

## **Teams of Leaders: Raising the Level of Collaborative Leader-Team Performance**

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### **ABSTRACT**

As organizations increasingly realize the need to learn and act more quickly and effectively, they discover their ability to form diverse, multi-faceted teams with shared purpose, trust, competence, and confidence is paramount to success. Technology and the subsequent broad acceptance of knowledge management approaches have revolutionized the way we think of and practice our business, but alone fall short of enabling teams to reach the high levels of performance required. While the U.S. Government shifts to a philosophy of collaboration and transparency, its operations and crisis or humanitarian disaster responses are requiring the integration of the whole government. A new approach to forming and developing distributed, cross-boundary, multi-functional, and interagency teams is required.

This paper explores the question of how teams of leaders from sovereign and diverse organizations with different operating mechanics and approaches, and sometimes incompatible interests and philosophies, find the shared situational understanding, purpose, trust, and confidence to achieve success together. Based on results of multiple applications of this approach with different types of teams, and recently piloted in the U.S. Army's European Command (EUCOM), the approach has shown that when we combine the multipliers of high-performing team qualities with modern collaborative technology tools and sound information/knowledge management processes, enabled by a simple leader-team development exercise, we create a synergistic effect that improves the qualities of shared purpose, trust, and team competence; increases confidence; generates "actionable understanding;" and accelerates sustainable, high-performance.

### **ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

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### INTRODUCTION

Does your organization have a culture of collaboration? Is there a high level of shared operational purpose across your project teams? Is shared trust among members of those teams as high as it could be, and does your organization have a deliberate approach to forming successful diverse teams of leaders, either co-located or virtual? Or are organizational boundaries, cultural differences, time, and geography degrading the performance of your team efforts? A dramatic transformation is underway, changing how the world connects and collaborates. The whole of governments, as well as industry, face a new challenge—how to continuously engage in a networked world, and learn, decide, and act quicker than their opponents. Cross-boundary and multifunctional teams are often created to work through the complexities of the organizational hierarchy and bureaucracies, but often the results are less than desired.

This global connectivity ensures that significant events, such as humanitarian assistance, pandemic health, market illnesses, and adversarial military or terrorist activities, which once took months or years to manifest, will now take only hours or days. Our institutions were built for slower times and their accompanying processes anchor us to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Cultures and methods are being challenged while traditional structures are being scrutinized, dissected, deconstructed, and reengineered, necessitating entirely new approaches to how business and government form and operate leader-teams.

This paper explores the question of how teams of leaders from sovereign and diverse organizations with different operating mechanics and approaches, and sometimes incompatible interests and philosophies, find the shared situational understanding, purpose, trust, and confidence to achieve success together. We address the challenges faced by virtual and co-located teams, the distinction between hierarchical teams and teams of leaders, how teams across the whole of government must be nested for successful integration, and offer

criteria for defining high-performing teams. We describe a proven approach for developing and sustaining high-performing teams of leaders, which includes activities and exercises that can be used to improve team communication and collaboration during the stages of team development. And, finally, we provide case study evidence of how the approach was applied to the whole of U.S. Government interagency teams. This approach has demonstrated its ability to help diverse teams of leaders reach a higher level of performance faster than traditional techniques.

### WORKING IN TEAMS

Generically speaking, the belief that working in “teams” makes us more creative and productive is widely held by organizational leaders who are quick to assume such teams are the best way to get results. However, research shows that “teams underperform despite the additional resources” (Coutu, 2009). Richard Hackman (2002), in his book *Leading Teams*, outlines five conditions that must exist for teams to be successful:

- An understanding of who is on the team
- Compelling direction or purpose
- An enabling structure
- Organization support
- Expert team coaching

Hackman suggests the failure to ensure these conditions requires us to rethink the importance of teams in organizations. However, teams can achieve high performance if they have a structured team process approach. The more accurate statement is that organizations need not rethink the *role* of the team, but the process of teaming and how to launch and develop teams. Providing a supportive context to enable high performance is often an afterthought in many organizations. “We spend millions on individual and collective training” according to Army Lieutenant Colonel Brad Hilton. “We assume we develop teams well, and the truth is we do develop our hierarchical unit teams well. But those teams are from our same culture, training background, wear the same uniform

and share a common language. Where we don't do as well is when we are forced to team across organizational, service, interagency, or multinational boundaries" (Hilton, 2009).

### **Do Teams Work?**

Technology and continuous connectivity do not solve the problems Hackman describes. The ability to stay connected to an ever-larger network is outpacing traditional work processes and social norms. Today, with the explosion of readily available mobile devices, this trend is more likely to grow. Generations X and Y are well ahead of the baby boomers in their acceptance and application of collaborative technologies, but often lack the relationship building skills necessary to work in diverse teams.

According to Hackman, teams underperform when the basic conditions are in not in place (2002). Currently the military lacks the doctrine and supporting structure for developing high-performing Joint Interagency Intergovernmental Multinational (JIIM) teams. While it does address 'teaming' in general for homogeneous and hierarchical teams, it provides little if any 'how to' approach to form and launch a diverse team of leaders, guide them through their work, or sustaining the team as membership, missions, and environments fluctuate. Current military doctrine, let alone that of most industries and government agencies, does not address ways to build the knowledge, skills, and abilities required for effective high-performing teams. Nowhere does doctrine address teams of leaders.

Of the 120 top teams Hackman (2002) and his team researched, almost all agreed they had set unambiguous boundaries. Yet, when asked to describe the team, less than 10% agreed about who was on the team and why. More recent interviews with teams in April-May 2009 showed similar results and are discussed later in the paper. Teams must also have a clear, compelling direction and a shared purpose; the difficulty is creating that shared understanding of vision and purpose. As Hackman also discovered, larger teams increase the number of links to be managed, and maintaining those links causes team performance to suffer. This is an even greater problem today as teams become more virtual.

### **Leader Teams: Where Work Gets Done**

What has become clear is that most organizational work is accomplished in teams. Less clear is that many efforts are now being conducted in *leader-teams*. Groups of action-oriented decision makers from multiple disciplines, functions, or organizations who come together to accomplish a specific purpose, and are

nesting themselves into larger efforts to maximize capability and problem-solving. Generally, leader-team members are not bound by an explicit hierarchical structure, but retain the authority to reach back to their organization of origin and generate action. The leader-team members may be an organizational representative or a leader in an organization, but each brings a unique contribution to the effort and acts as a decisive driver for the functions they represent. They are linked through purpose, but often lack clear lines of authority and accomplish work by finding mutual benefit and co-opting others.

In today's fast-changing environment, these leader teams are frequently nested into a larger network of effort. However, their inoperability is often spotlighted as the natural byproduct of biases created by stove-piped organizational hierarchies, cultures, regulatory systems, geographical dispersion, policies and procedures, inconsistent languages or lexicons, and juxtaposed organizational interests. These obstacles hang as an albatross to interoperability and high performance. Consequentially, friction and stagnation reduce agility and ability with, at times, deplorable results.

Nowhere is the phenomenon more starkly realized than the local, state, and federal responses to hurricane Katrina. As the Bush Administration's 2006 critique of the federal response notes:

At the most fundamental level, the current system fails to define federal responsibility for national preparedness in catastrophic events. Nor does it establish clear, comprehensive goals along with an integrated means to measure their progress and achievement. Instead, the United States currently has guidelines and individual plans, across multiple agencies and levels of government that do not yet constitute an integrated national system that ensures unity of effort. (*White House, 2006, p.66*)

The challenges of Katrina were not anomalies. They were, and in many cases remain, inevitabilities. Rather than address the outdated processes, too often the solution has been to create additional parent bureaucracies that pull decision-making to distances devoid of situational context. Decisive action is further constricted. These impediments dominate the effort with such efficacy that the notion of governmental unity and efficiency is the exception, while functionality is underwritten as exceptional performance. Understandably, the ability to anticipate, plan, and resource for such a cataclysmic event is indeed difficult. The range of potential crises to the city of

New Orleans alone, much less every city in America, is nearly infinite. Without a deliberate structure to build the skills and abilities to rapidly develop a common understanding of complex situations, ill-structured requirements, and potential interagency solutions, the realization of those good intentions will continue to result in frustration.

## **RECOGNIZING NEW CHALLENGES**

As governmental agency missions expand to include lead and supportive roles in the JIIM context, so does the recognition of this vacuum. General Martin Dempsey's remarks to the 2009 Joint Warfighting Conference define the challenge of the next 20 years in terms of JIIM networks. In circumstances such as Katrina, there may be no "lead" agency at all, requiring each team or agency to adapt to the other while organizational leaders must rapidly come together in tandem to form cooperative teams. As Gen Dempsey states, "If we are to be truly committed to becoming a Joint Interagency Intergovernmental and Multinational Team, then our interagency and coalition teammates are going to have to match our decentralization of capability and decision-making authority with their own" (Dempsey, 2009).

Implicit in Gen Dempsey's address is that constructive relationships among agencies, industries, and nations are central to the success or failure of the decentralized JIIM network. That is not to say that we are helpless. Subscribing to a few basic conditions for productive teaming can improve performance and solve these complex, ill-structured problems with relative ease. A model that allows organizations to form teams that learn, adapt, and innovate faster is a necessity to succeed in the high-risk dynamics of 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Remarkable advantages can be recognized if organizations have a deliberate approach to creating and maintaining collaborative team environments. People like to be part of 'the team,' but only when that team functions with a high degree of shared purpose, trust, and competence. Success builds confidence and empowers the team to confront more difficult challenges. In simple terms, applying sound teaming principles and practices is a cost effective way to increase profits and productivity by tapping the contributions of a broader pool of talent. But we cannot wait till the next crisis to begin developing our leaders for teams.

More than eight years ago, the U.S. Army School for Command Preparation successfully replaced process-oriented training with early versions of this approach to develop situational understanding and cognitive-skills

for critical thinking and reasoning in officers selected for command. In 2005, COL Mick Nicholson, commander of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Bridge Combat Team, 10<sup>th</sup> Mountain Division, in preparation for their deployment to Afghanistan, adopted the approach and used it for developing his horizontal and vertical leader-teams. LTG William Dubik later refined and applied the methodology to the Stryker Brigade Combat Teams at Fort Lewis, Washington, where it is still used to create improved understanding of the combat environment and enable knowledge transfer from troops in the theater to those at Ft. Lewis preparing for deployment (Stryker Net, 2006).

Most recently, the approach has been applied by the U.S. Army Europe (EUCOM) against a number of staff directorates. In Spring 2009, EUCOM expanded the approach to the nested interagency-military teams required for whole-of-government interoperability during an operational crisis. The results were positive in all cases where it was applied and the approach has only matured with application. Today, it has become known as the *Teams of Leaders (ToL)* approach and has shown notable ability in building and sustaining team relationships, actionable understanding, and performance by increasing the quality and quantity of both communication and collaboration. It has demonstrated the ability to significantly improve the team's understanding of a situation and its shared purpose and vision for an operation. Through this relationship building process, ToL improves trust and helps develop the sense of shared competence and confidence required for complex mission sets while incorporating greater numbers of people and organizations.

## **Defining High Performance**

High-performing teams have an increased sense of shared vision and purpose. They have a strong sense of trust for one another and understand the competencies that each member brings. Likewise, as they work together, they develop a team competency based on agreed upon operating procedures and shared methods for brainstorming and collaborating. These qualities, when applied successfully, appear to increase team confidence. Of the teams we observed that were rated as "high-performing" by peer teams and superiors, each had higher levels of these qualities. However, note that in addition to traditional teaming qualities, high-performance leader-teams must also achieve an additional set of qualities (Prevou & Veitch, 2009).

Characteristics of a high performing team:

1. Impact and teamwork
2. Adaptability

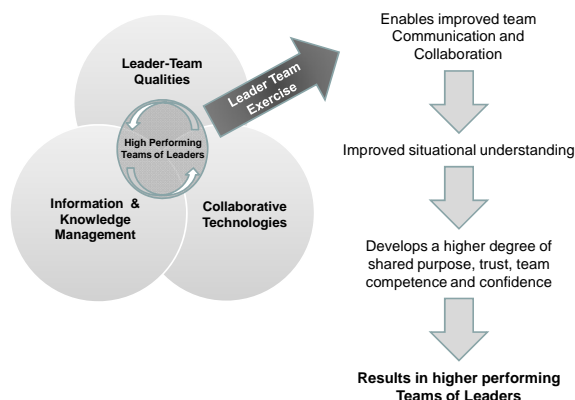
3. Shared cognition
4. Shared vision
5. Shared trust/confidence

High-Performing Teams of Leaders:

1. Communicate meaningfully more often.
2. Frequently collaborate.
3. Build constructive relationships and bring others into the team quickly.
4. Are quick to adapt to changing situations/requirements.
5. Are undeterred by bureaucracy and work around obstacles.
6. Create and use an extended network.
7. Feed each other’s creativity.
8. Challenge and support one another.
9. Make deliberate operating agreements.
10. Are constantly assessing their direction and progress in stride.

**THE TEAMS OF LEADERS APPROACH**

ToL combines the interactive effects of three elements: collaborative technology (CT), information and knowledge management (IKM) tools and processes, and the qualities of high-performing leader-teams. When applied in a coordinated and balanced way and accelerated with a leader team development exercise, it generates improved communication and collaboration, which in turn generates increased actionable understanding and a higher degree of shared purpose, trust, team competence, and confidence (see Figure 1). The result is higher team performance faster.



**Figure 1. The Teams of Leaders Approach**

Combining these three elements increases the reach of the team across the boundaries of geography and time. They facilitate sharing critical information and knowledge required to increase actionable

understanding and bring the expertise and experience of multiple agencies and their resources to bear on a problem. This methodology uses a Socratic questioning technique—a simple three-step team development exercise that generates conversation and clarity around the situation, the requirements, the options, and the actions. It helps team members with different perspectives and agendas find common agreement and synchronize efforts. It helps the team collaborate on expected actions and the solutions needed. Finally, it helps the team develop the essential qualities of shared purpose, trust, competence, and confidence required for high performance.

At a time when interagency teams are still in their adolescence, collaborative technology allows us to extend the reach of our distributed teams. With this new virtual teaming capability comes the need for new processes to manage not only the conversations but to actually enable collaboration at a distance. Teams must deal with an unparalleled amount of data and information and the need to manage the flow of the information to create actionable knowledge in digestible forms. Information management systems themselves do not ensure the timely delivery and adequate application of knowledge. Without good knowledge management strategies and processes to create, organize, integrate, and distribute useful information, information management systems “are necessary but not sufficient to prevail across an inordinarily [sic] complex spectrum of operations.” (Bradford & Brown, 2007). Combining these two provides both sides of the coin and enables the team. Likewise, without understanding and experienced decision-making, that same useful information is not fully-leveraged or is overlooked altogether.

As an added obstacle, each organization has different collaborative technology and information knowledge management needs, systems, capabilities, processes, and regulations, not to mention the cultural and organizational barriers to collaborating and integrating knowledge flow. In a JIIM setting, the problem before us is a “perfect storm” of sorts. It is the trifecta of technological incongruity, inconsistent process, and cultural and experiential friction. Mere functionality can no longer be the standard to which we strive, particularly in times of crisis. High-performing leader-teams must therefore address the areas of technology, information and knowledge management, and team development skills in unison with care and deliberation. The result is a synergistic effect that accelerates the leader-team to higher levels of performance faster.

The new formula must be CT x IKM not just CT+IKM. “A multiplier effect of increasing social sharing and

collaboration among leaders expands the impact of shared actionable understanding achieved through net-centric operations” (Bradford & Brown, 2007).

### THE LEADER TEAM EXERCISE (LTX)

At the heart of the ToL approach is the Leader Team Exercise (LTX). Based on Gary Klein’s model for building intuitive decision-making (2003), the simple three-part methodology provides the leader-team with the tool it needs to punch through most barriers and boundaries. Rather than the traditional “learn, train, do” cycle that pauses productivity, the LTX is conducted in stride as part of the operational sense-making process and draws out the team’s holistic experience and ability. It is a way of understanding and working through problem sets and decisions as a group, rather than clear chains of command. While leader-teams may agree on the desired outcome, they often have philosophical differences with respect to approach.



Figure 2. The Leader Team Exercise

The LTX helps build a common mental model that focuses the teams’ vision, effort, and ability with reduced friction so they may come to an agreement faster. In the process, it builds a common trust by drawing out the collective competence of the team, resulting in the confidence the team needs to address new situations. Ideally, this process would be coached until it is second nature to the team. The LTX follows three simple steps (see Figure 2):

#### Step 1: Identify and Understand the Situation and Requirements

This step asks the team, as a group, to simply describe the situation as they believe it exists and what it is they are trying to accomplish. Before any team can act, they must agree on the problem and the desired end state. Often, teams are thrust together with little time to react or prepare. The natural instinct is to dogmatically approach the problem from one’s own experience. Problems arise when teams fail to understand exactly

what the situation requires. As members perform this step, they begin building a common appreciation of other members’ intuition, and the foundation is laid for a common vision or purpose. The results of this step are a common understanding of where the team members agree and disagree about the situation and requirements.

#### Step 2: Practice Thinking Through the Situation

In this step, members discuss how they visualize the situation unfolding and what must be done to accomplish the requirements identified in step one. The team then conducts “what-if” drills that force each member to form mental models that may be outside their realms of experience. This step increases understanding of each organization’s capabilities and improves adaptability and problem solving. The outcome of this step is a common understanding of what might happen as the situation plays out and what each organization represented by the team members can offer to its successful resolution.

#### Step 3: Review Your Actions—Adjust as Needed

It is here that the collective knowledge is harnessed as each member contributes his or her unique gift to the solution. After conducting “what-if” drills, the team conducts “what-then” drills. They begin to understand the potential pitfalls of second and third order effects. As those pitfalls are identified, the cycle repeats itself until all “what-if,” “what-then” scenarios are satisfied. Team members codify who will do what, changes to operating agreements, and points of friction yet to be resolved.

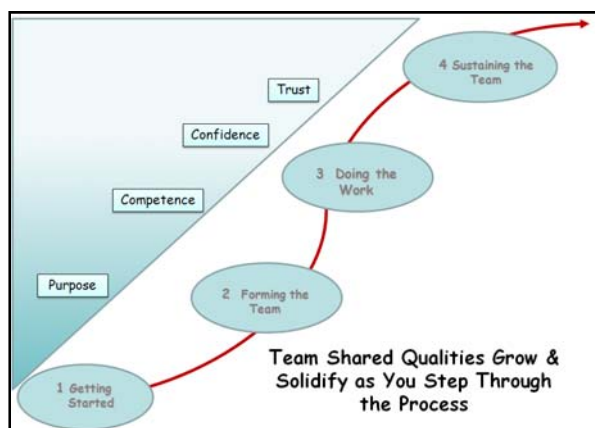
### TEAM DEVELOPMENT AND LIFECYCLE

All teams must start somewhere. Teams of leaders are no different. This methodology can be applied to newly-formed teams, teams that have received a change of mission, or teams that are performing below par and need revitalizing. While they follow a common development process and have a lifecycle, the ToL approach facilitates the process. While using collaborative technology and information and knowledge management expands the reach and ability to manage more critical knowledge, the LTX acts as an accelerant to team performance by increasing quantity and quality of communication and collaboration.

Each team must traverse four basic stages: getting started, forming the team, doing the work, and sustaining the team (see Figure 3). While most teams may experience a variant of each stage, it is important to remember that merely traversing the four stages does not itself propel a team to high performance. If it does achieve a level of high-performance, it is usually a delayed effect that happens well into mission execution.



The LTX drives steep curve increases throughout the team's lifecycle and achieves higher performance quicker.



**Figure 3. Team Development Lifecycle**

While every team will progress through the four stages at its own pace and develop its own rhythm, the groundwork laid by the LTX methodology provides the mechanics to constructively address challenges and build positive relationships. By applying the LTX at each stage, understanding, purpose, and wisdom are passed throughout the team.

### Stage 1: Getting Started

Stage one consists of those tasks done to prepare the leader-team for a 'launch' (Lipnack & Stamps, 2000). After identifying the initial mission and the specific team members, it is imperative that the leader-team organizer make initial contact as soon as possible with potential members of the team. It is critical to lay the groundwork for how business will be conducted.

### Stage 2: Forming the Team

Stage two is arguably the most important stage, for it is here that the team of leaders comes together and develops the basic understanding and agreements necessary for success. Leader-team members begin forming a shared understanding of the mission. Individual skill sets are identified as well as those efforts required to develop shared skills. As Hackman noted in his book, most organizations do not know how to launch a team, and this is a significant doctrinal shortcoming. The launch is one of the most overlooked and omitted parts of a team's formation, and failure to follow a deliberate approach at the onset usually leads to catastrophic failure, if not just simple dysfunctional performance.

Stage two is very much a sense-making and consensus-building stage. Operating agreements are formed and

the team begins to understand specific capabilities and boundaries. It will be the first time the team is faced with challenges and disagreements. The LTX is critical here and used to help the team develop an identity and build working relationships. The impact of stage two will likely define the long-term environment in which the team will operate. "If we fail to get stage 2 about right, then we could be expending a lot of energy in the wrong direction" (Hilton, 2009). If the groundwork from stage two has not been laid, the team stands to charge head long into its mission without a clear direction.

### Stage 3: Doing the Work

It should be noted that leader-teams, especially in a JIIM setting, may be required to move through this stage rapidly. Positive working relationships, communication, collaborative processes, and operating agreements are all established as the team moves into the execution phase. The LTX provides a non-confrontational framework to address major challenges and to build understanding if not consensus. As operational challenges arise, the team may revisit stage two and modify or adjust operating agreements as the team becomes aware of previous unknowns. It is in this stage that we have observed the greatest improvements in trust and team confidence.

### Stage 4: Sustaining the Team

Unfortunately, most established teams overlook this critical stage. Once a team achieves high-performance, the tendency is to take a "breather." Yet, many events or activities can reduce the team's impact over time. Changes in the situation or mission, fluctuating membership, and the absorption or reduction of technology and processes may seem inconsequential but can result in long hours of confusion and course correction. In this stage, the LTX helps the team deal with each of the situations above. The team should never hesitate to drop back to a previous stage to reaffirm its procedures and agreements. Our observations were that teams that go back to recalibrate rebound quickly, while those that do not begin a downward curve.

## TEAMS OF LEADERS PILOTS

In the spring of 2008, the U.S. Army Knowledge Management proponent at Ft. Leavenworth, Kansas, recognized that the Army was not collaborating effectively, nor was it effectively using the information and knowledge systems during virtual teaming sessions. It commissioned the development of a methodology that would improve communication and enable collaboration among geographically dispersed virtual teams. At the same time, at EUCOM in Germany, Dr.

Fredrick Brown was working with senior leaders to improve how cross-functional and cross-cultural teams of leaders collaborated and worked. He, too, was encouraging collaborative technology and information and knowledge management to increase the range, membership and situational awareness of teams. He went further by outlining the four qualities required in high-performing leader-teams (Bradford & Brown, 2008) and was actively coaching EUCOM directorates as part of a command initiative. In September 2008, the two efforts came together. EUCOM provided opportunities to pilot the emerging ToL approach during the annual interagency exercise Austere Challenge (AC09), which took place in Germany in April-May 2009. Included in the exercise was a conglomerate of government agencies, including the Departments of State, Agriculture, Justice, and Defense, and the U.S. Agency for International Development, just to name a few.

### Austere Challenge 2009

During the exercise, the ToL development research team observed and evaluated the performance of five different teams and how they interacted within and among the teams. The main focus was on two interagency teams deployed from Washington, D.C., to EUCOM Headquarters and three internal teams within EUCOM Headquarters. Each leader-team was comprised of leaders representing their respective organization or agency from multiple levels of government. For simplicity we designated the teams LT1 through LT5<sup>1</sup>.

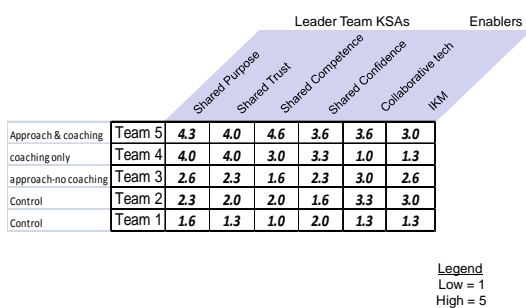


Figure 4: Test Group Capability Matrix

The research team observed and recorded on the various interactions both internal to the team and externally with other designated leader-teams. The leader-teams were measured for effectiveness through

<sup>1</sup> The team names have been removed to protect the anonymity of the participants.

direct observation and scored on three different occasions using six criteria and informal interviews with team members using a 24-question team assessment instrument from the coaching guide. Figure 4 illustrates the average score in each criteria: shared purpose, trust, competence, confidence, collaborative technology, and information and knowledge management<sup>2</sup>.

LT 1 and 2 acted as the control groups for the EUCOM pilot. With no knowledge of the methodology or coaching, the teams were assumed to have approached their mission in a manner consistent with their historical understanding. LT1 was purely interagency, while LT2 was mostly military but from different directorates.

LT3 was a mix of interagency, military, and Department of Defense civilians and had previous knowledge of the ToL approach. The ToL approach was not reemphasized during the exercise nor did they have ToL coaching during the exercise. Its leaders agreed to participate in after action review sessions every other day during the exercise with a ToL coach present and applying the LTX as a retrospective exercise.

LT4 had no prior exposure to ToL but had a coach proficient in the methodology embedded with them who applied the approach daily but without overtly referring to the approach. Reduction in the size of this team at the beginning of the exercise reduced its capability for applying the collaborative technology and information and knowledge management; however, the ages and experiences of the team caused it to bond quickly and generate high levels of purpose and trust.

LT5 had both prior training in the ToL approach and a leader who coached the team through the process during the exercise. LT5 had excellent information technology and knowledge management skills and used the LTX tools to great effect.

### Results from AC09

Leader Team 5 was able to achieve the highest level of performance. While the group did have a working knowledge of ToL, it did not appear to employ the methodology within the first couple days of the exercise. During its first meeting, there was no deliberate team launch and this working session ended with some lingering ambiguity. Once there was recognition of a changing situation (Day 3), the LT5 leader interceded as an internal coach and was observed

<sup>2</sup> Teams were given a rating of 1 through 5 in each of the measured areas based on survey and observation. Scoring matrix represents averages of three different measurements.



applying the LTX, which included every LT5 representative. From that point on, the approach was applied at each working session and the team's performance curve accelerated upwards. LT5 had excellent collaborative technology and knowledge management skills and used the LTX to great effect. The use of virtual collaboration, the information portal and knowledge management among the members were some of the best observed.

*Leader Team 4* achieved a solid level of sustained performance as noted in its shared understanding of the situation, purpose, and trust and the desired end state. The constructive relationships between the key members, their experience, and the coaching in the ToL methodology appeared to offset their technological and process handicaps. While LT4 made a significant impact on the exercise, its small size and experience reduced the complexity of bonding early. Its interaction with other teams was excellent, and where differences in philosophy and approach came to the surface, dialogue stimulated from the LTX resulted in an agreement of critical requirements even though the approaches were not agreed upon.

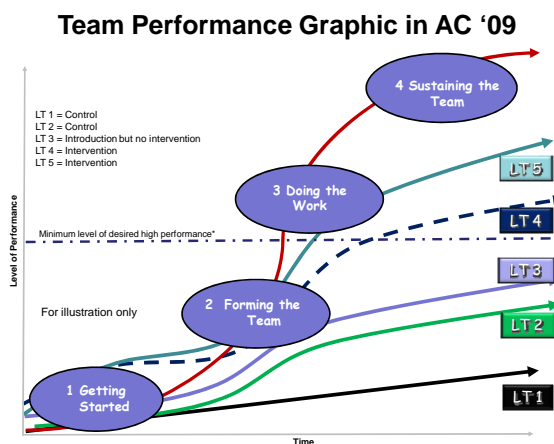
*Leader Team 3* was noted as having some of the best collaborative processes; however, its organization and synchronicity were initially lacking. At the outset, a disagreement of purpose and a problem of trust with other teams was observed. Secretariat staffs often called and emailed LT3 members with redundant or repetitive phone and email messages and the confusion slowed impact to a crawl. Once LT3 began conducting virtual team meetings between EUCOM, the Washington, D.C. policy group, and the EUCOM staff, communication and collaboration increased and resulted in a significant drop in requests for information. Email and phone inquiries dropped by nearly 75% in the operations center after all parties realized the value in the virtual meetings and attended regularly. Its understanding of the operational environment and requirements showed substantive improvement; they built new levels of trust between the actors, and mobilized Washington decision-makers to bring the full weight of U.S. Government resources to bear quicker and in a more synchronized effort.

*Leader Team 2* achieved only modest levels of performance. With a large swath of its team either newly assigned or augmenting from other efforts, the uniformity of their effort was found to be lacking. Though team leadership was familiar with the approach, the ToL methodology did not trickle down and was not applied consistently, if at all. While core members of the team briefed their view of the situation and requirements, there was little attempt to confirm those opinions with others members of the team to

achieve buy in and common vision. Conversation was one way and directive. Collaboration outside the core team was low. Once the team gelled and was able to refine its approach a bit more, its performance appeared to improve, although late in the exercise.

As the only team that did not partake in the pre-exercise planning four months prior and the newest team, *Leader Team 1* formed with significant haste and had the most to gain from the ToL approach. There was no deliberate method to launch the team or traverse the first two stages, and it was seemingly dysfunctional for nearly the first week. Not only did the team suffer internal communication and collaboration problems, external collaboration was almost unobservable. The resulting friction impeded team development, without even a modest degree of shared purpose, trust, or confidence in the initial exercise phases. While equilibrium did form over time, precious days were lost and on two occasions, resources and energy were spent on initiatives previously deemed canceled. External collaboration was nonexistent until an intervention prompted the LT4 to participate in headquarters-led briefings. Unfortunately its participation was near the last day of the exercise and the practice was not continued beyond the initial effort.

Figure 5 charts the performance of each team during the exercise.



**Figure 5: Test Group Performance**

### Insights from AC09

During the ten-day exercise in which all five leader-teams were observed, dozens of opportunities presented themselves as challenges to the cross-boundary teams. On three occasions the LTX was used by the teams with significant effect. In all cases, the LTX produced a rich conversation about the situation and forced the diverse group to talk about requirements and the contributions

their organizations could make towards a solution. In each case, team members learned something new about their teammates that helped build their relationship with one or more members of the group, and in each case team members from one organization came to understand a capability or insight another agency represented. Improved communication led to more collaboration, which in turn improved an understanding of situation, requirements, and capabilities. Shared purpose and trust spiked.

Another major observation was the need for and power of formally launching a leader-team. Without clear direction, understanding, and agreement at the beginning of a journey, it is easy to stray off the path. The hour and a half to effectively launch a team will save days in the long run. Teams should not undervalue the initial team assessment. Taking the time to determine the applicability of individual member skill and expertise will pay large dividends during execution.

Relationships are critical at this level of operation. Remembering that these were not teams of action officers, but rather representatives from organizations who had the power to pick up a phone or send an email directly to a decision-maker that could bring resources to bear. These connections were built over time and the rolodex that each leader-team member brings increases the value of the team. As part of the launch process in Stage 2, it is critical to identify who is on the team and who is missing. When the gap is identified, there has to be a conscious attempt to find out who knows someone who knows someone that can be brought into the team or the gap must be raised to the next level of authority for help in identifying the needed expertise.

While this does not seem to be an extraordinary observation, in fact it was. The expectation is that such interactions and collaboration will occur naturally. In this case, however, without the structured approach and trained coaches, clear points of friction emerged with nearly four times as many incidents of poor or one-way communication, minimal shared purpose, and outright distrust in others were observed in the control groups. In Hickman's terms, without structure, teams underperformed.

Likewise, it is not enough to simply introduce the methodology to leaders and team members. Those teams with understanding of the ToL approach and a commitment to coaching performed better. The role of the coach cannot be understated. Too often mission requirements cause us to be myopic and in a rush to complete one task so we can get on to another. One officer was overheard saying, "We never have time to do it right the first time, but we always seem to have

time to do it over." Applying the ToL approach saved time and frustration in at least three of the teams.

There is a clear implication to professional military education and experience for officers and senior non-commissioned officers. The environment is now well beyond "Joint," and Army leaders must quickly acknowledge and understand how intergovernmental and interagency teams think and work to operate together successfully. During this exercise, leaders were not fully aware of what mission partners could contribute and how, as a team, they could find common purpose even with varying approaches. Applying the ToL approach in professional military education and in interagency training will arm both with the tools necessary to find common understanding.

## CONCLUSION

According to Major General P.K. Keen, the EUCOM Chief of Staff, "this methodology is the basis for transforming a traditional team across boundaries of function, [hierarchical] level, organization or culture into a high performing team of leaders" (Keen, 2009).

The Army, like its sister services, is a team of teams and, while it believes that team building is at the core of its leader development and training strategy, most of that strategy deals only with hierarchical and homogeneous team building skills. It just recently acknowledged the need to develop nested teams of teams and build the knowledge, skills, and abilities to cross components, interagency, intergovernmental, and cultural boundaries. The evolving Army Leader Development Strategy acknowledges the need to synchronize information technology with knowledge management to create a culture of collaboration. It describes the need to develop "the cognitive ability in leaders to master transitions, innovate and adapt" (U.S. Army Leader Development Strategy). While the Leader Development Strategy captures the challenges required to solve complex, ill-structured problems and work across boundaries, cultures, and organizational hierarchies, it suggests a methodology is needed to develop the knowledge, skills, and abilities required for this type of teaming.

The ToL approach fills that vacuum. The ToL methodology works. The Leader Team Exercise is effective in helping a diverse group of teams work through situations and requirements and come to shared understanding and working agreements. The Austere Challenge 09 Pilot proved that there is substance to the ToL methodology that warrants further exploration and refinement.

It is not only the whole of government that requires potent, high-performing teams. In these challenging economic times, numerous mega companies have fallen or teeter on the brink of collapse. The ability to adapt, learn, and team expertly is often identified as a major contributor to a company's competitive advantage. Whether developing new cancer drugs, building automobiles, managing mergers and transitions, or delivering humanitarian aid, the ability to rapidly develop effective teams could mean the difference between organizational success and failure. By increasing team collaboration and communication skills, the ToL approach narrows time to maturation and achieves performance that far surpasses normal teaming techniques. ToL has the potential to be to the collaborative leader-teams what the Internet was to commerce—transformational.

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