

Bees and Spiders: Seeing the World from Different Perspectives

By LTC Brian L. Steed

As an exchange officer, I spent many hours in the offices of senior Jordanian officers. I sat and watched as a variety of internal and external guests would come, sit, drink tea, exchange pleasantries and then leave. As the hours of this activity passed, I initially thought to myself, "What a waste of time! They did not *do* anything!" Later I realized that this was the regular process of making and/or strengthening web connections. From their cultural perspective, the people who entered the office were doing something as important as checking off an item on a to-do list.

Military personnel from Middle Eastern cultures differ from U.S. military personnel. This is not simply about differences on the surface—we do not see the world the same way. When a U.S. Army soldier enters a room for a meeting in the Middle East, that soldier is not coming into the room with the same vision of the issues to be discussed as is his Middle Eastern counterpart. This means that events are not perceived in the same way, and techniques for accomplishing tasks will be viewed through a different lens.

There has been a great deal of interaction between the U.S. military and the people of Iraq and of Afghanistan, and working relationships have improved over time. This does not necessarily mean, however, that the other cultures are "coming around" to a Western way of thinking; they are probably adapting their practices to appease the current power broker. If we want to achieve real and lasting transformations, we need to first understand the underlying differences and then make adjustments to shape the discussion in a way that will assist in accomplishing our goals and desires.

The following is a simple analogy to explain this difference. As with any analogy, there are flaws and imperfections; I ask the reader to indulge in a little imaginative thinking when accepting this analogy.

Americans Are to Bees As Arabs Are to Spiders

The bee is defined by individual capabilities that allow it to accomplish its role within a larger community. The bee is a team player who has three main descriptors: task oriented, analysis driven and information sharing.

A bee sees its day as task oriented: It has "x" amount of flowers to collect pollen from in a given day. When the bee returns home at night, it is going to assess the day in terms of how many flowers it collected pollen from, the amount of pollen collected, the distances flown and so on. The bee is concerned with accomplishment of agenda items or task lists. To accomplish this list, the bee must conduct at least basic levels of analysis—how far to fly, how long it will take, how many flowers in the field, how many trips or other bees are required, and a host of other basic analysis items. When the bee finds a particularly rich field or garden with the ideal types of flowers, it returns to the hive and begins a dance that is designed to demonstrate to the rest of the community the direction and distance to the riches. The bee accepts the premise that it is better to share more information with the greatest number of members of the community in the fastest way possible.

Arabs Are to Spiders As Americans Are to Bees

The spider sees success as directly associated with its web in terms of its strength, size, location and effectiveness. The spider defines its daily success by the efforts it has made to strengthen the web. In this analogy, the spider's web is connected not to branches and leaves, but to other spiders.

Each day for the spider is an exercise in sending out additional strands to other spiders—increasing the reach and size of its web or strengthening the existing strands that already connect it to others. The spider does not need to do significant analysis. Basic social networking answers the question of which are the best spiders for future connections. The spider is not interested in sharing information about the location of its web or the other

strands and their strength with its other spider connections. To do so would directly threaten the placement and success of its own web. For example, if a spider had a web across a trail that provided particularly good hunting, introducing other spiders to that same location would threaten the current success enjoyed by the spider.

The main motivation is to increase the web. In general, spiders do not work together to build webs. It is also true that within its sphere the spider may show tremendous initiative in choosing the web location, which strands to strengthen and when to have the web prepared. The entire purpose of the web is to reach the point that when some other spider comes for assistance or a favor, the spider can simply tug on a web strand and make some other spider react favorably. The spider with the strongest web, therefore, has the greatest ability to convince others to do as it desires.

U.S. and Middle Eastern Militaries

There are clearly some naturalistic problems with this analogy; however, the analogy generally holds for Americans being bees and Arabs being spiders. The idea is that there is a difference in how different groups, in this case the American military and Middle Eastern military, are motivated and how they define themselves. This is by no means a judgment on one way being better than the other, but rather a critical point that needs to be accepted in conducting business across cultures: Different cultures see the world differently, including at the basic daily level of determining actions and activities.

A large part of this difference is in the definitions of success held by the bee and by the spider. A U.S. soldier might have a to-do list of tasks, and he mentally or physically checks them off over the course of the day. The day is successful if the highest priority task is accomplished, and if time permits, other tasks are accomplished throughout that day. It is success based on doing.

The Middle Eastern officer bases success on whom one meets with and how many people one has made contact with throughout the day, although the officer probably does not think about it that way himself. He does not determine his success on what he does, but on how he builds or strengthens his network. It is not a linear approach to success, but rather a network- or web-based approach. The officer who sits in offices of more senior officers all day and drinks tea with them and speaks about their families and cultivates connections is building his web. He sends out strands to connect himself socially with those above, equal to and below him. He wants to build this network so that when he needs something, he can reach out and touch a line and make contact with someone who can help him. This is a reason why hospitality is so important. If someone enters another's office, he must feel welcome and be treated well—the strand connecting the two people must be strengthened.

A great deal of effort is placed on such things, in many cases to the detriment of what some Americans have considered real work. Meetings will be interrupted by phone calls with people in the web or to greet someone, even of a lesser rank, who has just entered the room.

This is vitally important to understand, especially when one begins a meeting. If one has the desire to inspire the counterpart to *do* something, then the conversation must be shaped so as to make the doing seem logical within the construct of the counterpart. What motivates a spider to do something is different from what motivates a bee and must be considered prior to the meeting if one truly wants to achieve success. Conducting the meeting on a "bee-only" framework will end in frustration, as the spider will see no value in the logic or arguments.

Bees and spiders coexist in nearly every climate and can thrive together. They serve complementary purposes in meeting the needs of the ecosystem. The same can be said of the cultures addressed here—those of the American military and Middle Eastern military. The fact that the cultures are so different does not mean there must be conflict or even frustration.

To improve working relationships, it is imperative that one sees and understands the differences in culture and how this affects the daily life of each person. Once one understands the cultural paradigm of the other, then it is possible for real productive dialogue and cooperation to exist.

LTC Brian L. Steed is the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command senior liaison to the Israel Defense Force. He is the author of *Piercing the Fog of War*.

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