

UNLOCKING THE POTENTIAL OF PROBLEM-BASED COACHING



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The Joint Operations Planning Group Leaders Workshop (JOPGLWS) represents a hallmark of military excellence within NATO, transforming theoretical doctrine into practical skills essential for current and future leaders. This article delves into the profound impacts and ongoing evolution of this programme, offering insights into its past achievements, future direction, and practical applications of sophisticated methodologies that ensure NATO forces maintain an intelligent advantage in operational planning and decision-making.

A Quick Review of Where We've Been

In 2021, the NATO Joint Warfare Centre's Transformation Delivery Division initiated the JOPGLWS to address specific gaps in crisis response planning observed during the JWC-directed exercises. Since its launch, the workshop has significantly boosted planning capabilities across NATO. More than 25 sessions have been conducted, tailored to the needs of equally as many different cross-echelon headquarters (HQs), while training more than 350 NATO officers in a focus on organizational management, the NATO operations planning process,



and operational environment understanding through practical exercises. The workshop has evolved to become an essential part of military planning, integrating feedback, and adapting to the changing demands across the Alliance.

How We Have Changed to Empower NATO's Collaborative Culture

If we are convinced of one thing, it is that the strength of the Alliance comes from the ability of its diverse people to work together towards a shared purpose. We take our role seriously in facilitating a cross-echelon connecting file for NATO planners and decision-makers. We also believe in modelling the skill of listening to reflective feedback to enact intelligent change.

Historically, our facilitators primarily travelled abroad to individual HQs, where the sessions, although welcomed and successful, lacked the collaborative learning environment with other HQs that many desired. Recent on-site sessions at the JWC have enhanced facilitator flexibility and participant focus.

Participants noted that traveling to the JWC allowed them to fully immerse themselves in the experience, engaging deeply with the JWC team and their cross-echelon counter-

parts. Participants also noted benefits from the collaborative knowledge-sharing atmosphere, where experienced planners and HQ personnel exchange insights and refine their approach to a shared set of complex military operations. Like many in-person experiences across NATO, the ice breakers and coffee breaks between scheduled sessions facilitate countless networking and problem-solving interactions that cannot be replicated in other settings.

Rising feedback, growing NATO exercises, and constrained schedules necessitated a critical reassessment and restructuring of our approach. While individual stand-alone sessions are still planned and provided on a case-by-case basis (e.g. cooperation with the Baltic Defence College), our new exercise-specific model aligns more purposefully with the JWC's mission and programme of work in support of NATO's operational-level exercises.

To formalize our feedback methods, we also recently implemented a new survey programme with the following intent:

→ **Purpose.** The JWC Advisory Team (AT) offers an efficient process to capture comprehensive feedback from all JOPGLWS stakeholders, ensuring that the content and

methods employed undergo continuous collaborative review and updates to meet our evolving environment and challenges.

→ **Method.** This is twofold: (1) in partnership with the JWC's Organizational Development and Culture Specialist, the JWC AT provides universally accessible, unclassified surveys. These surveys can be accessed via any device, thereby broadening the spectrum of feedback while maintaining controlled oversight. (2) Through meticulous analysis, the JWC AT generate actionable insights and adapt our strategies to meet the dynamic needs of planners and leaders across the Alliance.

→ **Future State.** The JWC AT remains committed to transparency and improvement by providing periodic, substantial updates on the progress and evolving state of the workshop to all stakeholders. Our vision is to foster a culture of ongoing development that empowers our planners and leaders at every level within the Alliance.

All these changes aim to receive input from and facilitate the success of the warfighting HQs — our primary focus.

Below

NATO Exercise STEADFAST DAGGER 2024 JOPGLWS participants work through joint synchronization issues with JWC facilitators during a battle rhythm exercise. Photos by JWC PAO

HOW TEAMS WIN: UNIFIED ACTION FROM DIVERGENT THINKING



Teams require a wide array of experienced input, since being an expert in one domain does not automatically make someone an expert in other domains.
(Zull, 2002)

Divergence promotes and accelerates **creativity** needed in **team development**.
(Baer, 2015)

The **craziest and most divergent ideas** often provide the **greatest breakthroughs**. They require **unified team action** to **change industries, save lives, and win wars**.
(Bahcall, 2019)





Above

Facilitators use survey feedback to discuss and modify content for the upcoming workshop for STEADFAST DETERRENCE 2025 and STEADFAST DUEL 2025. Photo by JWC PAO

The JOPGLWS Facilitators: A Paradigm Shift From Advisor to Coach

The JOPGLWS facilitators, who are mainly members of the JWC's Advisory Team, carefully define their roles, shifting from advisors to coaches. The facilitators are not "keepers of wisdom" or "sages on stages," but rather foster an environment where all participants can contribute to and benefit from shared expertise and practical solutions. This is why we all strive to focus on the following traits: supportive, interested, actively listening, perceptive, aware, self-aware, attentive, retentive, collaborative, and resourceful.¹

Perhaps upon reading this list, you feel that some traits are missing? What about our military experience, combat leadership roles, or domain expertise? While there is nothing wrong with such qualities, we find them to be secondary (at best) in a workshop facilitator. We find that experts can often be problematic as facilitators because they are so certain that they are right, and may therefore fail to treat collaboration and the opinions of others with the appropriate attention and respect.² The most meaningful interactions come not from

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us telling others how to do their jobs, or in boasting of our own self-declared expertise, but by listening to others' issues to help unlock their potential through the proven techniques and perspectives we offer.³

Much like neither of the authors would want anyone coming into our homes and telling us how to parent our children, we are certain that none of our planning peers would appreciate it if we came into their HQs dispensing job advice. However, if confronted with a parenting challenge, both authors would value a trusted colleague or coach who would listen and offer a fresh perspective to

help overcome difficult behaviours and problems. Perhaps this research-based quote from coaching pioneer Sir John Whitmore sums up our facilitators' perspective best:

"Interest holds the attention; perhaps we need to learn to be interested in others. When we really do listen to someone, or when someone really listens to us, how appreciated it is... Obsession with our own thoughts and opinions and the compulsion to talk, particularly if one is placed in any kind of advisory role, are strong. It has been said that since we were given two ears and one mouth, we should listen twice as much as we speak. Perhaps the hardest thing a coach has to learn to do is to shut up!"⁴

As strong advocates for incorporating external feedback and coaching to maximize team performance, we apply this approach in our relationship, reflections, and practices while leading the JOPGLWS.

Participant-Centred, Problem-Based Sessions

Understanding the facilitator's role helps to highlight the unique benefits of the JOPGLWS.



Before presenting our workshop model, it's crucial to grasp the foundational, research-based principles it builds upon.

1. Military learning environments are often founded on rigid instruction from subject matter experts with the goal of completing well-defined procedural tasks. This often leads to predictable, inflexible and risk-averse actions.⁵
2. Facilitators and learning participants must align to the precept that all are equally valued and should engage in an interpersonal experience so that their learning can be successful and lasting.⁶
3. Organizations and their individuals are often hampered in efforts to learn and change due to habit-based bias. Such procedure-based habits train individuals to be risk-averse and hesitant to embrace necessary changes while simultaneously discouraging a true learning environment.⁷
4. Project-based and problem-based facilitation methods aid transformative learning by forcing participants to take more ownership through intentional collaboration.⁸
5. Participant-centred, experiential learning improves performance in the following areas: interaction, interest, engagement, challenge, and competency.⁹
6. Learning the practical application of complex theories is best achieved through active-learning methodologies that focus on participants' engagement with the content.¹⁰



Above
The authors, Lieutenant Colonel Janis (left) and Major Marano at the STEADFAST DAGGER 2024 JOPGLWS. Photo by JWC PAO

7. Experiential, participant-centred learning is preferred for increasing proficiency and retention of low-frequency, high-risk scenarios.¹¹
8. Thoughtfully designed shattering moments that force learners to struggle with difficulties and failures improve overall retention and learning by revealing blind spots and biases.¹²

From this insight, our team developed a simple and progressive design:

- **Shattering Moments:** We introduce practical exercises (PEs) and guided discussion moments in which participants are given difficult problems, to help uncover blind spots and biases and to coach through creative and critical thinking techniques.
- **Doctrinal Foundations:** We offer a framework and resources to establish a doctrine-informed, subject-matter baseline.
- **Planning Models:** We give examples from real-world operations and/or JWC exercises.
- **Facilitated Applications:** We coach participants through problem-based, collaborative PEs.
- **Continuous Feedback:** We provide peer-to-peer and facilitator feedback on participants' guided discussions and PE back-briefs throughout the workshop.

Beyond Doctrine: Putting Tools in the Practitioner's Hands

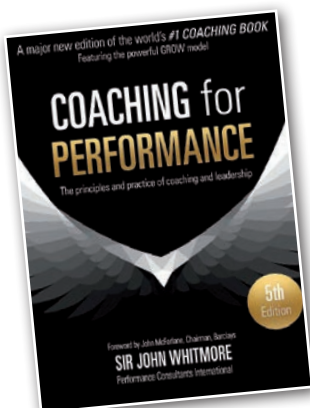
The JOPGLWS is designed to be a dynamic forum that is distinct from typical academic courses such as the Comprehensive Operational Planning Course (COPC). Instead of needlessly modelling itself as a "mini-COPC," the workshop focuses on practical application, specifically on how to use techniques and processes that best accomplish a given planning task. Participants are encouraged to share personal experiences and insights from different planning process steps, incorporating both their own practices and those observed at their HQs.

Additionally, every NATO planner must admit that our doctrine and other publications do not provide every useful tool that a practitioner needs. Our facilitators challenge participants to balance their necessary doctrinal foundation with critical and creative thinking as they tackle the problems and barriers presented to themselves and their decision-makers.

While the JOPGLWS continues expanding its reach and depth across NATO, however, it takes more than skilled facilitators and eager planning participants to enact intelligent change or empower successful decision-making for the warfighter. This also requires the engaged presence of another group.



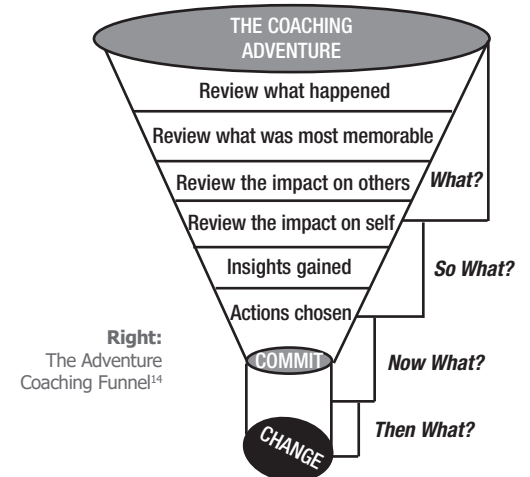
MORE TO EXPLORE



Embedding Collaborative Culture

	Told	Told and shown	Told, shown and experienced
Recall after three weeks	70%	72%	85%
Recall after three months	10%	32%	65%

Left:
We do not learn well by simply being told or even shown by others; we learn best by doing together.¹³



The Senior Leader's Role: Stop, Collaborate and Listen

In a recent workshop, a senior leader actively engaged with his team to examine their HQ's planning processes and transitions between the J5, J35, and J33. The team acknowledged a critical gap: the absence of a standard operating procedure or instruction (SOP/SOI) and a key battle rhythm (BR) event to manage this crucial transition effectively.

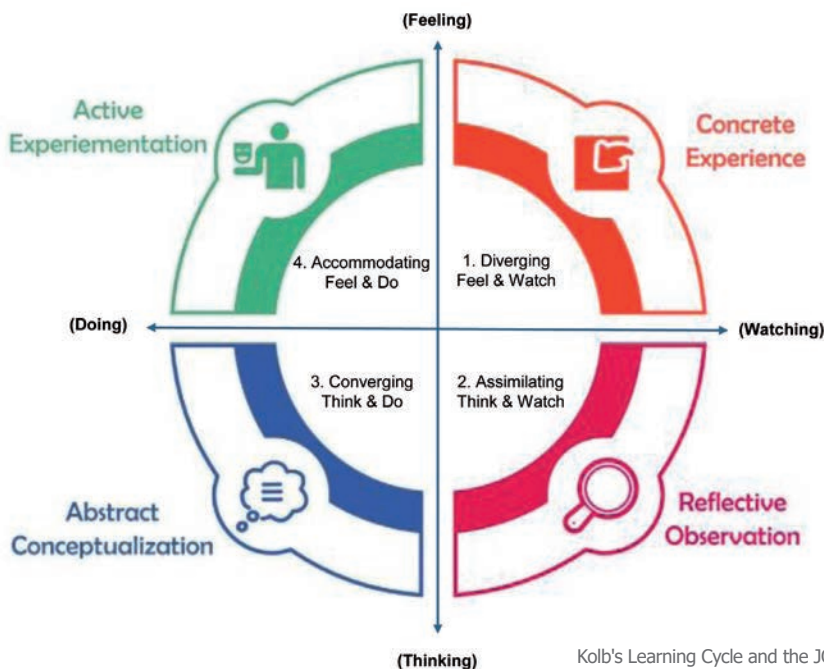
Through a 30-minute practical exercise, the facilitators and participants collaboratively developed a framework for the missing SOP/SOI and BR event. This session was characterized by insightful questioning and strategic facilitation, allowing the team to address a real

and immediate challenge within their HQ operations. Impressed, the senior leader praised the facilitators not only for their questioning techniques but for their ability to facilitate without relying on existing SOPs/SOIs. He highlighted their skill in eliciting diverse viewpoints and fostering a collaborative environment to produce a viable solution for a shared organizational need. Following this successful workshop, during a subsequent exercise at the JWC, the leader shared with the author a printed copy of the newly created SOP/SOI and BR event, illustrating the practical impact of the workshop.

This scenario exemplifies what we define

as an "adventure" in professional development: a process marked by the exploration of new ideas and the collaborative tackling of risks to achieve remarkable and sustainable organizational change.¹⁵ The Adventure Coaching Funnel above is a visual representation of this dynamic approach to facilitating meaningful and lasting change within an organization.

The engagement of the senior leader had a significant impact on the effectiveness of the specific iteration of the workshop referenced in this section. The leader in focus not only prioritized scheduling the JOPGLWS for his team but also showed a deep commitment to



Graphic: <https://www.simplypsychology.org/learning-kolb.html>

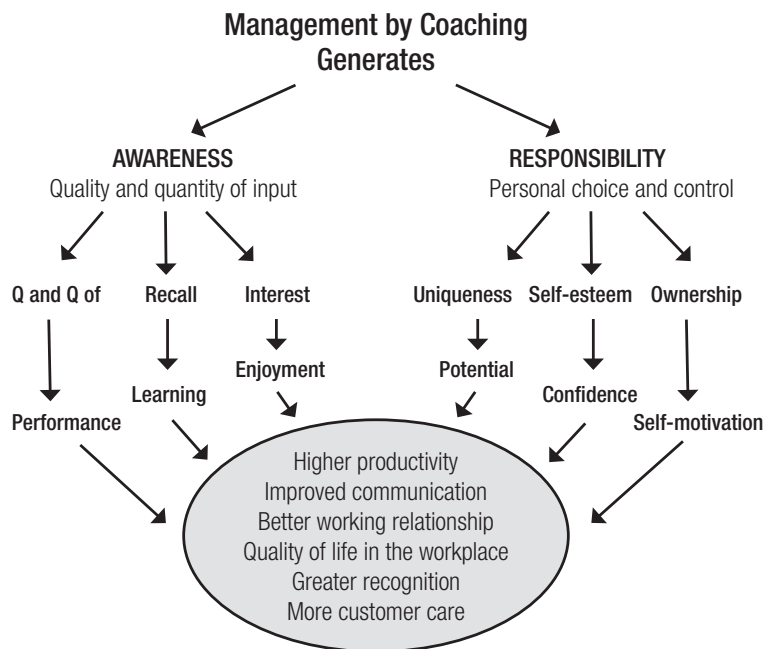
Kolb's Learning Cycle and the JOPGLWS:
How we create space for this full cycle of learning in each session



"Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience."

— David Kolb
Experiential Learning Theory, 1984





Above:

Advantages generated by incorporating external coaching into a team or organization¹⁶

his staff and their processes. He recognized the value of the methodologies we presented and actively participated, ensuring accountability and presence when it was crucial. Before his participation, however, came an often overlooked (but critical) step, as he made sure that the appropriate attendees were present at the workshop (e.g. JOPG or tactical-level planning group leaders and deputies, dedicated syndicate leaders and deputies, key cross-functional OPG planners, individuals with a deep understanding of their own HQ's planning principles, minimum rank of OF-3). This preparation ensured that the workshop was interactive and built on a shared foundation of operational-level planning knowledge and experience. His decision to incorporate our experienced external facilitators and coaches into his HQ team led to multiple benefits evident in the outcomes described in the "Management by Coaching" image above.

Developing Our Future Together

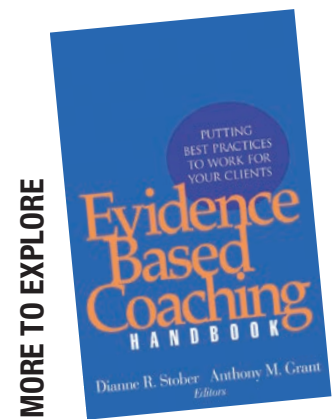
The comprehensive and collaborative approach offered in the JOPGLWS goes beyond practical learning and development. We equip leaders

with the necessary tools to excel in crisis response planning, while also preparing them to lead with confidence and strategic acumen in the dynamic and complex landscape of military operations. Through JOPGLWS, the JWC is nurturing a cadre of planners across NATO who are not only adept at handling current challenges, but also visionary in anticipating and preparing for the future.

If you wish to learn more about the workshop, please email us at Joshua.Marano@jwc.nato.int and Jens.Janis@jwc.nato.int. As we continuously develop our content and delivery of the workshop, we offer the following survey for candid feedback from all participants, senior leaders, and facilitators who have experienced our workshop. Scan the QR code below or follow the link to access the survey. ✦



<https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/H23S9QS>



MORE TO EXPLORE

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