

The Special Challenges of Leading Geographically Dispersed Teams

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“As is true with most technological innovations, our understanding of how information systems change the human system dynamics in organizations has lagged behind the introduction and use of new technology. We are using advanced information technology to lead and to follow without necessarily knowing the full extent of its impact on human dynamics in organizations. Is it working?”

Bruce Avolio
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The world we live and work in is changing at an accelerating pace. Information technology (IT) improvements enable information sharing faster than leadership and team-building theories can synthesize the impacts on organizational design and team dynamics. At the same time, the government ac-

quisition workforce is continually challenged to do more with less. In 2000, the Department of Defense inspector general reported that the DoD had cut over 50 percent of its acquisition workforce between fiscal year 1990 and fiscal year 2000, while the number of procurement actions had increased by 12 percent. These changes have put tremendous strains on government program management offices, and many have turned to geographically dispersed teams (GDTs) as one means to mitigate the impacts. Unfortunately, many government acquisition organizations have implemented GDTs before fully understanding how to most effectively lead and employ them.

Management theories in the 20th century focused on the power of collocating teams to form interdisciplinary product teams, and they linked the social interaction of a collocated team (CLT) with its overall productivity. Some programs, such as the U. S. Marine Corps Expeditionary Fighting Vehicle, went as far as collocating the developer/producer, overseer, and end user. Collocating 100 percent of a team can be expensive and impractical. Furthermore, personnel shortages and burdensome travel requirements force most traditional collocated teams to work in a geographically dispersed manner much of the time. Recent studies on the management of GDTs tend to focus on the implications for IT systems of geographical distribution. While IT tools are important, there are two key questions when considering the implications of GDTs: how GDTs affect traditional leadership and management models, and how distance factors (geographical, temporal, cultural) affect teamwork and intra-team communications.

The answers to these questions have a profound impact on the effective management of DoD acquisition programs that employ GDTs, as well as on the management of traditional program offices, which are so understaffed and overburdened with travel requirements that in fact, they act as pseudo-GDTs. I found many of the program management and leadership skills I used when leading a collocated integrated product team were not applicable “as is” when leading a GDT. I also found that once de-

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veloped, a GDT could become a formidable team with many advantages over collocated teams.

Geographically Dispersed, Collocated— What are the Differences?

The Center for Creative Leadership defines a GDT as a team that “has members dispersed across distance and time, who are linked together by some form of electronic communications technology, and who are only able to physically interact as a team on a limited basis.” Conversely, CLTs are teams “typically operating in the same location with close physical proximity, whose members can have face-to-face meetings on a regular basis.” The Center notes that while GDTs are not new, the global work environment and IT tools now support greater diversity in the geographic and temporal makeup of teams. There can now exist teams that integrate groups working in different locations, different time zones, and different cultures. These changes have implications on how leaders form teams, organize work, measure individual and group performance, reward team members, and make decisions. They also affect how teams communicate with each other, share knowledge, and identify and resolve issues.

Research summarized in the Center for Creative Leadership’s 1999 book *Geographically Dispersed Teams, An Annotated Bibliography*, indicates that most of the attributes of a CLT generally apply also to a GDT. Findings suggest, too, that collocated and geographically dispersed teams develop similarly in content, but they differ at the rate at which they progress through traditional team-building development cycles. In fact, McLeod et al. reported in a 1997 article in the *Journal of Applied Psychology* that GDTs tend to generate more ideas than CLTs in the same amount of time. In decision making, workers in GDTs expressed their opinions more candidly, but the arguments of GDT members with the minority opinion in a decision-making process had less influence than those of collocated team members.

Representative F-35 Mission Systems IPT Team Composition (2002-2003)

Service	Location	Percentage of Team
Home office (all Services, U.K.)	Crystal City, Va.	20%
Navy/USMC (NavAir)	NAS Patuxent River, Md.	20%
Navy/USMC (NavAir)	NAS China Lake, Calif.	20%
Air Force (ASC)	Wright-Patterson AFB, Ohio	20%
DCMA (on-site support)	Ft. Worth, Texas, with prime	5%
Joint Test Force	Multiple sites	5%
Air Force (ESC)	Hanscom AFB, Mass.	3%
Air Force (AAC/53rd Wing)	Eglin AFB, Fla.	3%
Navy/USMC (NavAir)	Pt. Mugu, Calif.	2%
International	Bristol, U.K.	2%

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The differences between GDTs and CLTs also influence how team leaders assign tasks, measure progress, and assess performance. This change is problematic for managers accustomed to managing a CLT because they can no longer see all their employees accomplishing the work. No longer able to rely on informal methods (coffee breaks or walking the floors, for example) to assess performance and detect problems, they must also develop new methods to collect information. R.F. Marucca, writing in the *Harvard Business Review*, notes that GDT managers tend to feel “disconnected” from subordinates, no matter what IT tools they use.

Using GDTs in Government Program Management Offices

GDTs exhibit strengths and weaknesses when compared with traditional CLTs. Program managers must be aware of these as they develop their organizations and choose leadership and management approaches. The analysis of the strengths and weaknesses in the sidebar on the next page is based on my experiences leading both types of teams. It assumes that large portions of the program management office are separated from the location of the program manager so that frequent (more than once-a-month) face-to-face visits are impractical.

Lessons Learned From the Joint Strike Fighter Mission Systems IPT

I spent two years as the F-35 Mission Systems IPT leader in the Joint Strike Fighter Program

The Geographically Dispersed Team

Strengths

- Enables greater diversity of opinions and ideas, and access to more people with a potentially wider experience base and expertise.
- Requires early transition to a knowledge-sharing organization for survival, as knowledge cannot be passed through informal coffee break conversations and water cooler talk.
- Enables use of differing hiring practices or support contract vehicles to gain additional human resources, since PMs are not constrained to hire only at their locations. This is especially useful in mid-year surge situations.
- Allows greater continuity of operations when large percentages of the program management office are traveling, since by design, the GDT is better equipped to function while dispersed.
- Forces clearer delineation of roles, missions, and task assignments.
- Tends to isolate a portion of the team from the daily fire drills of the PM, allowing those members to better focus on their specific tasks instead of being caught up in the PM's problems.
- Enables/facilitates alternate work schemes (such as telecommuting) and operations across multiple time zones, such as 24-hour development teams and 24-hour service support.

Weaknesses

- Potentially takes longer for the team to form and gain cohesiveness. New members can disrupt team dynamics if they enter the team in mid stream.
- More difficult to assess individual performance of off-site members.
- Cohesiveness between leader and off-site subordinates may be reduced or take longer to form, as there is limited social interaction outside the work environment. The same phenomenon can occur between teammates located at different sites.
- It is much more difficult for the leader to impact individual rewards and career progression of team members because administrative control, performance bonuses, and so on for those team members located at a different site usually remain with the home-site functional organization.
- It is difficult to schedule meetings at a time when everyone can participate; the PM cannot easily assemble the team in one place for "all call" meetings.
- There is heavy reliance on uninterrupted IT services.
- Over-dependence on e-mail can create an environment in which GDT members feel they need to check e-mail 24 hours a day.
- There may be a real or perceived feeling that members who are not located with the PM are second-class citizens who don't get the same opportunities and visibility as those members collocated with the PM.

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Office. This IPT was a multi-national, multi-Service GDT with members from the Air Force and Navy/Marine Corps tactical aviation product centers, weapons test centers, and international offices. The composition of the IPT at the time is shown in the table on the previous page.

As leader for this multi-Service, multi-national, multi-site IPT, I quickly became aware that I would have to modify my leadership style to deal with the distributed nature of the team and the different cultures. Time zone differences meant there were only two hours in a day when all team members were in their offices simultaneously. I chose to organize the team by product area, but I specifically mixed membership on each of the product teams with members from multiple sites, rather than assigning a separate product to a specific site (for example, the Air Force manages the radar, the Navy manages data links, and so on). This practice enhanced team cohesiveness and better captured each Service/country's experience operating a particular product in their peculiar environment. This team composition was challenging; however, its diversity in Service culture, experience, and business practices created synergies and knowledge sharing at a level I have not experienced on other teams (including other joint teams). In many cases, this diversity allowed us to cherry pick the best processes, skill sets, and tools from each of the respective acquisition organizations.

As part of the team development process, I held an off-site meeting to enable team members to build relationships that they would have to sustain in a geographically separated manner during execution. As part of this process, we jointly defined the following attributes of a healthy and successful GDT. Teams should:

- Be continually informed of the team's strategy
- Be involved in decision-making processes
- Receive regular communications
- Be provided with tools for communication
- See each member's efforts as contributing to the success of the team's strategy
- Have a leader who will provide feedback and stand up for the individuals on the team
- Be given an opportunity to have fun outside work.

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From my experience, I would strongly agree that leading a GDT was different from leading a more traditional collocated IPT. While many of the traditional leadership needs are the same, the GDT appeared to be much more sensitive to the communication methods used by leaders. I also found that I spent much more time thinking about how I could create collocated team-like social/collaborative opportunities through the GDT medium than I would have in a collocated team situation. I could not simply decide to invite the team to an all-hands session, nor could I afford (in dollars or time) to fly the entire team to monthly off-site or team meetings.

I developed the following takeaways for program managers of GDTs. They are the things a leader should consider beyond the other things he or she would normally do as leader of a traditional collocated IPT:

- Hire people (leaders and followers) who can function in a GDT—not everyone can.
- Keep in mind that leadership is more than forwarding e-mails and tasks. Over-communicate with rich context to make your off-site folks feel included and to improve the quality of their support to the team.
- Remember that personal relationships are made one e-mail message at a time.
- Face-to-face meetings are still important. Meet on team members' home turf when possible.
- Seek formal and informal feedback and look for miscommunications. Use multiple sources and techniques, as miscommunication issues are hard to detect.
- Establish regular virtual meeting times in which all team members can participate during their core working hours. Protect that time and use it judiciously, as it is scarce and precious resource.

The Future of GDTs in DoD

The use of GDTs within DoD acquisition will expand as the downsizing of the acquisition workforce continues in future budget years. Leading and participating in GDTs is different from leading and participating in traditional collocated teams, so it's important to recognize the differences and address them early in the team development process. Unfortunately, some program managers believe IT tools are the solution to the complexities of GDTs. While IT tools can facilitate information communication, they will not, in themselves, ensure an effective GDT. Program managers must recognize that in order to capitalize on the opportunities GDTs provide the acquisition workforce, they must modify the traditional leadership and management techniques they are accustomed to using with collocated teams.

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