

Build a War Room

Information sharing, communication, and coordination occur frequently among high level executives and managers of the collaborating organizations. As in the case of the IRS, many E-government initiatives in the public sector fall under the oversight of quasi-regulatory bodies, committees, and task forces that are comprised of high-level decision-makers. These "bodies" deal with policy, planning, and strategic issues. But, what type of information sharing, communication, and coordination goes on at the operational and tactical levels, especially to deal with day-to-day issues, technical problems, and development concerns?

In the cases of Access Indiana and Partners in Change, managers adopted "war-room" practices where employees from each partnering organization were required to work through solutions to difficult problems together. While the meetings were tense, forcing employees together generated greater understanding across the partners, the functional areas, and the levels of expertise.

The cross-agency development teams on early Access Indiana e-government projects were often unsure about which part of the application they were responsible for and how to coordinate application development with tightly coupled requirements between the state agency and the private sector service provider, Indiana Interactive. For example, the Indiana Interactive team, experts in building web interfaces, often faced decisions about the extent to which the work agreement required them to resolve problems with databases residing on legacy mainframe systems. Expertise about the legacy databases clearly lay with the state agency MIS department.

Frustrated by the lack of progress among employees from both the public and private partners, the CIO for the State of Indiana and the General Manager of Indiana Interactive took matters into their own hands and instituted a new meeting policy. Adopting lessons from war rooms, the two leaders required members of the technical teams to remain in a closed meeting room until they resolved the technical issue, wrote up a solution for the project knowledge base, and developed processes for dealing with similar problems in future.

One important breakthrough that sped up the development of Access Indiana occurred in these war room meetings. Learning from these earlier experiences, the State of Indiana and Indiana Interactive divided the application development work around the different information technology architecture layers. This IT architecture is divided into three major layers – the presentation layer; middle-tier layer; and back-end layer. Indiana Interactive is responsible for all work associated with building the presentation layer. The respective MIS departments, and as appropriate, the State of Indiana central Information Services Division are responsible for all back-end work. For example, the Bureau of Motor Vehicles plans to retire its legacy mainframe system and replace with a client-server based enterprise database system. The BMV in this case is responsible for this work. The middleware layer requires coordination between both sides. This structure has reduced conflicts significantly. And through a number of communication efforts by the State of Indiana Information Services Division and the Governor's Task Force on Information Technology, employees across the agencies and Indiana Interactive are also beginning to share a common mental model of the architecture and the respective roles and responsibilities of each organization.

The War Room also helped to improve communication among the partners involved in the Partners in Change E-government service [(Inset Link to Case)]. The Government of New Brunswick, Canada Department of Human Resources operates the Partners in Change, a web-based case management system in collaboration with Accenture. Communication and coordination were clearly a problem during the projects' development phase, especially since 140 people worked on the project and were located in dispersed locations throughout the province. The project partners created a war room to address these problems.

The war room provided many benefits to the project. It facilitated greater communication vertically and horizontally throughout the project and helped to create an environment where employees learned how to best communicate with each other. As the relationship among the employees matured, cross-partner teams were often formed including one that developed the interface for the E-government applications. The strategy also improved the flow of information between the Minister's Office to the smallest regional branch, and among team members and teams. The war room also helped communication occur among employees in the regional office and the central office.