Management Consulting in a Combat Environment

In June 2011, I began my Afghan journey. My team of four was sent to a Kajaki, a district located in the Helmand Province of Southern Afghanistan. The Forward Operating Base (FOB) where we lived was located close to the Kajaki Dam, the largest physical structure in the Helmand Province.

Kajaki was a highly kinetic area with a strong Taliban presence. Before Americans, Kajaki was inhabited by the British who caused an extreme amount of damage to the area. Afghans knew that the Americans were different from the British, but they also knew that the British were our allies in the reconstruction of the Afghan government. This created distrust with locals, who distrusted the British, and were used to the Taliban rule. Although strict, the Taliban provided governance for the area and resolved disputes in a fair manner. This was an obstacle that the local government had to overcome. Many locals were tired of being trapped between conflicting groups and simply wanted peace.

My team’s role was to support the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA), the District Governor (DG) and his staff. Our goal was to help the local government work more effectively with the people in the district to provide political and economic stability. While serving as the DG’s advisors, and interim District Stability Team (DST), we began looking at the District from a long term point of view. We collaborated and coordinated activities with representatives from the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT), USAID, Dept of State, DoD (civilians) and USDA to help accomplish the DG’s goals.

While working together, the DG asked us to help him adopt some American principles of government that would also be appropriate in Afghan culture. The DG knew that with a solid plan and support system, he could provide the help his constituents needed to move closer to peace and development. We initially focused on governance, but also looked at long term economic goals. In order to achieve these goals, we focused on:

- Strategic Planning
- Human Capital Planning
- Organizational Development
- Project Management
- Marketing and Outreach
- Change Management

In October, two key events happened in Kajaki. The first event was an unfortunate one. The current DG was replaced by an older man, whose family was friends with the current President of Afghanistan. This
created a great amount of frustration for the people because the current DG was well liked and respected. The new DG had held office before and was removed for his laziness and apathy. In addition, he was closely linked to the Taliban. The second event was Operation Eastern Storm, a large military offensive into Kajaki Sofla. This area had no U.S. presence, and was mainly controlled by the Taliban. I was one of two Civil-Military Advisors chosen to support this offensive.

After Operation Eastern Storm was complete, there was a heavy emphasis on relationship building and American-Afghan partnerships. I took the lead in identifying key stakeholders in the villages and engaging them on a regular basis. Many of the key stakeholders were elders of surrounding villages, but others were young people who were eager to capitalize on the opportunities the U.S. brought. I met with these individuals, both privately and in groups, to discuss ways to work better with the GIROA, and ultimately help ensure a more prosperous future for the area.

Kinetic activity significantly dropped in Kajaki Sofla as the relationships between Marines and Afghans strengthened. As I left, the locals were working with GIROA to discuss plans for schools, health clinics and other major changes in the area. Honestly, it was difficult for me to leave after forming such strong friendships with locals, but looking back, I feel like together, we had set the foundation for success in Kajaki. Major accomplishments included:

- **Wheat Seed Distribution Program**
- **Kajaki Sofla Health Clinic Refurbishment**
- **Kajaki Olya Water Distribution Project**
- **Kajaki Dam 3rd Turbine Installation Support**
- **Emerging Business Program**

As I transition back into A-G Associates, I remember the fun times I had in Afghanistan, and I think about how to apply many of the same change management principles to the work we do here. Some of the lessons learned pertain to the most basic of human interaction principles that transcend culture. I know that the people in the Kajaki District now have the personnel in place to move forward. I have no doubt there will be challenges that lie ahead, but before I left, I felt like the foundation for change was strong and the vision was clear. I look forward to applying many of the same concepts in our Government and helping our clients build the same foundation.