Government Executive

A Formula for Success

By Adrian Wolfberg

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Sometimes you have to shake up the status quo.

Business literature is replete with recipes for successfully leading organizational change and transformation. Change and adaptation are essential to a firm's vitality and growth, but rarely will failure to change result in mortal risks and consequences.

Governments, on the other hand, could face mortal risks and consequences if they do not adapt. Since change has more gravity for them, it might be more fruitful for agencies and the military to study revolutions and counterrevolutions. Transformation in government seeks to create and nurture revolutionary behavior that is legitimate and supported by the status quo. The Defense Intelligence Agency was a test bed for this thesis.

The linchpins of the given order are the fundamental durability of bureaucratic processes and the resilience of bureaucrats who make them work. While business transformation uses incentives and accountability, government has much less such capability. Thus, if DIA can make progress changing, then such progress might be transferable to other organizations.

Three Ingredients

At the heart of the sanctioned revolution are three things: an imperative for change that strikes at the core of the mission; a strategy that identifies and attacks the right problem; and an execution of the strategy that is alive and exciting. Key to execution is flexibility.

The Sept. 11 attacks served as a trigger for unfreezing agency thinking. They were the catalyst to consider new perspectives in intelligence. The changes began in earnest in 2003. Vice Adm. Lowell "Jake" Jacoby, then DIA director, created a vision statement for the agency that integrated functions to ensure knowledge was discovered and not lost.

Two signal events occurred in 2004, stimulated by Chief of Staff Louis Andre. First, DIA conducted a "lessons learned" study of its analytic performance leading up to the 2003 Iraq war. Second, it created a plan that translated Jacoby's vision into goals and objectives.

During the research for the strategic plan, the agency found no comprehensive and revolutionary models in other government plans to serve as a guide. The closest was the Government Accountability Office, and DIA modeled its plan on GAO's.

DIA's approach was based on three principles. First, the agency discovered that any mechanism to facilitate change must be positioned outside DIA's business units and must have the protection of top leader- ship.

Second, it saw that structuring this mechanism should be done through raids-short-term pilot projects-instead of battles or sieges. Agency leaders insisted that the pilot take place where the work actually was being done-at the practice level. To overcome what DIA called the "zero-sum game constraint," the mechanism could not occupy its own separate physical space, could not have resources other than one person and minimal funding, and should create a network of volunteers-revolutionaries-to spread new behaviors discovered through pilot projects. DIA named the new mechanism the Knowledge Laboratory.

Lab Tests

DIA leaders levied three initial requirements on the Knowledge Laboratory. First, that the types of pilot projects launched had proved successful elsewhere. Second, that the pilots focused on more effective communication at the practice level, assessing and implementing lessons learned where work occurs. And third, that the pilots produced an understanding of DIA's social networks and identified areas where collaboration-the key to integration-was occurring or not.

By the end of 2005, the Knowledge Laboratory achieved a reputation for excellence inside DIA as well as from intelligence colleagues, other agencies, academia and business. From DIA's perspective, it earned this reputation by attacking the right problem and making small changes and improvements in core processes. The right problem was a lack of collaboration within DIA. The right solution was to allow seeking, creating and sharing knowledge to trump organizational impediments.

A key discovery was that in order for people to behave differently, they need better values. Knowledge Laboratory participants had to believe in the significance of the DIA mission passionately, unselfishly want to fulfill it and be committed to overcoming existing and emerging obstacles. These values could not be acquired by reading a manual. DIA learned that realizing values can occur only by experiencing new behaviors. Today, the lab must discover ways to spread new learning-based behaviors throughout DIA. Its mission is to create the environment so DIA can become a learning organization.

In early 2006, DIA's new director, Lt. Gen. Michael D. Maples, arrived making a remarkable admission to his subordinates: "I have much to learn." This assertion suggested that, if the director was committed to learning, the entire agency must be. Maples also expressed the desire to expand DIA's integration vision to all defense intelligence agencies.

Maples sent the head of the Knowledge Laboratory to the Center for Creative Leadership, an international nonprofit educational institution. CCL had just launched a three-month virtual program that included a highly customized, interactive program focused on real challenges participants faced.

The CCL experience allowed the lab to see itself in a new light. Rather than rebelling against the given order, its mission became creating a new order from the best features of the old: committed DIA people. Proj-ects now focus on mission results through process improvements. The bottom-up approach incorporating a network of volunteers also evolved with Maples' support. He added vigorous engagement by senior leaders. The lab built and is executing a long-range strategy with an integrated roadmap for pilot projects five years into the future.

While the Knowledge Laboratory could let evolution take its course, the outcome might or might not be aligned with DIA's focus on improving intelligence collaboration. The strategy ahead is to create approaches that institutionalize learning in ways more purposeful. And by transforming DIA, the lab is helping to drive

transformation in the wider intelligence network.

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