



***Beyond the Interagency  
Liaison: Integrated  
Campaigns Require  
Cross-functional Teams***

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## **Beyond the Interagency Liaison: Integrated Campaigns Require Cross-functional Teams**

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Early last year, I found myself sitting in a darkened conference room, buried within a nondescript government building in the capital of a friendly West African nation. The curtains covering the windows blocked the morning light and stifled any hope of relief from the rising temperature in the room. Cans of Coke, Malta, and cold beer were arranged on the cheap office furniture, the small nation’s chief executive gazing down with approval from the ornately framed portrait on the wall. At the time, I was serving as a member of an interagency assessment team with the goal of identifying requirements and opportunities for programming to prevent the spread of violent extremism from neighboring countries plagued by conflict. The role of foreign advisor often reeks of overconfidence, even arrogance, and the meeting’s unremarkable setting certainly didn’t serve to diminish that feeling. Soon, however, it became obvious that this organization represented a level of civil-military integration that is rarely present even in our own government. The group of civilians, law enforcement and military personnel, called the Agency for Integrated Management of the Border Areas, was organized, led, and employed collectively to address a specific, complex, and multifaceted problem. The organization incorporated elements for border patrol, community policing, military response, economic development, and civic engagement—purpose-built to consolidate control over isolated border areas identified as being particularly underdeveloped and vulnerable to influence from extremist groups.

Unprepared to encounter such a high-functioning, integrated organization, I emerged from the meeting several hours later questioning my supposed position of enlightened outsider and wondering if the Special Operations Forces (SOF) community and the broader U.S. foreign policy enterprise could match the type of adaptive ingenuity I had just encountered. In theory, our team was an example of the collection of capabilities from multiple domains envisioned by the U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) commander in his 2016 posture statement and the SOF Operating Concept. Referred to as “Integrated Campaigning,” the concept proposes the need for campaigns that are “deliberately designed to synchronize whole of government approaches to ensure the most effective capabilities are applied to problem sets regardless of the agencies in which they reside.”<sup>1</sup> Despite the interagency character of our assessment team, we thoroughly missed the mark identified in the SOCOM concept. After the assessment was

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completed we compiled our report and returned to our individual components to develop programming largely independent from our interagency counterparts. The growth of liaison and exchange programs in recent years has helped to bridge some of this divide. However, in order to achieve the kind of intense collaboration and alignment envisioned by integrated campaigning, a different and more adaptive organizational model is required, one similar in philosophy and design to the agency I encountered in West Africa. Fortunately, such a model exists in wide practice within business and industry in the form of cross-functional teams. Adopting the principles and practice of cross-functional teaming is required to address the challenges presented by a complex, interconnected operational environment and adaptive adversaries committed to challenge U.S. strategic dominance below the threshold of active armed conflict. Cross-functional teams provide an intentional structure that incorporates leadership, expertise, and authorities from multiple domains to assault a problem with all of the components necessary to solve it.<sup>2</sup> Lessons learned from the implementation of this organizational structure in the business community can be applied to the context of integrated campaigning in the current and future operating environment to demonstrate its relevance and identify potential opportunities and challenges.

### **From Awesome Machine to Team of Teams**

As articulated in the SOF Operating Concept, integrated campaigning implies that SOF will be a type of gray zone superstructure, onto which the necessary external components will be fixed, in order to create an integrated approach to complex problems below the threshold of traditional conflict. This idea is sanctioned by Congress and the Joint Staff, with USSOCOM's responsibility to coordinate counterterrorism efforts and address transregional threats.<sup>3</sup> Proponents of this approach take cues from retired Army General Stanley McChrystal and his transformation of the Counterterrorism Task Force from an efficient "awesome machine" into an effective and "more transparent, more organic entity."<sup>4</sup> The model described by General McChrystal in his book *Team of Teams*, was designed to counter a complex and adaptive enemy: to find, fix, and finish the leadership and networks that comprised al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) before they could react. General McChrystal shifted the focus away from the traditional strength of the organization, emphasizing that success in the later phases of the targeting cycle, exploit and analyze, were the key to success against a networked adversary. This is where the interagency components were most needed and General McChrystal's transformation was effective in incorporating them into the broader structure.<sup>5</sup> But ultimately, this coordination was focused narrowly on the task of killing or capturing terrorists and insurgents in an environment where the force could go anywhere and do just about anything it needed to accomplish that task.

In certain environments and contexts, this organic superstructure approach can be very effective, and leverages the unique and powerful capabilities of empowered special operations forces. However, it is less useful in environments where the mission cannot be achieved by the precise application of military force alone. Even in Iraq, where the task force was highly effective in its efforts to "disembowel" AQI, the tipping point was largely dependent on the

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erosion of Sunni tribal support for the group and the sectarian civil war they had created.<sup>6</sup> The scale of this example is huge, but when narrowed to the more subtle campaigns of the gray zone, the comparison is useful. In circumstances that do not comply with the requirements of the superstructure model, a truly integrated, scalable organizational structure is required, at a lower level, to achieve the goal of an integrated campaign. Security challenges within gray zone conflict environments are complex and multifaceted. They require organizations that combine multiple functional specialties and can leverage the unique authorities, funding, and expertise of their members and apply a broad range of approaches to the given environment. In the business world, this necessity is addressed through the establishment of cross-functional teams.

### **Cross-Functional Teams**

Also called matrix organizations, cross-functional teams came into broad usage within the business and manufacturing sectors in the 1980's. They accompanied the rise of total quality management initiatives that advocated the use of these team structures and combined them with statistical analysis to improve quality and reduce cost. Today's Lean Six Sigma replaced total quality management for process improvement, but cross-functional teams remain a vital part of how corporations conduct product development quickly and effectively. A firm may incorporate representatives from sales, marketing, product design, process development, and manufacturing into a team that is purpose-built and led by an individual with the authority to combine the expertise of the team members to accomplish a set of clearly defined goals. These teams become increasingly important when multiple agencies compete for responsibility for a task and they may arise from failure, when single-sector approaches prove inadequate to solve the problem and force a collaborative approach.<sup>7</sup> Their use is ubiquitous in the business community but this does not mean they are simple to implement or universally required.

### **Critical Requirements for Effective Cross-Functional Teams**

In a recent study exploring the reasons for success and failure of collaborative teams, Behnam Tabrizi identified four critical requirements for their governance and implementation that are relevant to the integrated campaigning construct.<sup>8</sup>

#### **1. Teams must have a single, responsible leader with high-level support.**

The SOF Operating Concept echoes this imperative when it states that "within campaigns, all SOF will be placed under a single special operations commander with the requisite command authorities to direct all forces employed in pursuit of a common purpose."<sup>9</sup> However, this description adheres to the superstructure model described earlier and may not always be optimal. The application of the cross-functional concept to integrated campaigning would demand leadership dictated by the nature of the problem and the construct of the team which is organized to address it. Often, based on its human capital and demonstrated competence, SOF will provide that leadership. At times, however, adaptability and the nature of the problem may require SOF elements or individuals to support a team led by a representative

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from another agency.

Effective leadership of cross-functional teams also requires dedicated oversight from senior leaders within each organization involved. According to the Tabrizi study, “projects that had strong governance support — either by a higher-level cross-functional or by a single high-level executive champion — had a 76% success rate... [while] those with moderate governance support had a 19% success rate.”<sup>10</sup> This conforms with my own experience as a Theater Special Operations Command (TSOC) liaison embedded within a United States Agency for International Development (USAID) regional office: the interorganizational relationship that my position enabled was only possible because it was championed by both the TSOC commander and the Africa Bureau Chief at USAID. The relationship was built on shared goals and mutual trust—without them, interagency collaboration would have been a sideshow. With that support we were able to align program objectives and incorporate development expertise into the annual regional SOF exercise in a way that was mutually beneficial and amplified the impact of civil-engagement.<sup>11</sup>

### **2. Goals and available resources must be clearly defined.**

Within the business community, this mandate is often achieved through the chartering process. A cross-functional team charter will delineate purpose, scope, available resources, and expected results. The charter itself is a collaborative process between senior leaders of the various sectors involved. Once the purpose and objectives are clearly defined in the charter, membership and leadership of the team can be selected to provide the right mix of knowledge, insight, and authority to address the specific problem.<sup>12</sup>

Even with an effective chartering process, the implementation of a cross-functional team concept could present significant resourcing challenges. These difficulties are highlighted by a United States Africa Command recent effort to shift available resources to support an existing program designed to counter extremist influence. Rather than use its Counterterrorism Partnership funding to build programming from scratch, senior leaders asked to transfer that money to another agency with an ongoing and effective program in the specific area of interest, with the goal of saving time, resources, and capitalizing on existing expertise. This was determined to be illegal and required congressional legislation, submitted as an amendment to the 2017 National Defense Authorization Act. With support from current and former senior leaders within the Pentagon, the amendment was included in the final bill, but the process of gaining this approval took nearly two years.<sup>13</sup> Cross-functional teams would similarly challenge the rigid budgeting process and require support from Congress and the necessary legislation to allow for, and provide funding to, more adaptive interagency structures.

### **3. The objectives must be the team’s primary focus.**

If the chartering process is done correctly, and there is broad consensus among leadership and team members, and among the different sectors represented, then the team will be well-supported to focus on the assigned goal. An obstacle to the creation of a focused team will be organizational bias regarding the size and composition of SOF units. Within the military culture, the size and rotational timelines of the available units becomes dogmatic, dictating the provision

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of manpower rather than being responsible to a particular need. This is partly symptomatic of SOF units that are stretched to max capacity, so that no reserve remains in place to apply strategically. Nevertheless, it is an issue that will have to be addressed within the charter and constantly monitored to ensure that the prejudices of the source unit or agency don't reduce team effectiveness.

### **4. Success demands constant reassessment.**

Assessment and evaluation offer an opportunity to build increased collaboration between various elements of U.S. foreign policy. Under the current operational construct, it is not uncommon to find three or four separate government agencies conducting separate surveys and research to assess program effects within the same geographic region. In some cases, the programs being assessed have similar high-level goals. The shared mandate, desired end-state, and objectives in the cross-functional concept provide the means to streamline operational assessment and evaluation. This would greatly reduce redundancy occurring in the current model and provide a more holistic understanding of the impact of programming.

### **Examples in Current Practice**

Within current operational practice, there are two organizations that most closely resemble this cross-functional concept: a Joint Interagency Task Force (JIATF) and a U.S. Country Team. The later epitomizes this idea of a cross-sector organization, bringing together members of the entire foreign policy enterprise into a single entity, under the direction of a single, empowered individual. The recommendation to build cross-functional teams within integrated campaigns does not imply that country teams would somehow be replaced by this new model. In fact, as demonstrated by the example provided below, the ambassador and country team would be a critical component of this structure; serving as leaders on the chartering and governance board with high-level representatives of the other organizations involved.

The JIATF-South is probably the best example of a successful interagency cross-functional team. In a thorough examination of its structure and functionality, Evan Munsing and Christopher Lamb provide compelling analysis of the success of the organization based on 10 performance variables from the literature on cross-functional teams. They argue that "JIATF-South has demonstrated that interagency and multilateral collaboration is possible and efficacious," supporting the viability of cross-functional teams in foreign policy applications.<sup>14</sup> The success of JIATF-South is attributable to many factors, but the application of cross-functional principles, both external and internal to the team, has been critical to the integration of diverse capabilities, resources, and authorities. This enables the formulation of an integrated campaign against a highly-motivated and adaptive opponent and demands the examination of similar approaches elsewhere.

### **Cross-Functional Teams in Integrated Campaigns**

Within the business community, cross-functional teams are used for two purposes that have parallels into SOF campaigns and are useful for understanding how they could be employed.

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First, this teaming approach is crucial to process improvement. Within a particular firm, each specialized function typically has somewhat streamlined internal processes to reduce waste and improve quality control. But the overall process that delivers a product or service to a customer depends on all of these specialized functions working together to produce the end result. Developing the means to improve this aggregate process requires a cross-functional team. This purpose is similar to the disruption of stovepipes between the various departments, commands, and agencies that are involved in achieving national security goals. A cross-functional team chartered and sufficiently empowered to identify overlapping objectives, programs, and resources between interagency components could eliminate redundant elements and produce a more synchronized effort. The empowerment component of this equation is particularly important due to the parochialism that characterizes the various bureaucracies within the foreign policy enterprise.

Beyond improved coordination and synchronization of ongoing activities, corporations and manufacturers use cross-functional teams to rapidly develop new products that meet customer demands. These teams combine the elements of traditionally compartmented sectors of the company into a group with the authority and capability to move the product from design to delivery, while eliminating errors that occur based on the bias of individual components of the process. For SOF and their partners, the project team is analogous to a campaign design team, where the desired end-state becomes the product, or the object, requiring more effective collaboration between the elements involved in applying national resources to a given regional or local problem. An integrated campaign would require this type of design team to ensure that the peculiar interests of a single, dominant player do not overcome the actual problem and its requirements.

By extension, an integrated campaign would then employ one or more cross-functional teams at the tactical or operational level to achieve the desired end-state. Returning to the West-African border agency as an example, it is possible to demonstrate the utility of a cross-functional team to address the identified problem. In a hypothetical scenario, imagine that the organization did not exist but the host nation government was reaching out to the U.S. Ambassador and Geographic Combatant Command (GCC) for assistance in addressing a problem that aligned with U.S. interests. With delegated authority from the GCC commander, the commander of the TSOC and U.S. Ambassador collaborate to charter a cross-functional interagency team, purpose-built to design and implement a campaign that incorporates the specific components necessary to address the identified problem. This effort could incorporate elements of the country team, SOF advisors and enablers, representatives from Department of State functional bureaus, development practitioners from USAID, the International Criminal Investigative Training Assistance Program from the Department of Justice, or any additional elements from other government agencies with required capability and authority in the given environment. This cross-functional approach would allow the team to assist the partner government and security forces in the development of their program. As emphasized by the former USSOCOM Commander General Joseph Votel in his 2016 posture statement, this



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collaborative means would allow SOF to “deepen [their] understanding of complex regional issues, develop important relationships, provide early warning of emerging problems, and ultimately cultivate the influence that [they] can use to undermine the efforts of violent organizations.”<sup>15</sup>

### Conclusion

The example above demonstrates that incorporation of cross-functional teams, a proven practice within business and industry, into the concept of integrated campaign design has tremendous potential to greatly improve the level of coordination between the components of U.S. foreign policy. The establishment of a single cross-functional team to address a clearly identified security challenge will optimize utilization and effectiveness of SOF elements by combining their capability with the resources, authorities, and expertise of interagency and multinational partners, thus improving coordination and ensuring complementary effects with other SOF elements, the U.S. Country Team, and the GCC. Due to the dedicated efforts of senior leaders, the SOF enterprise has been successful in embedding and hosting liaison elements from and within interagency and multinational partners. In many cases, this exchange has reaped tremendous rewards and made SOF organizations more capable and effective. This effort must be expanded to build empowered cross-functional teams with these partners. In the business community, these teams are now commonplace because companies need to innovate and develop new products quickly to compete in a rapidly changing marketplace. In order to fully realize the potential of integrated campaigning, SOF need to make these structures equally ubiquitous at the front lines of our foreign policy in order to defeat agile, adaptive, and subversive adversaries and overcome the complex challenges of the modern environment.

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  2. The descriptions of cross-functional teams and their usage in business and industry in this paper are largely derived from personal correspondence with the author’s father, Sheldon Searle, and father-in-law, Patrick Strickland. Combined, they have over 60 years of experience in the management and improvement of industrial processes, team-building, and organizational design. Both have successfully chartered and led multiple cross-functional teams for product development and process improvement.
  3. Joseph L. Votel, “Statement of General Joseph L. Votel, U.S. Army, Commander, United States Special Operations Command” Senate Armed Services Committee, March 8, 2016.
  4. Stanley A. McChrystal, Tatum Collins, Chris Fussell, and David Silverman, *Team of teams: New rules of engagement for a complex world*, (New York: Penguin, 2015).
  5. Christopher Lamb, “Global SOF and Interagency Collaboration,” *Journal of Strategic Security* 7, no. 2 (2014): 8-20, <http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/jss/vol7/iss2/3>.

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9. USSOCOM, “Special Operations Forces Operating Concept.”
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14. Evan Munsing and Christopher J. Lamb, “Joint Interagency Task Force-South: The Best Known, Least Understood Interagency Success,” *Institute for National Strategic Studies Strategic Perspectives*, No. 5, (Washington: National Defense University Press, 2011).
15. Votel, “Statement of General Joseph L. Votel.”