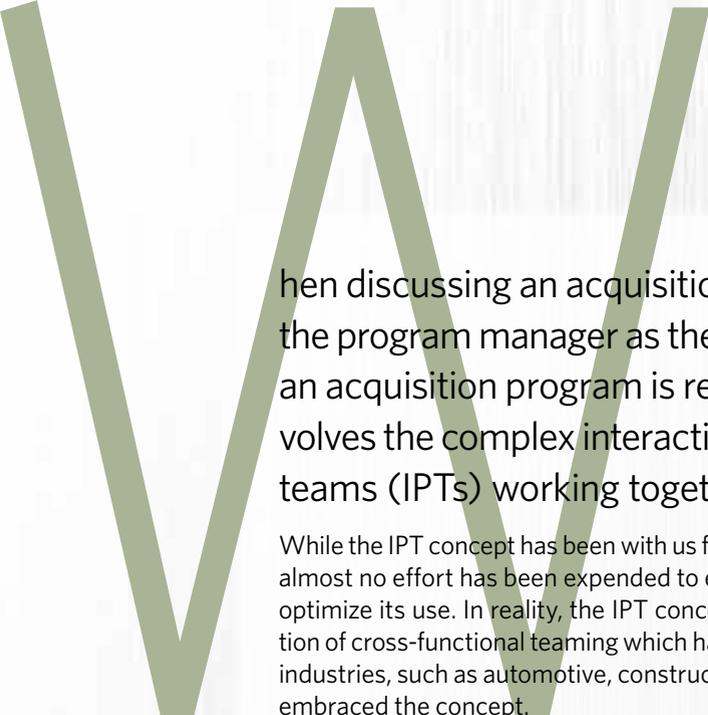


# Building the Program Office Team

Owen Gaden



When discussing an acquisition program, we often focus on the program manager as the key to success. But managing an acquisition program is really a team effort. Often, it involves the complex interaction of many integrated product teams (IPTs) working together.

While the IPT concept has been with us for over two decades, it is my experience that almost no effort has been expended to evaluate the concept or develop the tools to optimize its use. In reality, the IPT concept is nothing more than a tailored application of cross-functional teaming which has been employed in a variety of commercial industries, such as automotive, construction, and pharmaceuticals, well before DoD embraced the concept.

How do you build a collaborative and effective team? Most teams already exist in some form even before their project or program is officially started. A team leader usually does not get the benefit of building his or her team completely from scratch. Of the dozens of teams I have led, only one was a true startup. So a more practical question is how to take the people you are given and turn them into a successful team.

## Effective Leadership

Although there are examples of self-directed teams, most teams require leadership. The most important adjustment to make when you become a team leader is to realize that your role has changed from an individual contributor to being responsible for the efforts of a group. You are no longer the one who has to “roll up your sleeves” and do all the work. You have a different role of making sure you have the right mix of talent on your team and that these talented people work together.

One of the worst examples of this “roll up your sleeves” mentality was a missile development program I worked on where my boss’s boss had a Ph.D. in engineering.

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*peak  
performance*

*effective leadership*

*clear direction*

*cooperation &  
empowerment*

*communication*

*charter &  
ground rules*

*skilled team*

## DAU Offers “Leading Project Teams” Course

As an aid to team building, DAU offers its “Leading Project Teams” course which can be both tailored and conducted on-site for the sponsoring organization. The course focuses on both team building and developing project leaders. Course topics include setting team goals, team problem solving and decision making, conflict resolution, empowerment, and coaching, and leading in an environment of change. The course is a dynamic mixture of seminars and “hands on” team exercises designed to bring out the learning points for each topic.

So far, our biggest customer has been the Naval Air Systems Command where a 3-day version of the course has been offered at their locations around the country. Comments from a recent offering of the course include: “probably the most interesting class I have ever taken, very valuable exercises, wonderful course, wish it were 2 days longer.” For more information about the course, contact the author: [owen.gadeken@dau.mil](mailto:owen.gadeken@dau.mil).

We had a capable team, but every briefing to the big boss was a classic exercise in micromanagement. I remember one meeting where this boss even asked to look at the engineering drawings, which ended up taking us way off the topic. This executive was actually a pleasant person who didn’t realize he was playing the wrong role.

### Clear Direction

Every team needs a goal that they understand and fully embrace. A key role of the team leader is to provide clear direction and communicate it often.

Team members come with a diversity of backgrounds and experiences. Some are seasoned professionals with years of acquisition experience, but many more are both new to government and new to the acquisition process. Team members also come with diverse goals and objectives—professional, personal, and even hidden agendas, such as protecting their functional discipline or padding their resumé for their next job.

The challenge for the team leader is to get everyone to subordinate their personal agendas to the common goal. Team members can still represent their functional discipline or even pad their resumé, but the team goal must come first. This means team members will be called upon at times (or even frequently) to sacrifice their personal agendas in favor of the team goal. If they are unable to do so, the team leader should replace them with someone who can.

Clear direction is also specific direction, not a lofty or murky vision statement hanging on the wall in the conference room

or commander’s office. The direction must be specific enough, with numbers and costs, so team members have a clear understanding of what it means and what each of them must do to achieve it. Here is an example shared by Terry Little for one of his programs: “To produce and field by [specific date], a cruise missile system providing revolutionary combat capability with an average production price of less than (specific cost) resulting from a successful government/contractor/subcontractor teaming relationship.”

### Open Communication

This is the lifeblood of an effective team. Frequent communication is a must using both technology and face-to-face opportunities to share information, accommodate diverse perspectives, deal directly with conflicts and issues, and make timely decisions.

Increasingly, teams are being challenged by both time pressures and geography. Team members are often pulled in many directions, making it hard for them to stay connected. It is rare to find a team member who is not on other teams or special projects. Many acquisition teams are also geographically dispersed and rarely meet in person. While technology can alleviate some of these issues, there is still a need for teams to meet together and form close working relationships. Team leaders should budget and plan for these periodic meetings and visits to field locations.

Frequency of team communication is important, but authenticity of communication is even more important. It does little good to pass information around if you can’t speak freely about it within the team. Building and maintaining an open and trusting environment is one of the most important characteristics of high performing teams. Setting the climate for open and candid communication between team members is another responsibility of the team leader. This starts with the team leader “walking the talk” by being candid and honest in all team interactions. This has a positive and reinforcing effect on the clear direction when it is delivered with openness and candor. It also builds the leader’s credibility.

One team leader I worked for sent a weekly, informal e-mail to everyone on his team. The e-mails came regularly, even when the leader was on extended travel. The purpose was to share current status as well as relay his personal thoughts and feelings about what was going on. Even though he was a strong introvert, this leader also spent a good portion of his office time walking around and having informal chats with team members in their work areas. He not only learned what was going on firsthand, but was also able to influence and motivate team members in this one-on-one environment.

### Skilled Team Members

This is crucial to creating a high-performance team. There need to be enough skilled team members to reach critical mass. So the team leader must constantly focus on recruiting, developing, and retaining team members. With baby boomers

retiring and being replaced by younger and less experienced workers, building a high-performing team is becoming more challenging.

In an intermediate acquisition course I taught recently, the average acquisition experience of class members was less than 1 year. One student confessed to me that her total acquisition experience consisted of two IPT meetings she had recently attended. Although these younger workers are talented and highly motivated, they still lack experience working in DoD's complex acquisition environment. Some of this deficit can be overcome with training, but much of it will simply require more hands-on experience.

In the meantime, both DAU and many DoD organizations have set up acquisition support teams staffed with experienced acquisition professionals to provide real-time support to program teams on almost any aspect of their programs. This support ranges from specific subject matter expertise to coaching the entire team as they work through particular program issues.

### Cooperation and Empowerment

It is not enough to have a critical mass of skilled team members; they must also be team players who can work together. Many acquisition professionals are used to doing their own thing and do not adapt well to the team environment. Your team may have the best engineer, logistician, or contract specialist in the command, but their expertise is marginalized if they can't work well with others.

Equally important is the ability of each team member to speak for their parent organization which includes making real time inputs to team decisions. Team members who are there just to represent their functional discipline and who must check back with their organization on every decision defeat the real purpose of the team. So, as new members are identified to join the team, it is important to verify both their skill set and the empowerment they have from their home organization if you are working in a matrix environment.

When William Perry's first memo came out (May 10, 1995) on use of IPTs across the defense acquisition enterprise, he clearly recognized that cooperation and empowerment were "the two most important characteristics of IPTs." In the attachment to his memo, he elaborated on both concepts. "Teams must have full and open discussions with no secrets," and IPT members "are an extension of their organizations and leadership and they must be able to speak for those organizations and leaders."

One top Army project manager I interviewed told me his real success was to simply recognize the talent that already existed in the organization when he took over, make them team leaders, and give them freedom to act on behalf of their teams. His role was to make sure his teams had the clear direction, training, and resources they needed to succeed.

### Team Charter, Processes, and Ground Rules

Teams work better when they are well organized. The first tool of team organization is a charter. The charter outlines the team's purpose, membership, resources, deliverables, and accountability relationships. It is usually coordinated and signed by all participating organizations. Organizational leaders and team members may come and go so the written charter is very important to stability of the team over time.

Having a set of common processes is also important for high performing teams. The first process I recommend is a roles and responsibility matrix. This matrix tracks team members on one (usually the vertical) axis against team functions or responsibilities on the other (horizontal) axis. For each area of responsibility (such as test planning or earned value tracking), team members are coded by their role (such as lead, coordinate with, or keep informed). This matrix is very useful to make sure all important functions are covered. It also lets team members know their respective roles for each task area. Other important team processes that need to be spelled out include team communication, decision making, and conflict resolution.

Finally, top performing teams can benefit from establishing ground rules for all team meetings. Common ground rules could include full participation, don't interrupt, stay on task, and no hidden agendas. The processes and ground rules can be included in the team's charter, but they can also evolve separately over the life of the team.

Here are examples of ground rules developed by two acquisition teams:

Team One:	Team Two:
Assume noble intent.	Start on time and end on time.
Use the power of questions.	Don't shoot the messenger.
Really listen.	One speaker at a time.
Stay focused.	Everyone is encouraged to participate.
Build on each other's questions.	Come prepared.
Respect the perceptions of others.	No long-winded speeches.
Keep responses short (pithy).	Collaborate; strive for win-win.
Draw others into the discussion.	Have fun.

## Team Building

Teams don't just happen; they have to be built. Team building is the process of deliberately creating a team from a newly formed or existing group of people. Before a team can be expected to do great work on a project or program, great work has to be done on the team itself. Most of this great work is done by the team leader in guiding the team through the classic forming, storming, norming, and performing stages of team development (the Tushman Model).

A good way to start team development is to hold a team startup meeting or workshop. An off-site location can be a good way to pull team members away from their daily tasks and focus on organizing the team. The kick-off meeting is the ideal time and place for the team leader to offer clear direction and team goals and challenge the team to provide their feedback and inputs on how the goals will be achieved. This meeting also provides time for team members to really get to know each other both professionally and personally. Work-related sessions in the off-site can be supplemented with team building and social activities. One to three days may be required to do a really good job with the startup meeting.

With a good startup meeting under their belt, most teams assume they are set up for success. But success can be a moving target. Just as outside events continually impact every acquisition program, team dynamics are also subject to continuous change. Thus, every team needs to set aside time for periodic self-assessments of both how their work and their team are doing. While it is established practice to have periodic project or program reviews, it is rare to have periodic reviews of the team itself. But candid self-assessments of the team are

vital to keep it focused on their goals and working at peak performance. One of our industry guest speakers made the following comment: "Once a month, I try to rethink my team. I might pause and say, 'OK, I'm still comfortable.' I may say, 'I think we could do better if we could make this change. We may not be able to do it right now, but here's my plan. We're going to lay it out.' "

All work and no play can make for a dull team. Over time, the pressures of long hours and tight suspenses can hurt team morale. So all teams need to mix in fun events along with work projects. There are always opportunities to reward team members who do good work as well as those meeting milestones on the way to achieving team goals. These events can be turned into celebrations involving the whole team. Teams can also benefit from purely social events such as cookouts, picnics, and sports competitions. Such events help team members relax and get to know each other with the option to include family members at some events.

I am convinced there is something truly magic about a high performing team. Out of hundreds of teams I have been on in my career, I can only point to three or four that were peak performers. So the bar is set very high for any team to reach its peak performance. But top performance is still achievable if you pay attention to the basic principles reviewed in this article and work very hard. With the challenges currently facing defense acquisition programs, top-performing teams may be the only pathway to success.

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## Where Can You Get the Latest on the Better Buying Power Initiatives?

- BBP Gateway (<https://dap.dau.mil/bbp>) is your source for the latest information, guidance, and directives on better buying power in defense acquisition
- BBP Public Site (<https://acc.dau.mil/bbp>) is your forum to share BBP knowledge and experience