

## VIEWPOINT

# In the Know

Twelve cognitive steps can put managers on the path to team success.

BY DAVID NOBLE, MICHAEL LETSKY AND STEVEN SHAKER

Just like in pro sports, success in government is determined by how well an executive fosters team performance. In today's network-connected world, collaboration is increasingly important. Effective teams can flawlessly synchronize and quickly adapt in order to seize opportunities and thwart risks.

Unfortunately, teams do not always identify viable alternatives for action, reach a good understanding of the situation, or generate quality decisions. Sometimes a team's failure can have disastrous consequences. These failures usually boil down to one of three basic reasons: inadequate resources, unwillingness to do the work, or lack of knowledge. The last one can be a team's undoing.

Consider the Kennedy administration's Bay of Pigs fiasco, which was examined by Yale social psychologist Irving Janis in his famous essay, "Groupthink." In his analysis, Janis characterized the episode as "an

operation so ill-conceived that among literate people all over the world, the name of the invasion site has become the very symbol of a perfect failure." It illustrates the consequences of inadequate knowledge and ineffective teamwork.

President Kennedy and his team members did not lack resources or commitment. Instead, they failed for cognitive reasons. There were, for example, gaps in knowledge about decision-making safeguards, other

members' capabilities, preferences and style, and basic business rules for effective teamwork.

It's not enough for government executives to outfit teams with the most up-to-date problem-solving tools or recruit the brightest members. Rather, to promote success, they also must understand the cognitive basis of effective teamwork.

Because it was difficult for its teams to know everything they needed to know, the Office of Naval Research's Human Systems Department organized critical information into 12 "knowledge enablers." Each one is defined by what needs to be known, why and when this knowledge is important, how to get it, and how to determine when the team lacks it.

## The cognitive checklist includes knowledge of:

1. Team goals.
2. Team plans.
3. How one action of the plan affects another.
4. What members can and are willing to do.
5. The team's business rules.
6. How to accomplish individual tasks.
7. What other team members are doing.
8. What's happening outside the team.
9. How tasks are progressing.
10. Where members agree or disagree.
11. Whether the plan will still work, despite disagreement.
12. Whether decision-makers are factoring in what they need to consider.

The first six address the core knowledge that glues a team together. They relate to planning, organization and skills, and are typically longer-term activities that require foresight. The remaining six describe minute-to-minute information needed for coordination and adaptation. They reflect a point in time and can change rapidly.

For the Bay of Pigs, problems resulted when team harmony became more important than getting a good solution. Trouble could have been avoided if Kennedy had not implied a preference for any particular solution at the beginning. He should have urged the team to:

- Focus on goals, clarifying not only the desired outcomes, but also the side effects the plan should avoid.
- Consider all relevant information, even if it represents viewpoints that the team does not like.
- Evaluate the full range of possible interpretations about the nature of the problem.
- Consider a comprehensive set of possible actions.
- Brainstorm possible consequences of each action and identify factors that could lead to these consequences.

As government evolves to meet new challenges, it increasingly relies on teams. Understanding what makes teams work and improving collaboration is becoming the most vital attribute a government executive could have. **GE**

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