

# Leading Project Teams

## Program Management is Rapidly Becoming Team Management

OWEN GADEKEN

In today's acquisition environment, program management is rapidly becoming team management. The old hierarchical program office is being replaced by a set of integrated product teams (IPTs). The result is a program structure which is best characterized as a "team of teams."

This article examines changing team dynamics and why DAU is placing increased emphasis on leading project teams. It also looks at how traditional program/project offices are becoming team-based organizations that need and expect team building and leadership skills from those who would lead.

### Project Management is Dependent on Team Success

The traditional organizational structure or top-down "wiring diagram" is being replaced with interlocking networks of cross-functional teams. An example is the Marine Corps Advanced Amphibious Assault Vehicle (AAAV) program organization (Figure 1, p. 78).

In many ways, this organizational evolution is the result of the acquisition reforms begun by former Secretary of Defense William Perry early in the Clinton administration. In his May 10, 1995, memorandum on "Use of IPTs in DoD Acquisition," Dr. Perry called for the "performance of as many acquisition functions as practicable using integrated product teams." We in defense acquisition often assume that IPTs were "invented" by DoD, but there is sufficient evidence to conclude that IPTs are an-

other example of DoD adopting commercial best practices.

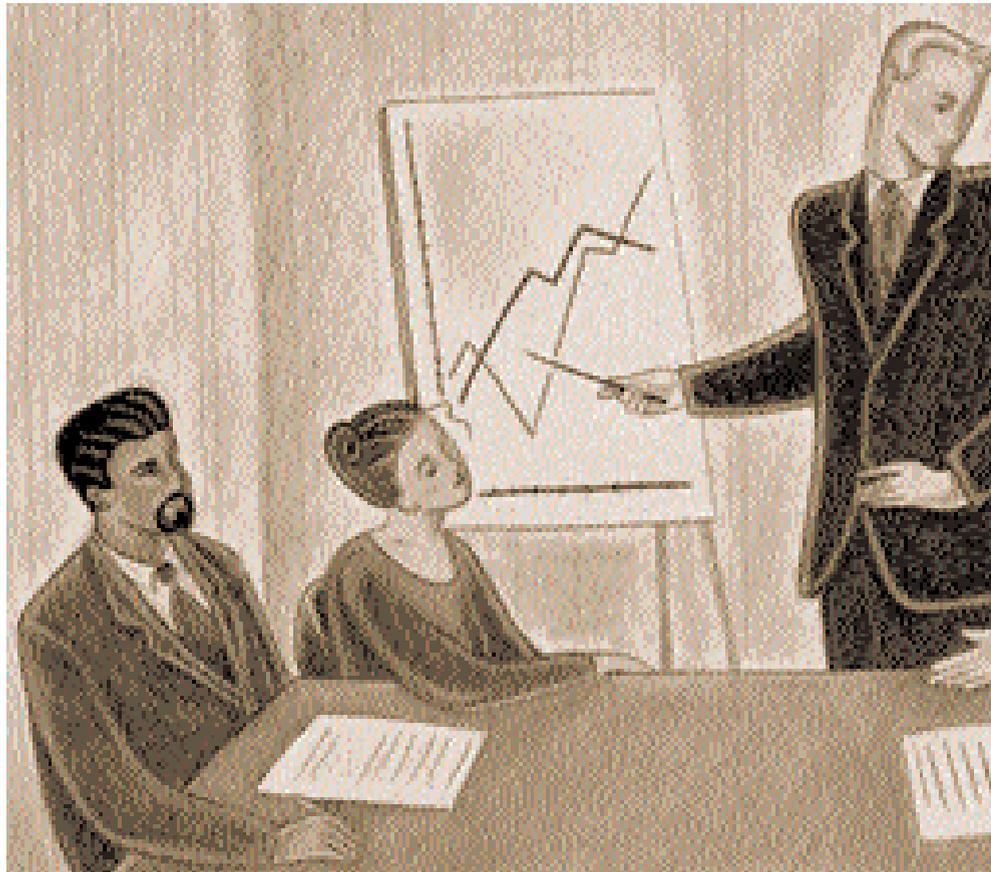
The ultimate success of the new team-based organization hinges upon the success of its fundamental building blocks—the teams themselves. Thus, program success is entirely dependent upon success of the individual teams that are part of the network. To achieve repeatable and predictable success, we must study the research and literature on successful teams.

### Most Teams Remain Dysfunctional

While teams and team building are very popular topics in management litera-

ture today, most of this literature is anecdotal and not based on empirical research. Perhaps the best early research on team dynamics was done by British physician Wilfred Bion. In his classic *Experiences in Groups*, Bion discovered that there are powerful psychological forces inherent in all groups that divert them from accomplishing their primary tasks. Examples of these forces are over-dependency on the leader, splintering off into subgroups or cliques, and fight or flight (engaging in or fleeing from intra-group conflict).

Upon closer examination of the classic stages of team development (forming, storming, norming, and performing),



*Gadeken is a Professor of Engineering Management, Program Management and Leadership Department, Defense Systems Management College-School of Program Managers, Defense Acquisition University, Fort Belvoir, Va.*

## MY FIRST SUCCESSFUL TEAM EXPERIENCE OR... HOW TO TAKE THE LOW ROAD TO A HIGH PERFORMANCE TEAM

### Forming

As a young lieutenant, I was sent to Squadron Officer School at Maxwell Air Force Base in Montgomery, Ala. This was the first in the series of Air Force professional military education courses I was required to complete during my career. We were immediately formed into teams of 12 officers. Much of the course featured competition between these teams.

### Storming

As the most junior member of my team, I quickly observed the tremendous pressure to show individual leadership capability. At one point early in the course, almost everyone in our group was vying to become the team leader. This conflict was so intense that it caused us to fail miserably in our first outdoor team building exercise. We spent so much time fighting over leadership that we were unable to complete any of the events on the outdoor obstacle course. What followed was a very intense period of bickering, conflict, and even shouting matches as our dysfunctional team tried to cope with our early failures and find some way to succeed.

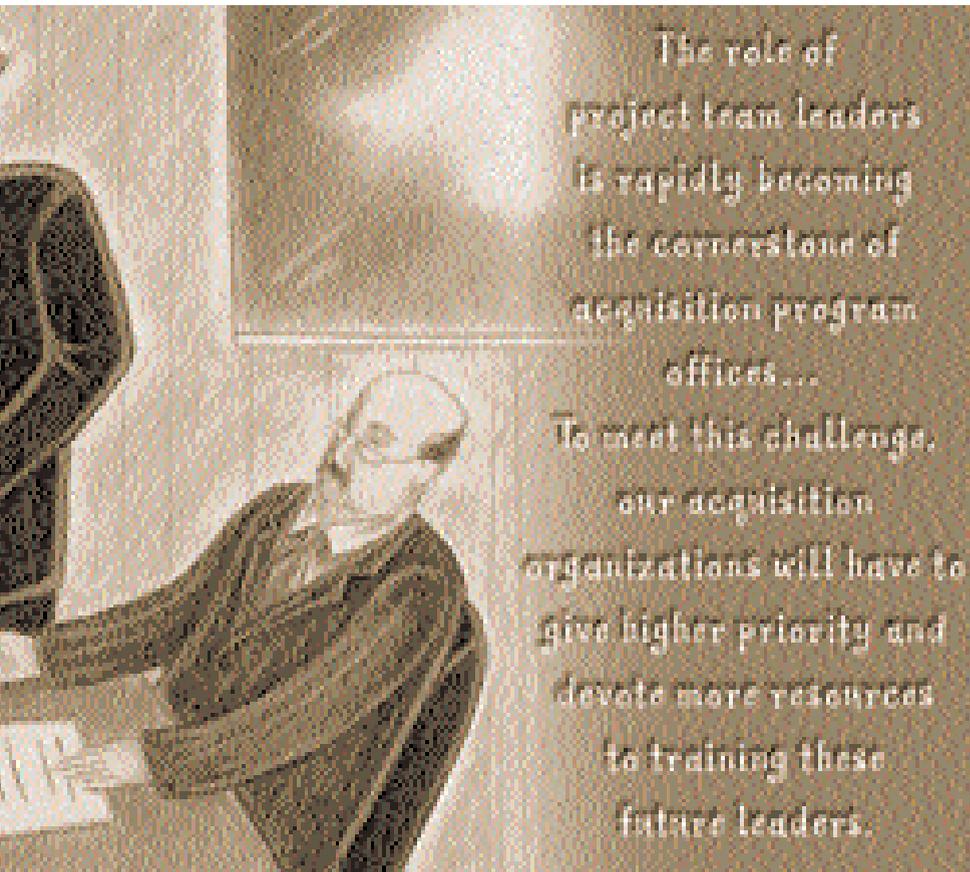
### Norming

Slowly some real leadership emerged from the more senior members who were also experienced pilots, and an informal sense of teamwork and organization took shape. When we began to have some success in team competitions, the momentum grew.

### High Performing

As evidence of our total turnaround, we successfully completed all events on our second try at the outdoor obstacles near the end of our course. Our team even won the chief of staff trophy as the best overall (academic and athletic) team in the course. The most surprising part of this turnaround was that it emerged from almost complete frustration as we slowly and even painfully worked through our conflict to develop a sense of teamwork.

As an aside, most of the other student teams in our course also performed poorly on their initial team activities but did not improve as significantly as the course went on.



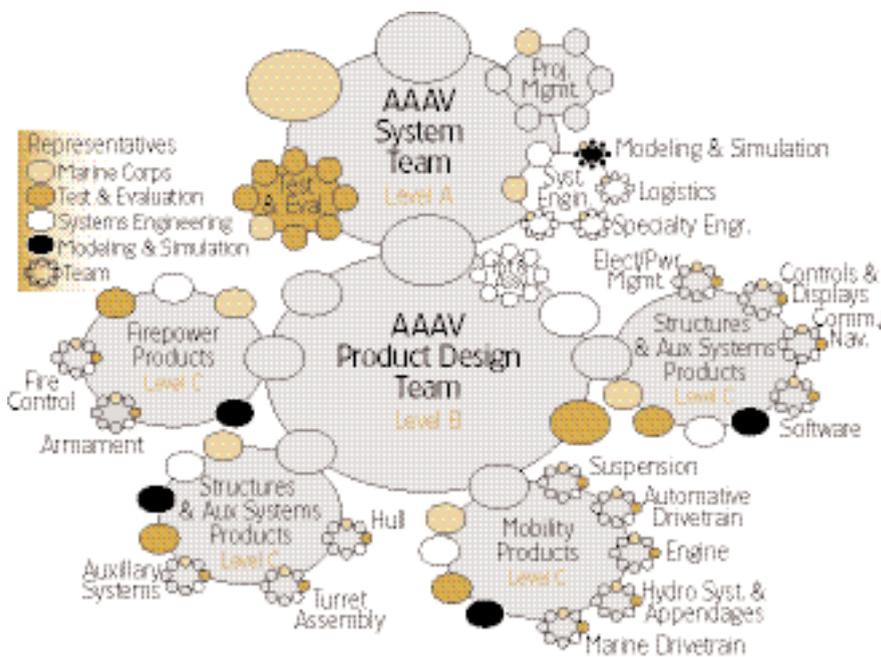
Bion is really saying that teams usually get hung up in the *storming* and *norming* stages and never make it to the *high performing* stage. This is clearly illustrated in Figure 2 on p. 79 where the team development stages are overlaid on the team performance curve taken from *The Wisdom of Teams* by authors Jon R. Katzenbach and Nicholas K. Smith. Beyond the *forming* stage, team performance actually deteriorates during *storming* and *norming*, making it even more difficult for teams to progress to *high performing*.

So the reality is that *high performing* is the exception rather than the rule for most teams. (As an example of a team that actually made it to *high performing*, the sidebar above describes my first successful team experience.)

### Teams Require Activation Energy

So what does it take for teams to progress to *high performing*? I use the term "activation energy" to describe the force required to move a team out of the

FIGURE 1. AAV IPT Structure



storming and norming “slump” and up the curve to reach *high performing*. Practically speaking, this energy is normally provided by the team leader. It also represents the energy required to counteract the natural negative forces or dysfunctional team behaviors described by Bion. In one sense, activation energy is a measure of the team leader’s skill in bringing a group to *high performing*.

In my Squadron Officer School example on the preceding page, as we confronted our conflicts openly our team actually got much worse before we got better. But this proves to be a hallmark of *high performing* teams: openly confronting conflicts rather than smoothing them over or concealing them as hidden agendas. Teams unwilling or unable to devote the energy to working through their conflicts will remain in a *storming* and *norming* “slump,” with most of their energy dissipated in nonproductive activity.

#### Team Leadership Requires New Skills

The natural assumption is that the most experienced project managers in an organization are the best candidates to become team leaders. However, existing project managers may not have the necessary skills to succeed as team leaders.

In *The Wisdom of Teams*, Katzenbach and Smith list six key team leader skills:

- Keep the purpose, goals, and approach relevant and meaningful.
- Build commitment and confidence.
- Strengthen the mix and level of skills.
- Manage relationships with outsiders, including removing obstacles.
- Create opportunities for others.
- Do real work.

In a series of competency studies completed by DAU over the last 10 years, top performing project managers were found to use a less directive style with more influencing and relationship behaviors than less successful project managers in the same organizations.

Just as most silent screen stars faded when talking pictures came into vogue,

## DAU INTRODUCES “LEADING PROJECT TEAMS” COURSE NEW COURSE CAN BE TAILORED TO MEET THE NEEDS OF THE SPONSORING ORGANIZATION

The Defense Acquisition University Program Management and Leadership department is introducing a new short course specifically designed to meet the needs of DoD’s current and future project team leaders. The new offering—“Leading Project Teams”—is a one-week course that fulfills three key learning objectives. Participants will:

- learn and apply team building processes to develop and maintain effective teams;
- learn the roles of the project team leader and the skills needed to successfully perform these roles; and
- evaluate individual leadership and team building strengths and development needs using a variety of feedback instruments.

Topics for the course include team building, problem solving and decision making, conflict resolution, setting team goals, empowerment and coaching, and leading in an environment of change. Course content,

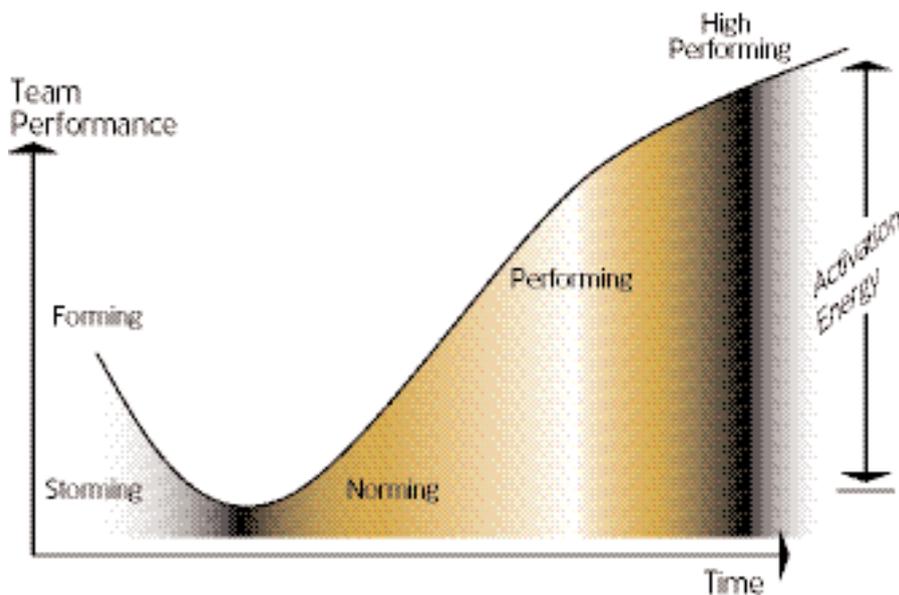
length, and location can be tailored to meet the needs of the sponsoring organization.

We also have a variety of special tools that facilitate team development. These range from “hands on” outdoor team building exercises to interactive management simulations that feature detailed observation and feedback on individual and team performance issues.

Even though team building principles and exercises are already incorporated into our Program Management career track, DAU is also committed to increasing the performance support provided directly to acquisition programs and teams in the field.

For more information, contact the DAU Program Management and Leadership Department at (703) 805-3424 or e-mail [owen.gadeken@dau.mil](mailto:owen.gadeken@dau.mil).

FIGURE 2. Project Team Performance Curve



so too may the current generation of highly directive “hands on” project managers be replaced by a generation of coaching and facilitating leaders of more “self-directed” teams. The key question is whether our organizations will recognize these new competency requirements and then recruit or develop the cadre of skilled team leaders needed to ensure the success of ongoing projects.

#### Do You Have What It Takes?

An important part of career development for aspiring team leaders is to assess their skills for both their current as well as future jobs. While the military and civilian performance appraisal processes are intended to do this, rating inflation and organizational politics often make these appraisals far less useful. More effective is the “360-degree feedback” process, which has rapidly grown in use by both government agencies and commercial firms. Several commercially developed multi-rater instruments are now available that feature Web-based assessment followed by generation of tailored reports and development plans provided directly to the individual.

This comprehensive feedback can be invaluable in providing a candid assessment of a manager’s key strengths and development needs. However, it must be accompanied by more detailed as-

essment and action planning by the manager to interpret the detailed and sometimes inconsistent data and apply it to the manager’s current job. Here, it is often helpful to work with a coach or mentor who can provide additional support and feedback as managers attempt to make sense of their detailed feedback and develop specific actions they can use on their jobs.

Another useful set of tools are simulations and experiential exercises, which put participants in realistic situations that require use of specific management and leadership skills. Participants respond, not by stating what they would do in these situations, but by actually doing it; they then step aside and become students of their own behavior through follow-up discussions, including feedback from trainers and other participants.

These exercises are an ideal follow-on to the 360-degree feedback process and can offer participants much more specific feedback on the key behaviors identified in their feedback report.

No assessment process is complete without discussion of the value of ongoing feedback from the workplace. Every aspiring team leader should develop the skills of reflective and critical thinking. After all major team meetings

and events, the leader should candidly reflect on what worked well and what could be improved. This can be correlated with candid feedback from others who were involved, especially those who will speak freely without “sugar coating” the result. Honest self-assessment is an extremely valuable tool for every aspiring project team leader.

#### Future Direction

The role of project team leaders is rapidly becoming the cornerstone of acquisition program offices. But capable project team leaders are in scarce supply and developing them is an even greater challenge. To meet this challenge, our acquisition organizations will have to give higher priority and devote more resources to training these future leaders.

DAU intends to be part of the solution. As mentioned at the beginning of this article, we are already focusing on resources to provide training—such as our “Leading Project Teams” Course—and development tools that can be tailored and exported to meet this need. Our staff and faculty are committed to increasing the performance support provided directly to acquisition programs and teams in the field.

**Editor’s Note:** Gadeken welcomes questions or comments on this article. Contact him at [owen.gadeken@dau.mil](mailto:owen.gadeken@dau.mil).

DoD 5000 SERIES UPDATE  
 READ THE LATEST AT  
[HTTP://WWW.ACQ.OSD.MIL/AR/](http://www.acq.osd.mil/AR/)

#### DoD 5000.2-R Final Regulation

*Mandatory Procedures for Major Defense Acquisition Programs (MDAPs) and Major Automated Information System (MAIS) Acquisition Programs, signed April 5, 2002.*

#### DoDI 5000.2, Change One Operation of the Defense Acquisition System, April 5, 2002.