



An interview with **Paul Sewell**, responsible for the JWC's organizational development and culture work:

"Nothing we do is in isolation; we are nothing but teams."



Matching staff to mission requirements:

Any organization is as good as its workforce, the people. The JWC's Organizational Development Programme has been a great success, helping staff to identify their common values and assist each other across divisions and branches, with an eye on improving overall performance and better exploiting capabilities. Paul Sewell explains how.

By Inci Kucukaksoy, JWC PAO

Even though we are all guided by NATO's professional ethos and abiding code of conduct, the overall feel of each NATO headquarters is different when we visit them. Why does each organization feel different?

— I think we have enough experience within the JWC to know that this is the effect of organizational culture at play. As a Centre, we are constantly training different organizations, many of which we have trained many times before. Taking a long-term view, many would argue that the “personality” or characteristics of each HQ remains relatively the same, even if most of the military staff has rotated out after some years. Edgar Schein, the modern father of organizational culture, sees these codes of conduct and other products like these as artefacts of the organization. But these are only on the surface and may not even be read or absorbed. However, at the core of each organization are its underlying beliefs and values and these are what make up the organization's culture. This is where the leadership is so important in my opinion, because they can have the biggest



influence on shaping the culture both in their actions and their messages.

Can you please give us a little background about the purpose and the scope of the Organizational Development Programme?

— Almost two years ago, after careful and comprehensive planning, the JWC moved into a new trial matrix structure in August 2015. During this time, there was a specific team at the JWC, which was focused on this transition. However, while this project team had a defined end date, there was a recognition that there would be a need to continue to focus on the JWC's development; not only because of the trial structure, but the leadership recognised that there was a need for a function that existed outside the normal immediate exercise schedule to look further out and anticipate future changes. From this focus, the Organizational Development function was trialled. Overall, the purpose is simple: to continually match the staff to the mission and to understand this; it is important to consider both sides of this equation.

Although the JWC mission remains relatively the same, the depth and complexity of the exercises continue to evolve. Balancing this requirement, therefore, requires a workforce that is able to adapt to these needs. But to do this we need to know the strengths and

skills of our ever-changing staff so that we can optimize our output with who we have.

Why is it important to focus on our organizational development and our culture?

— It is clear NATO and its HQs are facing external challenges. Some may argue that the geopolitical environment is now more unstable than it was in the last two decades. Our nations and the political process are focused on these external factors; they have, however, only so much influence. To my mind NATO's internal challenges are equally important and should always be within our focus.

The first challenge is the diversity of the staff. The diversity across the Alliance is so huge that it is sometimes surprising that we actually get things done. An Alliance comprised of 29 Nations, with different military services and national cultures, a mix between civilian and military, differences in rank and so on. These are typical group differences. However, we also have to consider all of our individual differences that come into play, such as our personalities, values, beliefs and experience. Each one of these differences can distort how we see the world and work with others.

A second challenge is the constant military rotation. Every year we lose a considerable cohort of our staff who often takes with them their three to four years of knowledge from

their HQs. Their replacements can then take anything from a handful of months to a year to get up to speed in a position for which they may have had no background.

A third challenge is NATO's relationship with the traditional military chain of command. Anyone who has had any form of leadership role within NATO knows how differently the chain of command is perceived compared to their national contexts. Some would argue that in NATO, the chain of command is not sufficient. Instead, NATO's leaders, at all levels, must more than ever be able to communicate clearly and with impact to get through these internal challenges we all face.

These three factors can have a considerable drain on the corporate knowledge of the organization, reducing its effectiveness to respond to external challenges NATO faces. Without doubt these three challenges, of which there are indeed many more, also represent enormous opportunities. However, within an organization, such opportunities do not naturally develop on their own. In fact, they need to be harnessed and this is where I see the value of focusing on our organizational development. It simply cannot be left to chance or good will.

For this reason, I think we need a constant conscious focus on improving how our organization functions. Otherwise, we are left to the individual levers and forces pulling us



Major General Reudowicz, Commander JWC, meets members of his civilian staff, 22 May 2017. Photo by JWC PAO





Colonel Jan Østbø, Director of Management, briefs at a senior leadership level organizational development meeting. Photo by JWC PAO

in different directions, at the mercy of all of the sharp edges of our differences. Our movement into this trial matrix organization is a strong positive example of organizational development in action. This has also been helped by the focus on our JWC One Team culture, which has shown to be a force multiplier. However, once again, neither of these would be possible without this conscious effort or focus.

A lot of your work is with teams. Why do you think they are so important?

— Let’s be clear here: nothing we do in NATO is in isolation; we are nothing but teams. Everything requires a team on some level or another and yet the formation and development of teams is something that I think we seriously overlook in NATO. It is as if we assume that our teams will just work out because we are all professionals with a great deal of experience behind us. In many ways this is understandable. Those with a military background are brought up working in teams and leading them. However, it is common that when we all come to NATO, this is no longer the focus. This is unfortunate because we are constantly building new teams and each new team has its own unique fingerprint made up of personalities, skills and experience. So, when we fail to stop and take stock of who we have in our teams, then the common problems with teams often arise: where personality differences are seen as challenges rather than opportunities; where differences in skillsets can be perceived

as threatening rather than valuable, leading to miscommunication and unnecessary tension so that the overall effectiveness of the team wanes.

We focused heavily in the last few years on our JWC One Team Programme and will continue to do so since it gives us, as individuals, a good foundation for working together better. However, I think we are now moving into the next level of our organizational development with our ongoing focus on developing our teams. This is where we will find the real value and innovation in the interactions that lie between us.

For the last two years we have been running a variety of custom-made team programmes at all levels. This ranges from our senior leadership level, across the organization with our branch heads, as well as true cross-functional team programmes for our exercise planning teams. In all cases, we have found that giving a group an opportunity to step outside of their normal working battle rhythm is always time well spent. If facilitated well, groups can discuss issues that they normally do not have time or focus to look into. Having a facilitator external to the team can help bring in new ideas and challenge those accepted norms held by the team.

I also think that another advantage of the Organizational Development role is that it reaches out across the whole HQ so it can also offer relevant connections and perspectives that are out of the range of sight for certain teams be-

cause of the filters and blind spots we have been talking about earlier.

Earlier on, an initial complaint was that to do this kind of team development takes valuable time, away from the daily work. Having done this for some years now, I have discovered that this objection is mostly unfounded. For example, some of our recent branch sessions focusing on capturing corporate knowledge have only taken one hour, and still we were able to extract a great deal of valuable information in that relatively short time. This is an extreme example, but we have also run many of these events, some running from half a day to even up to two days, which in the scheme of things is still a relatively short amount of time in the fullness of a year.

Is there an example of how the Organizational Development programme inspired a specific project at the JWC?

— Yes. We have conducted climate surveys among the staff for the last few years now as a part of our ongoing organizational development. Such surveys provide us with “temperature check” of the staff’s thoughts about the functioning of the JWC and are used to help refocus us for the year ahead. This year we found that our staff was most concerned about the maintenance of our corporate knowledge, an issue that is endemic across all of NATO in my opinion. So, we broadened our online Handover-Takeover (HOTO) programme





ABOVE: JWC's leadership (from left) Rear Admiral Brad Skillman, Deputy Commander/Chief of Staff; Commodore Hans Helseth, Special Advisor to Commander JWC; and Major General Andrzej Reudowicz, Commander JWC. Photos by JWC PAO

to include a more comprehensive plan for both capturing and exploiting our corporate knowledge for the benefit of our newcomers and more broadly for the JWC. This includes branch exit interviews, a simplified Welcome Handbook designed to give newcomers targeted information about the JWC, a set of guidelines for branch sponsors and a comprehensive newcomers and cultural programme. Incidentally, our HOTO form has been copied by other HQs over the years, with SHAPE taking it on board this year as they experience a relatively large turnover as well.

Our introduction of exit interviews has also shown to be valuable. You would be surprised how much you learn by sitting down with a person over a coffee and ask them about their experience at the JWC. I think those being interviewed also appreciate someone listening to them, maybe for the first time during their time here. This year we have brought the whole branch together, so that those that remain after summer can learn from those that are leaving. It turns out to be a much more immediate and richer conversation amongst these people who have been working together for the past few years.

We can always improve, though, and I am interested to see the fruits of our corpo-

rate knowledge plan post summer, including the reintroduction of the branch sponsors and their ability to help the newcomers get up to speed as soon as possible with their position and how it fits into the JWC mission.

What future do you see for the focus on organizational development within the JWC?

— When we started developing ideas about this function and what purpose it might solve, one of the initial thoughts I had was that, when people leave the JWC, both the organization and the person are better, the organization for having the person here, the person for having worked here; that is, the organization has benefited from this person's contribution and, equally, the person has grown from having been here. For me, this is still a worthy ideal.

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Our Commander has mentioned on a number of occasions that the JWC should be seen as a place where people come to get an education at the joint and operational level. I definitely agree. The JWC is unique in this regard in that it is a hub where NATO's operational HQs come through our doors. This exposure means that we can learn from all of these HQs, but also have the opportunity and honour of helping them with their own development based on this exposure.

Due to our warfare component, we also have strong links with HQ SACT, the JALLC, JFTC and NATO's Centres of Excellence, all of which help improve how we pursue our mission. Ideally, then, I would like the JWC to be seen as a unique institution where people will be trained and be given meaningful work, and from where they leave with an enviable education in modern warfare, which they can bring back to their nations. ✦

RECOMMENDED READING

* JWC's One Team Culture (By Boris Diekmann)

The Three Swords Magazine (Issue. No 26, May 2014): This article can be found at <http://www.jwc.nato.int/media/selected-articles-from-the-three-swords-may-2014-issue>