

Ever Get That Sinking Feeling?

[Bill Bott](#) | August 13, 2010

Earlier this week, the Department of Defense quietly announced the impending closure of the Business Transformation Agency. Yes, you heard it right, the office that opened with the mission of fostering efficiency is closing its doors due to cuts. Ironic, sure. But it's also completely predictable.

This post is not intended to make light of the growing number of public servants who have lost their jobs in this economy. But these things do have a life cycle all their own, and an early demise is as easy to predict as the end of the movie *Titanic*. (Spoiler alert: The ship sinks.)

All Aboard!

When the Business Transformation Agency opened in 2006, I'm sure it was with a lot more fanfare than the [closing announcement on page 9 of the *Federal Times*](#). Like the Titanic, there was a lot of enthusiasm for the journey ahead, people vying for tickets for the 360 seats and a \$340,000,000 budget aimed at the promise of modernization and a bright future of continuous improvements.

Smooth Sailing

When the ship left the dock, it seemed to have all the comforts and amenities needed for an adventurous trip. From a [budget estimate report in 2007](#), officials at the Business Transformation Agency described their open waters like this: "As the single agency responsible for DoD Enterprise business transformation functions, the BTA will establish and enforce requirements, principles, standards, systems, procedures, and practices governing business transformation."

Not quite a successories poster, but we've all seen these mission-type statements in the past. They seem air-tight, like a double-bottomed ship that "God Himself could not sink." The engineers had designed an office that combined functions from across the Department of Defense. The new agency had congressional mandates and an acronym. People were happy, the sea was calm. All was good.

Of course, improvements — real changes — don't happen in the engineering of new offices, or in mandates. They happen in the pipes, and it's rare that the pipes can all be managed by a centralized office. Even one that gets to play with the most powerful weapons mankind has ever known.

Hey, It's Kinda Cold Out Here

Budget cuts didn't sink this office, just like the Titanic's problem wasn't really an iceberg. The ship's problem was that it lacked a proper-sized rudder to maneuver such a large vessel. When the iceberg popped up, the ship simply couldn't get around it in time.

Same thing with the transformation agency: Charged with transforming one of the most behemoth departments in our country, the office simply wasn't equipped to turn that ship in less than four years.

It's no wonder the agency's main focus became the oversight of numerous acquisition offices. Watching over the procurement in an effort to modernize processes is a lot like reorganizing deck chairs on the... well, you know. Procurement processes deserve attention, but of all the pipes in

DoD, *that's* the one we focused on? The same one every auditor goes after first? The same one that has been under a microscope since the early 70s?

So hitting the iceberg was a foregone conclusion. The bad budget just accelerated the destruction of the hull.

Where's All This Water Coming From?

Leaking pipe? Nope. That's the cold sting of a new administration and a mission that just could not live up to the hype. The truth is, every ship is sinkable, every improvement office nowadays probably feels more like Tom Hanks's raft in *Cast Away* than the fancy ship from *Titanic*. The truth is, most survive on a wing and a prayer, living off of past success or some little niche they have carved out.

But there is one nagging thing that has bothered me since reading this article this morning that sums it all up. Improvement offices make improvement someone else's job. Despite their good intentions, they reinforce the notion that getting better is "other duties as assigned" and you should keep your head down and do your real work.

Truth is, improvement should be a part of what we all do. Not an administrative mandate, not a new office, not a blue ribbon commission, but rather a way we work all the time.

Grab a Bucket, and Next Time Build the Right Boat

Super-offices with legislative mandates are not what we need to navigate the rapids of change. Our boats need to be small, and an arm of the executive who oversees the organization. A team of four to six well-trained change agents can easily support an organization of 40,000 employees if they are continually supported by leadership and given the right projects to work. How can four people make a difference? By not trying to be the solution.

These offices often get caught up in the thinking that they need to have all the answers to our problems. The truth is, they really don't know much about our pipes because they don't work in the pipes. To fix the pipes, you need to engage the people who work in the system. Once you engage them, they need to be supported by executives as well, and given the space to explore new ways of getting across the water. Change agents should not have the answers — if they know how to fix government and have been holding out on us, they need to be tossed overboard. What they should have are the tools to unleash the potential of the people who know the pipes and be an advocate for new solutions that address the real work.

A small team of change agents does not have to be an improvement office. Once we have an office, too often we jump to mission statements, performance reviews, strategic plans, policies and staff meetings. Before you know it, we're not improving the organization, we're justifying the office and the office politics. Or it becomes all about the process and not the projects. You don't have to look much further than most project-management offices to see how we can spend so much more time making sure we follow the PMBOK, that we ever do managing the people and the project. Same issues apply to improvement offices.

Equally important is a boss who will stay engaged after the press release. These efforts need emphasis, they need support, and they need a protective bubble to work in. Emphasis that continually improving has to become a part of our genetic code. It cannot be a special program that we kick off with a bang and then scramble to find office space for, but a way of looking at our work and our pipes. In order to maintain the emphasis, leaders must support these efforts with more than just talk. They have to be willing to push for new ideas and willing to embrace innovative ideas. It's

easy to say we want out-of-the-box ideas, until they include having to redo the job descriptions of 30 percent of our employees. At that point, we'd rather hide in the box than take on HR. Teams have to feel supported and they have to feel protected. Protection extends past budget cuts (though that would be nice), improvement teams have to feel safe to explore radical ideas. You know who hates radical ideas? Everyone not involved with creating them, and they will do almost anything to stop change that they feel is being forced upon them. Once the fighting starts, team members start scrambling for the nearest lifeboat and the "improvement office" is left to go down with the ship.

If you feel a need to start an improvement office at all, keep it small, keep it in the executives' protective wing, and make sure you are working on projects that matter. In the end, what really sinks these efforts is missing the target. No one would cut an office that was redesigning how we launch billion-dollar satellites into polar orbit from a commercial space vehicle, but looking into defense procurement? That's a doomed voyage from the start, even for [the actor who ruined *Growing Pains*](#).

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