



# DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP **to Empower** Acquisition Professionals

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**A**FTER RETIRING FROM THE AIR FORCE, I secured a position as the Air Force's Rotary Weapon Systems Spares Manager. One aircraft we supported was the CV-22 Osprey. As spares manager, I was on the retail end of the acquisition process supporting the System Program Office (SPO) receiving spares and distributing them to the field. This was not my first time working directly with an SPO, but it was the first time I worked this closely with one. This closeness was necessary as we initially fielded the CV-22. This required coordinated synchronization of spares distribution as aircraft entered the field.

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Although I was on the outside of the SPO looking in, my position gave me a good view on how an SPO worked. It was obvious that the program manager (PM) was large and in-charge. Everything was controlled by the PM, and, as is common in many Department of Defense (DoD) organizations, there tended to be a vertical organizational structure to the SPO from the component acquisition executive, program executive officer, division leadership, senior PMs, down to the junior PMs.

Fast forward a decade, and I am a contracting officer (CO) at a component command in charge of numerous contracts supporting Acquisition Category (ACAT) III programs. Again, the PMs were in charge, but I had a seat at the table as the CO. I held a contracting warrant and had what some academic texts call “expert power.” Since few people outside the contracting profession understand government contracting, my experience, education, and authority held a level of influence within each of the supported programs. Again, we worked in a vertically structured organization with specific levels of responsibilities and authorities.

Fast forward another decade (yes, I’m that old), and I am the PM for three ACAT III programs. However, a funny thing happened to me somewhere on the way to the office ... my perspective on leadership changed. Having previously served as a senior non-commissioned officer, I was educated on leadership models and styles and comfortable in transitioning between them. I found that it wasn’t the models of leadership I needed to correct to succeed in my new role as PM. It was my perspective on leadership itself. The military had taught me to view leadership as a leader-centric activity. There are leaders and followers, period. Leaders lead and followers follow. Simple, right?

### **Digital Age and the New Leadership Environment**

But it isn’t that simple. Something changed from the conception of these leader-centric models. I’m not even sure my parents were aware at the time, but it all started 6 years prior to my birth when two Bell Lab engineers invented the metal-oxide-semiconductor field-effect transistor (MOSFET). The MOSFET is the basic building block of modern electronics. As the most widely manufactured device in history, it revolutionized the electronics industry, transformed our world economy, and allowed mankind to leap into the Digital Age.

In today’s Digital Age, information has become ubiquitous and extremely portable. However, prior to invention of the MOSFET, this was not the case. Information took time and effort to distribute. For example, although the World War I armistice occurred on the poetic date of the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month of 1918, fighting did not cease until Jan. 5, 1919. It took weeks to notify all of the German commanders that Germany had surrendered. Today, we could get that done in seconds with a tweet and a hashtag, thanks to the semiconductor.

When information was not easily accessible, it had the characteristics of currency—held by few, commanding by its presence, and tending to be leader-controlled. This coalescing of information among leader groups gave those communities great influence over follower groups. Conversely, in today’s digital environment, information has the characteristics of an electrical current—made by many, quickly shared, and peer-controlled. This change in information dynamics has significantly affected our social and organizational cultures.

Within our social culture, print news is nearly extinct. Who reads a newspaper anymore? Information is now aggregated onto websites giving people easy access to information and much more data to consume. This new availability of information has led to information overload and the demand for “safe spaces” from opposing views. Access to information has become so powerful within today’s world that American social media companies now work closely

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with socialist regimes to limit the information allowed into the borders of certain socialist countries for fear people will rise up. For example, in March 2019, revolutionaries in Hong Kong began developing grass-roots support almost exclusively through social media, demanding freedom from China. This single event may have changed how future uprisings and revolutions may be instigated and fought.

Armed with new information power, people are capable of and more likely to self-organize, challenge the status quo, and feel empowered to express their views. Individuals are now empowered to draw others to their cause and demand a voice in the conversation. Our workforce has also been affected by this new phenomenon and, as a result, been given more power.

## **Leading a New Workforce Within a New Culture**

While I was an employee in a large DoD organization, our commander had an "Ask Us Anything" social media platform. And ask the commander anything is exactly what the people did. Instead of being a way to reach out to the masses, it became a way for the masses to voice discontent, whether relevant or not to the organization's goals. People started visiting the site just to see what astonishing query or demand was presented to the commander that day. This was not an uprising like the one in Hong Kong, but it was a similar opportunity for people to challenge the status quo, feel empowered and express their views. Regardless of the relevance or lack thereof to the organization's mission, they expressed their views. One person even demanded that the commander address an issue about the saltiness of the fries at the base Burger King. People became so emboldened by this new power that the site was eventually taken down.

Another phenomenon created by our interconnected world is the ability of people to learn from each other. For example, with nearly as much ease as turning on a light switch, you can go to YouTube and reveal videos that will enlighten you on just about anything. Type in "how to perform heart surgery" and dozens of videos are presented giving nearly step-by-step instructions. No matter how expensive healthcare gets, I wouldn't recommend this as an option for open heart surgery.

Professional organizations, employers, and educational institutions have recognized and embraced this new medium of teaching elevating the capabilities of the workforce and further distributing expert influence and competencies within our organizations. Information, flowing like electricity and easily distributed, has created a highly capable, well-educated, and broadly skilled labor force within our acquisition community. Although leadership models have tried to keep up, I am convinced that leading today's acquisition professionals requires more than customary modes and methods.

Our leadership styles and practices must advance to meet the evolving changes of our new culture and workforce. Therefore, it is essential for acquisition leaders to continually search out new leadership thought. One new leadership movement popular in educational circles over the past decade and potentially compatible with this new trend is Distributed Leadership.

## **Distributed Leadership Is Compatible with Digital Age**

Distributed Leadership is still a nascent theory. Yet, an examination of it reveals promise in engaging with the current workplace culture. Leadership models and styles always will be important considerations, but unlike customary models that put the leader out front, Distributed Leadership highlights the practice of leadership at multiple points within the organization instead of the leaders themselves. Furthermore, Distributed Leadership is not a model or style. Rather, it is a "system" where responsibility for leadership stretches across the social framework of the organization with the recognition that there are numerous leadership activities in various situations occurring simultaneously within an organization. As a PM and CO, I found that our acquisition communities were populated with highly qualified professionals. They work with minimal supervision and have a high degree of technical ability. This creates an interesting dynamic within the organization as each of these professionals have a degree of information or 'expert' power to wield.

Furthermore, the acquisition profession has become extremely complex with the result that that leadership relies on mid-level acquisition professionals to be out front

in major organizational muscle movements. This gives mid-level professionals significant influence because they control access and flow of information and, thereby, influence and help set organizational direction. This influence is anchored in the information they choose to discern, create, and document. These professionals and their teams, considering (or not) policy or governance, make or create nearly unilateral decisions at key decision points, through information they select and contextualize. The assumption that policy or governance is enough to influence direction of these efforts may no longer be valid. Policy and governance, in an effort to frame all situations, quickly lose influence in today's continuously evolving environment.

Consider the Government Accountability Office (GAO) denial of a recent protest (<https://www.gao.gov/docket/B-417011.1>) in a decision that supported skills development outreach and training programs as prototypes procurable under Other Transaction Authority (OTA). The prototype determination was supported by requirement documents promulgated by acquisition professionals who chose to categorize these requirements as prototypes. GAO's decision to deny the protest ultimately came down to a matter of semantics on how the requirement was defined, documented, and solicited by acquisition professionals. This may have set an interesting precedent for the future procurement of training programs by the organization involved.

So let's go back to my leadership transformation. Relatively new to the position as PM, I relied heavily on my team of acquisition professionals. This dependence naturally resulted in conjoint responsibility for our program's success. Completely unknown to me at the time and purely out of self-preservation, I began to practice distributed leadership. Although I was the PM, and was responsible for delivering my program, I turned leadership or influence over to technical or functional experts on certain aspects of the program. This is where the "system" of leadership can be witnessed among the variables of leader, follower, and situation. The Distributed Leadership "system" considers the interrelation between leader, follower, and situation, with the understanding that none of the three elements remain permanently static. In select situations, I voluntarily converted to follower where a technical staffer was more qualified to take the lead. I did not abdicate my position as PM, but knew that allowing others to have a significant hand in leading the program was necessary for our success.

### **Distributing Leadership = Distributing Power**

The essence of Distributed Leadership is sharing leadership power. In an organization in which Distributed Leadership prevails, power is shared and lines of responsibility

are broadly drawn and allowed to blur. Thus, leadership becomes an organizational quality instead of a bestowal on select members. This does not mean that there no longer is a place for formal leaders, but they must defer to others who have more expertise. However, in this deference, the formal leader has an active role in anticipation of eventual resumption of leadership responsibilities. This is empowerment at a basic level.

You may have seen facets of this in your acquisition organizations, but in some ways we have failed to fully embrace it. The call for less control and more empowerment has been heard at the highest levels. As a result, less measured methodologies like OTA and middle-tier acquisitions are gaining traction in our acquisition conversations. These activities reduce not only governance, but put decisions and influence in the hands of others.

A May 2010 *Harvard Business Review* article, "Sharing Leadership to Maximize Talent," identified the following suggestions for sharing leadership that echoes Distributed Leadership practices.

- Give power away to the most qualified individuals to strengthen their capabilities.
- Define the limits of decision-making power.
- Cultivate a climate in which people feel free to take initiative on assignments.
- Give qualified people discretion and autonomy over their tasks and resources and encourage them to use these tools.
- Don't second guess the decisions of those you have empowered to do so.
- Consider yourself a resource rather than the manager.
- Set appropriate follow-up meetings to review progress and take corrective action if necessary.

### **Sharing Leadership Power Has Its Benefits**

Sharing leadership and the information that accompanies it allows people in formal leadership positions to create positive inroads within the organization's network, while generating trust and flattening the organizational structure. A flatter structure shortens the information path to and from organizational members, creates opportunities, and generates trust necessary for members to recognize and tackle opportunities as they arise.

Leadership is not executed in a vacuum. Leadership behaviors affect the organization's interpersonal network. Watercooler talk still goes on. It's just done instantly and efficiently through channels like Skype or Snapchat. Leaders should consider tapping into these new mediums, sharing and creating information that drives initiative and empowerment. As organizational needs are generated with no obvious solution, perhaps a quick social media post or



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instant message to the organization will produce an innovative solution. But leadership must be willing to share that information, receive the feedback, and allow organizational members to take leadership in developing the answer.

Leaders of organizations also must occupy key spaces in workplace networks, be sensitive to the situation, and influence information being distributed. Attempts like the “Ask Us Anything” website to occupy a key space in the information network fail because leadership allowed others to fill the vacuum of information and drive influence. In contrast, leadership must persistently inhabit the space and understand that information, like influence, is a shared resource.

Sharing leadership power may also reduce the walls of tribalism that can arise within our acquisition communities. We all understand that the PM is responsible for delivering desired capabilities, and the acquisition team supports that goal. Nevertheless, when one or more of the members of the acquisition team (PM, CO, test manager, etc. ... ) reaches for full and unrelenting control of the conversation, team members can become alienated and tribalism result. However if members feel empowered and consider themselves, regardless of rank or position, to be joint leaders within the organization, leadership is distributed together with a sense of responsibility.

Aspects of Distributed Leadership may already exist in various forms within your organization. Nevertheless, moving your organization to a fuller Distributed Leadership framework requires building leadership capacity within your workforce that will develop initiative and empowerment. There is hidden talent in our acquisition organizations that we need to tap into. Followers who possess hidden talent may be unfamiliar with acting in a leadership role and need instruction in how to recognize opportunities to lead, as well as on emerging leadership techniques.

The *Harvard Business Review* article suggested cultivating a climate in which people feel free to take the initiative. Instruction on recognizing those opportunities goes a long way in cultivating and/or exposing our hidden talent resources. Moreover, instruction in current leadership models, such as Transformational Leadership, and application within a “system” of leadership will prove invaluable. It will give members a leadership toolset to begin with.

### Times, They Are a-Changin’, and So Should We

As Bob Dylan sang in 1964, “The times they are a-changin’.” Leadership practices within our acquisition community must consider changing with them. Within today’s networked, information-rich world, we must view information and influence like an electric current. It is made by many and should be quickly shared. Handling it any differently will lead to a lack of innovation, trust, and empowerment within your organization. To develop Distributed Leadership’s culture, leadership power must be shared and leadership capacity increased. Broadly drawing lines of responsibility, permitting those lines to blur, giving power to qualified individuals, and providing wide decision-making freedom will develop a sense of empowerment among employees and expose hidden talent. Distributing leadership will make leadership an organizational quality and a sustainable competitive advantage within our acquisition community.

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### MDAP/MAIS Program Manager Changes

With the assistance of the Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Defense Acquisition* magazine publishes the names of incoming and outgoing program managers for major defense acquisition programs (MDAPs) and major automated information system (MAIS) programs. This announcement lists such changes of leadership for both civilian and military program managers late in 2019.

#### Navy/Marine Corps

**CAPT Jonathan C. Garcia** relieved **CAPT John J. Keegan** as program manager for Surface Ship Weapons (PEO IWS 3.0) on Nov. 8, 2019.

**CAPT Andrew J. Thomson** relieved **CAPT Jonathan C. Garcia** as program manager for Command and Control (PEO IWS 6.0) on Nov. 27, 2019.