



By Brian Thorson and Zachary Rozar

When first approached about participating on a tiger team, we were unsure if our boss was trying to be funny and make a Tiger King joke at our expense or if we were being given another task. With the benefit of hindsight and reflection, the authors of this article now see this experience for what it truly is. Serving on a tiger team is an opportunity to inform, shape decisions, and develop personally.

What follows are the experiences of two officers recently tasked with leading and contributing to the efforts of a tiger team. Our aim is twofold; that you would see serving on a tiger team as an opportunity and that our lessons observed become your lessons learned.

What is a Tiger Team?

Still unfamiliar with the tiger team concept, we did the only logical thing - consult the Google Box. The term tiger team was coined in the 1960s by NASA managers, referring to

small teams of experts assembled to solve specific and complex problems. The first well-known use of a tiger team was during the Apollo 13 emergency when Gene Kranz and a team of experts worked to solve several unique and complex problems to bring the crew safely back to earth. Since that time, tiger teams have expanded beyond the engineering realm, as many organizations have realized their utility. When an organization has a novel or emergent issue, its existing structure may not be ideally suited to address it. Or the human resources required may drain all of the organization's energy away from ongoing operations.

In the authors' case, the purpose of their tiger team was narrower: to identify new and creative solutions to an already established problem. Although the scope was limited, the benefits of a tiger team were still applicable and yielded viable solutions for the senior leader while providing a meaningful experience.

Properly Frame the Problem

There is a reason senior leaders form teams to tackle problems; the problems they encounter are not simple, or in some circumstances, not easily defined. Initial conversations within the team struggled to gain momentum or focus until we could frame the problem appropriately. In this process, it is also natural to examine the root cause(s) of the issue that served as the impetus for the tiger team formation. It is outside of this article's scope to address how to accomplish this task, but the Army and others provide plenty of tools spanning from design methodology to a myriad of tools taught within the Red Team course. Pick a tool or model and frame the problem upfront. Solving the wrong problem does not help the senior leader make a decision.

Identify Assumptions

At this stage in the process, the team develops relationships between critical factors, experiences, and obstacles to develop shared mental models and understanding. This was particularly important for our team, as the initial guidance was purposely limited to avoid introducing any bias that might stifle creativity. Because of this, the team had to make certain assumptions to enable progress. These assumptions primarily regarded solutions we would exclude, believing that they would not be feasible, acceptable, or suitable in the end.

Assumptions are essential in problem-solving, just like in planning, but they come with a warning label. Besides being used sparingly, any assumption the team makes should have

these two characteristics: 1) they are likely to be true, and 2) they are necessary to continue problem-solving. Applying these characteristics as rules will help ensure any assumptions made are logical and support the team's efforts. Finally, the team must regularly question their assumptions to see if they are still valid, and to identify any new assumptions that may need to be made.

Collaborate

No one set of experiences or perspectives is sufficient. A good tiger team is assembled based on the strengths, weaknesses, and experiences of its members. Use the differences to your advantage. Pool knowledge, expertise, and insights.

It is worth noting here that this experience remains an inherently human process. Consequently, each individual brings their own conscious or unconscious biases and views the problem and proposed solutions through their unique worldview. Overcoming these and other obstacles requires deliberate effort. There are many proven techniques that a team can use to develop ideas in chapter 7 of *The Red Team Handbook*. Two methods the authors found useful are brainstorming and divergence-convergence. The latter is especially helpful for teams working remotely, or when the face-to-face meeting time is limited.

Remain Humble

Having established the importance of collaboration, it is important to draw attention to its key enabling character trait. Humility is freedom from arrogance and self-preoccupation. Teams that value humility create an environment most conducive to the free flow of ideas necessary to achieve the necessary diversity of thought, knowledge, and experience.

Conduct Azimuth Checks

Depending on the complexity and scope of the problem, your team may work over an extended period. It is prudent to check your progress to avoid delivering a comprehensive analysis of something the boss did not ask for. There are many ways to approach this, but we recommend conducting an azimuth check after framing the problem, completing your analysis, and a final azimuth check before presenting. The azimuth check does not have to be completed with the commander but could be with another senior leader who is familiar with the problem. Time may preclude all of this; however, given the opportunity, it is a prudent "extra" step.

Be Flexible in Thought

As you examine the problem, root causes, and potential solutions, you must continually challenge your assumptions and potential biases. We found this to be incredibly important when attempting to distinguish correlation from causation. At the early stages of the problem-solving process, our team had to make assumptions about the relationships between variables to continue problem-solving. We incorrectly assumed that certain events caused specific outcomes (causation) when they were actually only correlated—exposing these initial assumptions as false enabled us to understand and solve the right problem.

The Five Bs of Presenting

As with any formal briefing, the advice to be brief, be brilliant, and be gone stands true. When briefing senior leaders on the outcomes of the team's work, the authors observed two additional principles that are worth mentioning. Both are obvious, but not often talked about.

Be Candid - The tiger team was established because the senior leader wanted a different perspective or feedback outside of normal channels because they believe this topic is important and worthy of additional resources. You owe them candor.

Be prepared - Prepared with research, prepared with options, prepared to change direction, prepared to be challenged, prepared to give an elevator pitch or a deep dive. Since your team may present divergent information or recommendations, be prepared to defend your analysis.

Leading in a Tiger Team

Leadership is never easy, and leading a tiger team is a particularly delicate undertaking. In the Army, the team lead may be evident based on rank or position, but this is not always the case. The authors' team was composed of peers, and "higher" did not pre-designate someone to be in charge. Besides the typical difficulties of peer leadership, the tiger team environment poses a few unique challenges. First, the team lead cannot "drive the train" the way they see fit but instead should rely on the more effective approaches of influence and persuasion. While the leader can and should contribute to the group's efforts, they must be careful to avoid outsize influence. Second, the team leader must be able to arbitrate disagreements or a lack of consensus. Time is never unlimited, so at some point, decisions must be made to maintain progress. The methods used to accomplish this are many, but the

team lead should be mindful that disputes among team members are likely, and should be prepared to handle these situations. Ultimately, the team lead is responsible for the deliverables the team owes and meeting the intent of the assignment. The overarching goal of a tiger team lead should be to keep the team headed towards the final destination, but not to pick the route the team takes to get there.

Conclusion

If given the opportunity to serve on a tiger team, accept it. Your efforts while serving in this capacity are important and worthy of your investment. It will be extra work in a profession without overtime, but you will reap the rewards in terms of what you learn and the experiences you gain. Most importantly, you contribute important analysis to senior decision-makers to enable them to make the best decision possible.

Major Brian Thorson is an Army Medical Service Corps officer, and is currently a student at the School of Advanced Military Studies. He has served in various staff assignments in USEUCOM, FORSCOM, and USASOC, and commanded a Forward Surgical Team and an HHC. He has combat and operational deployments to Afghanistan and Africa. Brian is the co-founder of [Medical Service Corps Leader Development](#).

Major Zachary Rozar is an Army Engineer officer and is currently a student at the School of Advanced Military Studies. He has served primarily in the operational force and commanded Alpha Company, 10th Brigade Engineer Battalion, 3rd Infantry Division. He has combat and operational deployments to Afghanistan, Korea, and Europe.

Share this:

- [Email](#)
- [Tweet](#)
- 
- [Print](#)
- [WhatsApp](#)