

U.S. Soldiers from Task Force Konohiki with Iraqis they trained for patrols



1st Combat Camera Squadron (Suzanne M. Day)

Cross-Functional Working Groups Changing the Way Staffs Are Organized

By JOHN S. HURLEY

Over the past several years, the Army has been drastically altering the way it organizes and fights. It is transforming divisional organizations into *units of employment* and brigade organizations into *units of action* while revolutionizing the way it thinks about and employs Reserve and National Guard forces. While these changes are critical to the ability to fight in a joint, interagency, and

coalition environment, the Army must seize the momentum and continue to transform. The next area the service must address is how it organizes and aligns staffs.

This article proposes a new method for organizing staff sections. In addition to building staffs around functional areas of expertise, commands need staff sections that are mission-focused and whose members have expertise in a variety of

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functions. These *cross-functional working groups* (CFWGs) would be more responsive to both customers' and commanders' needs and produce synchronized products more quickly than traditional staff sections. This article cites three examples from both peace and war where CFWGs have been successful.

Organizing by Task

By definition, staff sections are designed to support both the commander and the unit. They help the commander understand the current situation, prepare for future actions, and command, control, and communicate with subordinate units. They assist subordinate units by providing administrative and logistic support, as well as facilitating coordination and synchronization with other units.

Staff organizations, from battalion to Army level, are still rooted in the Prussian system. Each unit has a fixed number of staff sections, each with a unique function. A typical battalion has an S-1 for personnel support, S-2 for intelligence support, S-3 for operations, and S-4 for logistic support, along with maintenance and communications sections. Each section is composed of personnel with particular subject matter expertise. For example, S-1 Soldiers are trained personnel specialists, and the section provides general personnel support to the unit. As a result, each section is homogeneous by design and functionally organized.

The fundamental rubric for staff organization has hardly changed in a century. The Army has added engineer, civil-military, or financial sections, but the idea that commanders and units are best served by homogeneous, functionally aligned staff sections remains.

But given the increase in joint, interagency, and coalition operations, are functionally organized sections the most effective way to fight tomorrow's wars? No longer can a unit expect to perform only a few core competencies when it deploys to theater. The new environment demands that units work with different organizations to perform a wide variety of unique missions and tasks.

Perhaps instead of functional staff sections, it would be more effective to task-organize staffs the same way units are task-organized—that is, to resource and create staff sections tailored to particular assignments or missions rather than using the existing headquarters staff. By tailoring staff

sections, all the benefits of task-organizing units become available to staffs. For example, rather than providing support to all missions a unit performs, the tailored section would support only a specific mission. Knowledge of the mission would thus be more thorough and refined, making the task-organized staff more capable than the traditional staff structure.

Task-organized staffs are not new; they have been used under such names as "tiger teams." Nevertheless, their appearances have been surprisingly rare despite their proven efficacy. For the purposes of this article, task-organized (or tailored) staffs will be referred to as cross-functional working groups, the name used at Joint Forces Command, North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), in Naples (JFCNP). To illustrate the concept, a description of the CFWG will be followed with three examples of successful working groups.

The fundamental principle behind the group is that, rather than being organized around a functional area, it is crafted to solve a particular problem or support a unique mission; it is mission-centric rather than function-centric—for example, the Balkans CFWG rather than the personnel staff section.

The CFWG is composed of action officers from multiple functional staff sections. (In this article, the terms *action* or *staff* officers refer to officers, noncommissioned officers, and enlisted members who serve in staff sections.) Once action officers become members of the CFWG, they take all directions and orders from the chief of the working group, not their parent staff section. The CFWG, in turn, falls directly under the commander or his executive agent—the chief of staff or executive officer. This task organization makes the CFWG fundamentally different from committees, in which staff officers often participate. In a committee, the staff officer belongs to his functional staff section and only occasionally meets with the committee. In a CFWG, he belongs to and works for the CFWG.

An example is germane. A battalion might have ten Soldiers in S-1, five in S-2, ten in S-3, and eight in S-4. They all support the battalion's many missions through their own areas of expertise; but while deployed to Iraq, the battalion may be tasked to collect captured weapons and ordnance. Although the battalion has never trained for this mission, it is a critical task that must be accomplished quickly. Accordingly, the battalion could create a tailored CFWG comprised of six Soldiers—two intelligence, two operations, one lo-

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gistic, and one personnel. By focusing exclusively on weapons collection, the group could provide timely support to both the units and the commander, while the units executing this mission would have a customized staff supporting them.

This may sound simple, but a word of caution is in order. The mission would often be best served if a working group was formed that received guidance directly from the commander and whose members answered only to the working group. Those who have been primary staff officers are familiar with attending meeting after meeting, where they gather bits of information and taskers to pass down to action officers. The action officers, in turn, pass their products up through their functional staff section chiefs to be integrated into a master plan. In this mode, the value added by the primary staff officers is questionable.

Not Reinventing the Wheel

Under the CFWG concept, the action officers are removed from the staff sections and are directly integrated into the working group. As a result, the commander's guidance on the project is directly passed to the CFWG chief and then to the action officers. There are three immediate advantages of this task organization. First, each action officer receives identical guidance,

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so there is no opportunity for a primary staff section leader to miscommunicate it. Second, because the information does not filter down through the staff sections, the action officers, and later the CFWG, can be more responsive and reduce the turnaround time. Third, traditional (functionally aligned) staff section leaders can focus on issues that apply to their functional areas rather than merely acting as conduits for information.

At this point, some may object that this model would remove the traditional staff section leader and his expertise from the product. The concern is valid, but the action officer can and should go back to the functional staff section leader for guidance, mentoring, and quality assurance and control. It is during these interactions that the traditional staff section leader can shape the product. The input given for guidance and mentoring is fundamentally different from input from the one responsible for the project.

Also, some may conclude that a CFWG is reinventing the wheel—that the Army is already

full of working groups. They are correct; one need look no farther than any division's plans section to realize that every division in the Army has a task-organized, multifunctional staff structured to solve a problem (for example, producing plans and orders for the division).

The fundamental difference between existing sections and the CFWG is that the commander creates cross-functional working groups as missions develop, and they exist for the duration of that mission and are then disbanded. For example, to plan and coordinate military and political activities in the Balkans, the Commander of Allied Joint Forces Command Naples, the NATO commander for that area of operations, could create a staff section specifically designed to work issues from that region. Once the mission is complete, the group will be dissolved. Today's multifunctional shops are generally permanent; we can hardly fathom a time when we will not need them. Further, Army doctrine dictates that they will exist and how they will be employed, and they are resourced with manning documents to ensure that personnel are available to fill them.

CFWGs at Work

Three examples will clarify the working of the CFWG: the Base Camp Development Group (the G-8) in the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) during Operation *Iraqi Freedom*; the Project Management Office in Allied Joint Forces Command Naples; and the NATO Training Mission Iraq CFWG, again in Naples.

During *Iraqi Freedom*, the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) closed on Mosul in May 2003. It became apparent that summer that the initial assumption that the division would quickly depart was no longer valid. Rather, it would remain in Mosul for a year, then replacement units would take over. As a result, the division began to resource and develop base camps to house over 20,000 Soldiers. But first it had to decide who would organize and lead this mammoth effort. Obvious choices included the divisional engineers, an attached engineer group, the G-3 Plans Section, and the Division Support Command (since base camp development includes many service and support requirements in addition to construction). Most units in theater employed one of these courses of action.

There were advantages and disadvantages with each choice. The Assistant Division Commander for Support, Brigadier General Jeffrey Schloesser, the "base camp pasha" for the division,



Fleet Combat Camera Group Pacific (Edward G. Martens)

Army scout platoon investigating possible weapons cache, Operation Iraqi Freedom

concluded that to house the entire division by winter, the organization in charge had to focus solely on that mission and be immediately responsive to subordinate unit housing needs, contractor issues, and his own guidance. He believed the only way to achieve that level of responsiveness was to create a CFWG for base camps.

To demonstrate that the CFWG was independent of other staff sections and units, Schloesser designated it the G-8 (the division does not have a standing G-8 section). The chief was a major, and the G-8 contained permanent logistic, contracting, and engineer personnel. When required, the section received augmentation from G-1, G-4, G-6, and the Staff Judge Advocate. Because the CFWG was independent of other staffs and units, it was able to dedicate itself to base camp development, received guidance straight from General Schloesser, and reported directly to him. The benefits were soon apparent: although the division started base camp development later than any major unit in theater, it was able to house over 20,000 Soldiers by the end of January in containerized units or improved existing structures, an unlikely feat without an improved staff.

The second example of a successful CFWG comes from Allied Joint Forces Command Naples (AJFCN), a NATO command that is building a headquarters costing over \$180 million. As with the previous example, AJFCN could have tasked several standing organizations to execute the

project, for example, J-4, J-6 (because of the complexity of establishing a new communications and information network), or the Support Group (a colonel-level command responsible for current base maintenance and life support issues). But NATO decided to establish the Project Management Office as an independent CFWG. The office is comprised of members from the J-Engineer, J-6, and Support Group. Additionally, there is a civilian project coordinator whose duties resemble those of a contracting officer. Finally, the director answers to the Deputy Chief of Staff for Support, a major general.

The advantage is that since the group works together as an independent organization, it is immediately responsive to issues that develop on the project or requests for information from the command group. For example, as the command refines its guidance for equipping the new facility, the Project Management Office can act immediately. Further, since the action officers are not members of other sections, they can focus full time on the project. As a result, the office can be proactive in managing and ensuring quality control. The importance of this posture can hardly be understated since delays from inefficiencies or lax standards will cost NATO \$10 million per year in lease extensions on the current facility.

An additional advantage of the Project Management Office is that, as a NATO organization, AJFCN is a joint and combined command, so its

staff officers represent all services and NATO nations. Communications among staff officers are thus doubly challenging. Beyond the normal joint difficulties, such as the Army trying to talk with the Navy, there is often a language barrier. One has only to witness a German officer trying to communicate with an Italian civilian in English, the official language of NATO, to appreciate the problem.

In such an environment, the value of habitual work relationships is immense. Over time, staff officers from different services, agencies, and nations learn each other's strengths and weaknesses and develop a common language applicable to the specific working group. It would be hard to fathom the difficulties encountered in the

Project Management Office if staff officers rotated in and out based on work schedules or the whims of superiors. Trying to communicate rather than working issues for the commander is a very real problem that multinational and interagency staff sections face as they coordinate projects.

Lest one conclude that CFWGs are useful solely for niche engineer missions, the final example is more universal. In response to Operation *Iraqi Freedom*, NATO Training Mission–Iraq (NTM–I) was formed to focus on training and advice to the Iraqi Ministry of Defense and the Iraqi Security Forces' middle- to senior-level leaders, as well as on the coordination of equipment assistance for the security forces. Additionally, NTM–I

assists the Ministry of Defense in establishing an Iraqi-led Training, Education, and Doctrine Center near Baghdad. This mission has elements both in Iraq and throughout Europe.

The support for NTM–I includes predeployment training, personnel rotations, equipment contributions, and budget issues and is currently handled by the JFCNP. To ensure that this support is responsive, the commander created a CFWG to handle all issues related to the project. Building on experiences in the Balkans, the NTM–I CFWG is composed of members from nearly every staff section in the command and meets twice daily to handle all staff work and actions required to support the mission. Further, group members have dedicated workspace in the Joint Operations Center, which facilitates coordination and synchronization. Finally, the chief of the NTM–I CFWG is a lieutenant colonel whose singular responsibility is to run the CFWG and who answers directly to the Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations.

Because it is a standing staff that meets daily, direction and guidance from the commander or from Iraq are acted on immediately without having to pass through the functional staff sections. Further, since the staff physically meets and works together in a dedicated office space, its products are consistently more synchronized than products of functional staff sections in the command. Finally, products and solutions are quickly provided to the commander or the field as they are already synchronized across the staff and need only the approval of the Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations before moving to the command group.

As with the second example, the NTM–I CFWG dramatically improves communication within Naples. For other issues, the commander (a U.S. Navy admiral) issues guidance to the deputy and assistant chiefs of staff who, as expected in a joint and allied command, have a variety of national and service backgrounds. This guidance is then passed down to each staff section. However, because these deputy and assistant chiefs of staff have extremely varied backgrounds (to include languages spoken), the commander's guidance can be subtly different between the staff sections. These differences can lead to difficulties when the staff sections try to synchronize their products.

In the case of the NTM–I CFWG, the commander's guidance is given to the Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations and directly to the CFWG, ensuring that each member of the staff gets the same guidance. As a result, staff officers can more easily synchronize the product and, in turn, can

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Marines receiving final instructions to start Operation *Scimitar* in Zaidon, Iraq



2. Marine Division Combat Camera (Matthew Hulchison)



U.S. Navy (Mary Overstreet)

Mobile construction battalion providing security for convoy

the functional staff section must be prepared to handle an increased workload as members depart for work in a CFWG

more effectively and quickly support both the commander and the mission in Iraq.

Based on the success of the CFWG, JFCNP has published a command directive detailing the purpose, techniques, and procedures for working groups. (The command does not formalize

and publish staff procedures on a whim; thus, this publication is symbolic of the importance of working groups in the command.) In the future, among other changes, all

working groups will be appointed with orders from the Chief of Staff, and the chief of the working group will be an assistant chief of the staff (for example, J-1, J-2, and so on).

Not Perfect Yet

Despite the high marks bestowed on CFWGs, they are not without their shortcomings. First, personnel management using the groups must be flexible. In order to execute this system, action officers will move from their functional staff sections to CFWG and back, creating turmoil not only with transferring work responsibilities but also with counseling, mentorship, and efficiency reporting. Additionally, the functional staff section must be prepared to handle an increased workload as members depart for work in a CFWG.

Second, by definition, these CFWGs are new staff sections that must be integrated into the organization. To improve responsiveness, they should have access to the commander or his representative, but that is a double-edged sword since

an organization can overwhelm a commander with too many sections having direct access. However, burying the CFWG in a staff section could negate the group's inherent responsiveness.

Third, CFWGs will never replace functional staff sections. There will always be a need to handle general personnel, intelligence, or logistic issues. Therefore, while the number of personnel may remain relatively constant, the number of staff sections will increase. In other words, adding a CFWG will flatten the staff hierarchy, testing the commander's span of control of subordinate sections while giving him greater visibility on the issues. Although this will initially be a challenge for the organization, it will increase efficiency overall, which is why many competitive business leaders are flattening their staff hierarchies.

Fourth, the commander must be ready to deal with bruised egos. A CFWG is formed to deal with only the most critical missions. As a result, many functional staff sections and staff leaders might feel that their contributions or their organizations add minimal value. Such attitudes can have severe consequences on the organization overall.

Finally, until the concept of CFWG is fully embraced by the organization, conflicts can arise as young staff officers are pulled between their old functional staff sections and the new CFWG. In short, they will receive guidance and missions from both if responsibilities are not carefully delineated. Also, some functional staff section leaders will still want to influence and control the CFWG product. Since they might not be privy to all the commander's guidance, their control can unnecessarily delay the product.

The noted shortcomings, as well as others that will undoubtedly surface while implementing the groups, are not meant to dissuade organizations from using cross-functional working groups. Rather they are offered as issues that should be resolved before implementation. These few obvious problems notwithstanding, the benefits of CFWGs outweigh their costs. They will allow the command to respond quickly to unexpected missions or tasks while working with unfamiliar units from other services, agencies, and nations. Working groups do not replace existing functional staff sections; rather they augment them and provide adaptability to the command. Army transformation is ultimately about giving the command flexibility to prepare for and wage war most effectively. The cross-functional working group is another way to do that.

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