



Meeting the Leadership Challenge

Aberdeen Proving Grounds

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Aberdeen Proving Ground, Md., is in the midst of a transformation unlike any experienced since it opened in 1917. The Department of Defense Base Closure and Realignment is the immediate driver of change as more and more facilities close and their operations are moved to APG. There have been risks and rewards for many impacted by the changes resulting from BRAC, particularly with the leadership development required by those changes. This article examines the many leadership challenges, risks, and opportunities being faced at APG, and it provides examples of leadership development that can be emulated by other DoD organizations and locations.

The Challenge

The primary challenge facing APG leadership is the need to develop future leaders to implement change. APG Senior Executive Service (SES) leadership envisions developing a sustainable learning community of leaders to successfully carry APG into the future. Every person and every organization feels the impact in

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some way. According to Gary Martin, executive to the commanding general, Research, Development and Engineering Command, "Over the next two to three years, we expect a number of new organizations and 8,000 new government employees at APG due to BRAC. To compound the challenge, nearly 50 percent of our existing workforce will be retirement-eligible within the next five years. While BRAC will provide significant brick-and-mortar enhancements as new facilities are constructed for the incoming organizations, our real challenge will be sustaining the necessary workforce. We need to quickly develop more leadership at all levels to ensure successful adaptation of our people and our culture."

"We must work to help our people out of their silos so they can work together to create a new culture, a new community at APG that more effectively meets the changing needs of the warfighter," said Joe Wienand, director, Program Integration, U.S. Army Edgewood Chemical and Biological Center. "The magnitude of growth assures that the current culture cannot survive unchanged."

Developing top performers into leaders and building an effective leadership learning community is a challenge. How does one go about doing that? It is accomplished by creating a program with multiple levels of support, engagement, and accountability. It is accomplished by having top leaders encourage the emerging leaders and having emerging leaders engage in developmental opportunities, self-observation, and individual coaching with the support of their supervisors. To grow a sustainable leadership learning community, many APG tenants saw a need to participate in the first APG leadership program as well as future programs.

Action Science

For the first APG leadership program, top APG leaders envisioned a sustainable leadership learning community with all APG organizations involved, and leaders asked the Office of Personnel Management to help them. An OPM faculty team accepted the challenge to develop and implement an innovative leadership program, and the team decided to apply the principles of action science.

Action science—originally developed by Chris Argyris, Robert Putnam, Diana McLain Smith, and Donald Schön—is a strategy for designing situations that foster effective stewardship of any type of organization. It is a framework for learning how to be more effective in groups. It aims to help individuals, groups, and organizations develop a readiness and ability to change to meet the needs of an often-altering environment. To help individuals in groups to learn how to overcome barriers to organizational change, action science goes beyond simply focusing on improving the participants' problem-solving or decision-making skills. It also looks beyond making incremental changes (e.g., identifying opportunities; finding, correcting, reducing, or eliminating threats) in the external environment. Action science focuses on look-

ing inward, learning new frameworks, and establishing new routines. Once that is accomplished, participants are able to look outward with fresh perspectives and ideas.

Most leadership programs are classroom lecture and practice experiences. Those programs are based on theoretical examination of professional leadership philosophies. It is hoped that participants' experiences in such programs result in post-program implementation, but there is no direct pathway to confirm that this happens. Action science is different. The classroom learning is a prelude to the learning that takes place in the community-based projects and on-the-desk projects. The theoretical examinations are drawn out through individual coaching, Socratic dialogue, and resultant periodic self-examination. The focus is on issues at hand and outcomes as reflections of leadership philosophy made concrete through action. Then the cohort provides a community in which learning is stimulated, encouraged, fed, and assimilated.

SES members from many APG tenant organizations agreed to try that leadership development approach and nominated some of their aspiring managers to participate in the program for one year. Participants accepted the challenge of entering the year-long program at a time when changes at APG were overwhelming, and their workloads reflected this status.

George Liscic, an OPM training and development consultant and co-author of this article, agreed to lead the customized development of the program. According to Liscic, "It was a rare opportunity. Our desire to expand leadership development based upon action science coincided with the opportunity offered by APG who had a clear vision of what they wished to accomplish."

Designing the Program

Once OPM was committed to the program, the next step involved creating a faculty team that would be willing and able to design the leadership program and to facilitate all activities for a program on a regular basis over a one-year period. The OPM faculty team based design, development, and delivery of the program on four key assumptions:

- The learning experience would be real-time with real challenges.
- The experience would deliver real results that were significant and meaningful to the participants, their bosses, and their bosses' bosses. Results would be observable and measurable. The impact of the training would be seen by individual participant, the cohort team, the participant's organization, and the larger APG community and beyond (e.g., Army, DoD levels).
- The transfer of responsibility and accountability from the APG SESers, supervisors, and OPM faculty team to the participants was critical and needed to be accomplished as quickly as possible.

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- The values and norms created by this cohort would reflect civil service values, which called one and all to serve others for a cause or causes greater than themselves.

Developing the Cohort

While the faculty team was fleshing-out the customized design of the program, Martin and Weinand were busy persuading their direct reports and other APG SESers to commit themselves to program oversight and to select some of their best people to become program participants. The SES group committed their time, effort, and people to the program because they believed major change was needed and because they believed that a new approach would move APG into the future. Thus, the process of selecting the 31 people who would constitute the first APG Leadership Cohort Program began.

The individuals selected for the cohort program came from 12 different organizations with backgrounds in science, engineering, facilities, human resources, acquisitions, and operations and other fields. Predominantly, the managers were at the level of GS-15, DB-IV payband, or equivalent, with direct reports or in a senior technical role. Some had been working at APG for many years while others were in the process of moving to APG.

Structural Elements of the Program

Action science requires learning where real leadership occurs—where a person works and lives outside the classroom. It also requires that each person have support, encouragement, feedback and accountability from multiple dimensions. Those fundamentals drove specific structural design elements of the program:

- All activities would be held at APG.
- There would be SES leadership and supervisor engagement, support, and visibility throughout the program to build an APG community.
- Learning groups would come from different organizations, creating cross-organization connections.
- Individual coaching would foster emotional intelligence and application.
- Participants would receive on-the-desk projects. Those were real projects that added value to an organization. The projects served as one of the practice fields for the participants. Participants learned more about their leadership capacity as well as got the opportunity to experiment with different approaches.
- There would be community-based projects benefiting the APG community and typically not in participants' area of expertise.
- There would be cohort facilitation that explored all facets of leadership and action learning with an emphasis on leadership beginning inside each person.

Each person observed his or her own leadership behaviors, skills, energy, and emotions; and then experimented with new approaches to achieve goals, lead others, and complete tasks in different ways. There was particular focus on learning how to detect and correct error as quickly, efficiently, and effectively as possible. Many times in the classroom experiences, participants were given the opportunity to stretch their perspectives and develop new mental models as a result of real-time feedback received from an APG SES leader who remained with participants throughout the program as well as from SES guest speakers. Ensuring that one does not carry forward obsolete views of reality is an important foundational aspect of the action science learning strategy.

Participants completed several assessments (e.g., Insights Discovery® evaluator and 360° assessments) and spent time with their coach reviewing those reports and developing specific goals for themselves. Some participants shared their reports with their supervisor and others with their direct reports. They also spent time creating their own personal energy management plan that would enhance their ideal performance state.

Converting the knowledge they gained in the classroom into action, participants were asked to brief their recommendations for APG-wide community-based projects to APG SESers at a board meeting. Participants shared their evaluations and assessments of the as-is conditions of several important APG community scenarios, and proposed

recommendations for solutions accompanied by the value proposition that each project would have for the wider APG community. In some cases, the SES responses validated the participants' assessments and evaluations, and in some, it did not. The briefing experience as well as feedback on the recommendations provided the teams with real-time consequences of their actions and opportunities to reflect on their performance. They could learn how to better respond to emerging challenges that took the form of disagreement, changing environmental conditions, or faulty evaluations and assessments. Participants had responsibility for working together on the six approved community-based projects, ensuring implementation and working toward completion.

Vision, Assumptions, and Values

The vision was to create a sustainable leadership learning community that would help all APG organizations work more effectively and successfully together in the future. The key assumption that energized the program was that you can take a core faculty team and a core senior leadership group, add a group of very sharp participants, and create a self-sustaining leadership learning community.

It was not assumed that every participant was being groomed for higher positions. Instead, it was assumed that each participant could become a more effective leader in any capacity. The only assumption was that participants would want to become better at leading themselves and others.

Peter Senge, MIT professor, founding chair of the Society for Organizational Learning, and author of *The Fifth Discipline*, captured the essence of the program when he said, "When people have a practice field where they can relate to each other safely and playfully, where they can openly explore

difficult issues, they begin to see their learning community as a new way of managing."

The relevant values/beliefs shared by the core faculty team and the core senior leadership team were:

- We believe the federal government is a force for good.
- We believe federal employees can set a new standard for leadership in the United States.
- We believe people want to do their best and will grow if offered the opportunity and guidance.
- We believe that by working together we can create a better model for leadership development as well as an effective leadership learning community.

Status Report

The program has been under way since March 2009. Participants have experienced a shift in their perspectives about the program as well as their perspectives of their own leadership capacity. For example, at the start of the program, faculty members talked about the group being a cohort and the idea that having some ground rules would be helpful. Participants had difficulty seeing the group as a cohort or understanding why they might need ground rules. Near the end of the program, participants were involved in a variety of dialogues talking about how they were a cohort and wanted to continue as a cohort beyond the formal closure to their program.

The program has helped participants manage their personal energy—and therefore their activities—in a healthier and more productive manner. For example, some began spending more time engaging in activities they felt passionate about and changed habits to create and support a healthier mind and body. One participant commented that he had lost weight and now finds his healthier diet much more delicious and supportive of his energy throughout the day. Others have found that time for reflection offers more than they realized and have incorporated regular time to reflect each day.

The community-based projects that were presented at the SES meeting are now being developed. All projects address top priority issues facing APG and are supported by senior leadership. The cohorts are expected to continue working on their projects even after the program ends.

The formal program is due to complete in February 2010. At that time, there will be a broader sharing of learning, accomplishments, and ideas for the future. It is expected that this first cohort will take a leadership role in supporting the next cohort program. The sustainable, leadership learning community is growing and assimilating.



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