

Coordinating for Results: Lessons from a Case Study of Interagency Coordination in Afghanistan

By Andrea Strimling Yodsampa

Interagency coordination is an essential element of effective public leadership. Few agencies have the funding, expertise, or influence to achieve their goals single-handedly. Moreover, complex problems require interdisciplinary—and hence interagency—solutions. To succeed, public executives and managers must leverage the financial, human, and organizational resources of multiple agencies. This requires coordination.

Coordination, however, is easier said than done. Agencies differ in their goals, priorities, and cultures. They compete for resources and turf. And they have different interests and concerns relative to coordination itself. Coordination also takes time and money; coordination processes must compete for resources with other mission needs and priorities. Compounding these challenges, executives and managers rarely have line authority over agencies and individuals with whom they must coordinate.

In the face of these challenges, how can executives and managers deliver consistent coordinated results? Those who have led or served on interagency teams often argue that coordination is driven by personalities and relationships. Personalities and relationships do matter, of course. Public executives and managers must pay careful attention to the composition of interagency teams. But they must not stop there. Attitudes and relationships are deeply affected by organizational factors. Therefore, public executives and managers must institutionalize systems and processes that foster the attitudes, relationships, and behaviors conducive to coordination.

A case study of U.S. stabilization and reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2009 illuminates concrete examples of successful coordination amidst extensive coordination failures. It then identifies the organizational systems and processes that made those successes possible.

While the Afghan context was unique in many respects, the agencies on the ground faced many of the same challenges domestic agencies face in attempting to coordinate. The lessons about interagency coordination therefore are broadly relevant.

Background

The U.S. experience in Afghanistan demonstrates that coordination is possible even in the most challenging of contexts. Civil-military coordination in Afghanistan was immensely difficult. The Department of Defense, Department of State, and USAID differed not only in their priorities and timelines, but also in their organizational cultures, lexicons, and operating norms.

Power disparities, reflected in DoD's overwhelming financial and human resources on the ground, contributed to long-standing mistrust and tension between civilians and military. Add to this the fact that they were working seven days a week in complex, volatile, and often dangerous conditions, and a perfect storm for interagency conflict and competition ensued. In such a context, it is not surprising that coordination often floundered.

What is significant is that civilians and military on the ground delivered some important coordinated results. These coordinated results, in turn, advanced agency missions, saved resources, and contributed to the achievement of U.S. and multinational goals in Afghanistan.

The case study shows that when coordinated results were achieved, it was because civilians and military put in place organizational systems and processes conducive to coordination. When coordination failed, it was because critical factors necessary for consistent coordinated results were lacking. While these lessons emerged in a unique context, they are relevant to public executives and managers seeking to enhance coordination in any issue area or context.



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Findings: Systems and Processes to Enhance Coordination

Finding One: Co-location and convening provide opportunities for face-to-face interaction that facilitate joint analysis and planning and foster relationship development and mutual learning.

Co-location of civilians and military at the U.S. embassy in Kabul and at various levels of the military structure in the field, including the provincial reconstruction teams, facilitated information sharing and joint analysis and planning and enabled civilians and military to learn from one another and develop a greater appreciation of each agency’s comparative advantages. Co-location of the senior civilian and military leaders at the embassy in the second phase also served as a powerful symbol of high-level commitment to coordination, reverberating to lower levels of their respective chains of command.

When co-location was not possible, convening of civilians and military provided opportunities for regular, in-person interaction and thus facilitated information sharing, joint analysis and planning, relationship development, and mutual learning.

The benefits of regular convening were evident in the Bagram process, where civil and military leaders met monthly for a full day. As one military officer puts it: “The process worked very well because it put the embassy, USAID, [and the military] in the same room, at the same lunch table, working the same things. The synergy from doing that, versus talking with someone you don’t know on the other end of the phone, paid huge dividends.” Another official agrees: “Before you can collaborate, you must coordinate. Before that, you must know the names of people. Before that, you must break down some barriers so that you’re not separate vessels.”

Finding Two: Regular information sharing and joint analysis and planning enable participants to develop a shared assessment of the situation, identify common goals, and agree on a division of labor.

The experience in Afghanistan shows that regular, structured opportunities for information sharing and joint analysis and planning are necessary to develop a shared assessment of the situation, identify common goals, and agree on a division of labor that leverages complementary resources and capabilities in support of shared goals.

In the early stages of U.S. reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan, the lack of a joint interagency plan and associated lack of information sharing caused numerous coordination failures, including situations in which civilians and military inadvertently worked at cross-purposes, wasting resources and undermining effectiveness.

As time went on, civilians and military instituted systems and processes for joint analysis and planning. Examples include the Joint Interagency Task Force established at the embassy, the focused planning for priority sectors that contributed to coordination in road construction, the Bagram process, and the Civil-Military Action Group. These systems and processes made possible concrete coordinated results. They also fostered mutual learning and the development of strong working relationships, creating foundations for enhanced coordination moving forward.

Finding Three: Facilitative leadership is necessary to convene and lead effective joint analysis and planning processes.

One of the most significant challenges public executives and managers face in coordinating across agency lines is lack of line authority over many of the stakeholders involved. To be successful, executives and managers must exercise facilitative leadership, or leadership without authority.

In Afghanistan, civilians and military reported up different chains of command. Facilitative leadership was the glue that held the joint analysis and planning processes together and enabled them to succeed. In some cases, it was people in formal leadership roles who exercised facilitative leadership. General David Rodriguez, for example, had direct authority over military officers who served under him, but not over the many civilians involved in the Bagram process. To be effective convening and leading that process, in concert with his civilian counterparts, he had to exercise facilitative leadership.

The military is an intensely hierarchical system, and directive leadership is the norm. Thus, it is telling that a number of senior military officers who served in Afghanistan emphasize their learning about the importance of facilitative leadership.

Facilitative leadership need not be limited to people in formal leadership positions. Interagency processes are complex, and facilitation of joint analysis and planning processes is necessary to keep the dialogues focused and on track. During the technical working group breakout sessions at Bagram, civilian participants selected to serve as ad hoc facilitators were credited with contributing to the effectiveness and efficiency of the process.

Finding Four: Delegation of decision-making is essential, but it must be paired with professional incentives to coordinate and accountability for results.

The case study shows that delegation of decision-making authority to the field, combined with incentives to coordinate and accountability for downstream results, is necessary for consistent coordinated results.

In Afghanistan, the lack of decision-making authority on the part of many USAID officers in the field undermined coordination. Without the ability to make decisions and allocate resources, USAID officers were unable to respond quickly and in concert with their military counterparts to emerging challenges and opportunities.

Delegation of decision-making authority without the requisite incentives and accountability systems, however, was counterproductive. In Afghanistan, military officers in the field were

authorized to allocate significant amounts of money to development projects in the provinces under the Commanders' Emergency Response Program. However, incentives emphasized spending money quickly, rather than taking the time to coordinate with civilians, and military officers were rarely held accountable for the downstream effects of their spending. The high level of decision-making authority, combined with perverse incentives and insufficient accountability, led to a go-it-alone attitude at many provincial reconstruction teams that resulted in wasteful duplication of efforts and working at cross-purposes with civilians.

The military was not alone in struggling with perverse incentives and insufficient accountability. USAID officers in the field also faced pressure to spend money quickly. And, civilians, like their military counterparts, were not held sufficiently accountable for the downstream effects of their decisions. The vast flow of resources to civilian and military efforts in Afghanistan, the incentive to spend money quickly, and the lack of accountability for downstream results led to ongoing coordination failures, wasting resources and undermining the effectiveness of U.S. and multinational reconstruction efforts. ■

TO LEARN MORE

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