, in particular, performed in these roles.

#### STUDY TEAM COMPOSITION

The study team's composition consisted of nine faculty members within the Department of Command, Leadership, and Management at the US Army War College. Of the nine, six were active serving military officers (three Army, one Army Reservist, one Air Force, and one international officer (Chile), who provided an invaluable, non-US perspective). Each had more than twenty years of service and held the rank of colonel. Further, they had some to a great deal of experience serving on multinational staffs. Joining them were three civilian faculty members, two of which had multinational staff experience as well. The team was ably led by a qualified researcher from an academic background. One of the faculty members participated in the interviews, but was deployed and unable to participate in the analysis phase of the study.

#### IRB AND RECRUITMENT OF PARTICIPANTS

The study team met in January 2018 to refine the questionnaire used to support structured interviews and the process the team would use to notify students and request their voluntary participation in the study. To answer the research questions, the study team set out to interview 30 resident students from the United States Army War College (USAWC) Class of 2018.

Since the study team would be interviewing human subjects, the study team submitted an Institutional Review Board request for approval on 9 February 2018 in accordance with USAWC policy. The Deputy Provost approved the conduct of the study on 15 February 2018.

In order to recruit voluntary participant in the study, messages were sent to faculty members within the Department of Command, Leadership, and Management in the midst of teaching the resident students during one of their core courses, Defense Management, in the February-March of 2018 timeframe of the academic year. Potential participants sought had to have experience working on multinational staffs. They were asked for 30 minutes of time.

The faculty initially identified 18 US resident students and 14 international officers willing to participate in the interviews. Amongst the US resident students, four were active duty US Air Force officers, eight active duty Army officers, two Army National Guard officers, and two civilians from the national security community.

Amongst the international officers, the 14 volunteers consisted of 12 students and two international faculty members. Together they represented 13 different countries.

Volunteers were told they would be interviewed after oral comprehensive exams and during the electives terms when there was more flexibility in their schedules and less pressure due to other academic requirements. Consequently, interviews with participants were delayed 30-45 days after they initially volunteered. As a result of this delay, the team scheduled 13 of the 18 interviews with U.S. resident student participants consisting of three US Air Force officers, one civilian, one Army National Guard officer, and eight active Army officers.

Similarly, electronic invitations sent to international officers met with no response. Instead, one of the international faculty members on the study team reached out to them personally and successfully scheduled ten of the 14 who initially volunteered. Of those ten, eight were NATO/European officers, one was from Central Asia, and the last was from the Asia-Pacific region.



---

## DESIGN OF QUESTIONNAIRE

The study team met early in the process to refine the study's objectives and develop a scripted questionnaire. The purpose of the scripted interview protocol was to standardize interviews across participants and the interviewing teams involved in conducting the interviews, to minimize variance between interviews. The interview protocol consisted of one document used for each interview as shown below.

### INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

#### **Interview Protocol for IF and Current American Student Interviews:**

**[Note: it may help to review bios prior to the interview (it will shorten the intro time)]**

##### **1. Introduction**

We are conducting interviews with a number of USAWC students. We want to learn more about your experiences, challenges, and approaches to preparing for and for being part of multinational staffs.

For the next 20-30 minutes, you and I will have a conversation about your experiences in multinational staffs. By multinational staffs, we are including bi-lateral and multi-lateral military staffs or military staffs with international officer participation. They can be either on-going or ad hoc staffs. [e.g., ISAF, NATO]

We (a group of DCLM professors) are primarily here to learn from you—to get your perspective. Our goal is not to see if anyone is conforming to a particular standard or practice. The purpose of this research is to *find out* what the common challenges are and how to better prepare our officers to lead effectively and inclusively. Our results will translate into a new DCLM elective on Multinational Staffs and to publications that inform how we train and understand multinational staffs.

There are two of us here—I will be asking you most of the questions and [name] will be mostly taking notes. We want to make sure we capture what you are teaching us. We thought the best way to do that would be to have one person really listening to you and the other fully focused on capturing what we are talking about. I may take notes too so that we have back up—so please know that I am listening to you even though I am writing. [Name] might chime in too to make sure we understand you. Again, we are not here to overwhelm you—just to really learn from you.

##### **2. Consent and Confidentiality**

First...a little background. I will ask you some questions about your experiences, some specific, and some more general. We are interested in your opinions or thoughts only—there are no right or wrong answers. Your decision to participate in this study is voluntary and you do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer. You are free to withdraw or stop the interview at any time.

Our studies are purely for pedagogical academic research purposes. The results may become available to the public in research journals, books and other academic publications, but our conversation will not be available to anyone outside of the research team, and your name will never be identified in any databases, publication, or any other way as a study participant. We will also not record your country of origin. In publications we will need to describe the group we are talking to (e.g., high-level military officers), but will neither use nor record names.

If you have any questions pertaining to this research you may contact the researchers Dr. Kristin Behfar, Michael Hosie, Rick Sheffe, Dale Watson, George Woods, Rich Meinhart, Silas Martinez, or Christian Vial. If you are interested in receiving an executive summary of the research following completion of the study you can provide us with an email to send it to you. [Note if they want it] If you agree to take part in this research study and the information outlined above, could we please have your verbal consent to participate in the project?

---

**3. Background Question (2-3 minutes)**

I'd like to get some background information first about you:

- a. Can you tell me a little about your experience on an multinational staff? You don't need to use names (to protect confidentiality), but if you could tell me where you were located, how long you were there, and what your role was, etc.?

*If they do not offer, ask explicitly about: Where were they located, what kind of staff, how long were they on it, who else/other countries represented on the staff?*

**4. RO1 & RO3: How were you trained (10 minutes)**

- a. When thinking back on your experiences, what surprised you or what had you not anticipated about working in a multinational staff environment?
- b. We would like to know a little more about how you formally or informally prepared for your assignment(s):
- i. How did your military formally prepare you?
  - ii. Did you do anything outside of that formal process to prepare yourself for your assignment?
  - iii. Did you get any ongoing support while you were there (formally or informally)? Please describe.
- c. What did you (personally) learn about yourself or your own leadership from your multinational staff experience?
- d. If you were go to back and do it again, would you prepare differently?

**5. RO2: How multinational counterparts are experienced (15 minutes)**

- a. Now we'd like to shift to how you experienced the people that you worked with. What are your thoughts about what makes multicultural teams or staffs work (or not work)?
- i. What are some ways that leaders can make everyone feel like they are a valued part of the staff?
  - ii. How do you create a unified effort versus a focus proprietary interests?
- b. What advice do you have for someone working with AMERICANS /MULTINATIONAL STAFFS?
- i. What is the good news?
  - ii. What is the constructive feedback?
  - iii. Is there a nation from which you have consistently experienced officers doing this well?

**6. Closing comments and additional things to share (1 minute)**

- a. Is there anything else you think we should know or ask about as we conduct this research?
- b. Your insights have been very helpful. Thank you for your time.
- This will now conclude our interview. When we have results to share would you be interested in receiving them? [If yes, we will email the summary when it is ready]
  - Give small thank you gift

---

## PREPARATION AND ORGANIZATION OF INTERVIEWERS

To further limit variance in the interviews, the team conducted two practice sessions to validate both the script and the interview protocol. Four interviewers conducted a mock interview with two role-playing faculty members not of the study team. Those not actively involved in conducting the mock interview witnessed the sessions and participated in an after action review of the experience shared with the interviewers and the interviewees.

To insure accurate capture of the interviews, at least two members of the study team conducted each interview. One served as the interviewer, the other the recorder. The recorder for each session wrote up the results of the interview which was then reviewed and edited, as necessary, to ensure the results were accurately archived and uploaded in a shared database for the entire study team to review. Interview teams, were largely focused on just one group of interviewees. There was an assigned US interview team and a multinational team that conducted the interviews. This was important as the teams that interviewed one subpopulation, were not the ones used to review their interviews during the analysis phase.

After all interviews were complete and uploaded within the US folder and international officer folder on a shared drive.

## ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

The study team organized itself into four subgroups to analyze the results. Those who interviewed US officers, analyzed the international officer interview records and the same rule applied to those who interviewed the international officers. This afforded greater objectivity in the analysis of the written summaries.

Further, two subgroups were assigned to each category of interviews (within group analysis). Two reviewed US officer results and two reviewed international officer results. Both subgroups did their analysis independent of each other.

The subgroups' task was to review the interviews to interpret their meanings and categorize them in themes that emerged. Once themes were identified, they defined the terms associated with their themes. The team lead also instructed them to discern how their themes answered the three research questions the study focused on answering. The US and international officer subgroups shared their results (within group), refining them to achieve consensus on what each meant. After the US and international officer subgroups independently came to their conclusions they shared them in meetings across types (between groups). The between-group analysis and integration of major themes identified with each subgroup occurred over three meetings. This process also helped identify themes offered by both sides, those that were only offered by one side, and gaps the research effort may have missed.

Organization of themes and between-group convergence identified several macro themes classified as:

- a. Preparation (institutional, interpersonal (mentors, etc.), and personal self-preparation)
- b. Structural Friction (extra-organizational factors identified as ends, ways, and means, as well as artifacts evident in national caveats, classification restrictions, interoperability challenges, and power differentials)
- c. Cultural Friction (extra-organizational factors that created tensions between cultures, surfacing stereotypes and judgements of competencies, and their impact on interpersonal, cross-cultural relationships (affinities within and between cultural groups))
- d. Competencies required (intra-organizational competencies categorized into to individual, group, manager, and leader knowledge, skills, abilities, and other attributes (KSAO))
- e. U.S. scorecard (others' perceptions of US officers in multinational staffs identifying strengths and shortcomings)
- f. Recommendations to address shortcomings (those explicitly offered to individuals assigned to staffs and leaders of these staffs, as well as a missing category of those implied by the shortcomings and tensions identified above). This category, by inference helped highlight some skills or best practices in d. above. Hence, they were combined into one macro theme in the findings.