Team Talk: The Adaptive Team Model

Team. The premise at the core of many of our SOF units is the ability for our Soldiers to work as a member of a small, autonomous team. Throw in the *austere environment* descriptor and we have a group of people who must work together EFFECTIVELY in highly stressful, ambiguous situations. Team is a concept that is lived and breathed in SOF, so much so that one of our ARSOF attributes is *Team Player*.

> **Team Player:** Able to work on a team for a greater purpose than himself; dependable and loyal; works selflessly with a sense of duty; respects others and recognizes diversity

Our attributes also give us *Adaptability.*

> **Adaptability:** The ability to maintain composure while responding to or adjusting one's own thinking and actions to fit a changing environment; the ability to think and solve problems in unconventional ways; the ability to recognize, understand and navigate within multiple social networks; the ability to proactively shape the environment or circumstances in anticipation of desire outcomes.

So, if we put these together, we have an Adaptive Team. But really….. <u>what</u> are the actual hallmarks of an adaptive team? <u>How</u> does a team work effectively in stressful situations and adapt efficiently? How do we <u>develop</u> these attributes in our students?

<u>A look at the science</u>

There have been numerous studies that have looked at the characteristics of effective teams. Have you ever seen a medical team respond to a code? There are things that effective, well-oiled teams do extremely well that make them highly successful and that give them the ability to adapt.

One body of research presented by Pulakos, et.al (2006; *Understanding Adaptability*) forms the
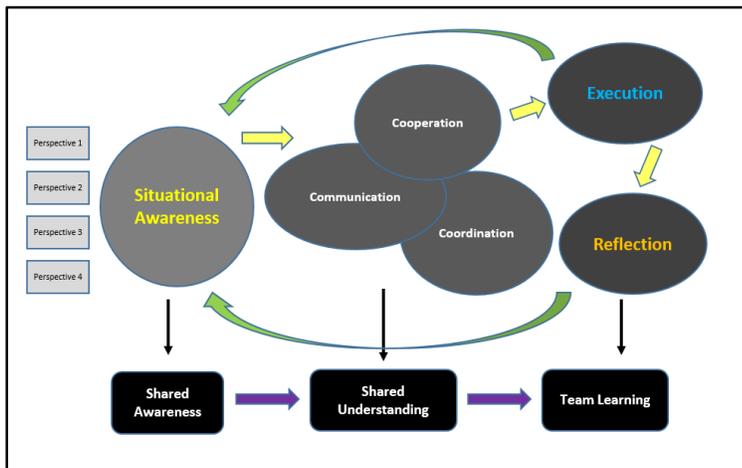
foundation of the I-Adapt Theory and is used by the Asymmetric Warfare Group for the premise of their Adaptive Warrior course. The main focus of this Adaptive Team model revolves around the 3C's—Cooperation, Coordination, and Communication. Makes sense, right? But a team can't get to these C's without some initial communication that moves the team from basic Situational Awareness (*Hey, this doesn't look right!)* to a team's Shared Understanding (*This is what we think this means*).

This common understanding of the situation is **<u>key.</u>** Forming a plan based on only some of the situational cues, or a common misunderstanding of facts, won't be nearly as successful as forming a

plan based on the actual situation. Teaching students to notice situational cues, think about them both critically (*what IS the nature of the situation?)* as well as creatively (*what are the range of options we have to address this?)* is important for this phase of the model. These modes of thinking can be developed, but only with deliberate events that assist students in processing, evaluating, and reflecting on their decisions and processes.

The next key for high functioning teams is that everyone has something to do to address the problem. Where the line is drawn between Good and Great teams is what the members do at this juncture. Members on teams that are <u>Good</u> and teams that are <u>GREAT</u> may both get down to executing their tasks, but members of the Good team may be involved in only Task Work. Task Work is actively working on and focusing on your own piece of the solution without coordination or any monitoring or notion of what others are doing. Actual TEAM WORK, is being actively involved in your own tasks as part of a larger coordinated effort, but also keeping your head up to monitor teammates---to monitor each other's progress, to ask for help or offer assistance, and to generally keep one another informed on progress, glitches, and successes. Expert strategic performance of tasks is critical but with that we must also have coordinated adaptive performance.

What does this have to do with us?

Consider this….in the context of the schoolhouse, where are our teams? Yes, we need to develop our students to be members of effective, adaptable teams. Having a model to teach from can assist students with understanding where their own teams break down or are successful. But let's consider our other clusters of teams.

Teams of cadre work within each phase of our courses. There are best practices occurring among cadre from course to course, and even within the same course. Do cadre work together to share awareness and understanding of what is working well or how to make a cleaner execution?

Consider Post-Instructional Conferences (PICs); these are a great forum for a team approach as it should be a venue for Training Developers, QAO, instructional leaders and cadre to consider the sustains and improves in our current course structures….and invite a representative from the left and right of your course, too. Getting all these perspectives will improve situational awareness of what is happening and can greatly assist in improving your own foxhole.

> Cooperation: Ability and willingness to work together and understand how your information and skills fit into the solution to the issue
>
> Coordination: Efforts based on the created plan and how efforts co-exist
>
> Communication: Ability to transfer ideas among and between team members

Does teaming extend up or across battalions? Do we understand each other's tasks? Are we working with our heads down or with our heads up? Sharing information through Cooperation, Coordination, and Communication is crucial for establishing a Shared Understanding. A Shared Understanding is the only way to successfully execute a team plan. This model is not only crucial for producing highly effective team players, but also for maintaining truly effective, adaptable teams in our own work environments.

For more information on this model or to continue the conversation, please reach out to the ESC at lroukema@ttp-usa.com.