

UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS
FIELD MEDICAL TRAINING BATTALION-EAST
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MCECST

2401-LDR-1002 OPERATIONAL CULTURE

TERMINAL LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

1. Without the aid of references, describe operational cultural concepts, without omitting key components.
(2401-LDR-1002)

ENABLING LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

1. Without the aid of reference, identify operational cultural, in accordance with reference ISBN-13: 978-1511949835 Operational Culture for the Warfighter: Principles and Applications.
(2401-LDR-1002a)
2. Without the aid of reference, identify cultural terrain, in accordance with reference ISBN-13: 978-1511949835 Operational Culture for the Warfighter: Principles and Applications.
(2401-LDR-1002b)

1. WHAT DOES THE TERM "CULTURE" MEAN?

a. **CULTURE** is the customary beliefs, social forms and material traits of a racial, religious or social group or, a set of shared attitudes, values, goals and practices of an organization.

(1) Provides insight into the conditions on the battlefield

(2) Helps us distinguish friend from foe

2. WHY STUDY CULTURE?

a. Why should Marines and Sailors study other cultures? Simply stated, we cover the globe. As Service members, we want to maximize our success while forward-deployed to "every climate and place." To enhance this success, Service members constantly maintain their situational awareness. For instance, people in Middle Eastern countries generally do not use toilet paper as we do in American culture. They instead will use water and their left hand to clean themselves when they use the facilities. For this reason Middle Eastern men never offer their left hand for a handshake as it is considered highly offensive. Here, the issue is not agreement or disagreement with a particular aspect of another culture but rather it is leveraging our knowledge of the culture to serve our interests. If you are stationed in the area and have knowledge of this particular custom, you will not unintentionally and unnecessarily offend people. You will instead have a head start in gaining their respect and trust. This respect and trust may further serve to distinguish friend from foe.

3. Cultural Terrain: Much like a map and compass will enable you to navigate physical terrain by giving you knowledge of physical obstacles, knowledge of the cultural characteristics or the *cultural terrain* will assist you in the accomplishment of your mission. The elements that make up the cultural terrain include:

- o Land
- o History
- o People
- o Religion
- o Language
- o Social Hierarchy
- o Local Beliefs
- o Local Practices

a. Conversely, individuals, groups and factions' behavior and attitudes toward you are shaped by different aspects of their history, religion and practices. Based on these, people may be placed into one of three different categories as they relate to you and your assigned mission. **These categories are supportive, non-supportive or hostile:**

(1) Individuals, groups or factions that are labeled **supportive** share the following characteristics:

- (a) They share the same mission (task)
- (b) They share the same goals (objectives)
- (c) They share the same intent (purpose)
- (d) They share the same concerns (interests)
- (e) They are reliable (dependable)
- (f) They are trusted (integrity)

(2) Individuals, groups or factions that are labeled **non-supportive** but neutral share the following characteristics:

- (a) They are non-threatening
- (b) They are innocent
- (c) They are to be protected

(3) Individuals, groups or factions that are labeled **hostile** share the following characteristics:

- (a) They have opposing goals
- (b) They have opposing intent
- (c) They are not trusted
- (d) They must be defeated

Ignorance of the cultural terrain in your area of operations (AO) will likely impede mission success. Conversely, the practical application of knowledge in these areas will help reduce friction and conflict, reduce the chance for alienation and misunderstandings among friendly and/or neutral parties and will assist you in accomplishing your assigned task.

4. **CULTURAL DIFFERENCES AND COMPARISONS:**

a. In every conflict beginning with our first landing on New Providence Island in the Bahamas to the present day operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, Marines have used their combat experiences to develop new tactics, techniques and procedures in order to defeat the enemy. Taking note of and applying your knowledge of differences between American culture and the prevailing cultural terrain of the battlespace is important. Consider these common ways that American culture might differ from other cultures:

(1) **Sense of self and space:** In American culture, it is common that we greet each other in an informal manner, with a handshake. It is common in other cultures that the greeting is more formal. This might include formal hugs, bows, handshakes or the formal exchange of business cards.

(2) **Communication and language:** Americans use direct explicit language, we "cut to the chase" while people from other cultures use more implicit, indirect conversation. As a result you then perceive them as "beating around the bush" or being less than truthful.

(3) **Dress and appearance:** Although the highest American standard is to "dress for success", there is a wide range of accepted dress. In other cultures the style of dress is seen as a sign of position, wealth and prestige; or a sign of religious rules.

(4) **Time consciousness:** American standard is to be conscious of time. We place a value on promptness (time is money). Other cultures view time as relative. Time is best spent on enjoyment of relationships.

(5) **Relationships:** American focus is on the nuclear family (i.e. mother, father and child). We revere responsibility for self and place a value on youth. Conversely, age is seen as a handicap or liability. Other cultures focus on the extended family, loyalty and responsibility to the family. The aged are given status and respect.

(6) **Values and norms:** Americans value independence and freedom. We cherish our ability to be independent and we prefer direct confrontation in a conflict. Other cultures are focused more on the welfare of the group. They tend to conform to prevailing social norms and prefer harmony.

(7) **Beliefs and attitudes:** The American ideal is equality for all. We also believe strongly that individuals control their destiny. Other cultures tend to be hierarchical and place a high value on respect for authority and social order. Individuals generally accept the station assigned to them by the circumstances of their birth. Lastly, other societies tend to be more blatantly patriarchal - meaning that men traditionally hold the dominant roles while women occupy the subordinate roles.

(8) **Work habits and practices:** The American emphasis is on task completion and reward is based on individual achievement. For other cultures, work is just a necessity of life and the emphasis is on personal relationships. Rewards are based on seniority.

5. **OPERATIONAL CULTURE CONCEPTS IN ACTION.**

a. **Fallujah, Iraq, 2005:** A scout-sniper platoon was operating outside of Fallujah, Iraq in 2005. They had set up an observation post in a local residence. Daily, Marines would observe the area for potential insurgent activity and for intelligence gathering purposes.

During their pre-deployment briefs, the Marines had learned that Iraqi males traditionally shun yard and garden work believing it to be the women's responsibility. Early one morning, a Sergeant on watch observed that men were coming out of a house to do some yard work. He further noticed that the men were repeatedly looking in his direction. Thanks to his knowledge of this aspect of the local cultural terrain, the Marine surmised that these men had their observation post under surveillance and that their position had been compromised.

b. **Kabul, Afghanistan, 2003:** In 2003, a Marine Corporal was part of a Medical and Civil Affairs patrol at a local medical clinic. Security measures required that all Afghans entering

the clinic were to be searched. The Corporal observed that very few Afghani women and children were coming to the clinic. Afghani custom dictated that women were not to be touched by men who were not their husbands - especially foreign men. Further, the Afghani men considered it a great insult to their honor if their wives were touched by other men.

Being aware of this Afghani custom, the Corporal arranged to have female Marines conduct the searches in an area free from American male personnel. Further the Afghan husbands were permitted to observe the searches of their wives.

Then, through an interpreter, the Marines arranged for a sign to be painted in the local language explaining where families could go for female searches and that only female US personnel would execute the searches. As word spread among the local populace, increasing numbers of Afghanis began arriving.

By showing a respect for local customs, the Marines managed to maintain the proper security while accomplishing their mission of providing proper medical care to the Afghanis. The provisions that the Marines made for the Afghani women and their families helped to build trust and resulted in the additional benefit of valuable intelligence from male family members. This assisted Marines in rooting out the enemy and it reflected positively upon the Marine Corps and the United States of America.

c. **September 11, 2001**: On the morning of September 11, 2001, a group of nineteen Islamic terrorists successfully carried out a devastating suicide attack on U.S. soil resulting in the deaths of nearly 3000 American citizens. Two commercial airplanes were crashed into each of the twin towers of the World Trade Center. One plane was crashed into the Pentagon and yet another plane crashed in rural Somerset County, Pennsylvania. It has since been determined that this last plane's intended target was either the White House or the Capitol Building. How were nineteen Al Qaeda operatives hostile to the United States and its interests able to slip into the country and live among us undetected as they planned the wholesale killing of American citizens? They were successful in part because of their knowledge of the American cultural terrain and their ability to use this knowledge to move about undetected. Consider the steps they took to blend in with American culture:

(1) Soon after arriving in the United States, they enrolled in English courses.

(2) They avoided associations with certain mosques and militant strains of their religion so as not to appear as the extremists they in fact were.

(3) They obtained stateside driver's licenses and took part in common American pastimes (shopping, eating pizza, etc...).

(4) Prior to carrying out the attacks, they shaved their beards and obtained gold necklaces and chains so they would appear to be wealthy Saudis enjoying their vacation in America.

Clearly, these Operational Culture Concepts can work both ways. The terrorists applied their knowledge of American culture to blend in and successfully carry out their deadly mission!

REFERENCE(S) :

MCU publication Operational Culture Operational Culture and the Warfighter, Salmoni 2008