

# Roadblocks to Effective Team Dynamics in the IPPD Environment

## Successful Teams Leverage Their Differences

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### A Word From the Author

This article was written while I was a student attending the Advanced Program Management Course (APMC) at the Defense Systems Management College (DSMC), Fort Belvoir, Va. My assignment was to choose a topic and write a paper in the area of program management/leadership. Having occasionally participated in some sub-optimal work teams during my career, I chose to investigate some of the root causes of difficulties teams encounter in the Integrated Product and Process Development (IPPD) environment.

This article attempts to explore six roadblocks to effective team dynamics likely to be encountered by a PM. Published articles from periodicals and journals, reports, books, videotapes, audiotapes, and lectures on team dynamics formed the basis of the article.

I sincerely hope that some of this information may prove useful in improving the effectiveness of *your* Integrated Product Team (IPT).

powerment limitations, and defined processes.

Some experts in the field of team dynamics point to an unclear team mission as the *single largest reason* for a team's failure to perform at optimal levels. A team's mission may seem obvious, but it is vital that each member understands the team's purpose, vision, and goals in the same way. To achieve this common understanding, a PM must provide a shared purpose; short-term, long-term, and end-game goals; measures for goal achievement; and a timeline for goal achievement.

Next, team members must generate and believe in a shared value system of team interaction. Clear ground rules must be formulated by the team and accepted by each team member. These ground rules form the rules of engagement, a framework for team conduct when interacting with one another and externally to the team. Behaviors to be included under the rules of engagement are those that are important to team members such as conduct for meetings, keeping promises, timely communication of information, mutual respect, conduct for customer interaction, and speaking with one voice on settled issues. The rules of engagement should be established and then periodically reviewed. They should be modified any time the team believes it necessary, and the rules can be used as a compass to help find common ground when team conflict arises.

The term "empowerment" seems to be overused and misunderstood in seg-

In today's DoD systems acquisition environment, integrated multidisciplinary teams are essential to manage procurements for the armed services. A multidisciplinary team consists of people whose backgrounds are, by definition, quite diverse and who often have significant differences in how they think, communicate, problem solve, and work. When diverse teams effectively leverage their differences, they make higher-quality decisions because their synergism allows realism, increased complexity, and the ability to better recognize an outsider's view.

### Assembling the Right Team

This high-performance state does not come without considerable thought, ef-

fort, and foresight by the Program Manager (PM). Simply gathering a multidisciplinary team of qualified people does not guarantee the team will be effective.

### Roadblock 1 — Lack of a Proper Foundation

The first roadblock to assembling and maintaining a high-performing team is the failure to establish a firm foundation. Diverse teams need a foundation upon which a working relationship is built. Ideally, a team establishes this foundation from the beginning, and continues to periodically discuss and modify elements of the team foundation throughout the duration of its efforts. A team's foundation consists of several components: mission clarity, stated values, em-

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ments of today's DoD acquisition workforce. Empowerment is not a ticket for management to exclude themselves from the working level and then point a finger of accountability should things go awry. Nor does it provide the working level unlimited authority. Instead, when managed appropriately, empowerment is documented with well-defined limits that are understood by team leaders, individual team members, and functional area managers outside the program.

For instance, to help clarify roles and ease any issues between program office and functional managers, drafting a memorandum of understanding defining limits of the team has been very effective. This is particularly important to ensure IPT members have authority to make most decisions regarding their functional area without having to constantly check with superiors. In addition, by assigning team and individual responsibilities, problems can be avoided that might otherwise arise when authority is perceived or unduly assumed. The delegation of authority must be visible to the entire team and can be shown via letters of authority or introductions at staff meetings. Team empowerment, when appropriately applied, provides a sense of mutual accountability, and is vital to the long-term health of the team. Equally important is the PM's support of decisions that are delegated.

Finally, the PM must provide some overarching policies and processes. This element of the foundation helps facilitate team interaction and accomplishment of goals. Processes for decision making, issue nomination and resolution, communication, and administrative functions are some examples suggested as mandatory for high-performing teams to meet their goals.

The importance of a firm foundation for team behavior can not be overstated. For this reason, documenting these fundamental ele-

## Roadblock 1 Lack of a Proper Foundation



ments is valuable for both current and future team members. Once documented, they can be provided to (and response solicited from) new team members as the IPT makeup changes. However, PMs should be wary of overstepping the limits of guiding principles and processes to an overly restrictive set of rules. Rigid IPT charters dictated from above can create stovepipes with the undesirable consequence of IPTs that are too bureaucratic with too many teams and too many meetings.

## Roadblock 2 Failure to Communicate As a Team



## Roadblock 2 – Failure to Communicate As a Team

In the heat of the business day, it can be easy to fall into a mode of ineffective communication. To avoid this roadblock, the PM must practice and facilitate effective communication techniques. Effective communication takes time and planning by the PM, and the precedent he or she sets will determine the tone for IPTs. Most team communication occurs during meetings. Ineffective meetings can be a tremendous drain on team productivity because the number of team members at the meeting multiplies any wasted time. Effective meetings provide read-ahead information including an agenda, data to be discussed, and the meeting objective (status meeting or decision meeting).

While not always possible or reasonable, sticking to the agenda topics and time limits should be a common practice and prevents overassessment of less-than-critical issues. Teams that act like committees, where each member defends his or her own constituent interests, will not promote the environment of a common team purpose. This does not mean that all team members should be encouraged to agree. Leaving time on the agenda for candid discussions saves time later when conflicts would otherwise arise.

Periodic status meetings that provide face-to-face communication are a must; E-mail-only is insufficient and leads to miscommunication and confusion. Finally, beware of communication that is too rapid. With today's technology and the emphasis on empowerment, rapid communication can lead to a problem if a customer knows problems/issues that management does not.

### Roadblock 3 — Poor Conflict Resolution

The third roadblock to effective teaming is the inability to resolve conflicts. Conflict in any team is inevitable, and many successful managers agree that team conflict is healthy, even vital. However, conflict becomes unhealthy if not managed appropriately. Typical reasons for conflict include role ambiguity and disagreements over methods, goals, procedures, responsibilities, values, or facts. The PM can ensure the most prevalent sources of conflict are avoided by addressing the roadblocks identified in this article. Yet, even PMs who carefully plan to avoid the principal roadblocks must still actively manage conflict. The PM best manages conflict by providing team members the tools to resolve conflicts themselves and by quickly addressing issues when self-resolution approaches are not successful.

One method of turning team conflict into synergy is to teach team members to recognize conflict and then reinforce self-resolution. Team members need to be trained in conflict resolution methods to enable problem solving without finger pointing. The lack of training can result in a failure to understand differences and may increase the conflict level. Once trained, team members in conflict must first agree that there is a problem, agree on exactly what the problem is, search for a solution, agree on what each must do to mitigate the issue, and then follow up. Individuals learn to resolve differences by acting early to acknowledge conflict, directly engaging the other party with whom the conflict exists, responding rationally and without emotion, and by dealing with each other honestly and directly.

At times, management needs to recognize when self-resolution approaches are not effective and intervene in the situation. In such

### Roadblock 3 Poor Conflict Resolution



cases, the PM should resolve conflict with all parties present. The first step is to hold a meeting for the sole purpose of resolving the conflict. The PM needs to get those in conflict to recognize a problem exists and allow them to define the problem. Technology should not be used to avoid uncomfortable issues; face-

to-face meetings work best. Initially, the PM should strive to mediate, not judge. This is best achieved by being open minded and actively listening. Active listening fosters feelings of acceptance and appreciation, saves time, keeps team members responsible for the issue, and builds relationships. The goal is to create an environment of healthy discussion of viewpoints and to foster candor. As such, the PM should withhold judgment until the situation is fully understood.

It is a good idea to focus on common goals without stifling differences, but the PM can not tolerate destructive disputes. It is often helpful to refer to the team's foundational guidelines as a point of common ground and mutual objectives. Explore alternatives with the team members and agree on a course of action for the future. Actual behavior must follow dialogue, so always schedule a follow-up session to ensure the conflict has been properly resolved.

### Roadblock 4 – Unrecognized Gender Differences

Gender differences need to be recognized and understood to avoid this roadblock. If left unchecked, these differences can lead to misunderstandings, reduced morale, and ultimately poor team performance. Some of the common sources for differences between men and women include differences in listening behavior, interaction skills, and linguistic styles.

When listening, men and women often exhibit different behaviors that can, at times, be misunderstood by the other gender. Women often exhibit steady eye contact, use "listening noises," smile, and nod to cue the other person that they are actively engaged. Men, on the other hand, usually do not smile, use non-steady eye contact, and often exhibit additional physical activity while listening. One common misinterpretation a man might have when speaking to a woman is that he assumes she is agreeing to what he is saying when in reality she is simply acknowledging that

### Roadblock 4 Unrecognized Gender Differences



she has heard what he said. Men also sometimes misinterpret that the female listener is very interested in what he is saying when she is simply actively listening. When women are speaking to men who exhibit typical male listening behavior, they can mistakenly believe that they are not being listened to or that the listener is trying to undermine and distract the speaker.

Men and women often use different methods of interruption during group interactions. A typical male behavior is to jump in and interrupt the speaker, while on the other hand females frequently wait for a pause in the discussion. These differences can lead men to mistakenly believe a woman is not participating. Women can misinterpret the situation as well, believing that men are “bulldozing” them and stifling their inputs.

Men and women also have different linguistic styles. Linguistic differences can lead men to not always recognize women’s ideas or to fail to give women credit for ideas generated in a team discussion. For example women often include the use of an add-on question in their speech. The comment, “Normalizing the data shows a trend, doesn’t it?” can make men think a woman is unsure of her conclusion when in reality the add-on question is simply a speech mannerism. Another example of linguistic differences is that men will often use the pronoun “I” while women will often use the term “we.” This too, can lead men to misinterpret a woman’s statements and vice versa.

A final example of linguistic differences that can lead to miscommunication is the common use of qualifiers in women’s speech. Men are not as prone to tag qualifiers such as “probably” on to ends of sentences, and this stylistic difference

## Roadblock 5 Differences Between Military Personnel and Civilians



can add to confusion and misinterpretation.

### Roadblock 5 – Differences Between Military Personnel and Civilians

Another challenge facing the PM is making teams function efficiently when they are composed of civilians and military members. While this situation is often not a significant issue, it sometimes can hinder team capability. Issues can stem from perceptions, biases of the other group or differences in organizational backgrounds, cultural backgrounds, and power interests.

For instance, due to their job assignment rate, the military tend to hold a shorter-term focus while civilians often have a longer-term focus. This difference can result in differing priorities and conflict. When conflict exists, civilians tend to think military personnel treat civilians as second-class citizens; however, the military team members are often unaware of the perception. Military IPT members also sometimes perceive that civilians are less motivated and are driven more by money than by doing the right thing for the Service. Further, civilians are sometimes perceived as clock-watchers (implies lack of commitment to cause), so it is a good idea for the PM to set guidelines for schedule adherence.

## Roadblock 6 Insufficient Team Recognition



Power plays can also become a factor when civilian “rice bowling” is used to protect territory or a power base. In general, military participants are considered better leaders because they are good at caring and coaching, but they can often overlook coaching of civilians and apply these skills only to military subordinates.

Should this type of conflict creep its way into an IPPD environment, the PM would be well advised to take time to train both groups about the other’s culture. Dictate and

take-charge servicemembers will be most effective when they recognize and alter their leadership style from the field to the corporate setting. Each group needs to recognize the benefit of both functional expertise and operational experience.

### Roadblock 6 – Insufficient Team Recognition

Insufficient team recognition is a roadblock that keeps a high-performing team from sustaining long-term performance. PMs must place emphasis on the importance of team accomplishments and should take every opportunity to celebrate team accomplishments. In addition, a reward system must be generated to provide rewards to teams, not individuals. From a near-term standpoint, collective work products can help lead to collective recognition. However, from a longer-term standpoint, a team type of reward approach is, and will continue to be, a challenge.

Civilians from functional organizations typically staff IPTs, and the historical career track for those employees has traditionally been ascension through the functional management chain. Bregard and Chasteen recognized this issue in an article about the PM's perspective of the IPPD environment when they wrote, "We have created career tracks for employees that use the hierarchical functional organization as the centerpiece of career aspirations. What is the logical career track for IPT members?" In the long run, DoD must address this issue to ensure high performance of IPTs.

### No Magic Formula

While this list of roadblocks is not comprehensive, the roadblocks identified in this article are the principal reasons teams fail to reach and sustain a high performance level. There are, of course, other sources of inefficiency. An unskilled workforce, racial bias, cultural misunderstandings, and generational differences are some additional areas that can have a negative impact. Nor are the suggestions presented here guaranteed to produce favorable results.

There simply isn't a magic formula that will work in all cases; every PM must endeavor to address the unique set of problems he or she faces with creativity, respect for those involved, and sincerity. While there are factors that affect team performance outside of the PM's control, the most effective teams are cultivated by minimizing the principal roadblocks to high performance.

**Editor's Note:** The author welcomes questions or comments on this article. Contact him at [thomansj@navair.navy.mil](mailto:thomansj@navair.navy.mil).

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## KALLOCK NOMINATED

**O**n May 17, the President nominated Roger W. Kallock of Ohio, currently serving as Deputy Under Secretary of Defense (Logistics), to be Deputy Under Secretary of Defense (Logistics and Materiel Readiness). Kallock's nomination is now before the Committee on Armed Services for Senate confirmation.



ROGER W. KALLOCK, DEPUTY UNDER SECRETARY OF DEFENSE FOR LOGISTICS, HOSTS LOGISTICS REFORM FOCUS DAY AT THE PENTAGON, OCT. 1, 1998.  
Photo by Richard Mattox