

Project Blue Lynx

An Innovative Approach to Mentoring and Networking

Maj. Dan Ward, USAF

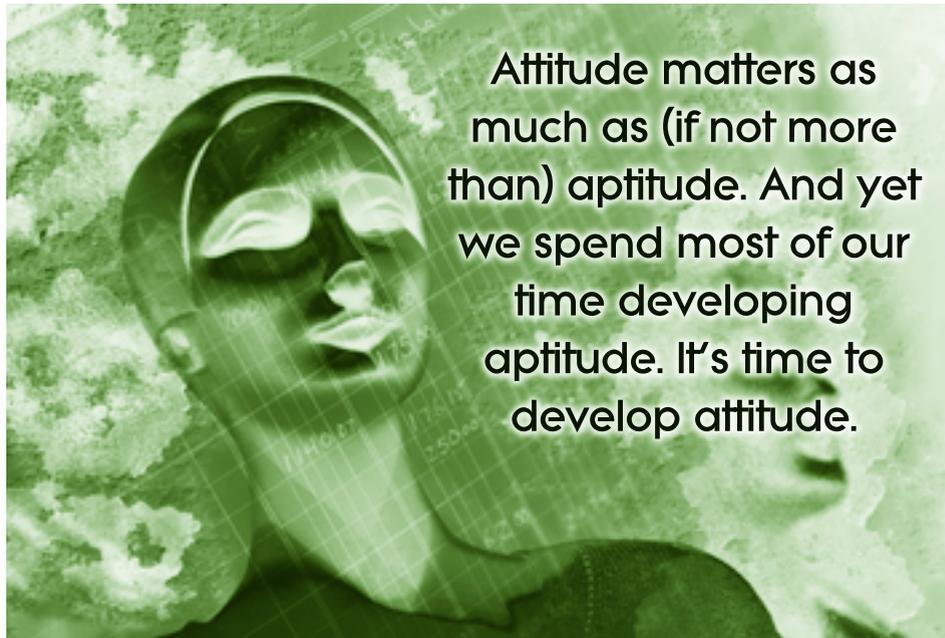
In February 2005, shortly after pinning on Major, I began conducting a somewhat low-profile experiment called Project Blue Lynx (PBL). The name is a play on words that refers to the "blue links" in a Web document. The objective was to foster the development of a networked cadre of innovative thought leaders. In this article, I'm throwing back the curtain and presenting the PBL methodology and some of the initial results in the hopes that others around the DoD may launch similar efforts.

An Aptitude for Attitude

The first step was to recruit the PBL members, so I spent several months getting to know the company-grade officers in my part of the Air Force Research Lab. I wasn't looking for aptitude in the traditional sense; everyone around here is tremendously smart, so intelligence is not exactly a useful discriminator. Rather, I was seeking a particular attitude. To be specific, I was looking for something that was equal parts optimism, adventure-seeking, dissatisfaction with the status quo, and open mindedness. I was more interested in personal chemistry than professional credentials, and in the end I selected eight people: four lieutenants and four captains.

It wasn't easy to pick them—or rather, it wasn't easy to *not* pick some others. I would have liked to bring 20 people on board and could easily have built a team twice that size. However, keeping the team small, at least initially, was an important part of the atmosphere I wanted to establish.

I approached each candidate in person, quietly explaining the invitation to join a very small, more-than-slightly-subversive group. We were going to look for ways to do



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things better. We were going to question hidden institutional assumptions, and we were going to challenge the status quo. We were going to explore some unusual, potentially revolutionary ideas. In short, we were going to try to change the world for the better. Everyone said yes.

"There Will Be Homework ..."

Our hallway discussions were followed by a detailed e-mail that explained the group's operating principles (shown in the sidebar on the next page) and gave them their first assignment. "There will be homework," my note said, assigning Robert Coram's book *Boyd* and Col. James Burton's *The Pentagon Wars* as required reading. Readers who are familiar with those two books will begin to get a sense of PBL's flavor. I also provided a PDF document by Tom Peters, a few links to some online documents, and a list of eight other recommended books for their consideration. The list of recommended reading has grown wildly since that time.

The point was to expose the group to a wide range of perspectives and experiences and help lower their associa-

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tive barriers as a means of stimulating innovative thought. The reading list includes a cyberpunk novel (*Snowcrash* by Neal Stephenson); a business biography from a former cartoonist at Hallmark Cards (*Orbiting The Giant Hairball* by Gordon MacKenzie); and an assortment of books about the information revolution with varying degrees of obscurity (*The Hacker Ethic* by Pekka Himanen, *The Unfinished Revolution* by Michael Dertouzos, and *Just For Fun*, by Linus Torvalds.)

In keeping with the informal nature of PBL, there was no due date for everyone to finish reading the two required books, much less the ever-growing list of recommended books. There was simply an expectation that everyone would read as many of them as possible, as soon as possible ... and almost without exception, they did. In fact, one enterprising member contacted the lab's technical library and arranged for the purchase of several copies of *Boyd* and *The Pentagon Wars*. I can assure you that every single copy the library purchased has been read at least once, and probably many times.

Technology, Networking, and Guerilla Marketing

PBL meetings are held at irregular intervals, usually every six to eight weeks. They last approximately 90 minutes, and are very informal. Discussion topics range from Col. John Boyd's life and work to Brazilian business leader Ricardo Semler's management principles. We examined the Simplicity Cycle long before it appeared in the the November-December 2005 issue of *Defense AT&L*—and in fact, that article contained a few ideas suggested by the group.

Over the past year, we have together wrestled with the Air Force Research Lab's approaches to technology transition, played with Web-based social networking tools, debated ways to effect culture change, and launched a guerilla marketing blitz for an in-house wiki project that we wanted to help support, even though technically none of us was actually working on that particular project. It's been a lot of fun, and we've all learned quite a bit. [A wiki is an online resource that allows users to add and edit content collectively. The word derives from Hawaiian wiki wiki meaning "quick."]

Operation Verse

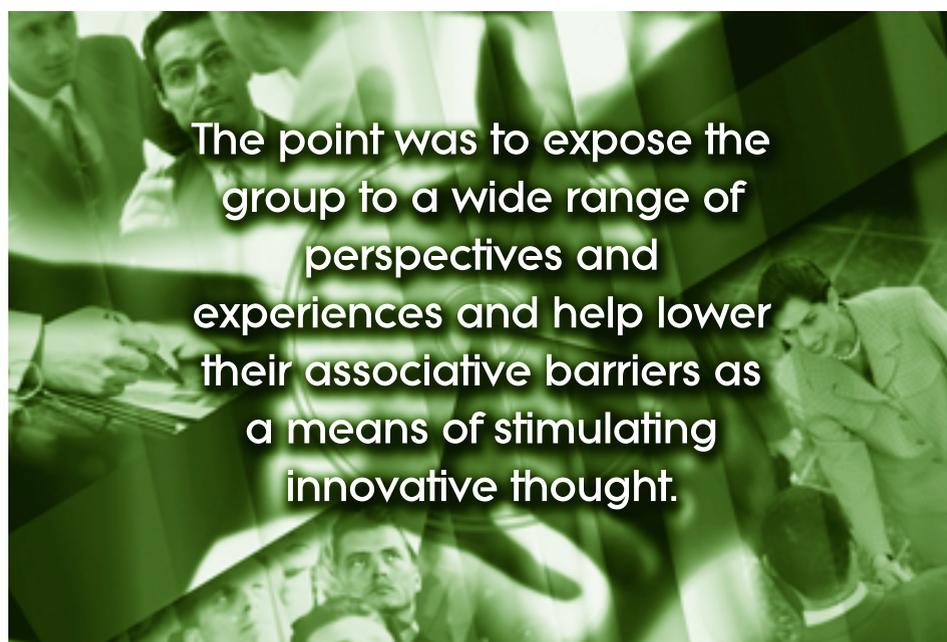
As one example of an unusual PBL activity, I once launched a surprise exercise code-named Operation Verse. When no one

PBL Principles

- Honesty, integrity, etc., are key—ALWAYS.
- Everyone prepares. Everyone participates. Everyone contributes. Everyone reads.
- It can be done better. Acquisition and tech development can and should be faster, cheaper, simpler, easier, better.
- There will be lots of surprises. The key phrase is "unpredictable but not unreliable." Good things will come of this. I just don't necessarily know what those things will be.
- This is the Fellowship of the Frustrated. If you're perfectly content with the way things are, you may not want to stick around. If you don't think this is worthwhile, you're free to go at any time.
- Attitude matters as much as (if not more than) aptitude. And yet we spend most of our time developing aptitude. It's time to develop attitude.
- Please, please, please disagree with me—vigorously—whenever you think I'm full of crap, heading off course, or otherwise wrong. Be prepared to defend your position, of course
- Focus on results, not process. Keyword is "focus."

was looking, I delivered unmarked manila envelopes to the PBL members' offices. The assignment contained within was straightforward: Write a poem.

The instructions explained that the poem could be on any topic, in any genre, and of any length. Sonnets and haiku were on par with doggerel and limericks. "It doesn't have to be good," I explained. "It just has to be honest." Further, there was no requirement to actually show the poem to anyone. All I asked for was an e-mail that said, "I did



You're the Judge: The Verdict (from page 28)

What the law says: 5 C.F.R. §§ 2635.201-205 states that executive branch employees generally may not accept gifts that are given because of their official positions or that come from "prohibited sources." Prohibited sources include persons (or an organization made up of such persons) who are seeking official action by, are doing business or seeking to do business with, or are regulated by the employee's agency; or have interests that may be substantially affected by performance or nonperformance of the employee's official duties.

Jim M., because of his position with a defense contractor, is a prohibited source. Joe G. vaguely remembers there are a number of exceptions to this general rule involving gifts, the first of which states that a gift valued at \$20 or less, provided that the total value of gifts from the same source is not more than \$50 in a calendar year, is an allowed exception.

Although the cost of each individual round at the 19th hole may not exceed \$20, the total well exceeds \$50 over the course of the year, so it appears that Joe G. may have improperly accepted gifts from Jim M.

Joe and Jim: Fortunately, when Joe belatedly raises this issue with his Standards of Conduct counsel, he finds out that his conduct with Jim falls under another exception. Counsel advises him that a gift motivated solely by a family relationship or personal friendship is also an exception. Since Joe and Jim have a long-standing relationship that started well before Jim's entry into industry, there is a solid basis for this exception. Although no requirement exists to do so, Joe asks for and receives from Jim a signed letter stating that he, Jim, personally pays for all golfing expenses and doesn't submit them for reimbursement as business expenses.

Joe and Bill: The situation with Joe and Bill is a problem. There is no long-standing relationship, and their infrequent contact may suggest that the outings are more than social gatherings. Although the individual amounts involved are relatively small, the total exceeds the limits permitted by this exception. Joe needs to refrain from accepting Bill's hospitality by paying for his portion of the 19th hole bill—the entire portion, not just the amount that exceeds the \$20 per outing or the \$50 aggregate per year.

This fictitious account shows how easy it is to unknowingly violate the Standards of Conduct. It is incumbent upon all of us to know the rules and apply them to our particular situations. We suggest that you review the rules annually—or more frequently, depending on the situation—aggressively examining your relationships to verify that you're not unwittingly breaking the rules.

it." I was quite pleased when several people boldly decided to share their poems with the whole group.

My objective was to go beyond the science and engineering of their daily work and get them to use a different part of their minds. I wanted to help bust them out of their comfort zones. I somewhat obliquely explained that this exercise "has something to do with imagination, innovation, experimentation, and courage." The willingness of several members to take the plunge so publicly is a testimony to their aptitude for attitude.

SAWABI Redux

Naturally, some things didn't go entirely according to plan, no matter how flexible and fluid that plan has been. We tried to write a "Transition Manifesto" that would both highlight the challenges of transitioning technology from the lab to the warfighter and offer solutions ... but we didn't get very far, for a variety of reasons. Maybe we will pick that up again sometime, and maybe we won't.

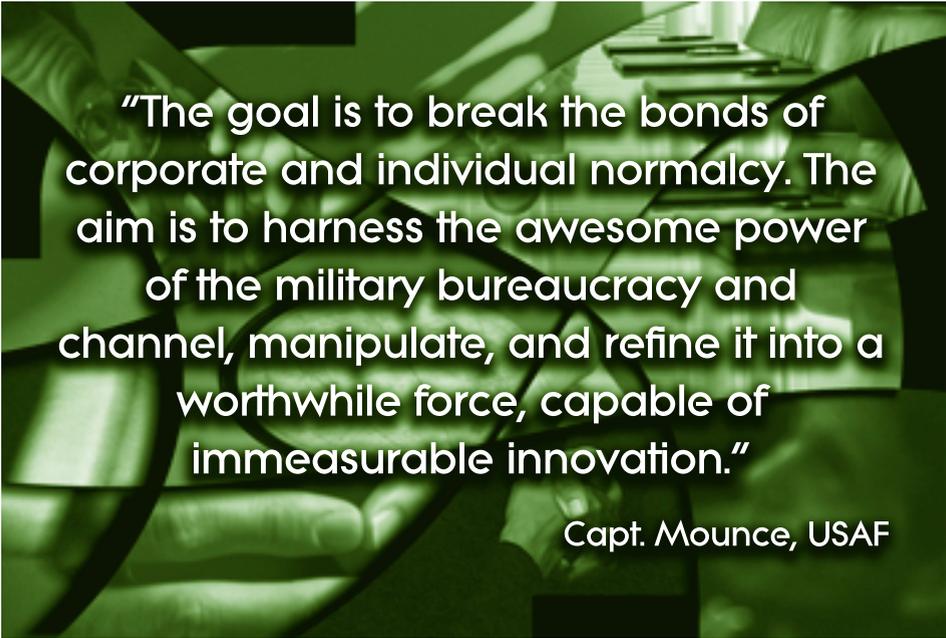
Our attempt to experiment with a Web-based social networking tool successfully revealed that the tool we selected wasn't very good. There are a handful of other little projects we toyed with and then discarded, and while that may be frustrating or seem wasteful to some, it is actually a healthy part of life in a laboratory. Longtime readers of this journal may recall the SAWABI (Start Again With A Better Idea) concept I introduced in the July-August 2004 issue of this magazine. PBL truly put SAWABI into action.

We were not aiming to be predictable or to do things that we knew would succeed. We were experimenting and trying to stimulate thought. The ability to cut our losses and move on was built in to the PBL framework of expectations from the start. Within this framework, finishing a particular project was not nearly as important as starting. Ultimately, PBL's success is defined by how much we learned and our ability to apply those lessons to the group's overall mission: build a networked cadre of innovative thought leaders.

Phase 2 Begins

After 12 months, it was time to shake things up a little. We're about to lose one of the original members because of a permanent change of station, and a few others are getting short on time. So we recently expanded the group's membership, including some junior civilians and a handful of new lieutenants. As before, we were seeking attitude, not aptitude. As before, the list of people we would like to invite was much longer than the list of people we actually did invite.

This new phase will undoubtedly be different from the first. We have a track record now. We have tried some things, made some discoveries, and built some relation-



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Capt. Mounce, USAF

down. Each team member helps all the others, to include bottom-up mentoring. It offers an opportunity to influence the minds of all participants, hopefully for the better.”

Lt. Barsch: “I particularly enjoy the brainstorming sessions, which encourage out-of-the-box thinking and lively debate. Contrary to common stereotypes about military leadership, I believe it the solemn duty of every officer to take time to think outside the box, to seek out the next innovative approach that will keep us not just steps, but miles, ahead of the enemy. PBL is a forum for such debate.”

ships. We are quite comfortable, which is almost reason enough to introduce some fresh blood and new perspectives.

The objective in this new phase is the same as before: foster the development of a networked cadre of innovative thought leaders. We are simply trying to do more of it, perhaps in a slightly different way. And perhaps in a wildly different way. We’ll see.

When PBL was first launched, I didn’t entirely know what to expect, and I made that very clear to the group right from the start. I was pretty sure something good would happen, but I wasn’t about to make any predictions. As time goes by, we have come to understand PBL as a mentoring and networking group, but I still am hesitant to predict the eventual outcome.

The Results So Far

So what has been the outcome and what have we learned so far? Let’s have a few PBL members answer those questions:

Capt. Bartlett: “It draws me away from the daily grind. It’s a chance for a small group of fellow officers from various experiences and backgrounds to get together to discuss latest readings, Air Force issues, as well as technology cross feeds and transition issues.”

Capt. Yoshimoto: “The networking aspect of PBL is immense. We have made contacts with people who mutually respect each other’s opinions, and we can contact them in the future, regardless of current membership, to seek advice or work program collaboration. Further, this group is not about one-way mentorship from the top

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For my part, I have loved watching and encouraging everyone’s individual voyage of exploration and discovery. It’s great to see their eyes open to new possibilities; to watch them connect with each other, encourage each other, and wrestle with some big issues. I’ve seen technical problems addressed as well as personal and professional challenges. When I stop to reflect, I realize I am on the same voyage of exploration as the rest of the group. This has been entirely new territory for me, and it’s been a real adventure.

And the cool thing is that *you* can do this too, with the people you work with. You can start now: Just look around and start making a list of people you want to invite into your Project Blue Lynx group. Remember, you’re looking for attitude and chemistry, not just aptitude and credentials.

Sure, it’s tough to carve out the time because we are all busy. It is also a little scary to launch onto an uncharted sea, with no guarantee of positive results. But the investment you make in the personal and professional development of your local PBL crew has the potential to hugely impact this nation’s defense. I hope you go do it. I’m sure glad I did.

The author welcomes comments and questions and can be contacted at daniel.ward@rl.af.mil.