

Organizational Leadership Challenges

L200, Crucible Essay

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Many of the positions I've held in the Army have had their own unique leadership challenges. These positions allowed me to exercise and develop many different leadership techniques and experiences in varying organizations. My last leadership position, as a Program Manager with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Baltimore District, proved to be the most challenging position of my career. It offered new organizational leadership challenges and dramatically impacted my basic beliefs on leadership. With significant organizational differences from a standard military organization, this leadership experience opened my eyes to the fact that leadership is much more than giving direction. This position changed my leadership views and emphasized to me leaders should always rely on their ability to influence and motivate rather than simply direct, should always seek to empower their employees to the greatest extent, and should work to manage information flow within all levels of an organization as an enabler to leading effectively.

What made this job difficult were the significant responsibilities entrusted to me as Program Manager and as head of the District of Columbia Integrated Programs Office (DCIPO). The DCIPO was initially established to oversee a \$700 million renovation and construction program for the D.C. school system. With this program ending upon my arrival, my more significant organizational problems centered around finding a role for this office in the D.C. area providing construction services for a new variety of customers. As Program Manager, I was responsible for a primary office of 50 government employees among four offices throughout the District of Columbia region. The DCIPO gradually took on responsibilities for overseeing over \$90 million in annual construction and renovation projects during my year in the position. These projects supported various federal customers to include the Fort Myer Military Community (FMMC) on Ft. Myer and Ft. McNair, the National Defense University (NDU), the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), Medical Command projects on Andrews Air Force Base, the National Cancer Institute, Arlington National Cemetery, and support for the Architect of the Capitol on Capitol Hill.

Some of the ongoing conditions under which I assumed this responsibility added additional difficulties enabling some of the leadership challenges I experienced. The timing of my transition occurred very quickly. My assumption of responsibilities as head of the DCIPO forced me to assume

responsibilities for vital office functions on which I had yet to gain a working knowledge. Additional challenges included retaining all my previous responsibilities directly overseeing the construction of a \$115 million facility for NDU for the first four months until a replacement was found. I also remained heavily involved in the project throughout my job as Program Manager because of the historical knowledge I possessed with the project, the overall importance of the project within the district, and the trust I built with the many different project stakeholders. Also, due to the onset of BRAC related projects in other district offices and the retirement of numerous government employees over half of the office turned over during the year. The office leadership placed significant effort in the hiring of new employees and the training of these employees in a timely manner to fill critical positions needed to maintain an appropriate level of service for our customers.

The organization of Corps of Engineer districts are complex, making the exercise of leadership challenging. This forced me to adapt my leadership and management styles significantly. Districts are matrix organizations with both horizontal and vertical authorities for all projects. This structure means that the authority for any specific action may rest with a variety of individuals and, usually, not all were present within my office and under my direct authority. Under the district, vertical authorities were grouped by function to include construction, engineering, contracting, operations, resource management, counsel, and project management. All these functions fell under their respective functional supervision chains. However, the execution of an individual project relied on a slice of every functional group, led by a Project Manager forming a Project Delivery Team (PDT). The Project Manager was in charge of the project, but had no specific authority over anyone in the PDT. PDTs also included other government agency stakeholders involved in the project. This matrix organization was also represented down under the DCIPO structure with the Program Manager in charge of those within the DCIPO and the various projects assigned to the office. Even within the DCIPO, vertical supervision chains for construction, engineering, and contracting, carried all the way down to the lowest levels from the district. Almost everyone in the DCIPO office had more than one person to answer to in the performance of their duties.

Because of this complex structure and the multiple lines of supervision, I found the most significant challenge to leading within the organization was the requirement to lead, in many circumstances, without always having specific authority to simply unilaterally direct action. Instead, leading, in most situations, required the ability to influence and motivate others, and to work collaboratively in a group to solve more complex issues, sometimes through negotiation. Leadership was most important in the resolving of some of the tougher conflicts occurring on projects. Unresolved issues would impact a project's status, costing a project precious time and money in some of the most extreme circumstances. In situations such as these, my ability to treat others fairly and convince others that a particular compromise was beneficial to all parties was one of the most challenging and rewarding exercises of the position. In developing these techniques I realized in all leadership situations, while a leader may have the authority to simply direct an action, it is always better for that leader to rely on their ability to influence and motivate first, rather than simply direct the action by that authority. In general, by doing so, subordinates will have a better understanding of why they are performing a specific task and will already be convinced as to the benefits of the action.

Another aspect of leadership that was at first difficult to grasp was the requirement to rely more heavily on others, with different skills, talents, and responsibilities, to perform their job to the required standard and resist any form of micromanagement. Because of my unfamiliarity with certain office functions, I initially had no choice but to allow others significant latitude in the day to day performance of their duties. Unlike previous leadership experiences where, from the moment I took over, I had a fair grasp of the organization and how it worked, taking over as program manager forced me to be extremely flexible from the start. This proved to be beneficial in many ways. Most significantly, I had no preconceived notions of how the office was supposed to operate and how people were supposed to perform their duties. Also, because of the complexity of some of the office projects, certain issues were so complex that they could only be resolved with the input and collaboration of various different technically proficient individuals to address the problem. Also, by allowing others to exercise greater freedom in the performance of their duties, it allowed those who were capable, the ability to perform their

duties in a manner most efficient for both them and the people they worked with. As time went on, I was able to identify those who needed additional help and provide that help through additional guidance or training. I found that subordinates were extremely appreciative of leaders who listened to their recommendations, trusted in their judgment, and gave them the flexibility to institute change at their respective levels and to be a part of implementing change at higher levels making the workplace more efficient for them and others. In the end, by trusting and empowering others, I was able to draw upon the vast experience and skills of the employees working with me to help tackle the toughest problems.

In addition to these difficulties, the other challenge in leading this type of organization is the deliberate effort and planning it took to manage the information flow throughout the different office functions in support of the numerous ongoing projects. While managing information is not leadership in itself, a leader would have a hard time being successful without managing it effectively. Successful management of information allows leaders to maintain a good pulse on the status of the many different actions occurring simultaneously within a complex organization. Managing the flow also allows leaders to interject guidance and direction when necessary to augment the information being transmitted and to ensure actions are being handled by the appropriate people at the appropriate level. Each project had its own unique challenges and, with the variety of projects and customers, keeping everyone informed on the status of the project and project issues was a routine concern. Overcoming challenges with each project usually required the input and support from numerous different people operating at different levels in different locations working simultaneously to resolve them within a satisfactory timeframe. More fundamentally, I found proper information management allowed me one avenue of assessing the organization and the individuals within my organization. By addressing issues with information flow from the start, I was able to quickly make up ground in understanding some of the office functions I was not originally very knowledgeable on.

Serving as Program Manager provided many lessons having significant impacts on my leadership style. I was placed in a challenging leadership position, with vast responsibilities, at a difficult transition point for the DCIPO. These difficulties helped me to learn valuable leadership lessons that would have

been difficult to learn in a traditional military leadership position. In many respects, my lack of knowledge on some of the office functions placed me in a challenging position I had not been in before with previous assignments. In order to compensate, I was forced to rely strongly on other leadership skills I had not previously, routinely exercised and are usually used only when convenient when leading in a military unit. In the end, I found that leading primarily through inspiring, motivating, and by empowering others, as opposed to providing specific, narrow direction, had a dramatic impact in the performance of those working for me and should be central to every leader's philosophy. I also learned that within a complex organization, information management was much more difficult, yet even more essential to the exercise of leadership. These valued lessons will have a lasting impact on my leadership philosophy and style. As a result, I will seek to continue to expand on what I have learned, take them with me to future leadership assignments and impart them to junior leaders whenever possible.