

Goons, Lemons, and Saviors



by **Dennis Barlow, Director, MAIC**

For about five years now, it has been accepted wisdom that the national mine action centers (MAC) are the critical nodes of humanitarian demining activity. MACs are at the virtual cross roads of mine action, with policy “coming down” and tactical results “going up.” MAC managers are asked to implement standards, evaluate clearance techniques and equipment, integrate the various components of mine action (marking and monitoring, clearance, mine risk education, victim assistance), help prioritize programs and activities, answer to donors, report to the host government, provide information to the UN, master GIS systems, fill empty databases, develop the perfect mix of mechanical, dog, sensor, and probing techniques – and oh, yes, by the way – clear and return vast amounts of land to productive use without any accidents or political turbulence.

The Human Factor

In encountering, and let’s admit it, to some extent creating this elaborate and daunting maze, we may have often overlooked the most basic yet most important challenge to the success of the national mine center manager – dealing with people. I am reminded of the axiom, which holds that while deriving truth is a vastly complicated process, when it is finally attained, it turns out to be daz- zlingly simple.

While attending the recent meeting of the Mine Action Directors’ meeting in Geneva I heard a refreshingly candid discussions of “lessons-learned” as a result of the UN mine action program in Kosovo. Dr. Dirk Salomons of the Praxis

Group, alluded to several categories of people which have to be dealt with during a demining operation; he labeled these groups as “goons,” “lemons,” and “saviors.”

Of course, I found myself wondering why it has taken so long to discuss such basic personnel topics within the context of mine action operations. It was only an instant’s reflection for me to realize that indeed, dealing with human behavior must be much more difficult to deal with than coping with machines, data, dogs or even policy. Finding, recruiting, training, integrating, promoting, dismissing, evaluating, rewarding, correcting and appreciating people are the most difficult tasks any manager can undertake, and layers of policies and procedures in the twenty-first century do not make the mine action center managers’ human resource responsibilities any easier.

While I do not pretend to possess the wisdom for dealing with these three groups of people operationally, I believe that discussing them and their place in the demining environment may help crystallize the problem.

Tag the Goons

Goons are probably the easiest group to identify. Most notably they are the exploiters who directly exacerbate the landmine threat. They may be local arms merchants, salvage bosses, or others who trade in the business of landmines. They and their cousins, the terrorists, insurgents, factions, thugs, and bullies are willing to spread human misery for their own selfish (or ideological – does it matter?) ends. Goons are often the purveyors of human misery, dispensing drugs, prostitution and other forms of false hope, which are particularly alluring to those who are in the greatest need. Goons are best identified, then shunned. To pretend they do not exist, or to ignore them, is to invite trouble. But rooting them out and destroying their networks is the job of the government and its agencies. Goons must be kept isolated from the logistics and other activities of a MAC. Getting information on these goons and being aware of their movements and methods can help mine action programs and the people they serve, avoid their traps and enticements.

Transform or Terminate the Lemons

Lemons present the most immediate impediments to successful results. Lemons are those people ostensibly out to do good, but who for a variety of reasons, merely impede progress. Lemons are the “dead-wood,” those unsuitable for their jobs, hangers-on who want to collect wages but are unable or unwilling to work effectively for them. They are the lazy ones who will falsify data rather than to take the effort to collect it accurately; they are more concerned with being served than serving. Often they are the critics who would rather find fault with one who is honestly striving than to take the initiative for themselves. For one reason or another they are the unreliable element of the team, late for work, performing inconsistent service and putting the burden on other teammates.

Some lemons need to be identified and released from mine action as soon as possible so as not to infect the entire team. Others can be counseled, given remedial training or reassigned to duty more compatible with their talents. But making no decision is to make a bad decision; rotten lemons invariably will infect the entire operation.

Edify your Saviors

Finally, there are the saviors; the team members who are positive in working together to do good. It seems self-evident that they are the heart of the operation and can be simply relied upon to perform good work. But in a very real sense, this group presents the greatest challenge. All good team members and deminers do not have the same goals or aspirations. Some are altruists, some are ambitious, others are careerists, some are interested in receiving high pay for a high-risk job, some want to redeem their lands and culture. Not all saviors are members of the manager’s team. Some are volunteers, some are “cheerleaders” from the local populace, some are far-off donors, and some are members of other humanitarian efforts that are being accomplished with or near mine action projects.

The goal of the manager, therefore is to take these team members and allies

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with different motivations and different talents and mold them into a unit in which all are not identical, but all are in synchronization. Not only does the manager have to integrate the varying skills and mind-sets of his crew and supporters, but he also has to plan and carry out a system of rewards, promotions and notices of a job well done. I am reminded of a saying, which the cynics often use (and which unfortunately, is too often true), that laments that a typical project will, "...punish the innocent, reward the guilty, and promote the non-participant." Would it not be wonderful if we could actually turn that phrase on its head and see to it that the heroic, the steadfast and the loyal be remembered, recognized, or rewarded? Nearly everyone, regardless of motivation, appreciates recognition. The smart manager will give

great attention to identifying and paying tribute to his stalwarts.

The premise for this column is that focusing on basic human attributes is a simple truth. It is indeed a core concept, easily understood, but certainly not easy to accomplish. Not only will human nature baffle and perplex the manager, but he will find that administrative procedures, human resource polices, cultural concerns, the immediacy of everyday operational problems and the enormous burden of time management are all natural enemies to planning and conducting an aggressive successful "people-oriented" program. However, what must be borne in mind is that no matter how whiz-bang the equipment, how well-trained the dog, how smooth the logistics, how precise the GPS, how generous the donor, how firm the stan-

dards, how well-fitting the prosthetic device, how accurate the data, and how valid the risk education program, without a group of competent and motivated integrated team members working toward a common goal, the project will falter.

MAC managers do indeed have a baffling array of concerns. However, if they are brave enough to "tag" the goons, tenacious enough to eliminate or transform the lemons, and imaginative enough to edify their saviors, they will have created the proper base structure onto which any number of attractive mine action approaches can be harnessed. ■

Contact Information

Dennis Barlow
E-mail: barlowdc@jmu.edu