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Goons, Lemons, and Saviors

by Dennis Barlow, Director, MAC

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 vanguard of humanitarian demining efforts, and they face the lion’s share of the brunt of any real or perceived problems in the humanitarian demining sphere. It is certainly true that the MACs face a daunting job, with the demand for humanitarian demining increasing each year. This demand has placed a great deal of pressure on the MACs, which are often short of resources, funding, and personnel. In short, the MACs are under a great deal of pressure to deliver results, and they are often forced to make difficult decisions about how to allocate their resources. This pressure has led to a number of challenges for the MACs, including managing expectations, ensuring that their work is effective, and maintaining the morale of their staff. Despite these challenges, the MACs continue to work hard to deliver results, and they are to be commended for their efforts.

The Human Factor

In encountering, and letting’s admit it, to the 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 action centers: dealing with the 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 dazzlingly simple. While attending the recent meeting of the Mine Action Directors’ evening in Geneva 1 heard a refreshingly candid discussion of “lessons-learned” as a result of the UN mine action program in Kosovo. Dr. Dirk Salomon of the Praxis Group, allied to several categories of people which have to be dealt with during a demining operation: he labeled these groups “goons,” “lemons,” and “saviors.” Of course, I found myself wondering if one 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 dealing with machines, data, dogs or even policy. Finding, recruiting, training, integrating, motivating, disciplining, evaluating, rewarding, correcting and accepting the people are the most difficult tasks any manager can undertake, and layers of policies and procedures created for the first few decades will not make the mine action center manager’s 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 army soldiers, merchants, salesmen, or others who trade in the business of landmines. They do not distinguish between civilians and combatants, generals, 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 afflicting to those who are suffering the greatest need. Goons have been identified, thinned out, and then pretended to do not exist, or to ignore them. It is to invite trouble. But turning 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 the MACs. 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 entrenchments.

Transform or Terminate the Lemons

Lemons present the most immediately imperative tasks to successful results. Lemons are those people constantly out to do good, but who for a variety of reasons, maintain mistaken perceptions. Lemons are the "dead-wood," those unsuitable for their jobs, hang-ons who want to collect wages but are unable or unable to do so. 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 fight with one another than strive for 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 team members.

Some lemons need to be identified and released from mine action as soon as possible so they can enjoy the safer environment and focus on the mine action tasks. Other lemons can be counseled, given remedial training or reassigned to duties more compatible with their talents. But making no decision is not a viable option. 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 team members.

Edify your Saviors

Finally, there are the savors; the team members who your work is in progress and who can get you that one step ahead of the curve. Some are 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, Goons are often the purveyors of human misery, dispensing drugs, prostitution and other forms of false hope, which are particularly afflicting to those who are suffering the greatest need. Goons have been identified, thinned out, and then pretended to do not exist, or to ignore them. It is to invite trouble. But turning 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 the MACs. 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 entrenchments.

Indian Farmland Converted Into Mine Action Center

In early January, Indian soldiers began placing mines in farmlands on the border of India and Pakistan in anticipation of a continued conflict with the neighboring country. This mining process has greatly disrupted farmers living on these lands. Women and children have been relocated, while the men struggle to salvage what little cultivable land they can. As the conflict has continued, so have the landmines. In the last few weeks after the mines’ placement, some estimate the new mine fields to be up to one and a quarter miles wide along the 1,800-mile border separating the two disputing nations.

Tokyo Conference Leads to Demining Funds for Afghanistan

Representatives of 24 countries and international organizations attended the International Conference on Reconstruction Assistance to Afghanistan on January 21-22, 2002. These officials pledged a total of $27.2 million (U.S.) asking for a rapid and concentrated demining effort. Interim Prime Minister of Afghanistan Hanif Kazazi stated, "The need for action is great. Our citizens are falling victim to [mines] daily." Much of the money donated to Afghanistan for these efforts help create jobs; the demining field currently serves as the country’s largest single source of employment. Some of the money will go to UNICEF, who will implement an education plan to begin in March, when Afghan schools reopen. The funds are also greatly needed since much of the demining equipment already in the country was stolen, vandalized or destroyed, according to officials.

Engineer Fulfills Vision of Helping Cambodian Children

Several years ago, engineer Kiyoshi Anmiyoshi returned from a business trip in Cambodia, troubled by the images of the many young landmine victims he had seen there. He decided to put his engineering skills to work and had four of his employees create a mine sweeper. After five years of trial and error, the team had successfully turned a hydraulic shovel into a machine capable to safely explode buried landmines. The machine completed its first sweep in 1999 and was displayed at the Third meeting of States Parties held in Managua, Nicaragua, in September 2001. The company now has five landmine sweepers being used in countries such as Afghanistan, Cambodia and Nicaragua.
Get the user involved at the start—what do they need? Decide what you can do. Get potential donors involved. Do controlled testing. Do testing with the users. Complete the loop by connecting the users and the donors. And always make sure that your data is not contaminated by a (real or perceived) conflict of interest.

There is one final failure in the successful insertion of technology into the mine fields: the failure of communication. The labs and the manufacturers often fail to get their message across and the end-user community remains unaware of what new or improved technology is out there. Just as importantly, the end users often fail to communicate their needs except in general terms. The labs and the companies often cannot figure out what they are shooting for. In June 2001, CCMAT sponsored a conference that attempted to address this very issue. Improved mechanisms for information exchange are being developed but they will only work if both sides participate.

The technology developers have to present their information and seek out the participation of suitable end-users. Meanwhile, the user community needs to present both its needs and the results of its real-world experience and tests. Only when both sides come together and engage effectively in an information exchange will we overcome this final hurdle.

Can technology deliver? No. But technology can be defined. CCMAT's program is one example of how it can work.

*All photos courtesy of the author*

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From the Director's Desk

with different motivations and different targets 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, he also has to plan and promote 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 lauds 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 it so that the heart, the heart-felt and the loyal be remembered, recognized, and rewarded? Nearly everyone, regardless of motivation, appreciates recognition. The smart manager will give great attention to identifying and paying tribute to his subordinates.

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 humble and perplex the manager, but he will find that administrative processes, human resource policies, 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 while-banged the equipment, how well-trained the dog, how smooth the logistics, how precise the GPS, how generous the donor, how firm the standards, how well-fitted the prosthetic device, how accurate the data, and how valid the risk education program, without a group of concerned and motivated integrated team members working toward a common goal, the project will fail.

MAC managers do indeed have a baffling array of concerns. However, if they are brave enough to "bag" the goons, countless enough to eliminate or translate the lessons, and imaginative enough to edify their subordinates, they will have created the proper base structure upon which any number of attractive mine action approaches can be harnessed.

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