

# A Knack for Training

BY BRIAN SUMMERFIELD

To adapt to transforming geopolitical realities, the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) made drastic changes in how it operates in the past few years. Matt Peters, chief learning officer at DIA, has rolled with those changes.



Following the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, it became axiomatic to many U.S. government policymakers that the attacks “changed everything.” The thinking went that the very nature of these actions fundamentally altered the existing legal, political and military frameworks around war, diplomacy and foreign policy.

More than seven years after the fact, there is a great deal of disagreement, both within the United States and overseas, about how many of and to what extent these things actually changed. However, Sept. 11 indisputably revolutionized the overall strategy and operations of one organization in particular: the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA).

Prior to Sept. 11, DIA had operated as a long-term strategic intelligence outfit within the U.S. Department of Defense. More than 80 percent of staff worked in or near Washington, D.C., and primarily conducted research and crafted studies that could take years to produce.

In the months following the attacks, though, DIA became a more tactile, tactical organization, with a much greater emphasis on activities that supported battlefield operations. As a result, about 60 percent of DIA’s workforce is now based outside of the Washington area, spread out across between 150 and 200 locations worldwide.

“This changed the rhythm on how work was done: If your projects are typically delivered five years out, as opposed to five hours out, that means big changes to processes and the way things work,” said Matt Peters, chief of DIA’s office of learning and development. “As all that has occurred, DIA has picked up a lot of different responsibilities for leading special intelligence areas within the Department of Defense: analysis and some things that go across other agencies.”

Peters has presided over the learning function in DIA throughout much of this transition. In fact, he was initially attracted to the organization because of the major changes it was going through, not only in terms of workflows, but also the makeup of its employee population.

“One of the things that attracted me to DIA was the fact that they recognized they really had to make some changes to have a deployable, worldwide workforce,” he said. “The workforce they had at the time was relatively senior, but they knew things had to change. We’ve been doing massive amounts of hiring over the past five years. About half of the people in our organization weren’t there five years ago. We’ve had that much growth.”

One of the first major changes senior leaders instituted was the consolidation and centralization of various human capital processes and programs, Peters said.

“At the time, they established a human capital director. This was before my time. Each of the major units within the DIA — there are probably between 14 and 20

structured within the organization — had their own personnel systems, training interests, career development and all the other human capital pieces. They established this central human capital structure, and I’m now the chief learning officer working within that. A lot of the programs are pretty new, implemented in the past two or three years.”

As with any organizational restructuring, the progression hasn’t always been smooth. Bringing together all of these formerly independent training elements requires patience, establishment of trust and careful management of partnerships.

“All of that takes time,” Peters said. “The organization you’re working with has to be used to that way of doing things, as well. In the past, it didn’t always work that way. In the intelligence community itself — and this was one of the lessons learned from 9/11 — the organizations were too stovepiped. They weren’t collaborating enough. That approach cascaded into all the intelligence organizations. DIA was the same way.”

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Peters and his team received occasional pushback on new projects. For instance, he

## DID YOU KNOW?

Matt Peters also serves as the president of the International Society for Performance Improvement.

mentioned the less-than-enthusiastic response to the idea of having the ambassador to Afghanistan give a presentation as part of the DIA orientation program.

"We invited the ambassador of Afghanistan to speak to one of those orientation classes, and the system had to react to that," he explained. "[The organization] wasn't used to having an ambassador from that part of the world come in and give a presentation. It was a great idea, though, and we got it to work. We actually ended up hosting it across the intelligence community. We had new employees come in from the CIA, NSA and FBI. Senior leadership welcomed the individual and worked with him throughout his visit."

Still, the transition has been mostly successful, due in no small part to the fact that DIA didn't overcentralize its human capital structure.

"You can't centralize everything," Peters said. "That

areas of global learning and the science of learning.

Also, Peters exerts additional influence on learning at DIA and beyond by serving on various governance councils.

"One of my responsibilities is chairing the General Intelligence Training Council, which has representatives from all Department of Defense intelligence communities, where we look at all-source analysis and collections and try to work out standardized solutions in development and delivery across the entire domain," he said. "That's a collaborative body, and we're trying to insert some more rigor into it. We're also trying to take it across the intelligence community, so we'd be bringing in the CIA and other organizations.

"There's a lot of recognition that people need to train, grow and improve," he added. "We've been able to establish some governance councils on how to articulate requirements and priorities at some of our distributed sites. There are combatant commands throughout the world: Southern Command, Special Operations Command, Pacific Command and others. In each of those organizations, there are intelligence pieces. DIA is now responsible for the professional development and training of the intel officers at those sites. There are 10 major sites throughout the world that we've had to figure out how to support, so we've established these learning governance councils to try to balance out what they're getting locally and what we have to push to them."

A particular area of focus for Peters has been leadership development, which is especially challenging considering that about half of DIA's workforce has been around for fewer than five years. To help the organization grow its future leaders in the face of such demographic obstacles, Peters and his team developed Gemstone, an end-to-end leadership development suite that runs from frontline supervisors all the way up to pre-executives.

The first tier of Gemstone is a two-week, off-site program called Frontline. It's a mandatory course that covers the fundamentals of leadership, specifically designed for DIA's young and untested employees.

"Previously, you had a workforce that had 15, 25 or even 30 years of experience in leadership," Peters explained. "Now you have people with three years or less. They're being thrust into these leadership positions, and they've got no experience to draw on. That's why we need to insert that course."

Peters also implemented a rigorous, off-site program for pre-executives that involves several action learning and experiential learning elements.

"Probably the most significant thing about that is, for the first time, participants were handpicked by senior leadership based on performance," he said. "We

"You really need to have a distributed network. One of the things we're trying to do at DIA is identify those customers and their requirements and prioritize them."

– Matt Peters,  
Defense Intelligence Agency

means you really need to have a distributed network. One of the things we're trying to do at DIA is identify those customers and their requirements and prioritize them. Within my organization, which is called human capital learning, we essentially have program leads who are connected to different business units. The key to our success is that we have great leaders at all levels. I have seven direct reports working with our customers in different areas. Then, there are 40 to 50 middle managers working on their own programs, coordinating with customers on projects, how they're measured and what we need to do to be successful."

Peters' department is comprised of approximately 300 personnel, which includes headquarters staff, employees who run DIA's four "schoolhouses" and people who work in internal consulting organizations in the

actually had one participant picked up for executive before the class even finished.”

Additionally, DIA now has what’s called an initial training cohort to on-board employees more quickly and effectively. This includes a mandatory five-week program called Tomorrow’s Intelligence Professionals, in which mid- to junior-level personnel spend time together working on collaboration, integration and orientation. This has been key in establishing a common culture among employees of formerly autonomous intelligence services.

“Before, people would come in and go through a Gateway program on getting security clearances, parking passes and things like that,” Peters said. “Then they would disappear in their office spaces and might or might not come back for any other training courses. Now we’ve established the Initial Training Cohort that pulls together the Gateway piece, Tomorrow’s Intelligence Professionals and their initial training for their occupational standard. Doing that has allowed us to

accelerate initial competence, [and] time to competency has shrunk dramatically.”

Peters earned an engineering degree from the Naval Academy and started out in the U.S. Navy working in operations and analysis. He spent time flying in Lockheed P-3 Orion patrol and reconnaissance aircraft as a flight officer, and didn’t initially view learning and development as his calling. Yet, a series of training roles later in his career brought him to his current position, one he thoroughly enjoys.

“Throughout my career, I had a lot of jobs in the training arena,” he said. “I perhaps demonstrated a knack for that.” **CLO**

## PODCAST

Matt Peters of the Defense Intelligence Agency discusses major transformations in learning strategy. Listen to the interview at [www.clomedia.com/podcast](http://www.clomedia.com/podcast).



## “ The convenience & affordability of APU

made it possible for me to continue my education, and advance my knowledge of security issues.”

### Olga Mokrova

Master’s Degree, Security Management

### Set your team a part with respected degrees from American Public University.

Specializing in education that is in demand among corporate, IT, government and public service professionals, American Public University offers certificate, bachelor, and master degree programs that are affordable and conveniently online.

#### Leading online programs in:

- Business Administration
- Security Management
- Information Systems Security
- Emergency and Disaster Mgmt.
- Transportation & Logistics Mgmt.
- Sports and Health Sciences
- Sports Management
- Intelligence Studies
- Homeland Security
- and more



American Public University

Respected. Affordable. Online.

LEARN MORE AT  
[studyatAPU.com](http://studyatAPU.com)

OR CALL  
877.777.9081

American Public University is a member institution of the regionally accredited American Public University System