Putting the T Back in IPT
How to Build More Effective Integrated Product Teams
Angelo Christino

Have you ever referred to another member of the Integrated Product Team (IPT) as a teammate? Do you leave IPT meetings with clear direction and a decision made on an important issue? Does your IPT function like a “well-oiled machine”? These are all questions that I asked myself as I began to think about my experiences on IPTs.

First, what is a “team?” The Army Technical Publication 6-22.6, “Army Team Building,” defines a team as “any group that functions together to accomplish a mission or perform a collective task. A key to effective teamwork is the cooperative or coordinated effort of individuals acting together as a group or in the interests of a common goal.” If this definition doesn’t sound like the IPT in which you currently serve, then some team improvement is probably needed.

The IPT process exists to bring together people with varying perspectives and opinions to produce an “integrated product.” Because different organizations and views are represented within an IPT, it can be a powerful tool to produce a product that is greater than the sum of its parts. Sometimes, however, the IPT never establishes the teaming aspect of the process. This is not necessarily the fault of any one person or group within the IPT. Often, an IPT culture can be one of incongruence, not collaboration, with the causes ranging from historical biases to budget constraints. However, there are a few basic teaming best practices that can be applied to help put the “team” back into our IPTs.

There is not a “one size fits all” solution for building a high-performing team. Let’s explore some of the issues with IPTs based on my experiences and an approach for solving a specific issue, a horizontally aligned narrative. A new approach to the IPT’s engagement with senior leaders can help unify the team to a common purpose. Expanding on the Army Requirements Oversight Council concept through using a “Senior Leader Forum” in which every General Officer (GO) or Senior Executive Service (SES) key stakeholder of the IPT is briefed at the same time by the IPT, can help create a real-time shared
understanding of the issues at hand, how decisions are made and unify the team under a common goal.

What Is the Purpose of Your IPT?
There is a common misconception that any assembly of people in one space is a team. However, to be effective, a team must work together toward a common goal. Consider, for example, a basketball team, which has 12 individual members with five on the court at a time. If each team member has a different goal, such as each one wanting to shoot as many 3-point shots as possible, then the team will ultimately fail. The goal that gels the team is simple: Win the game. To achieve the goal, each teammate should play and make decisions to help the team win.

So, what is the goal of your IPT? If you can’t answer this question with certainty, that’s OK. Most IPTs never state a goal or a purpose of a team. In the case of the basketball team, however, lacking a clear understanding that the goal is to win each game, every player will decide to pursue individual goals, resulting in chaos on the court. The IPT must similarly know why it exists and what the goal is. How do you know the IPT is accomplishing what is needed? Without any clear purpose, how can an IPT claim victory or “win”?

Admittedly, it would be naive to think that team victory is the sole motivation for each member. Each individual also has personal goals within the team; consequently, something must unite a team around a common purpose. The concept of team of teams includes a shared sense of purpose, or an aligning narrative, as described in the recent work of Chris Fussell’s 2017 book One Mission: How Leaders Build a Team of Teams.

Is Bureaucracy Blocking Your IPT?
IPTs are considered working-level forums where the chair or other facilitator is required to moderate the debates and provide recommendations from the team to the next higher level. The level of responsibility varies, but generally speaking most IPT members report the information and decisions made within the IPT to their chains of command. This phenomenon is described by Fussell as an “information pump.” As the information is “pumped” to the next step in the IPT member’s respective bureaucratic structure, there is no “connective tissue” that aligns that message. Senior leaders then discuss that information and may or may not arrive at a shared understanding of the situation.

The current structure of “stovepiping” information into each IPT member’s respective organization does not work in today’s rapidly changing and interconnected world. Fussell describes networks as the alternative to the structured bureaucratic structures that continue the flow of stale, often disparate, information into our organiza-

tions. Networks, unlike bureaucracies, are not objects of pure structure whose properties are fixed in time. They change rapidly, and their connections are in constant motion based on the surrounding conditions. Our traditional IPTs allow networking, but only to the extent permitted by the parent organizations. Interactions and the relationships built among IPT members often are closely controlled and solid-line relationships to senior leaders are strictly hierarchical. Too often IPTs are governed by strict parent organization rules that don’t allow open sharing of information within the IPT and up the solid-line hierarchy of senior leaders. The problem of integrating potentially divergent organizational objectives into the broader IPT narrative can be addressed through networks.

It sounds like building a network is the answer to our IPT woes, right? Well, not so fast. In a purely networked organization, there is a tendency to be narrative driven—meaning each networked team has its own aligning narrative and is disconnected from the “big picture” of the larger organization. Where pure networks fail, we may be able to use some of the positives from a bureaucratic approach. You may be thinking that bureaucracies are bad. But it depends. Much like a pure network, a pure bureaucratic structure leads to issues, and many of those are highlighted in this article. Fussell describes the solution as a hybrid method. This method incorporates the rapid information flow and speed of a network and the efficiency and predictability from a bureaucratic system. The concept of an aligning narrative is at the heart of the hybrid model. This aligning narrative is a story that forces teammates to integrate their small-tribe norms into the mission enterprise.

Improving the IPT’s Horizontal Alignment
The idea is simple—create a simple narrative that coalesces the team around a few basic attributes. Sounds easy, right? Well, it can be with the right narrative and a willingness to work together. As one might suspect, there are “tribal tendencies” within acquisition. Testers, program managers, and the requirements community all have their own unique parochial objectives. Often, this organizational strategic alignment comes from a mission statement. But these alignments tend to reinforce bad habits within IPTs. Each organization within an IPT works on behalf of its respective organizational leader. The teammate carries the organization’s message and aligns vertically with the organization’s mission. The problem is that this type of team tends to reinforce the inherent bureaucratic inefficiencies in which we work. Being reluctant to share information, working toward individual (versus team) accomplishments, and having mistrust within the team result from strong vertical alignment within each teammate’s parent organization.
It is not that each organization’s missions are unimportant or are necessarily in conflict with the others. But how can teammates within an IPT align horizontally instead of vertically with their organizations’ strategic narratives? And who is responsible for horizontally aligning the IPT?

Consider the vertical versus horizontal alignment within an IPT. As discussed previously, a basketball team must work together with a shared purpose to achieve the team’s goals (assuming again that the goal is to win and excel as a team). In a network model, the basketball team would have its own narrative that might not align with that of the coaches. If the basketball team operated like a bureaucratic organization, each member might report to a different coach having a different goal in mind, which would be an example of vertical alignment. Neither way leads to success, but a horizontal aligning narrative among the teammates from the head coach would give the best chance of success, of achieving the team’s goals.

Members of an IPT tend to work within “silos,” meaning that each person within the group is responsible for a certain aspect of the process. Whether it is the test lead from the program management office or the representative from the Department of Defense oversight agency, each member of the team has an area of expertise (i.e., each member is a subject-matter expert) and represents the member’s organization’s interests within the IPT. Each of these members is aligned to a parent organization’s mission. The focus on vertical alignment within a team can make it difficult for these individuals to horizontally align to a specific narrative that is unique to the team.

Why is that? Articles such as “Why Strategy Execution Unravels—and What to Do About It” in the March 2015 Harvard Business Review explain how this strong strategic vertical alignment between teams actually makes it more difficult to work together. It may seem obvious, but if one builds a team of individuals who focus on individual goals rather than team accomplishments, it can be much harder to horizontally align to a common narrative within the team. This is not to say that having organizational mission statements and “role players” (such as a 3-point-shooter specialty on a basketball team) within a team is not important but that the inability of team members to align to a strategic team narrative creates the problems.

**How Can Senior Leaders Help Develop High-Performing IPTs?**

Who develops the narrative that horizontally aligns the IPT? The narrative must come from a leader, typically at a higher organizational level than those within the team, to create the context in which the team will operate. The horizontal aligning narrative should tell a story that aligns each of the teammates to a common mission and casts new light on each teammate’s role within the team. The horizontal narrative should also emphasize the traits and characteristics that will be required from each teammate for the team to be successful. The narrative should encourage collaboration within the teams, build relationships, and begin to break down barriers that exist among “tribes.” Fussell describes the aligning narrative of Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal, a retired four-star U.S. Army general and forebear of the concept “Team of Teams” as “Credibility = Proven Competence + Integrity + Relationships.”

Developing a simple, profound horizontally-aligning narrative is much easier to say (or write about) than to do, and an aligning narrative is only one aspect of how a team can improve its performance. These changes require a cultural shift. And, the cultural shift isn’t exclusive to the working level members of the IPT.

Senior leader (GO/SES) engagement at the IPT level is lacking. More frequent engagement with senior leaders would help the team horizontally align to a common IPT.
narrative. There are pockets of success, such as those teams with IPT charters that lay out a foundational understanding of that aligning narrative, but it is more than requiring an IPT charter for every IPT. It is a fundamental change in how we operate within teams. The relationships built within the IPTs are fundamental to the IPT’s success. But, the relationships the IPT builds with senior leaders, those who are generating the aligning narrative, are necessary for team success. This doesn’t mean micromanaging the IPT but ensuring that the team is aligning to the horizontal narrative of the senior leaders. In fact, the IPT should be engaging with a senior leader forum to ensure that everyone is given the same information and an equal opportunity to engage in the process. For example, within a test and evaluation IPT, the senior leader forum would have representatives from the U.S. Army Test and Evaluation Command, U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, program executive office, and Army Staff. More oversight does not improve team performance—but frequent, open and honest discussions are critical to creating and maintaining the relationships between individual IPT members and senior.

Cultural change can be difficult and requires a willingness to change within every level of the Army. Fortunately, the Army has recently seen the need for change, including how we operate within teams. The Army has introduced the concept of cross-functional teams, or CFTs, along with establishing a four-star command, Army Futures Command (AFC) to alleviate some of the very problems outlined in this article. The GOs and SES leaders involved with the newly formed AFC and CFTs face the arduous task of pushing the Army into areas that may challenge some stakeholders’ long-held and deeply entrenched beliefs. Individuals must reconcile their beliefs with the Army’s mission and its unifying narrative. The narrative should not question a teammate’s loyalty to the past, but it should push individuals to unite and continually improve the team’s performance toward meeting the Army’s goals.

**Conclusion**

The first step in problem solving is to recognize that there is a problem. The Army is poised to make great strides in cross-organizational teaming, and I am excited to see what the future holds. Complicated problems such as this are not solved overnight and there will be painful moments as the Army transitions to a more horizontally aligned team environment.

IPTs should not be considered a hurdle to achieving success. There is no substitute for a high-performing team. But my experience working with the acquisition community has shown me areas that can be improved. Each IPT member must know his or her purpose and have an active role in the IPT. Each IPT member must be free to interact and network with peers and leaders in every organization, and the artificial walls of bureaucracy must be eliminated. Creating a horizontally aligned narrative among the IPTs can help achieve a common purpose and “one-mission” attitude among IPT members. Senior leaders must be active participants in the IPT process, and engage in more cross-organizational forums that allow issues to surface and critical dialogue to take place. Overly formal briefings through each organizational chain of command can hamper the creation of a horizontally aligned narrative by reinforcing restrictive bureaucratic structures (for instance, those affecting information sharing and open dialogue).

I hope you have gained some insights into how to improve the IPT process and begin to put the “team” back in IPT. There is no silver bullet that will solve every IPT’s woes. Even with an aligning narrative, senior leader forums and the creation of CFTs, nothing guarantees success. Every team member should accept ultimate responsibility for an IPT’s success or failure.

*The author can be contacted at Angelo.J.Christino.Civ@mail.mil.*