

Boundary Spanning as Battle Rhythm

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"Our two organizations really do have different DNA, and left to their own devices, they would work at cross-purposes ... [Collaboration] is not an easy thing for us because we're such different organizations ... Achieving unity of effort was something that was crucial to being successful in the future, and it started with the Ambassador and me."

—General Lloyd Austin
Commanding General
U.S. Forces - Iraq



"We had to understand how we were different as organizations, but also different as individuals within the organizations. That was the first step to ensuring that the two organizations could deal cooperatively with each other and, to some degree, meld together to meet the mission."

—Ambassador James Jeffrey
U.S. Ambassador to Iraq



On September 1, 2010, Lloyd J. Austin, III became Commanding General of U.S. Forces-Iraq (USF-I). Just days before, James F. Jeffrey was confirmed as the new U.S. Ambassador to Iraq.

The United States had just completed Operation Iraqi Freedom which ceased combat operations and reduced U.S. troops in Iraq from a high of 115,000 to 50,000. Together, General Austin and Ambassador Jeffrey were now charged with leading Operation New Dawn and the United States' transition from a military operation to a sustainable diplomatic and civilian role in Iraq. They had fifteen months to accomplish the mission including the withdrawal of all U.S. forces.

If you follow news reports, you know the outline of events in Iraq. What you don't know is the story of a leadership relationship characterized by an extraordinary commitment to working across boundaries - and how it applies to you.



General Austin (left) accepts command of U.S. Forces in Iraq.



Among attendees at the ceremony marking the transition to Operation New Dawn are (left to right) Ambassador Jeffrey, Vice President Joe Biden; Secretary of Defense Robert Gates; and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mike Mullen.

From “Us and Them” to “We”

Our relationship with others is often determined by boundaries found in virtually all organizations: demographic, geographic, horizontal, vertical or stakeholder. All too often, however, boundaries become barriers separating people into groups of “Us” and “Them.” These shared identities can create suspicion and distrust that undermine effective collaboration.

Yet in today’s interdependent and complex world, effective solutions to the most pressing challenges in business, government and our global society involve working together collaboratively. We must find a way to work with other groups despite differences in our defining values, perspectives and beliefs. Leaders must learn to span boundaries.

Those who do can transform boundaries from barriers that divide us into frontiers that lead people toward new possibilities. When practiced effectively, boundary spanning can improve individual, team, and organizational collaboration through the following outcomes:

Boundary Spanning Outcomes

- Inclusion, Engagement & Connectivity
- Enduring Partnerships
- Innovative Processes
- Flexibility & Agility
- Global Mindset

So how does one become a boundary spanning leader? What does it “look like” when people behave interdependently across the boundaries of their differences? What kind of leadership encourages and enables diverse parties to behave collaboratively? What does it take to move from “US versus THEM” to “WE are in this TOGETHER”?

The story of General Austin, Ambassador Jeffrey and the joint mission in Iraq between the Department of Defense and the Department of State helps to answer these questions. On August 30 and September 8, 2011, we had the privilege of conducting one-on-one phone interviews with both gentlemen.

The Leadership Challenge: Build a Team of Teams

Imagine the boundary spanning challenges as the U.S. role in Iraq transitioned from the Department of Defense to the Department of State.

Two organizations with vastly different cultures had to complete a delicate handoff in just 15 months prior to the departure of the U.S. military in December 2011. They needed to work together with a myriad of American, Iraqi and regional players to forge a secure, self-reliant and sovereign nation.

“We’re in uncharted waters,” said General Austin of Operation New Dawn, the name of the Iraqi campaign after September 1, 2010. “We’re drawing down a significant military footprint after eight years of combat, moving a mountain of equipment, transferring responsibilities and equipment to the State Department, negotiating with the Iraqi leadership about the future, and helping to shape things in this region.”

It was clear to both General Austin and Ambassador Jeffrey that the complex, high-stakes nature of their task and the many groups involved required the two organizations to transform into a “team of teams.” General Austin explained:



Ambassador Jeffrey and General Austin at the Combined Vision Development Seminar. They brought the top leaders of both organizations together to build a "Team of Teams."

“ Partnership with the Embassy was one of, if not my top priority, coming into this job. The partnership was pretty good over the years leading up to this, but we knew we had to make it better going into the final lap.

I felt that one of the things I had to do early on was establish a great relationship with the Ambassador. Luckily, Jim Jeffrey was of like mind. We both felt that unity of effort needed to start at the top. ”

Both men also knew that the relationship needed to be woven deep and wide through the two organizations as they worked together on common goals. Navigating horizontal boundaries - or those that span functions, peers and expertise - between the Departments of Defense and State was crucial. General Austin continued:

“ I knew we had to build a team of teams with the Ambassador and the Embassy. If we achieved unity of effort, we would have a chance to reach all of our objectives. We really thought about this, and we felt that if we worked at cross-purposes, it would be nearly impossible to accomplish both of our mission sets. ”



General Austin

Ambassador Jeffrey concurred:



Ambassador Jeffrey

have enough external problems tackling an ultra-hard problem to generate internal stresses and strains and frictions. ”

“ We were faced with what I would call a ‘no-kidding, ultra-hard mission’. And if you’re faced with a no-kidding, ultra-hard mission, you really have to scrub down to the basic things that make your institution or the set of institutions really, really good. Unless you’re lucky or really, really good, your chances of success are very small ... In our particular case, it’s not just one organization. It’s two or more working together. And therefore, the nodes between them, the things that link them together, those have to be carefully looked at to ensure that they are working well and that they are complementing and reinforcing what we’re trying to do. You’re going to

The focus on collaboration and partnership was rooted in experience. Both General Austin and Ambassador Jeffrey had previously worked in Iraq and held inter-agency roles. Both learned from what worked and what didn’t. They fundamentally understood the tasks they were facing, the complexity and the multiple (often competing) stakeholders involved.

But need for tight integration was also categorically different during this time of transition. “We had to work together for both normal operations and also for the transition itself,” said the Ambassador.” So there was a much more intimate relationship between the two of us over this year than there would have been in any other year.”

What's Your Leadership Challenge?

You may be thinking that your challenges are nothing like those faced by General Austin, Ambassador Jeffrey, and the soldiers, diplomats and staff who were responsible for conducting the largest transition from a military-led to civilian-led mission in history. It is true that the intensity and pressure of the Iraq context was more amplified than in situations most of us experience. The consequences of not working together, of not spanning boundaries, were apparent, extremely dangerous and far-reaching. Both the General and the Ambassador noted that the clarity of purpose, along with a 15-month deadline, created shared motivation for the Military and Embassy personnel.

For you, the consequences of inaction, false starts, ineffective collaboration may be more muddled or uncertain. You may be working in an organization where the big picture hasn't been painted or a sense of urgency doesn't exist.

Yet, we are certain that you face complex and vexing challenges. Your organization is built upon a scaffold of boundaries - rank and authority; expertise and function; partners, vendors, customers and communities - upon which are layered numerous demographic and geographic differences. This is what you have in common with the General and the Ambassador.

As you consider the need and opportunity for boundary spanning in your line of work, ask yourself:

- What is mission-critical work for the organization?
- What are the common goals and interdependent tasks among groups?
- What is the real timetable?
- What are the consequences of failure?
- What type of leadership culture do you need to succeed?
- What is the "joint mission" for you? Where is "unity of effort" essential?
- How will you create your own team of teams?



Military and Embassy leaders formed joint teams to discuss challenges and collaborative approaches.

The Leadership Solution: Manage Differences, Forge Common Ground, Discover New Frontiers

General Austin and Ambassador Jeffrey knew that their complex mission demanded a tight, “as one” working relationship among individuals and teams throughout both organizations. But wisely, they did not assume that their people knew how to span long-standing boundaries to collaborate effectively.

The two leaders understood that it would take more than assigning people to work together on tasks or talking the talk of collaboration. Just putting groups together when there is a history of competition or conflict or “different DNA” typically leads to failed partnerships, diminished problem-solving capability, turf battles, disengagement and distrust, and decreased productivity.

CCL facilitation team flying into the U.S. Embassy compound

The General and the Ambassador decided to build capacity for collaboration within their organizations by conducting a “Combined Vision Development Seminar” for the senior Division Commanders, General Officers and Counselor-level Embassy personnel. The goal of the seminar - a one-day session held in Baghdad just weeks after the two men had assumed their respective posts - was to jump-start the process of becoming a “team of teams.” The day would set the framework for “how” the two departments were going to achieve unity of effort.

During the seminar, the participants from Defense and State learned about three strategies that would allow them to effectively overcome the challenges of identity difference, span boundaries and create high-performing, collaborative teams:





Military and Embassy participants in the Combined Vision Development Seminar along with their CCL facilitators in light blue shirts.

Manage boundaries.

The first step to spanning boundaries, ironically, is to create or strengthen them. You must be able to see group boundaries clearly before you can bridge them. It taps into the power of differentiation (e.g., clarifying roles, purpose, areas of specialization) in order to build safety and respect across boundaries.

Forge common ground.

Common ground represents what is universal and shared. To forge common ground is to bring groups together to achieve a larger purpose. It is about integration (e.g., creating shared vision and a unified force) in order to build trust, engagement and shared accountability across boundaries.

Discover new frontiers.

The final boundary spanning strategy is about discovering new frontiers where similarities and differences meet. It merges differentiation and integration - creating a "team of teams" with differentiated expertise, experience and resources, yet driven by an integrated vision and strategy - in order to support interdependence, transformation and reinvention.

The Combined Vision Development Seminar began with a focus on the mission and a goal of understanding differences. Initially, the groups from Defense and State worked separately, in different rooms, to clarify the achievements and positive outcomes they wanted to see when the transition was completed 15 months later. The question then turned to the culture of the group. What is the leadership culture the group currently has, and what culture is needed moving forward to achieve mission objectives?



Participants review their work on screens during the Combined Vision Development Seminar.

Independently, the participants from both groups echoed the mindset of the Ambassador and the General: Collaboration and interdependence would drive mission success. As each group assessed their own effectiveness in working across different kinds of boundaries, they began to identify their strengths and weaknesses - as individuals and as an organization.

Tellingly, when the groups from Defense and State came back together, they learned that their boundary spanning skills were practically mirror images of each other. What Defense saw as weaknesses, State saw as strengths, and vice versa. This began a shift from seeing differences as obstacles to the possibility that the strength of one could offset the weakness of the other.

The two organizations spent the remainder of a long 16-hour day building from this initial honest and respectful understanding of their differences. Through facilitated dialogue and activities, the groups shared perspectives, took a hard look at each other's roles and responsibilities, and gained insight as to how they could best work together. They established and strengthened cross-organizational relationships, crafted a shared vision, and made personal commitments to collaboration and creating unity of effort.

But the leadership discussions were not held in a vacuum. By combining their unique experience and expertise, the groups worked on specific, high-priority issues, identified metrics to measure success, and began to solve joint challenges. And they confronted the realities of what could go wrong, both between the two agencies and as they worked with external stakeholders: What challenges might get in our way? What obstacles are we facing? How could these challenges be transformed into new solutions?

Throughout the day, diplomats and soldiers learned how to manage organizational boundaries and forge common ground. They discussed ways to jointly tackle operations and work to weave regional stakeholder interests toward a common goal. This work not only cultivated critical skills while tackling a real challenge. It also created a shared sense of direction, alignment and commitment for the long haul.

A Different Battle Rhythm

One year later, we asked the Ambassador and the General: How did the two organizations apply boundary spanning in real time, as they partnered to tackle work that had never been done?

Implementation began with the shared commitment to collaboration that emerged from the Combined Vision Development Seminar. “It was transformational, because the investment we made during that one long day really carried us for a year,” said General Austin.

“The day set the tone and set many of the operating conditions for what happened the next year,” said Ambassador Jeffrey. “It was extremely helpful. And it has paid tremendous dividends.”

The two men and their organizations created several structures and expectations that would support boundary spanning work in the coming months, including:

Joint meetings. The General and the Ambassador made it a top priority to meet together twice every week. A significant commitment of time and energy, as any CEO or executive understands. But adding to the commitment, the two met face to face, alternating locations between the U.S. Embassy and military headquarters, with risky helicopter flights across Baghdad or rides down one of the most dangerous roads in the world.

“After the seminar, we set up a relatively rigorous and planned-out system,” said Ambassador Jeffrey. Instead of using a secure video conference system, “I would go to General Austin every Monday. He and I and his staff and some of my people would conduct a joint update and work through the major issues. Lower levels of deputies from each organization would also have a set of meetings. Then we would do the reverse on Thursday.”

General Austin described the meetings as “part of what we call our ‘Battle Rhythm’. It’s something that we elected early on to put on our schedules and stick with it. It got us on the same sheet of music ... We remained pretty much synchronized because of those efforts. Quite frankly, we didn’t allow anything to get in the way of us going to the other guy’s headquarters on the appointed day, even when it was very, very difficult to do. Our subordinates knew that we were going to do this come hell or high water.”

Inclusive mindset. The weekly meetings set the standard for inclusion and collaboration. “We would tackle many issues, the idea being that even if something was primarily a military issue, we needed to know about it and vice versa,” said Ambassador Jeffrey.

Ambassador Jeffrey and General Austin made it clear that inclusion, openness and over-communication would be needed and expected throughout the ranks and across the system. General Austin explained: “I wouldn’t accept



Ambassador Jeffrey and General Austin receive a briefing from the seminar participant teams.

anyone claiming 'Hey, this is an Embassy problem. It doesn't affect us.' We worked hard at being inclusive. We made a commitment that we would approach a number of meetings and issues and problem sets together. We'd always ask ourselves on this side whenever we were going to a meeting or a key leader engagement, Who from the Embassy should we take? The Embassy has routinely done that with us as well."

Inclusion also meant that logistics wouldn't interfere with collaboration. The military provided transportation for Embassy staff when needed, and telephone and computer systems were updated for streamlined communication between State and Defense personnel.

"We all went the extra mile to help the other organization do its job," said Gen. Austin. "We wanted to make sure that we did everything we could to increase the situational awareness of the other side. This helped us get to know each other better, faster. In this very dynamic and complex environment, over-communication and inclusion helped us address very challenging times - and there is a different challenge we must deal with just about every other day."

One voice. While meetings and shared work focused on policy and operations related to the transition, the larger goal was to operate "as one" in the eyes of both Washington and the Iraqis. Building on the strategy of their predecessors, General Austin and Ambassador Jeffrey partnered to speak with one voice, holding joint meetings with American, Iraqi and other officials.

"Even when the Ambassador and I would have to be on a teleconference back to Washington, we made a point of being together whenever possible. That had a powerful effect in terms of the visual that was communicated back to the folks that we work for," said Austin.

The "one voice" goal was upheld, even in the most difficult situations according to the Ambassador: "We had a serious increase in American casualties and attacks, and there were various diplomatic and other steps we had to take to deal with that. And there were some very significant threats to mission accomplishment that we had to deal with. But, across the board, we were able to come in with common approaches to Washington and common approaches to the Iraqi government."

Differences as strengths. The understanding that differences between State and Defense could be complementary and supportive rather than competitive or adversarial was maintained and leveraged. General Austin gave an example:

“ If you’re a diplomat, you are trained in all things diplomacy. You can write a cable at the drop of a hat, you can summarize key points. The Embassy has some first-rate professionals who not only can do things like that, but also help us structure and convey ideas and information in a very concise and accurate manner.

If you are a diplomat, your planning skills probably aren’t what those of the military are. So, for doing something very complex like taking over responsibility from the military, we have been able to help structure and provide guidance and vision for the way ahead. I think we played upon each other’s talents in this way and really capitalized on strengths. ”

Ambassador Jeffrey noted:

“ Differences are hard-wired into the system. But they are not differences because the other people haven’t figured out the world as well as you have, or they want to threaten you, or replace your thoughts with theirs. Once you get to that point that you understand this, it just is what it is. It is like a marriage. You recognize that husband and wife bring different viewpoints, cultural and psychological points of view, to a relationship. But that’s OK. The relationship is complementary. ”

In a short period of time, collaboration has become part of the hard-wiring within and between State and Defense operations in Iraq.

“We knew that if we really set out to model the right behavior for our subordinates, it would help to forge a common ground with both of our organizations,” explained General Austin.

“Over time, our actions became routine. Even as people rotated in and out, it became normal; it became ‘the way that we’ve always done things’.”

Role-Modeling

The General and Ambassador are mindful that they - and their soldiers and diplomats - are also modeling collaboration and boundary spanning for numerous Iraqi stakeholders. In addition to their one-voice strategy and ongoing relationship-building efforts with Baghdad, they are called to intervene and mediate among various political, ethnic and religious interests in the country.

One particularly challenging situation involved long-standing political and social divisions between Kurds, Arabs, Turkomans and Christians in the city of Kirkuk. For a year, U.S. forces had been trying to build trust between Baghdad and the Kurdistan Regional Government by using Iraqi troops and peshmerga (Kurdish soldiers) on joint patrols. But a nascent "Arab Spring" movement in February and March 2011 became a flash point for fear and mistrust, threatening the delicate

stability in the region. Jeffrey explained the role he and the General and their staffs played:

“Lloyd and I had to work with the Kurdistan Regional Government and the Iraqi government and Washington to come up with courses of action - political and military - that would deal with the underlying problems, some of which were political, some of which did have a counterterrorist feel to them. We had to sell this to the various folks here in Iraq. We had to convince the U.S. government that we were pursuing the right policies and that this didn't require Washington intervention. It was a real-time crisis, and we were able to carry it out I think in a very effective fashion led by Lloyd and his soldiers on the ground supported by my diplomats and our political contacts.”

A Baghdad neighborhood with concrete barriers



General Austin described the efforts to calm the conflict in Kirkuk as an example of extending the boundary spanning ideas into a new context:

“ When you look at the underlying reasons for what occurred up there and the tension between the Arabs and Kurds, a lot of that is due to a lack of trust. This ability to bring people together, cause them to see the other’s viewpoint, and to really work with them to create a condition where they would be willing to work together towards a common goal is really unique.

But our working together, I think, really is what got both the Arabs and Kurds to a point where they said, well, if we can’t trust each other, then we can trust the Americans and the Americans can get us to a point where we can begin to work together and make this thing better.

We applied some of the same things that we have done within our own organizations to address this extremely sensitive and difficult problem set. It was rewarding to be able to watch that. But I’ve got to tell you, it was one of the most difficult things that the Ambassador and I have done and it continues to be so because this tension goes on every day. ”

An “Ethos” of Collaboration

At the time of our interviews, Operation New Dawn was in its closing months. Both the General and the Ambassador said that the transition of the U.S. mission in Iraq was on track.

Iraq has a functioning elected government. Oil exports are up more than 10 percent. The country has been moved from U.N. Security Council special status into a more normal

financial and diplomatic status. The Iraqi Security Forces are performing admirably under the tutelage of U.S. advise-and-assist brigades, resulting in much improved security for the Iraqi people. Plagued by generations of conflict, Arabs and Kurds and Sunnis and Shi’ites have, with the help of American diplomats and soldiers, developed mechanisms for addressing problems. In short, Iraq has the opportunity to develop internally and become a leader in the region.

Although Iraq and its people have a long journey and great uncertainty remains, the ambitious and intense handoff from Defense to State has been successful. “All in all, we’ve been able to carry out the plan that looked so daunting,” said Ambassador Jeffrey. “There’s no doubt in my mind that without the kind of unity that Lloyd established with me and our teams established with each other, we would not have succeeded at this level.”

The “unity of effort,” “team of teams” strategy made “us twice as powerful as we would have otherwise been,” General Austin said.

An “ethos” of collaboration, as General Austin puts it, has taken root among the hundreds of Military and Embassy personnel who have led and implemented the U.S. transition in Iraq. They have built a greater capacity to manage complexity, change and challenge. They’ve learned to find solutions when answers don’t come easily.

The Ambassador added:

““ Today, Defense and State are still two separate organizations with somewhat different world views. It’s just that we understand that to accomplish the mission, we have to not only understand the other side’s world view and organizational imperatives but also adjust to some degree to be more like that other organization.

The main thing was that it was pounded into everybody that a huge part of success was about being united with the other team ... I come back to that all the time. We’re all one team and the whole culture has shifted. ””

While the long-term impact of their collaborative, boundary spanning efforts is unknown and, in many ways, uncontrollable, one thing is clear: Military and Embassy staff have staked out new leadership territory - exploring new frontiers where differences are seen and valued, similarities and common ground are discovered, and new possibilities, processes and solutions are sought.

Spanning Boundaries in an Interdependent World

Reflecting on the experiences and lessons learned from the U.S. Forces-Iraq Commanding General and Ambassador of Iraq may benefit each of us as we tackle our own boundary spanning challenges.

Both men made a personal commitment to collaborating across boundaries. They did not simply request or impose this commitment on others - they owned it, lived it and modeled it. They adopted a mindset in which they were vigilant to communicate with and include the other in making decisions and resolving problems. They created an ethos of unity that underscored the work on both sides.

They also knew that this mindset had to cascade throughout the organization and be embedded into daily and weekly practices to truly succeed. Thus, boundary spanning became part of their "battle rhythm." Over time, collaboration across boundaries became commonplace and the identity of both organizations was transformed to become more connected.

Intuitively perhaps, both men seemed to understand that the investments they made in developing a strong partnership and unified approach would pay off in the end. They respected the unique identity of each organization and despite the intense time pressure to move forward quickly, took a step back to identify how they could complement one another and work together most effectively.

Perhaps most striking to us when listening to their story was the importance of developing close and trusting relationships - that is, relational, interdependent leadership. Both General Austin and Ambassador Jeffrey commented several times about the intimacy of relationship that is required to effectively leverage differences and span boundaries.

Similarly, more interdependent forms of leadership are required of all of us as we attempt to collaborate across multiple sectors, cultures and geographic regions. Today's leaders, whether working in a government or corporate sector, must span boundaries to tackle the world's toughest, most mission-critical challenges.



General Austin (far right) participates in the ceremony marking the return of U.S. forces from Iraq.

“All in all,
we’ve been able to carry out the plan
that looked so daunting.”

- Ambassador Jeffrey

Ambassador Jeffrey and
General Austin testify before
the Senate Foreign Relations
Committee hearing on Iraq.





CCL facilitation team members on the ground in Iraq with General Austin and Ambassador Jeffrey are (L to R) Harold Scharlatt, Chris Ernst, George Houston, Jennifer Martineau, John Ferguson, Clemson Turregano and Bill Adams.

Like General Austin and Ambassador Jeffrey, we must invest time and energy in developing the relationships that allow us to span boundaries. This process begins by managing boundaries to define the unique identity of each group and organization, including oftentimes deep differences in values, perspectives and areas of expertise. It then moves to forging common ground, enabling groups to tap into shared vision and unified purpose. And it leads to discovering new frontiers where ultimately interdependence becomes the new “battle rhythm” of working together.

Boundary Spanning Background

The experiences of General Austin and Ambassador Jeffrey reflect and build on much of what the authors, along with our colleagues at the Center for Creative Leadership, have termed “Boundary Spanning Leadership.” Through over a decade of research and experience in fostering more interdependent forms of leadership, we’ve found that to realize high-performing, innovative, and successful outcomes across groups, leaders and organizations must first manage boundaries to forge common ground to ultimately discover new frontiers. Our model, along with specific practices, tactics and stories are described in the book, *Boundary Spanning Leadership: Six Practices for Solving Problems, Driving Innovation and Transforming Organizations* and on the Web site SpanBoundaries.com.

About the Authors



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