

Joining the Agency's Cohort Training Program

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I hadn't been assigned to the Defense Contract Management Agency for very long when I got my first e-mail from my training coordinator about attending DCMA cohort training. "What the heck is that?" I remember asking myself. I couldn't even fathom what such a course might be about, so, I consulted my *Webster's Dictionary* for a clue.

Webster's Dictionary gave me the following clues concerning the content of the program:

co•hort [koh-hawrt]—*noun* [Origin: 1475-85; < MF *cohorte* < L *cohort-* (s. of *cohors*) farmyard, armed force (orig. from a particular place or camp), cohort, retinue, equiv. to *co-* CO- + *hort-* (akin to *hortus* garden); r. late ME *cohors* < L nom. sing.]

1. A group or company: *She has a cohort of admirers.*
2. A companion or associate.
3. One of the ten divisions in an ancient Roman legion, numbering from 300 to 600 soldiers.
4. Any group of soldiers or warriors.

Perhaps I'm joining some auspicious group ... or serving as someone's companion. I doubt that I'll be an accomplice to any crimes. Perhaps it's going to be a guy thing, and they're getting a bunch of us together to watch sporting events.

5. An accomplice; abettor: *He got off with probation, but his cohorts got ten years apiece.*
6. A group of persons sharing a particular statistical or demographic characteristic.
7. *Biology.* An individual in a population of the same species.

— *Synonyms 2.* friend, comrade, fellow, chum, pal, buddy.

Well now, that's interesting. Perhaps I'm joining some auspicious group ... or serving as someone's companion. It's unlikely that I am reentering the military or associating with soldiers or warriors as those days have long since passed for me. I doubt that I'll be an accomplice to any crimes. As far as I know, I don't share much demographically with anyone at DCMA. Perhaps it's going to be a guy thing, and they're getting a bunch of us together to watch sporting events.

No, the dictionary isn't much help. I don't have a clue what this is all about, but it must be important! They're sending me there three times (either it's important, or they don't expect me to pass the first time and are ensuring I have enough sessions to successfully get through the course).

Well, I am happy to say that it wasn't the latter! Attending cohort is key to helping DCMA develop leaders for the challenging days ahead, and the agency believes so much in the program that



From left: Rebecca Davies, executive director of contract operations and customer relations, listens to the cohort's "burning question" briefing as Michelle Campbell, DCMA Tucson, and Gary Smallwood, DCMA International, look on.

it is attempting to send every supervisor to a cohort training session. So just what is it?

Human Resources Management for Managers and Supervisors

The official title of the course is "Human Resources Management for Managers and Supervisors." So where does this "cohort" stuff fit in?

"That's the nickname given to the course because all of the attendees come from DCMA," said Dan Mielke, acting chief of workforce development. "Ah," I thought to myself. Not only do we share a particular demographic characteristic — we all come from the same agency — but we are also associates. "Now the cohort thing makes sense," I thought.

Mielke explained that of the 900 code supervisors or managers within DCMA, more than 700 have attended cohort. Each cohort class consists of a maximum of 30 people, so it will be awhile before all of the agency's managers and supervisors are cohort alumni.

The agency's goals for each cohort are many and include:

- Change DCMA's culture to emphasize flexibility, inclusiveness and development of people
- Establish high goals for DCMA personnel and help employees reach them without compromising the agency's values or people
- Communicate openly so that the agency thrives
- Find ways to contribute to any situation by not holding back actions or opinions and

During this portion of our cohort experience each of us received an executive coach to discuss our career goals and desires, assist us in mapping out a career plan to take advantage of our strengths and help us realize our career goals.

to publicly support decisions once made

- Address problems openly and directly, without fear of retribution, and lead discussions skillfully to encourage the free flow of information and ideas
- Learn from past mistakes and apply them to new situations
- *Carpe diem* — "seize the day"
- Challenge one another to innovate and take risks to support new and creative ideas
- Empower oneself and others to act as "champions of change"
- Foster a sense of urgency in making change happen and be on the lookout for new or better ways to operate
- Learn to create an organizational climate that rewards teamwork
- Practice team-building skills
- Learn skills to integrate new team members quickly and effectively
- Learn to take charge while including others and use good ideas, wherever they may come from.

I became part of cohort 26 (the 26th class since the program's inception) in May. I was the only member of the class to come from DCMA Headquarters. Most came from contract management offices around the U.S. and Europe or from one of the six product division headquarters.

The Western Management Development Center

Each cohort is broken up into four parts, requiring three trips to the Office of Personnel Management's



The course includes many games and exercises to help illustrate important learning objectives. Dr. Maria Valdes demonstrates a special rug for a classroom team-building exercise, which sounds an alarm if students step in the wrong spot while trying to travel across it.

Western Management Development Center in Aurora, Colo., a southeastern suburb of Denver.

The first trip to WMDC covers “Leading Through Transformation: The Challenge of Change” for two days and “Emotional Intelligence as a Leadership Skill” for five days. In between the two classes is a weekend off, allowing attendees to do some sightseeing at nearby attractions including Pikes Peak — elevation 14,110 feet — the 31st highest peak out of 54 Colorado peaks. (It is also the farthest east of the big peaks in the Rocky Mountain chain.)

Civilian contractors teach the cohort classes. The first class was led by retired Army Col. Barry Berglund, who now serves as a lecturer and instructor specializing in change implementation. Through humor and a number

of interesting exercises and questionnaires, Berglund helped all of us in the class understand our personal needs during periods of change and how we deal with the challenges of leading transformation within DCMA.

Following our weekend off, we met a new group of instructors,



Retired Army Col. Barry Berglund helped the class understand personal needs during periods of change and discussed how to deal with the challenges of leading transformation in DCMA.

including Dr. Don Crist, Stephen Hoel, Linda Reinhardt and Marisol Konczal, for the “Emotional Intelligence as a Leadership Skill” portion of the training. Each of our instructors brought years of executive leadership coaching and academic training in leadership, emotional intelligence, facilitation and conflict management to the classroom. It was also during this portion of our cohort experience that each of us received an executive coach to discuss our career goals and desires, assist us in mapping out a career plan to take advantage of our strengths and help us realize our career goals.

The Burning Question

One of the key assignments during this first visit to cohort occurs at the end of the emotional intelligence class. Each cohort receives a “burning question”

from a member of the agency's senior leadership team. For cohort 26, Rebecca Davies, executive director of contract operations and customer relations, was the SLT member who assigned the "burning question" — an opportunity to research and make recommendations concerning the resolution of a DCMA leadership or management problem. Each cohort briefs its findings to the SLT member assigning the project, and each group knows it could end up briefing the entire SLT on the cohort's findings.

Davies asked cohort 26 to examine what the agency did well and poorly during its recent implementation of performance-based management and in the functional realignment of the agency. She also asked the cohort to make recommendations for the management of similar projects in the future. Davies assigned the project to cohort 26

via a teleconference at the end of the group's first visit to the WMDC. For the remainder of the course, the cohort participants continued to work on preparing a report to Davies, including times when they were at their home duty stations.

Learning to be Coaches and Mentors

The second trip to Denver occurred approximately one month after the first but lasted only three days. The second session covered "Coaching for Excellence: Maximizing the Development Process." Once again, the students met a new group of instructors including Glenn Brōme, Dr. Barbara Pollack and Dr. Maria Valdes.

"My favorite part of consulting and coaching is helping people solve problems by seeing things in a new way," said Dr. Pollack. "I believe when people become smarter about

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— Marion Julian

understanding how they think and recognize what impact they have on others, they can be better learners." Dr. Pollack also offered that, with greater awareness, insight and curiosity about ways to approach challenges, people can be more adept at using their strengths: "They become better team members, leaders, and can significantly impact their organization."

During the second trip to WMDC, cohort 26 members learned how to be coaches and mentors and lead their subordinates and coworkers to greater achievement and self-fulfillment. As with the previous courses, the instructors used case studies, games, group challenges and humor to make their points and help the members of the cohort learn.



From left: Ginnie Collie, Marion Julian and Charles Snavely listen to the fine points of coaching employees.

On the way to Becoming Cohort Alumni

The final session — “Leaders Growing Leaders” — follows the second session by a month and lasts five days. Brōme and Dr. Pollack returned to work with the group for this final session, and Dr. John Lybarger joined the team. Like most of the instructors in the cohort program, Dr. Lybarger also specializes in executive coaching and leadership training. “I most enjoy being involved with cohort because I believe DCMA’s senior leaders are committed to making DCMA one of the best places to work,” said Dr. Lybarger. “I am passionate about leading change and growing leaders in agencies that desire to be the best in class.”

In addition to exploring how to develop the agency’s future leaders, and about our roles as supervisors in that process, the cohort also spent considerable time wrapping



Dr. Maria Valdes taught feedback and coaching skills, creation of supportive work environments and teambuilding to the cohort students.



Dr. John Lybarger, second from right, and Glenn Brōme, far right, join students in building a “support web” during the last session of the course.

up the loose ends in preparing to brief Davies on our study of the “burning question” findings. The last day and one-half of the course was devoted entirely to providing a briefing to Davies, answering her questions and having the opportunity to get to know her better through informal interaction at dinner and a “fireside chat” during our last night in Aurora.

Praise for the Cohort Program

All of the students departed cohort praising the program and being thankful that they were selected to attend. How did the students benefit from attending the program?

“I feel the benefit of the cohort program is getting to know the other participants,” said Steve Fischer of DCMA Los Angeles. “The energy generated and the dynamics produced by each class are dependent on the level of participation by each [cohort] member. The more

involved, the more dramatic the results and the learning experiences are for each of us.”

Marion Julian, director of the DCMA packaging division, agreed with Fischer: “This was a wonderful experience and I truly enjoyed everyone,” said Julian. “We all received the opportunity to learn from one another as well as from our instructors. I would really like our class to have a reunion and share how we put into practice the many things we were fortunate to learn from the instructors and one another.”

Brad Keim, a team leader from DCMA Lockheed Martin in Marietta, Ga., was near retirement but came to cohort anyway and is glad that he did. “Cohort 26 reinvigorated me not only with the subject matter taught in the classroom but with the awesome talent and energy I was exposed to by my brother and sister cohorts. This network will not fail.” 