A Leadership View of "Crossing Boundaries"

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Why "Crossing Boundaries" is Important to a Leader

When Lieutenant General Michael Maples, USA, first came to the Defense Intelligence Agency as its Director and read the comments in response to the 2005 Human Capital annual survey, he learned that employees felt they had no ability to provide input on issues of concern to them to leadership; they couldn't find a way to staff solutions and concerns up the chain of command. As a result of those comments, improving morale and organizational change became important goals. The Director credits an agency-wide program called "Crossing Boundaries" with much of the improvement that has been made in morale over the last three years. Crossing Boundaries has now become the standard by which changes are proposed and made to improve DIA.

Description of Crossing Boundaries

He holds Crossing Boundaries meetings in the agency's main auditorium which has video teleconferencing capabilities with DIA facilities around the world. These are open sessions that I, as director of the Knowledge Lab, facilitate, while the Director or sometimes another senior leader, faces agency employees to listen and respond to ideas that are presented. Employees offer their solutions for improving DIA's mission. Maples has tried to make Crossing Boundaries very different than suggestion programs or Town halls, primarily in that employees themselves take responsibility for implementing their ideas once he has had a chance to respond to them. Following the meeting, coaches based in the Knowledge Lab contact each of the solution submitters to assist them move their idea forward (e.g. to help write a business case, open doors, connect to others with a similar idea, etc.)

Crossing Boundaries is one of many innovative projects created by the Knowledge Lab, a headquarters-level sponsored effort to identify agency-wide organizational challenges like collaboration, communication, creative problem-solving, and teamwork, find techniques in academia, industry and other parts of government that successfully address these challenges, apply these techniques within the organizational context of DIA through short-term pilot projects sponsored by a work unit, and iterate the successful projects until adopted by DIA.

Consequently, the Knowledge Lab is a platform for organizational change and Crossing Boundaries is one of our most effective vehicles. From a leadership perspective, employees who participate in Crossing Boundaries gain developmental skills. First, just about any solution that has been offered, no matter how simple it initially appears, is very complicated to solve. That is because multiple agreements have to be made across organizational units who have some role in either creating or solving the

problem, or both. Negotiating a consensus solution means employees get experience in solving complex problems, problems that never fit neatly or entirely in one single unit's area of responsibility. Second, in the process of developing and promoting their solutions, employees meet with senior leaders and other employees who they have not met before and develop a new comfort level in conversing with people who are either senior to them or may have conflicting opinions. This experience helps them advocate their positions on issues. Third, by going through the process of creating new solutions, employees are developing confidence in leading change. The Knowledge Lab has seen former idea submitters placed in expanded areas of responsibility back in their home offices because they have demonstrated the ability to develop new solutions to complicated problems.

Why Crossing Boundaries Works

"First, we make the results from Crossing Boundaries visible," said Maples. At the beginning of every meeting, I display a slide that shows quantifiable results. By the November 2008 meeting, 352 ideas had been submitted since the program's inception in May 2006;167 of which had resulted in change (47%); 59 were in progress (17%); and 54 ideas have been withdrawn (15%).
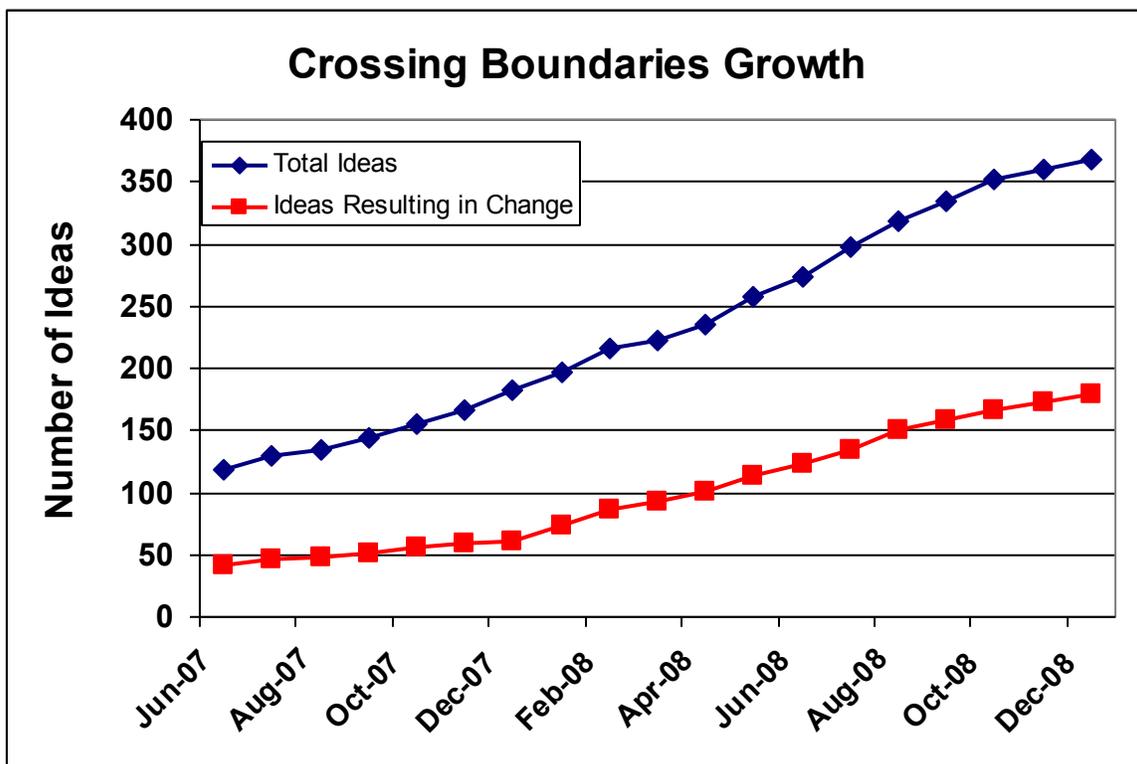

Figure 1: Chart shows increase of submitted and successful Crossing Boundaries ideas over time. As of December 2008, 368 ideas had been submitted by employees and 179 (or 49%) of those ideas have resulted in positive change for DIA. Crossing Boundaries started in May 2006.

We have published successes in magazines such as this in an effort to demonstrate how Crossing Boundaries can be a powerful tool for organizational change. We also publicize some of those successes in the Communiqué, DIA's internal publication. It's important to reinforce that employees, regardless of rank or position, can join together and solve a problem or implement an idea. To that point, sometimes we arrange for people to stand during a session and talk about an idea they implemented and how it changed the agency. Maples has said, "*All of that demonstrates to others that you can make a change in the agency.*"

"Second, there is a dedicated staff that tracks the issues," continues Maples. The support staff, which is a part of the Knowledge Lab, provides an action mechanism to see the idea to completion. They meet individually with each idea submitter to show them how they can team with others who have a similar idea to bring about the implementation. They help create collaboration and connect people across offices and levels in the workforce.

"Third is the leadership piece: I always try to be there. I see it as my program - a way for me to demonstrate my personal involvement." Maples has a lot of respect for employees who are willing to stand up in front of a group of others — to go on-the-record that they have an idea they want people to act on. He is appreciative of their willingness to do that. He listens closely to what they're saying and makes sure that he understands, often by paraphrasing the essence of what he heard. Maples wants to make it clear to the person talking that he is listening. Because he truly values cognitive diversity, hearing people who think in different ways is very important to him, and that's what he hears at Crossing Boundaries.

Once when Maples was leaving for a trip, he was asked if Crossing Boundaries should be canceled. He said, "No, the deputy will do this. It demonstrates buy-in by the civilians as well — not just military." He hoped having other leaders in front with him and responding to ideas would have an impact on those leaders. That's important to him because he is convinced that this new generation they are leading are connecting with others across organizational boundaries. He has tried to get the leaders comfortable so that they can do that kind of connecting so it is not threatening. Maples thinks that it's working, as other DIA leaders are becoming a part of Crossing Boundaries. Many have started attending the meetings, which they didn't do initially. He has not had to do a lot of selling — he thinks they want to know what's being said.

"Fourth, I try to keep the idea alive in the meeting." After he has heard the idea from the submitter, Maples elicits input from the audience about the idea in an effort to create a small group around the idea in the room. He also tries to tie the idea to efforts either underway or might be appropriate for one of the agency's directorates by getting one of the seniors from that directorate to respond to the idea and accept some ownership publicly during in the session. The goal is to put the idea into motion before everyone leaves the session. This has worked out well.

Evolution of Crossing Boundaries

Topics for Each Meeting: When we started, the floor was open to anyone who had a good idea on any topic. When the DIA human capital annual survey came in, Maples read the employees' concerns and saw several distinct categories of issues. He decided to focus on those categories. Then when people have ideas in those areas, he could have the experts there to talk about what they are doing on those issues. That way it brings the whole organization together.

Crossing Boundaries Council: Another change that evolved was to create a council made up of representatives from each directorate. That has provided both ownership and input. Whereas it started out as the director's program, the council makes it more an agency program.

Issues that Stalemate: As the program progressed over time, some ideas were going stale. They weren't going anywhere. They weren't moving ahead but they weren't dead either. Maples didn't want to have ideas stalemated so he asked me to find a way to move them to a conclusion. Now the Crossing Boundaries team works them on a case-by-case basis. In a couple of situations an interim decision was reached and in some cases the chief of staff has gotten involved to remove the impediment. For example, in one case involving an idea to more effectively use remotely located facilities, the stakeholders who needed to be involved were many: facilities, information technology, recruitment, line managers, and so on. The reason the idea reached a stalemate was that there was no mechanism to link all the stakeholders together to focus on the proposed solution to be more effective; there was no imperative to reach an agency viewpoint. The impediment in this case was the absence of a leadership authorized focus. As a result, cross-agency team was set up to focus on the issues and the reached a solution that involved testing a pilot project in the field that has been very successful.

Making More Work for Some Parts of the Organization: Early on, many of the solutions were focused on one or two types of issues and that made an enormous amount of work for the one or two directorates managing those issues. Some managers wanted to stop Crossing Boundaries because it had created so much work for them. As this reaction illustrates, the solutions are not always welcomed by the directorate that is impacted. As he explained to the directorates, "If you will listen and correct things you will have less work."

Unexpected Benefits: Maples has gotten some insights from Crossing Boundaries that has made him realize that on some issues, he is thinking one way, but people in the field are looking through a different prism. From comments made in Crossing Boundaries when DIA turned to its employees located in the United States and overseas (through the video teleconference) he began to understand that there is a lack of clarity about what this really means to be in the field. So with this understanding he was able to conduct some follow-up. The new civilian performance-based pay systems is another example of, while not the result of a specific suggestion made at Crossing Boundaries, a topic that he began to hear about through responses and comments. As a result of the feedback, he knew he needed to get a group of analysts around the table in his office so he could listen to their issues.

Conclusion

Leadership gets value a number of ways from Crossing Boundaries. The program develops individuals and improves the organization by implementing good ideas. It does so because employees are provided a trusted environment – established by the top leadership – that says its okay to let leadership know what needs to be corrected, and gives the responsibility to employees to own the solution. The program has been iterative since the start in 2006, adapting to needs by employees and leaders to make Crossing Boundaries more effective. Crossing Boundaries ultimately is a social contract between employees and leadership and has to be nurtured. It has to be carefully and selectively modified and treated as a public good much like our Constitution. Crossing Boundaries can be replicated in other organizations, incorporating the distinct contexts, but one thing that will be unchanged. The participatory role and value of leadership is central to ensuring success, and that this leadership role is used to quietly empower and develop employees. It can be a win-win scenario.