

CROSSING BOUNDARIES

TO BUILD CHANGE

BY ADRIAN WOLFBERG AND JOHN T. O'CONNOR

On May 18, 2006, a small crowd in a Bolling Air Force Base auditorium in Washington, D.C., helped launch a new era at the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA). Lieutenant General Michael D. Maples, the director of the DIA, walked up to the microphone and said, “I am here to hear your ideas.” Since that day, nearly a hundred volunteers from across the DIA have stepped forward first to share their ideas for how to improve the agency then to take the risks needed to act on those ideas.



In an organizational culture that has long rewarded quiet adherence to a rigid command-and-control style, coming forward in an open forum to tell the director that problems need to be fixed is a major development. This program, called “Crossing Boundaries,” takes on the challenge of adopting the changes necessary to make the intelligence community more collaborative, imaginative, and open to new ideas. DIA’s experience offers lessons for innovation and organizational change that others may appreciate and use.

The success of the initiative has at least three critical sources:

- Consistent, visible support from senior leaders
- Focusing efforts on the “seams” between organizations, the potential points of connection and collaboration
- Encouraging the formation of networks of like-minded people to bring about change

The Government Culture

With more than 8,000 employees located at major sites in Washington, Maryland, Alabama, and other sites around the world, the DIA supports U.S. armed forces operations by providing critical intelligence collection and analysis for customers in the U.S. Department of Defense. DIA includes both active military and civilian personnel.

Readers familiar with government agencies will recognize the DIA culture. Separate directorates—each managed by a deputy director who reports to the agency head—oversee human intelligence collection (Directorate for Human Intelligence, or DH), intelligence analysis (Directorate for Analysis, or DI), the complex discipline of measurement and signatures intelligence (Directorate for MASINT and Technical Collection, or DT), and other activities. The directorates formerly functioned as separate entities. Intelligence analysts in the DI knew little about

how MASINT capabilities of DT might help them in their mission. Interactions were traditionally controlled by top-down decision making that protected and controlled information and stifled creativity and new approaches suggested by working-level DIA employees. There was little movement of employees, knowledge, or best practices among directorates.

Changing the Culture

LTG Maples inherited an agency that was already changing, becoming a learning organization, and seeking knowledge through collaboration. One of the operating principles behind the DIA’s change strategy is to create a network of volunteers who are committed to improving mission performance by helping people collaborate and share knowledge more effectively. The DIA created the DIA Knowledge Lab to support these networks and drive adoption of new practices that would improve mission performance by enabling employees to collaborate, share, think, and imagine with more freedom than before.

Crossing Boundaries

At the first Crossing Boundaries meeting on May 18, 2006, DIA employees volunteered ideas that included new methods of analyzing human networks, developing increased sensitivity to cultural differences, and helping people break down complex problems into smaller, solvable pieces. Maples and a small panel discussed each idea candidly, and he offered support and resources to help the volunteers move forward to explore their ideas further and potentially put them into practice. At the conclusion of the hour, Maples thanked the audience for being a part of Crossing Boundaries. Then the real work began.

A relatively new employee in the Directorate for Information Management proposed the idea of breaking down problems into smaller pieces. Working with the Knowledge Lab staff, she crafted her idea into a concept that could be tested in a pilot project. (Knowledge Lab pilots are limited-duration tests of ideas designed to determine whether they can provide value to the agency). Over a period of months, she refined her idea and worked with her home office, Enterprise Solution Management (ESM), and the Knowledge Lab to fashion a cooperative pilot (now called “Small Victories”). She negotiated with her management, recruited interested employees, and negotiated agreement among all parties. She began her Small Victories pilot



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in November 2006, engaging a team of ESM project managers to develop, coordinate, and deploy guidelines for ESM project management. The pilot participants will use a collaborative leadership model drawn from the health care profession as an organizing principle. The Knowledge Lab will evaluate the process, behavioral changes, and outcomes accomplished by the pilot team.

Ideas and Changes

Since May 2006, DIA employees have volunteered eighty-eight new ideas to Crossing Boundaries. They have shared them with Maples and other attendees in open meetings that include a number of other senior DIA leaders who regularly contribute to these discussions. A number of Crossing Boundaries ideas have led directly to new actions by the agency, including the following:

- Creating a new award program to recognize employees who demonstrate significant collaborative behavior
- Reinstating random security checks at building entrances to raise the level of employee vigilance about protecting sensitive information
- Holding a “Leadership Day” to provide training and educational opportunities to help employees at all levels improve their leadership skills
- Bringing in adjunct faculty to improve training opportunities at the agency’s Joint Military Intelligence Training Center
- Investigating ways to improve the agency’s antiquated, paper-intensive time-and-attendance reporting system
- Reviewing the process for allocating office spaces in the agency to develop a more efficient and effective space management system

Proposals continue to come into Crossing Boundaries via e-mail, the internal Web site, and LTG Maples’ forum.

A Learning Organization

Crossing Boundaries increases trust in the agency’s leaders, demonstrates that the agency values knowledge wherever it resides, and encourages employees to take risks and practice analyzing and solving complicated problems.

Increase Trust

In November 2006, the Knowledge Lab convened the first quarterly Crossing Boundaries Roundtable meeting for employees who had volunteered their ideas to the effort. Roundtable participants described the director’s involvement as providing a “license for creativity” for employees to step forward and pursue their ideas. One participant described her conversion from the cynicism that some of her peers still express. “I’ve seen it work,” she tells them, and she encourages them to attend a Crossing Boundaries session to see for themselves.

Seek Knowledge

By demonstrating the value of seeking knowledge without regard for organizational boundaries, Crossing Boundaries exemplifies the new culture envisioned by senior national and intelligence community leaders. Anyone with an idea can propose it in an open forum. Feedback from senior leaders is immediate and public, and offers to help often come on the spot. Crossing Boundaries is not a panacea. Employees who propose ideas must still fight battles, and not every idea comes to fruition. But the premise of Crossing Boundaries—that all employees have something of value to add to the mission—is demonstrated every day.

Solve Problems

DIA employees address complex and substantive intelligence issues daily. In Crossing Boundaries, they usually take on complex problems that are outside their areas of expertise and responsibility. For instance, many of the proposals for organizational change have come from analysts in the Directorate for Intelligence Analysis. The proposals for changing the time and attendance system came from analysts, support professionals, and technologists. These people take risks by making a public statement on behalf of change. We are all in their debt.

What’s the Secret?

People who are successful in Crossing Boundaries *act*. They build networks of supporters and advisors that cross organizational boundaries inside and outside DIA. For instance, the employee who started the time and attendance project networked with others in the Directorate for Human Capital and the Directorate for Administration, learning about the reporting process and identifying potential improvements. She then led a group that

engaged another defense intelligence agency that provides the payroll service to DIA. Together, they identified potential changes that could significantly streamline the process. As a logical next step, the DIA's lean Six Sigma process improvement group began a detailed study of the time and attendance process to identify the set of process changes appropriate to the agency's needs. That study is under way now.

Another employee identified a potential change in how DIA collaborates with another intelligence agency. The change, if implemented, could improve mission performance in a sensitive area. He got immediate attention and support from Maples and senior leaders at a meeting in October 2006. He developed a paper that identified options for improvement, engaged other offices in DIA that had undertaken similar actions, and led a working group to explore details of implementation further. He engaged representatives of the other agency in a detailed evaluation of potential options. Today they are moving toward improving the depth of that agency's support for DIA.

At the Crossing Boundaries meeting on July 14, 2006, another DIA employee proposed an idea for better sharing of useful databases and tools among analysts. He envisioned a regular communication of "News You Can Use" to the broad agency via an internal Web page that would publicize new analytical tools available to analysts. He has gathered a number of volunteers to serve on an editorial board and assess which tools "News You Can Use" would feature, and he has collected a list of numerous tools that already exist. His group is planning to begin "News You Can Use" operations in early 2007. The positive impact on the work of individual analysts could be significant. The group plans to use already available tools, including Intellipedia (the intelligence community's version of Wikipedia), to provide this service. They do not need special permission or support from anyone. They are going ahead.

Building Networks

Crossing Boundaries participants form their own unique and changing networks of supporters. These networks contribute to problem solving in a number of ways. Through interaction with supporters and advisors, proposals become stronger and better. For instance, an employee who proposed saving funds provided to new employees to cover moving expenses found that his proposal may not conform to legal requirements of the hiring

process for Department of Defense organizations. Rather than dropping the idea, he has worked with his network to develop a different approach that has the potential to provide the same savings within the bounds of current regulations.

An Innovation Network

As the Knowledge Lab has worked with these and other participants, it has found itself at the center of a virtual innovation center. The Crossing Boundaries network has the ability to apply its members' experience to complex problems facing the agency that no one has solved before. It is a complex, ever-changing set of individuals who are pooling their energy, passion, and resources to address the issues that have seemed too difficult to fix.

The Crossing Boundaries approach represents a real departure from usual change efforts in government. It works in the seams between organizations, draws support from all levels of DIA, and addresses issues that employees feel are critical to the agency's mission. By calling on volunteers to take risks and pursue their ideas for change outside normal channels and chains of command, Maples has demonstrated trust in the judgment and capabilities of the DIA workforce. He has gained (and continues to gain) the trust of those employees who have taken up his cause. They are becoming his advocates, and they prove that change is real. Through them, the DIA is growing a new culture of breaking down barriers, seeking knowledge, and learning new ways to scope and solve problems. Crossing Boundaries represents a visionary, driven-from-the-working-level approach to remaking the culture of an intelligence agency. ●

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