

# Attracting and Keeping America's Young, Bright Minds

*1st Lt. Brian R. Smith, USAF*

**A**s the four-year point in my defense acquisition career approaches, a debate rages in my mind: Should I continue in the government or leave for other endeavors? The answer is not simple.

I have always believed government work is honorable and enjoyable. My colleagues are highly intelligent and patriotic. My employer, the Department of Defense, has a mission that is vital to America's national security. But right now, government acquisition organizations are challenging (in the sense of frustrating) places to work. I have little insight into what my colleagues and leadership do and limited tools to communicate my own activities. Forms, documentation, presentations, and other bureaucratic functions can consume significant parts of each work day. Organizational investments are diverse. With few common goals binding everything together, it is difficult to know what leaders consider to be high-value ideas.

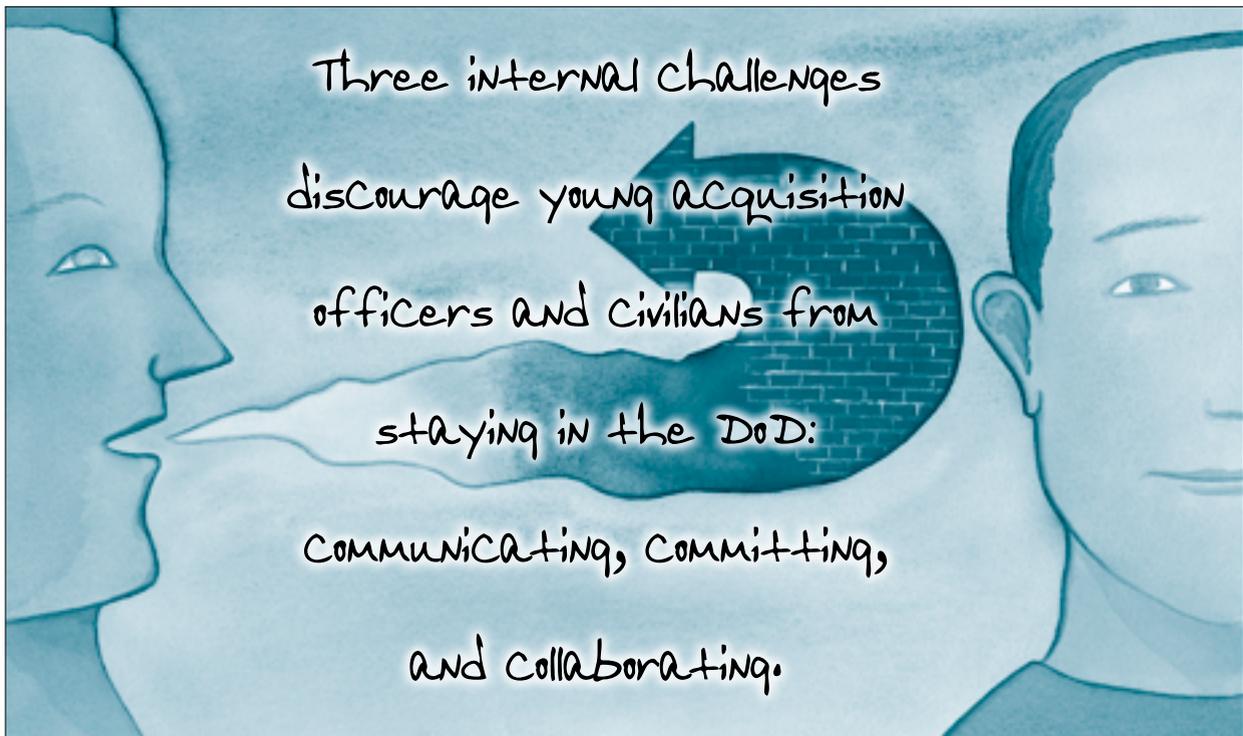
Do other businesses and organizations have more to offer? After all, service to country can be given in other ways.

The private sector might offer better compensation, more responsibility, and broader opportunities for world business travel. What prevents young and talented employees in defense acquisition from leaving for Northrop Grumman, Amgen, McKinsey, Goldman Sachs, or a host of others? How are the Air Force Research Laboratory or Aeronautical Systems Center superior to Apple Computer, Intel, or GE?

## Three Cs: Impediments to the Ideal Organization

Three internal challenges discourage young acquisition officers and civilians from staying in the DoD: communicating, committing, and collaborating.

First, information-age technologies have yet to improve internal and external communication. Most ideas are conveyed through one-size-fits-all bullet-point or fill-in-the-blank formats. So employees spend significant time updating PowerPoint® presentations or strategy documents instead of modifying and molding actual products and



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ideas. Stovepiping is widespread, making it difficult to know what other people are doing. The emerging world of online networking revolutionized by AOL Instant Messenger, Wikipedia, Blogger, or Friendster is slow to gain ground. External customers face similar challenges as they try to decipher what happens in government, who does it, and when it's occurring.

Second, organizations commit resources across countless genres and ideas. With no center of gravity or focused big ideas to ground or unite an organization, neither employees nor leaders can determine which products and ideas have value to the organization. Likewise, leaders cannot easily identify high-value investments. As the jacks of all trades but the masters of none, we find it difficult to justify and defend our budgets to Congress or the chain of command.

Finally, people of different perspectives don't collaborate. Traditionally, program managers, engineers, and scientists flock with those of the same feather to solve problems. Engineers rarely team with artists or designers, and scientists hardly ever receive industry analysis and business development from economists or historians. The unidirectional problem solving often overlooks the holistic picture, resulting in ideas or products that don't meet customer needs. More collaboration would help us work smarter not harder to meet cost, schedule, and performance requirements.

These shortcomings frustrate young acquisition officers and civilians. We grew up in the information age, so Internet chatting, blogging, sharing, and advertising are second nature. We were teenagers during the strategically confusing post-Cold War period, and we long for a concise and compelling vision of the future from our defense acquisition leadership. We have experienced global travel, trade, and communication; and we thrive on multidisciplinary interactions.

### Visualizing the Ideal Organization

The idealized organization is a hypothetical entity but one that would wow employees and customers if it existed. Communication would be unparalleled. Commitments would be focused and compelling. Collaboration would be natural and easy. Such an organization would consistently produce innovative ideas and products.

Creative **communication** and storytelling are vital in the ideal organization. Ideas are communicated through stories, pictures, models, and prototypes. Employees create Web sites (think Friendster), weblogs (think Blogger), or wikis (think Wikipedia) to share evolving information and learn from coworkers. [A *wiki* is a Web site or other online resource where all users can add and edit content. The word derives from the Hawaiian for "quickly."] Research, programs, patents, and funding levels are available on these

sites. When employees gather in meetings, they present drawings, models, or prototypes that colleagues can circle around, pick up, or write on. Customers have clear insight into the ideas and products at every stage of development. Consumers feel good about the functionality and aesthetics of the products they receive.

The ideal organization **commits** to a focused set of big ideas. Highly talented employees and efficient processes organize around these ideas, leading to unprecedented innovation. Organizational leaders have undisputable credentials and experience creating big ideas and developing high-value products. Top-notch leadership stays at the helm of the organization for multiple years (longer than the typical three- or four-year military tour) to ingrain an innovative culture around the big ideas.

**Collaboration** is an essential element to success in the ideal organization. Leadership has holistic experience in technology and product development, and facilitates collaboration between introverts and extroverts. Organizational culture treats design and engineering with equal importance. Fast-paced, high-growth companies collaborate closely with the organization, uniting the best minds in the world around problems. In an October 2005 interview with *Business Week Online*, Apple Computer's Steve Jobs summed it up: "You need a product-oriented culture [to innovate], even in a technology company. Lots of companies have tons of great engineers and smart people. But ultimately, there needs to be some gravitational force that pulls it all together. Otherwise, you can get great pieces of technology all floating around the universe."

While the ideal organization is a utopian hypothesis, there are organizations that do contain elements of the ideal.

### One Company's Story

I spent a three-month period of temporary duty in one such, a company that attracts many of the best and brightest employees in the country. Its cofounders had the experience and knowledge to conceive and commit to big ideas and to encourage spin-off innovations. They set the pace and creative culture of the organization. They constantly encourage the world-class workforce to devise new ideas. And they require tight collaboration among diverse individuals to achieve well-designed and well-engineered products.

Communication is a vital part of the culture at that company. Drawings, photographs, models, and prototypes are the center of many meetings; and discussions focus on making these renderings better. Large white boards are essential to every meeting room so that individuals can share ideas. Architectural lighting and color schemes ensure individuals can communicate in a comfortable and relaxing environment.



## You're the Judge

Defense AT&L presents the first in a new series featuring cases that center on ethical dilemmas, and invites you to be the judge. What would you

do in similar situations? (Remember that if you're faced with an ethical quandary, before taking any action, you're strongly encouraged to consult with your general counsel or, if in the military, your judge advocate general representative.)

**L**onette Bryan served as a contract specialist at the General Services Administration from December 1997 to November 2002. As a full-time federal employee, she was responsible for overseeing the proposal, award, administration, modification, renewal, and termination of the Software Professionals, Inc. contract with the federal government.

Software Professionals, Inc. provided computer technology professionals to the federal government on a contract basis for five years. The contract expired in April 2003.

Bryan terminated her employment with GSA in November 2002 and began working for Software Professionals in February 2003. Between March and August 2003, Bryan, on behalf of Software Professionals, met with personnel in her old office at GSA several times, seeking to extend the term of the contract that she had worked on while at GSA. Later, she tried to persuade GSA to award Software Professionals a new contract.

### *You're the judge:*

*Does Ms. Bryan have a problem here? Did she commit a crime?*

*The verdict is on page 50.*

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### **Project Mercury**

Project Mercury, the American effort to put man into space between 1958 and 1962, evidenced the attributes of an ideal organization—strong communication, commitment, and collaboration. Artists and writers closely communicated with the American public to convey goals, expectations, and possible outcomes. Astronauts held press conferences to explain their training, and a public affairs specialist trained with the astronauts, serving as a bridge between the public and Project Mercury.

Project leadership committed to three big ideas: orbit a manned spacecraft around Earth; investigate human ability to function in space; recover both personnel and spacecraft safely. These ideas were challenging but seemingly attainable, and success or failure could be measured.

A highly talented team of engineers, storytellers, scientists, and operators collaborated. People like astronaut John Glenn and rocket scientist Wernher Von Braun were key to program success. It was a time of unprecedented innovation, where the integrated team pushed the state of the art to build rockets, space suits, equipment, and

capsules. The lessons learned and technologies developed are still in use today.

### Three Steps to the Ideal Organization

How might leaders accelerate their organizations toward the ideal and entice talented young officers and civilians to stay in defense acquisition? I propose three steps:

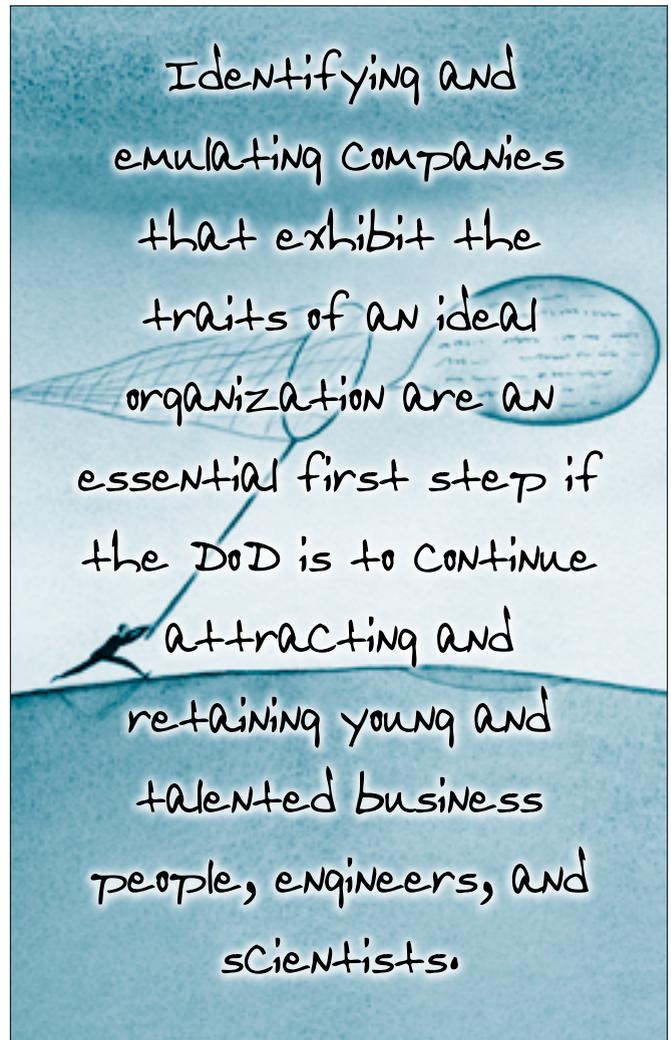
- Go wireless and network.
- Spin-off entrepreneurial ventures.
- Organize core work under big, compelling ideas.

**Step one** introduces wireless communication and networking for all employees, regardless of travel habits. Every employee should have a laptop, PDA, or tablet PC. Workers can update weblogs, wikis, and online personal networking software from anywhere and everywhere. Oversight should be minimal (while respecting standards of discretion, ethics, and security expected in a government workplace). The .mil domain should be opened so that more individuals inside and outside the government can view and comment on DoD development efforts.

**Step two** consolidates entrepreneurial spin-offs. Every organization has innovative projects that grow unexpectedly out of core work and do not quite fit the organizational mission. These entrepreneurs could leave their core organization for two to three years (think DARPA meets small business startup) and be placed with other entrepreneurs in a collaborative area—that encompasses artists, engineers, technical writers, and program managers—to continue development and commercialization of the entrepreneurial endeavor.

**Step three** is to evaluate remaining core projects and commit to three to five compelling ideas. People and processes should be organized around the ideas. High-value products should emerge as the organization pursues them. To be sure, a small percentage of current work will fall outside the big ideas. That work should either be placed as entrepreneurial ventures in step two or transferred to an organization where it is a better fit.

Managing the complex intersection of theory and reality will be challenging. It is neither easy nor cheap to spread wireless technology. On the other hand, all employees can begin blogging to share their ideas. Step two is slightly more complicated, since there must be agreement as to what constitutes an entrepreneurial spinoff. To avoid potentially divisive debates, I recommend picking the top five or top 10 concepts through a vote by key decision makers. And step three is the most prone to failure because it requires an ideal leader who is adept, credible, and skilled enough to manage different personalities with different fears, opinions, and experiences. Like the ideal organization, this ideal leader may be merely hypothetical. Despite challenges, there is one possible way to proceed: Leadership could determine the best of the best in



their organizations—those with unparalleled credentials and unprecedented innovation—regardless of age or experience. Those individuals, with their legitimacy, could be instrumental in crafting the big ideas, uniting diverse disciplines, and communicating the ideas.

### Identify and Emulate

Currently, defense acquisition organizations have many traits that make them frustrating places to work. Communication—internal and external—doesn't effectively employ information-age technologies; there are few compelling big ideas that unify the community; and collaboration can be challenging and difficult.

Identifying and emulating companies that exhibit the traits of an ideal organization are an essential first step if the DoD is to continue attracting and retaining young and talented business people, engineers, and scientists.

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