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SOF ENTERPRISE GROWTH: HOW TO BULK WITH LEAN MUSCLE

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Maj Jodi-Jane Longley

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SOF ENTERPRISE GROWTH: HOW TO BULK WITH LEAN MUSCLE

AIM

1. Canadian Special Operations Forces Command (CANSOFCOM) and its holistic enterprise can grow in size and capability, in line with *Strong, Secure, Engaged (SSE)*, yet maintain its attractive attributes of being strategic, small, flat and fast by staying true to its principles: focus on the quality of its people and agile processes. Effective expansion requires conscious and deliberate organizational growth and a refusal to compromise or dilute standards. This service paper is a reflection on the qualities of CANSOFCOM and a rationalization for expansion using methodologies that allow an organization to scale quantity without compromising quality.

INTRODUCTION

2. In a study featured in Harvard Business Review, 85% of executives said the largest barriers to achieving organizational growth objectives were internal to their companies.¹ Canada's latest Defence Policy, SSE, promises 605 new personnel to Special Operations Forces along with new platforms, vehicles and information systems and networks.² The planned but inevitable expansion of CANSOFCOM puts into question one of the indisputable Special Operations Forces (SOF) Truths: SOF cannot be mass-produced.³ Trying to expand the numbers

¹ Zook, "The Greatest Barriers to Growth, According to Executives", *Harvard Business Review*, May 17, 2016, 2.

² Minister of National Defence, "Strong Secure Engaged", *Canada's Defence Policy*, (National Defence: Ottawa, 2017), 40.

³ CANSOFCOM, "CANSOFCOM Capstone Concept for Special Operations 2009", *CANSOFCOM Canadian Special Operations Forces Command*, (National Defence, Ottawa: 2009), 6.

and capabilities causing a dilution of quality or compromise in standards is a valid concern worthy of investigation. However, with a conscious maintenance of the CANSOFCOM aim, adherence to selection and training standards, creation of processes to empower leaders at all levels, and an internal reflection of why and how expansion is to be achieved, an evolution of organizational growth is not only possible, but healthy in the lifespan of an organization with growing external demands.

3. Larry Grenier has developed a model for organizational growth that demonstrates 5 phases of evolution framed between five periods of volatility that lead to revolutions and growth, or conversely failure. This model and its principles will be applied to CANSOFCOM to take a focused look at the appropriate category of growth in which it fits, and what activities CANSOFCOM should concentrate on going forward to foster growth. Two themes will emerge: one of the importance of people, and one of the importance of processes. Additionally, this paper will take a closer look at how General Stanley McChrystal invoked a team of teams approach to solve an organizational crisis within the Joint Special Operations Task Force (JSOTF) in Iraq as they realised the needed to adapt their internal relationships (people) and the processes they used in order to beat their adversary. Both Grenier and McChrystal speak of the identity crises that invoke successful organizational growth. With the upcoming expansion in personnel and pending change in command leadership, CANSOFCOM can leverage the opportunity for reflection and self-awareness to ensure a renewed identity and ensure success moving into its next phase of growth.

DISCUSSION

4. The 2009 CANSOFCOM Capstone Concept for Special Operations highlights the key factor to SOF success is its people.⁴ As noted above, most barriers to organizational change are internal to an organization; therefore, it is pertinent to reflect on how people will play a role in the planned expansion of the CANSOFCOM enterprise. The roles will fall into two major categories: those already a part of the organization, and those 605 recruits that will be inculcated into the culture of the organization.

5. The importance of a unity of effort to help the members of CANSOFCOM embrace growth and change cannot be understated. People in organizations are prone to getting comfortable, and reinforcing their cognitive biases on the success of yesterday's experiences. General Stanley McChrystal, in his book *Team of Teams*, explains how his JSOTF was failing in its mission and had to reflect and implement drastic internal changes in order to adapt to the seemingly more agile terrorist groups they were confronting in Iraq in 2003-2004.⁵ He notes that large organizations often focus on efficiency and repetition in order to mass scale processes and predictability much like industrial assembly lines. However, in an organization where the operating environment is volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA), he outlines how efficiency is the enemy of adaptability as adhering to strict pre-defined processes hinders the ability to innovate and react to a faster, polymorphic adversary.

⁴ CANSOFCOM, "CANSOFCOM Capstone Concept for Special Operations 2009", *CANSOFCOM Canadian Special Operations Forces Command*, (National Defence, Ottawa: 2009), 6.

⁵ McChrystal, *Team of Teams: New Rules of Engagement for a Complex World*, (New York: Penguin Publishing Group, 2015), 2.

6. CANSOFCOM must remain self-aware and enable its staff officers and line commanders to think and act in ways that allow for adaptation to emerging problem sets in the VUCA environment and find maximum flexibility within the legal confines of policy. The premise in *Team of Teams* was that even with the adaptability of the teams being employed under the greater headquarters; the “command of teams” approach was still not adaptable enough to plan around the enemy’s decision-action cycle. The break-through came from a systems design of a team of teams, focused on relationships that were both vertically and horizontally integrated. These relationships focused on building trust, common purpose, information sharing and higher levels of transparency, which were all enablers of success. CANSOFCOM must therefore get buy-in from leadership and staff alike for a team of teams approach. It must establish stronger stakeholder relationships based on more open information sharing and collaboration across horizontal internal stovepipes and external stakeholders as well as vertically into its subordinate units. This in turn will foster trust, common purpose and shared culture of adaptability and agility, ultimately enabling faster decision-making.

7. The selection of new recruits is also of paramount importance as a part of organizational growth. Each unit as well as the Headquarters already have rigorous independent criteria and processes in place for the selection and training of new members. Two challenges exist: The first is if CANSOFCOM can recruit the requisite numbers of new members without dropping the standard. The second will arise in whether or not new members will become additional capacity in capabilities that already exist, or intentioned for the development of new capabilities, or both. In either case, all of the selection standards must remain objective and centered around the CANSOFCOM ethos; relentless pursuit of excellence, shared responsibility, humility,

determination and creativity. They are all identifiable personality traits that shall not be compromised in recruiting 605 or more new members. Previously, in the stand-up of new SOF capabilities, entire conventional units were subsumed into CANSOFCOM where a mass screening of personal traits of each member being absorbed was not possible. The SOF culture has thankfully permeated through and immersed all of these units now, and provided valuable lessons going forward as new capabilities may come online with pre-trained personnel attached.

8. In considering where CANSOFCOM sits in terms of its internal processes, it is valuable to consider a theoretical approach. Grenier's model of the five phases of growth of an organization (see Figure 1) can help identify the revolution factors that contribute to growing through his outlined phases of development. CANSOFCOM will turn 12 years old in 2018 and has already seen many phases of evolution and growth through its creation and past expansions. What started as primarily a domestic counter-terrorism mandate in the early 1990s morphed into a mostly direct action task force mandate in Afghanistan, and more recently has evolved to add focus to the "access, understand and influence"⁶ capability and mission sets to train, advise and assist host nation forces while maintaining all previously developed capabilities. US SOF doctrine refers to these newer missions as "Security Forces Assistance (SFA)."⁷ In this latest period of increasing advise and assist missions for multiple units simultaneously, it is argued that CANSOFCOM is presently past the volatility of its own red tape revolution and settling into the early growth of an evolution phase of collaboration (as denoted on Figure 1).

⁶ CANSOFCOM, "Consolidating the Objective", *CANSOFCOM's Strategic Plan*, (Ottawa: National Defence, 2015), 10.

⁷ USSOCOM, *USSOCOM Factbook 2015*, (Washington: USSOCOM, 2015), 14.

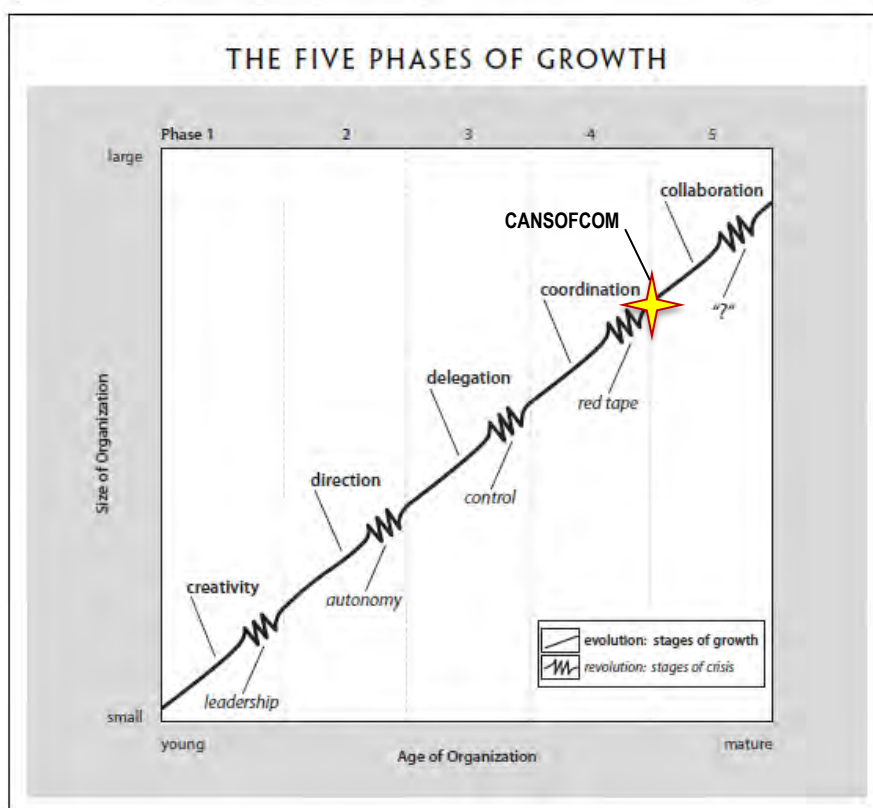


Figure 1 - Larry Grenier's Five Phases of Growth from Harvard Business Review, May-June 1998

9. Grenier describes a red tape crisis that the coordination phase sparks quite convincingly as follows:

All these new coordination systems prove useful for achieving growth through the more efficient allocation of a company's limited resources. The systems prompt field managers [Unit COs] to look beyond the needs of their local unit. Although these managers still have a great deal of decision-making responsibility, they learn to justify their actions more carefully to a watchdog headquarters. A lack of confidence however, gradually builds between line and staff, and between headquarters and the field. The many systems

and programs introduced begin to exceed their usefulness. *A red tape crisis* (sic) is in full swing. Line managers, for example, increasingly resent direction from those who are not familiar with local conditions. And staff people, for their part, complain about uncooperative and uninformed line managers. Together, both groups criticize the bureaucratic system that has evolved. Procedures take precedence over problem solving, and innovation dims. In short, the organization has become too large and complex to be managed through formal programs and rigid systems.⁸

10. CANSOFCOM's recognition of the need to cut red tape, and its emergence into the collaboration phase of evolution is timely in the modern information space. Specific recommendations to foster continued growth in this phase include processes with a focus on resolving problems with team action. Grenier recommends a reduction in staff officers at the HQ level and a reassignment into interdisciplinary teams that consult vertically as opposed to directing subordinate units. Both Grenier and McChrystal espouse regular conferences or meetings of senior managers to focus on large problems. Professional education in behavior skills, teamwork and self-improvement are recommended for all team members to ameliorate everyone's personal growth. Additionally real-time information management systems need to be integrated into daily decision-making. Through SSE, CANSOFCOM is receiving capital investments to procure modern C5ISR systems that will enable that faster flow of information for

⁸ Greiner, "Evolution and Revolution as Organizations Grow," *Harvard Business Review*, May-June 1998, 7, <https://hbr.org/1998/05/evolution-and-revolution-as-organizations-grow>.

reach back and situational awareness. All of these suggestions highlight a modern focus on stronger teams, team processes and continuous professional development of the individuals.⁹

11. A practical look at the expansion of CANSOFCOM in light of its phase of organizational growth should also take into consideration the ‘why’ for its growth. CANSOFCOM receives its mandate and authorities from the Government of Canada (GoC), and the Commander holds the position of an L1 within the strategic command of Canada’s Armed Forces (CAF). This hierarchy sits as one of the flattest in the CAF with unit and task force commanders reporting to the L1, who reports directly to the CDS, who in turn reports to the MND for decisions to /direction from the GoC. This short, agile chain will not be impacted by the increase of numbers or new bolt-on capabilities being force generated within the units as all forces will still be force employed on operations under the same construct, four steps from the government decision makers. The attributes of being fast, flat and strategic all speak to this relationship. CANSOFCOM must stay true to its minimalist hierarchy that is both a part of its structure as well as its culture.

12. In terms of maintaining the attribution of being a small organization, it is worth now taking a broader look across the SOF ‘industry’ to our coalition partners, as well as to some of our adversarial organizations. USSOCOM is an organization that employs 69,000 people including 2,500 in its headquarters alone.¹⁰ Australia’s SOCOMD has 2050 active duty and 750

⁹ *Ibid*, 8.

¹⁰ USSOCOM... 14.

reserve.¹¹ Boko Haram is assessed to have between 7-10000 fighters.¹² Estimates of the size of al-Qaeda's affiliate in Syria, Hayat Tahir al-Sham (HTS) run around 20-30000 members. Recent US estimates of the remaining ISIS forces in Iraq and Syria are around 12-15000.¹³ All of these numbers form an awkward but realistic shape of the 'industry' size in which CANSOFCOM can measure itself, noting that CANSOFCOM is smaller than all of these organizations and yet finds itself working alongside or against teams from each of them. In this sense, size is very much relative, and CANSOFCOM should still be considered a small organization. Within the context of operations, CANSOFCOM continues to operate with a small team approach for tactical missions with strategic effects, whereby small but self-sustaining footprints can be deployed as required. The expansion of CANSOFCOM in both numbers and capabilities should not change this approach to operations. Clandestine operations do not come with large footprints, and it is very much a part of the culture of SOF as well as a SOF planning first principle.. Similarly compared to CJOC and NORAD, the other two Canadian force employers, CANSOFCOM is the leanest headquarters staff, and it notably manages force management, development, generation and sustainment on top of force employment unlike its Canadian counterparts. With all of this in mind, there is little risk that CANSOFCOM will lose its attribution of being a small organization, along with being strategic, flat and fast.

13. The growing popularity of using SOF in response to myriad global crises is not likely to dissipate in the near term. Part of the 'why' that justifies the expansion of CANSOFCOM comes

¹¹ Australian Army, "Modernizing from Beersheba and Beyond", *Australian Army*, August 26, 2014, https://www.army.gov.au/sites/g/files/net1846/f/army_101_brief_ver_7_-_modernising_from_beersheba_and_beyond_v4.pdf

¹² Dorrie, "How Big is Boko Haram?", *War is Boring*, February 2, 2015, <https://warisboring.com/how-big-is-boko-haram>.

¹³ Beauchamp, "16 Years After 9/11, al-Qaeda is Back", *Vox*, September 11, 2017, <https://www.vox.com/world/2017/9/11/16288824/al-qaeda-isis-911>.

from our government demands to do more. What is not being asked from the GoC is to create larger CANSOF footprints around the world, but to operate in more locations concurrently. CANSOFCOM provides discreet assets, and increasing the numbers of forces at its disposal will simply allow it to operate a greater number of concurrent missions of the same small, flat, fast, strategic qualities. The growing external demands for SOF will not compromise the quality or drive an uncontrolled mass production.

CONCLUSION

14. The forecast growth of CANSOFCOM, as a part of Canada's Defence Policy, has mitigatable risks to ensure the maintenance of the qualities, culture and standards of Canada's most elite military organization. The greatest threat to the growth of an organization comes from within, in terms of structures and personalities that are not prepared for or willing to change. CANSOFCOM, inclusive of its personnel, has made a deliberate effort to explore into what capabilities are worth expanding, and espouses a culture of innovation, adaptation and agility amongst other traits.

15. CANSOFCOM's most valuable asset is its people, and the qualities they represent are due to rigorous selection processes that apply high standards at every level in the command. It is therefore crucial that in expanding the force, CANSOFCOM maintains the integrity of its people by not compromising on the standards of the people it selects nor rushing the time it takes to perform the selection. Similarly, the indoctrination and training processes for each unit as well as the command must keep pace with the operating environment, however they must never be reduced or compromised for external resource demands of time or quantity. Additionally, a

priority for professional military education and personal development skills for all CANSOFCOM personnel will continue to raise the bar of quality throughout the command, contributing at the heart of a growing organization.

16. In an organization with quality people, the remaining constraints on effective organizational evolution and growth are the processes and structures within which people are employed. A team of teams approach to collaboration enhancing both horizontal and vertical networks will help enable more open communication and shared understanding. Similarly, regular meetings of senior personnel to discuss large issues will ensure no obstacles are overlooked. The procurement of faster, more networked and accessible information systems will contribute significantly to the priority of better information sharing. CANSOFCOM can maintain its small, fast, flat and strategic attributes in a growing organization with a similar deliberate approach to maintaining as flat, open and transparent a team of teams as possible.

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