

SMART MENTORING TO INCREASE CONNECTIVITY

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The Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), a Department of Defense (DOD) combat support agency, is a critical member of the U.S. intelligence community. With more than 12,000 military and civilian employees worldwide, the DIA is a major producer and manager of foreign military intelligence, which is used by war fighters, defense policy makers, and force planners to support U.S. military planning, operations, and weapon systems acquisition. A typical DIA project usually involves some sort of collaboration, whether intra- or inter-agency, in an attempt to harness all relevant sources of knowledge in a problem-solving effort.

As in many organizations, however, collaboration, particularly across lines of formal structure, did not always come naturally. Whereas some people reached out to colleagues within the DIA or in other organizations inside and outside the DOD, many operated within the confines of their own units, isolated from the broader knowledge and experience that the full DOD has to offer. This was especially true for newer employees, who hadn't yet developed many ties and whose expertise was not yet widely recognized. In this chapter, we will describe how a program called Smart Mentoring improved the connectivity of isolated, or "peripheral" individuals and created a more cohesive cross-DOD network.

The Knowledge Lab Network

The idea for Smart Mentoring emerged from a change initiative we at the DIA undertook in 2004 to improve knowledge sharing and collaboration. As part of this initiative, we decided to form a cross-agency network called the Knowledge Lab, designed to break through traditional silos, bring together multiple perspectives, and provide a safe space for experimentation. It was hoped that the lab would become a model of collaboration organizationwide. The lab was also to act as a proving ground for network concepts, which could then be applied to DOD more broadly to make improvements in the areas of communication, creative learning, solving problems across organizational boundaries, cross-cultural awareness, and organizational self-awareness. Members included employee volunteers who remained in their full-time positions.

One of our first steps was an organizational network analysis with Knowledge Lab participants to inform our efforts and strengthen agencywide collaboration. In addition to basic questions about demographics and identification of who one knows and communicates with, we included questions about how employees felt about the culture of the organization and how they would like it to be in the future. This “culture index,” as we called it, showed that people felt the organization was too formal, task-oriented, hierarchical, and inflexible and that they wanted the organization to be agile and to empower individuals.

The ONA also revealed that while the overall information network was somewhat connected, certain members, generally those who had been around the longest, were overly central and many others, typically newcomers, were stuck on the periphery. The network was also fragmented by both line-organization affiliation (analysts talked with just analysts, HR staffers talked only with other HR staffers) and physical location in ways that undercut strategic directives for DIA. We followed up on the ONA results with a number of actions. The Smart Mentoring program, one of the most important, was aimed specifically at the challenge of linking some of the most central members of the network with those on the periphery.

Launching the Mentoring Program

The fundamental idea behind Smart Mentoring was to create mentoring relationships between central and peripheral players in the Knowledge Lab network. Central people would be able to offer connections and better integrate their peripheral mentees into the flow of organizational knowledge. The peripheral people would bring unnoticed or undervalued skills and perspectives more clearly

into the organization's problem-solving discussions. Everyone would benefit from a greater degree of knowledge-sharing overall.

Enlisting Mentors and Mentees

We chose the people to participate in the Smart Mentoring program on the basis of the ONA findings. To form the mentoring pairs, we identified 22 very central individuals as potential mentors and 33 less connected individuals as potential mentees. The potential mentors were not only central to the network but also were brokers, people who have relationships across various subgroups. Because they serve as a bridge between individuals who do not otherwise know one another, brokers can be tremendously influential in a network, helping to disseminate new ideas and ways of working. Our goal in pairing brokers with peripheral people was to quickly boost the network's overall connectivity.

We then contacted the potential mentors individually, informing them that they had been identified as individuals in key positions in the network and asking them to become involved in a Knowledge Lab program to help others become more collaborative. These potential mentors, flattered to have been invited to play an important role in the organization's development, generally responded positively.

Inviting mentees—people who were on the periphery of the network—to participate was a more delicate task. These were largely new and young employees, who would not necessarily appreciate being told that others in the DIA thought they needed help. We decided that the best way to approach them was through a short narrative. So the Lab members created a marketing pitch that focused on the opportunity to meet experienced, seasoned employees who felt the same way as the newcomers did about the need for change. Potential mentees were asked, “How would you like to be better connected to people in DIA who themselves are well connected and share your belief that the DIA needs to become more agile and creative, and less risk averse?” Potential mentees responded positively to this approach, which came with an implicit promise of self-development in a safe environment.

Gaining General Acceptance

Another challenge was to gain acceptance for the new program in an organization that already had a traditional mentoring program. Because our initiative was not part of the official DOD program, we had to frame it as an experiment that had objectives beyond individual development. We met with the members of the official mentoring program, explained the project, and reached an understanding on how to gain value from two programs with two different sets of objectives.

Roles of Mentors and Mentees

To launch the Smart Mentoring program, each mentor crafted an autobiography and supplied a photograph. We emailed the autobiographies to the mentee candidates, who were asked to rank the top three mentors with whom they would like to be paired. An independent consultant supported a process to match the pairs, based on this initial show of interest and other network factors. To help the program succeed, we also made sure that all participants obtained permission from their supervisors and that they would actually take the time to participate fully in the program and were not about to take on a new work assignment or go on an extended business trip.

The final number of pairs participating in Smart Mentoring was 12. After the pairings were completed, we e-mailed the mentor and mentee about the pairing and goals of the program. The mentor and mentee then worked together to create specific objectives for their relationship.

Mentors The mentors were asked to help mentees increase their knowledge and experiences. Mentors would help mentees do the following:

- Achieve a diverse network.
- Add new people to their network.
- Develop strong relationships with a few well-connected colleagues.
- Gain access to a broad base of knowledge.
- Engage in activities that would keep them on the cutting edge.
- Be proactive and intentional in developing relationships.
- Spend time getting work done (instead of engaging in political or self-marketing activities) to achieve a good reputation and attract new opportunities.

Mentees Mentees were asked to help mentors understand a new generation of employees, in particular regarding matters of communication and technology. Mentees would do the following:

- Identify the most crucial bottlenecks and barriers that new employees face, including communication and process barriers.
- Help break down the communication barriers that sometimes exist between newer and more tenured employees.
- Help the organization understand what new employees want and need.
- Become a bridge between newer and more experienced employees.
- Incorporate new energy and skills sets, such as technology skills, into their work.

Providing Examples To help mentors and mentees begin immediately to form useful and trusting relationships, we provided each pair with examples of what to look for during their initial conversations. For instance, mentors were urged to develop an understanding of the ways their mentees communicated orally and through technology. Mentees were urged to become more aware of their mentors' connections and the various ways they moved ideas and questions through the organization.

Results

We have been gathering both anecdotal and quantitative results about the impact of Smart Mentoring.

Anecdotal Outcomes

As the individuals got to know one another, we began to see interactions that were substantially exceeding our expectations. For example, a mentee named Fred was paired with a mentor named Jack. Fred wanted help with his career decisions. Over a couple of years, Fred discussed the various options he felt were open to him.

Jack, who thought that Fred was highly motivated and creative, explained to Fred the need to become recognized as an expert at some core mission area. But Jack could see that other factors were influencing Fred's thinking in this matter; in particular, Fred believed that he would not necessarily thrive in all environments across the agency.

Fred always appreciated Jack's insights about the DIA organization and its values, as well as insights on the options he was considering. Over the course of the relationship, Jack developed a deeper understanding of the concerns that young, creative analysts were experiencing.

In another example, Sarah was paired as a mentee with Kim. Sarah had selected Kim in part because they were already acquainted; while working at separate organizations in the past, they had collaborated on various projects. This familiarity made it easier for the two to build a relationship. Sarah wanted help planning her career, so Kim asked Sarah to write down her goals so that together they could work on a road map for Sarah.

Kim learned that new employees are not all the same. Their needs and questions depend on their experiences, education, and personality. Kim learned that the onboarding process must be tailored to each employee.

Though seemingly simple, such interactions between mentors and mentees helped shaped the overall Knowledge Lab network.

Metrics of Success

In 2006, after the Smart Mentoring program had been up and running, we conducted a follow-on ONA, which indicated a significant improvement in information flow, including a 14 percent increase in helpful relationships. Interestingly, we found that the peripheral people's networks grew, and the number of people leveraging these newcomers' expertise tripled. We knew from anecdotal evidence that this growth was due in no small part to the legitimization and introductions mentees received from their well-placed mentors.

Beyond information flow, our comparison of the first and second networks also revealed a significant improvement in employees' perceptions of the organization's culture: Knowledge Lab participants felt far more energized in collaborations with colleagues; 18 percent more people felt that the culture was becoming decentralized and flexible; and the gap between the perceived and desired work environment had shrunk substantially.

The network analysis also revealed a total of 388 new relationships in which people had collaborated and benefited as a result of the mentoring program and other Knowledge Lab initiatives.

These metrics have been inspiring, but perhaps even more telling were the recent remarks of the agency's director of human capital, who said that the informal mentoring that the Knowledge Lab has pursued is much better for producing results than the formal program within his organization. This may be the best indicator of the continued success of Smart Mentoring.