



JCISFA

Joint Center for International Security
Force Assistance

RAPPORT PRIMER



**BUILDING INFLUENCE AND EFFECTIVE
RELATIONSHIPS IN SECURITY FORCE
ASSISTANCE OPERATIONS**

Rapport Primer

Numerous sources dealing with security force assistance, often as part of counterinsurgency (COIN) or foreign internal defense (FID) operations emphasize the importance for advisors to develop strong positive rapport with their counterparts. This paper looks at the definition of rapport, its role in advisory missions, constraints affecting rapport-building, and possible ways to develop adequate rapport to accomplish the mission.

Why rapport? Quite simply, effective rapport will allow advisors to more successfully complete their missions. The advisor must be able to influence his counterpart to follow a particular course of action or behavior pattern. Since the advisor is not in his counterpart's chain of command, he cannot simply order any specific action, but rather needs the counterpart to follow the desired course of action by working toward a commonly developed goal. The measure of effective rapport is whether the advisor can influence his counterpart to take the desired action.

Definition. For the purposes of this paper, rapport will mean a relationship between people based on mutual **understanding, respect, and trust**. This may mean positive or effective rapport, or it may mean negative or ineffective rapport.

Understanding. The first component of rapport is, Understanding. Understanding for the advisor begins prior to deployment and may include host nation cultural studies, language training and HN military equipment and doctrine. Once in country he continues to broaden his understanding by observing and asking questions. Since all the components of rapport are two-way streets, the advisor has to be willing and able to share things about his culture, language, military experience, and himself. Practically speaking, interpreters can offer valuable informal insights into local customs and mores.

Interpreters can be approached more informally than counterparts, especially if the counterparts are of significantly higher rank.

It is important to remember that personal rapport may—and probably will—require the advisor to establish an intimate level of understanding with his counterpart, in order to be maximally effective. This will require the advisor to get to know his counterpart at a deeper, more personal level than American soldiers are sometimes used to in short amounts of time.

Respect is the next step in the rapport process. The advisor can start by giving his counterpart a basis to respect him. The counterpart should grow to respect who the advisor is (character), what he knows, and how he performs. If that sounds like the old be-know-do of Army leadership doctrine, that's because it is, and it works. The counterpart will generally follow suit. But in any case, the advisor should begin to look for those things that he respects in his counterpart. Sometimes, this is easy, but more often it's a challenge. The counterpart probably will not fit the mold of U.S. or other coalition officers. He may not have formal military training or education; he may even be illiterate. His "uniform standards" may not be the same as the advisor's. But start with the basics and expand over time. The counterpart is probably placing himself and

possibly his family in mortal danger, simply by assuming the job he's in. He may have proven himself as a fearless warrior even if he didn't have formal training. In short, there will be traits deserving of respect even before the relationship matures. Mutual respect grows through shared experiences and shared dangers. Advisors should live with, eat with and fight with their counterparts, sharing their hardships and dangers – this will help advisors build respect through shared experiences. The advisor will be on the way to establishing good rapport if he is –

- 1) sincerely interested in his counterpart, his nation and their cause,
- 2) in the counterpart's nation not to belittle him and his efforts or take over for him, but to help him because he believes his goals are just, fair, and deserving of success, and
- 3) a competent professional who can help him achieve his goals.

Trust grows only over time and is based on understanding and respect. Building trust needs to begin on day one, but it will not mature until later in the relationship. The advisor should begin by showing that he is reliable. Regardless of local customs, the advisor should do everything that he says he'll do. He should be where he is supposed to be, on time. Once combat operations start, trust will develop as HN forces and their advisors perform their respective functions. If the HN unit is newly formed, two things may enhance this growth. First, the advisor should attempt to start out his unit with “confidence-building” missions. Early success will build both self-confidence and trust. Secondly, he should take care not to “promise” any support that he might not be able to deliver.

Rapport considerations.

Language. In the best of all worlds, advisors would be able to converse in the local dialect of his counterpart. That world usually doesn't exist. Speaking the HN language passably well for most military and social situations is the next best option. If language proficiency is not an option, learn to work with an interpreter. Even in this case, it is helpful to learn enough of the language to give basic greetings, etc., but it really helps to have enough of an understanding to catch the basic direction of conversations, even those between the “terp” and the counterpart. As a minimum, the advisor should attempt to learn the counterpart's language over time; this will generally be a well received gesture of respect.

Local customs. Respecting local customs goes a long way in building effective rapport. In virtually every culture, refusing extended invitations is seen as a slight. This is extreme in some cultures. The advisor must be prepared to accept all forms of hospitality except the most extreme. Eating local food, unless there is a documented medical threat, should be the order of the day. Participating in cultural ceremonies also helps build rapport. At some point, however, there is a level of activity where it is necessary to draw the line. The advisor must be prepared to be able to deal tactfully with issues that are out of bounds.

Modified uniform or grooming standards. When authorized by higher headquarters, modified uniform or grooming standards may enhance rapport. This may take shape in the simplest measure by allowing advisors or personnel to wear bi-lingual name tapes or rank, or may be as extreme as allowing relaxed grooming standards, like beards or longer moustaches. Sometimes local scarves or unit insignia can be used to augment uniforms without compromising standards; this may also aid in recognizing friendly personnel in environments personnel from multi-national coalitions, including contractors, all operate in the same battle space. In cultures where facial hair is the norm for males, it might help to grow a moustache, for example.

For advisors to conventional HN units, however, the counterpart will usually expect the advisor to adhere to his sending unit's standards. Keeping high standards of uniform and appearance will establish a level of expectation in respect to other standards also – training, maintenance, etc.

Going native. Building rapport has its limits. Some academicians claim that one must “go native” in order to truly understand the host nation and its challenges. In the military, however, it is appropriate to assume enough of the customs of the HN to be effective. In fact, advisors who are close to their counterparts can often provide headquarters with valuable insights into how things look from a grass roots level. However, once the advisor begins to pursue the agenda of the HN to the detriment of the U.S./coalition campaign plan, he has effectively “stepped over the line”.

References. The following references were used in the preparation of this paper and provide deeper insight into some of the issues raised here.

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