

BrainTrust

An Innovative Forum for an Agency's
Supervisor Development

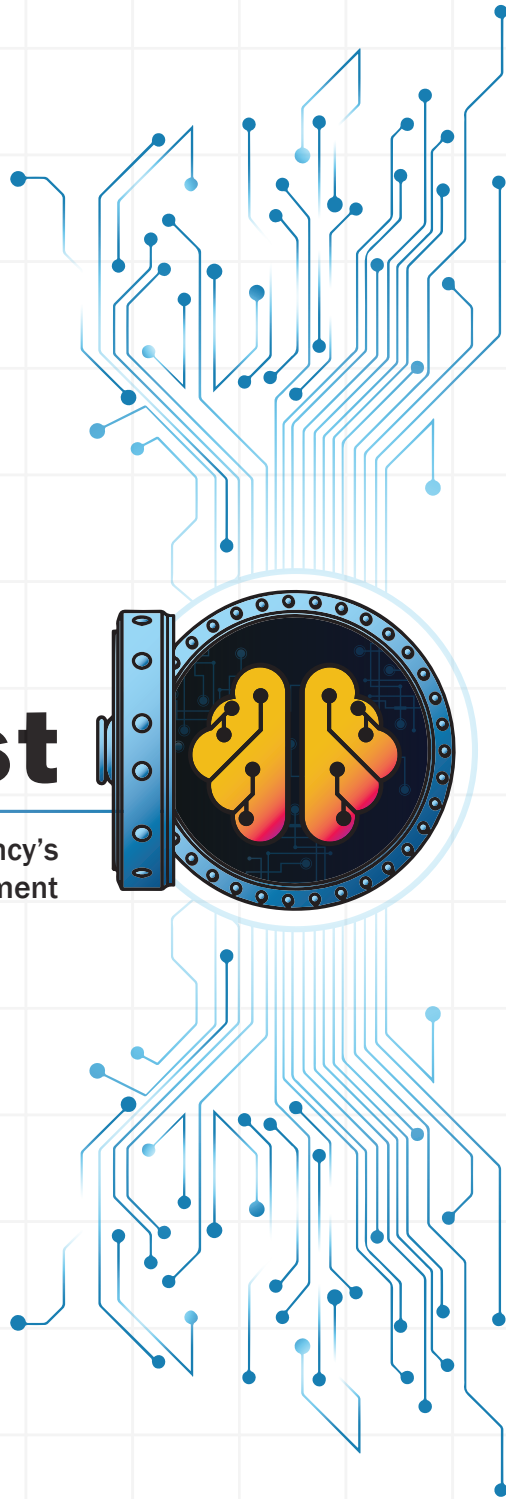


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Executive Summary

This framework is a guide to starting a peer learning and support group in a government agency or private sector organization. The guidance and the title “BrainTrust” are based on a pilot group operating in a directorate of the Department of Homeland Security. The purpose of the BrainTrust is to provide (first-line and second-line) supervisors with a small network of peers and a safe forum for meeting with those peers to discuss issues relating to their roles as leaders and managers. The BrainTrust can function as a valuable yet low-cost form of employee learning and development that helps the members apply known concepts of supervision to their actual daily experience as supervisors. As a method of employee development, the BrainTrust complements traditional training because it is experiential and ongoing rather than, like most training, process- or knowledge-oriented and singular. Current research validates this method of learning, and creating a forum for peers to learn from one another in this way can also help transform the organizational culture. In addition, a BrainTrust group can foster greater collaboration and camaraderie among members beyond the actual meetings, and these benefits among supervisors can in turn result in greater morale within the workforce.

Although there is no “right” way to create and sustain a BrainTrust group, several principles and best practices can help an agency toward success:

- Choosing a facilitator with the right qualities is one of the most important steps;
- Setting a group size of 8-12, scheduling meetings at regular intervals, and limiting meeting length will help ensure productive interaction by all that doesn’t exhaust itself or the participants;
- Carefully selecting members for a BrainTrust group will also foster the fruitful interaction and other benefits the pilot group has seen;
- Establishing ground rules for confidentiality and for interaction during meetings will help establish trust and a safe environment;
- Choosing discussion topics relevant to the needs of the world of supervisors will facilitate lively, productive discussions, yet the facilitator should always be ready to change the plan if he or she senses that the group needs to discuss something else, even at the last minute; and
- Finally, taking notes and distributing those to members will help reinforce the discussion and sustain the group by keeping momentum going between meetings.

Agencies should consider this innovative approach as an element in their supervisor development, and they are invited to contact the DHS team responsible for the model group this framework is based on.

Introduction

What is this framework?

This framework is a written plan, model, and resource guide intended to be used for the scalable replication and implementation of the “BrainTrust” initiative currently operating within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), Science and Technology Directorate (S&T). This framework documents the optimal requirements and conditions for replicating the BrainTrust initiative and is intended to make possible the successful establishment of a similar initiative within your agency/organization. Also included are insights and suggestions to improve the existing DHS/S&T initiative based on current BrainTrust participant interviews and their suggestions.

What is the BrainTrust?

The BrainTrust is a peer learning and support group designed to effectively bridge the gap between formal supervisory training and “real world,” practical application. The BrainTrust is comprised of first and second-line supervisors who meet regularly with trained facilitators (and subject matter experts, when applicable) in a “safe” environment to discuss issues related to common experiences supervisors encounter in the federal space. It can be used as a cost-effective means to augment formalized training through a peer learning environment, enabling sustainment and topic exploration by the participants and facilitator. Experienced supervisors are a tremendous resource, but most organizations do not have an established structure to share (institutional) knowledge with others.

Why was the BrainTrust created?

Emerging leaders step into the role of first-line supervisor across government every day. The transition from individual contributor to a supervisor can be daunting for many. The technical and soft skills required for supervisory positions vary widely, and individual high performers are often given the responsibility to supervise others without being given training/feedback to successfully complete their supervisory responsibilities. For example, supervisors need to ensure team growth, cohesion, engagement, and satisfactory performance; technical proficiency or mastery in one’s profession have now become less essential than leadership potential or “people skills,” yet promotion decisions quite often are based upon the former.

Additionally, supervisor training often happens after, rather than before, an employee is officially reassigned into their new supervisory position; thus, one must “learn as they go.” Often times the problem is new supervisors are simply not equipped with the full suite of tools to effectively perform their tasks and supervise their subordinates, yet direct reports naturally turn to their supervisors for guidance from “Day one.” Compounding this challenge, first-line supervisors often lack either internal or external mentors and/or a space to discuss potentially sensitive topics with managers at their same level. Supervisor training is often process-oriented rather than experience-oriented. For example, most new supervisors are trained on the mechanics of performance management and time and attendance, without receiving guidelines to properly manage employee performance, or how to navigate personal issues, grievances, low performers and morale. An introductory, singular, process-oriented training lacks the concrete experience (e.g., doing, having experience), reflective observation (e.g., reviewing, reflecting on the experience), abstract conceptualization (e.g., concluding, learning from the experience), and active experimentation (e.g., planning, trying out what you learned) necessary for experiential learning, as described in Dr. David A. Kolb’s experiential learning theory model. In his book *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*, Kolb states, “learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping experience and transforming it.” The BrainTrust allows for students to learn from one another, apply those lessons/skills in the work context, assess the outcome(s) of a decision, and return to their peers for further discussion and feedback.

Lastly, organizational culture is a critical factor often overlooked in supervisor training. A prior military officer may find previously utilized techniques that worked quite effectively in a military context to be counterproductive in a civilian organization. New supervisors must be able to adapt their leadership style and implement an approach to best fit the culture of the team and organization. New supervisors can both learn and better understand various techniques, methods, and approaches from peers who have demonstrated what works effectively within your organization and its respective culture.

What spurred this idea at the S&T?

In late 2017 and early 2018, the S&T's training and engagement team performed a needs assessment to better understand the common experiences and issues new supervisors face at the S&T. Originally, the team thought this effort would lead to the creation of a training and experiential learning "roadmap" for future supervisors; it quickly became evident however, current supervisors, particularly new supervisors in federal government or new supervisors at the S&T, lacked a structured way to voice their challenges and concerns and seek feedback from their peers on potential solutions.

These suggestions prompted the S&T's training and engagement team to pilot a ground-up forum for a small group of such supervisors to share ideas and challenges, seek counsel from one another, and receive informal training targeted specifically at issues they were facing as new supervisors. The training team called this new forum the BrainTrust, and invitations were sent to a targeted, diverse group of individuals to participate in the pilot. The name "BrainTrust" has two sources. It was most directly inspired by Creativity, Inc. by Ed Catmole, which the S&T Book Club discussed in early 2018. The book discusses how Pixar Studios has sought to cultivate the creativity and collaboration that have led to its success both as in storytelling and technical innovation. Pixar has a group called the Brain Trust that critiques new storylines in order to collectively make them better. Pixar itself adopted the use of the name from a group of advisors President Franklin Delano Roosevelt assembled and called the Brain Trust to help him make decisions. The first S&T BrainTrust meeting was held in April 2018, and since the publishing of this framework, the S&T has successfully conducted 9 BrainTrust meetings.

How does the organization benefit?

The BrainTrust creates a collaborative, non-judgmental environment where first and second-line supervisors can come together; share and leverage their experiences and unique perspectives (from where one sits within the organization); and receive suggestions, feedback, and recommendations. Facilitators may also tap into the BrainTrust for input on current and future initiatives (e.g., strategies, policies, procedures) to help ensure implementation is better suited for the organization and its trajectory.

Secondary benefits include creating a vehicle for supervisors to meet their colleagues and various counterparts across an organization; building esprit de corps; furthering a culture of learning, self-reflection, and continuing one's analysis and refinement of approaches to problem solving; stimulating meaningful dialogue around key challenges; and growing the next generation of leaders/mentors.

Additionally, supervisors directly influence an organization's morale, and the mental state of those supervisors directly affects whether or not morale is high or low. According to "Mental Health and Productivity in the Workplace: A Handbook for Organizations and Clinicians" by Jeffrey Kahn M.D. and Alan Langlieb M.D., productivity loss, absenteeism, job abandonment, and higher turnover are often directly linked to poor mental health. Federal agencies have formal Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs); there is a small amount of formal research on the effectiveness of peer groups of supervisors, but the benefits of other peer support groups are applicable. Based on a review completed by Linnan, Fisher and Hood ("The Power and Potential of Peer Support in Workplace Interventions") of more than 30 studies, 81% reported significant change for the better due to peer group participation.

Developing and Sustaining a BrainTrust in your Agency

As discussed above, BrainTrust groups are a cost-effective way to leverage the collective wisdom and experience of current supervisors to foster increased productivity, morale, and leadership. The BrainTrust was created in order to provide first-line supervisors – particularly new first-line supervisors – with an opportunity to gain the knowledge and support necessary to succeed in their new assignment. By creating a diverse group of supervisors, the BrainTrust facilitates knowledge transfer at a scale significantly beyond the basic training that new federal supervisors are required to receive. This framework includes key steps and strategies for getting your BrainTrust off the ground and ensuring its success and sustainability over time. When using the framework, remember that no BrainTrust is the same. Each organization must design its BrainTrust program to meet its own specific needs; the characteristics described herein are simply best practices in and critical success factors for the S&T's BrainTrust.

Finding the right facilitator and facilitator characteristics

While a BrainTrust program's success or failure depends on a number of factors, none is more critical to the program's success than the facilitator. In our interviews with current BrainTrust members, program participants universally highlighted the importance of a strong facilitator to their program's success. The facilitator is the program's champion, as well as its driving force. There is high probability the program will cease to exist over time without a facilitator who continues to drive active participation.

Due to the sensitive nature of the topics discussed in BrainTrust, the facilitator must be someone who can establish an atmosphere of trust and encouragement from the outset and manage the ground rules of the BrainTrust in accordance with the desires of the participants. The facilitator should be someone who participants are familiar with prior to starting the program or who has a reputation of being trustworthy and discrete. Often times this will be someone in the organization that individuals regularly approach for advice. This person should have strong communication skills, experience in conflict resolution, and display qualities such as honesty, empathy, and integrity.

Additionally, a good facilitator must be organized, but also be able to remain flexible on meeting times, structure, and agendas. Facilitators need to be able to plan and prepare agendas ahead of time, but be willing to deviate from a prepared topic at a moment's notice. This may take a lot of time to plan, which means the facilitator must be committed to the initiative and have the time and flexibility from his own supervisors to adequately lead the group.

HR Considerations

In the course of discussions among supervisors who are sharing challenges and seeking one another's counsel, someone may share about an employee relations issue he or she is facing. For example, a group member may share about a recent experience with one of their employees who is filing a grievance. While this sharing can be productive, and others may offer encouragement or guidance, members must be careful not to share information about employees that needs to remain confidential. In addition, the BrainTrust discussion should not be a substitute for bringing concerns to the organization's Human Resources (HR) Department (or Human Capital Office). The facilitator of a BrainTrust group should be trained to recognize when an issue raised for discussion needs to be referred to HR, and have the skill to steer the conversation toward that end. He or she should make all members aware of this distinction from the beginning in such a way as not to stifle or constrain.

Group size

BrainTrust cohorts should ideally number between 8-12 members. This size has several advantages. Assuming an average number of unavailable attendees, each meeting would consist of between 6 and 10 participants. Even if all members did attend, the group would still sit comfortably around a large conference table and be able to see one another and have an engaging conversation. Second, building trust among the members is a key element of a successful BrainTrust cohort. Although there is inherent trust amongst similarly situated peers, a group larger than 12 may hinder the ability of members to get to know, and thereby fully trust, one another. For large organizations, you may want to run separate, concurrent Braintrust cohorts (ideally numbering 8-12 members each), and for smaller organizations, a minimum of six members is recommended.

Scheduling and Meeting Length

One of the most significant challenges for a BrainTrust program will be driving sustained attendance/participation. BrainTrust participants emphasized the importance of having—to the greatest extent possible—regularly scheduled, standing BrainTrust meetings. Because BrainTrust participants are first and second-line supervisors, they face great demands on their time. Outstanding meetings allow participants to plan their schedules ahead of time, which significantly reduces the need to coordinate around multiple schedules every time the group meets. While it is not strictly necessary (or realistic) that each participant attends each meeting, ensuring the greatest participation level possible through consistent scheduling benefits not only each individual participant, but the group as a whole. Furthermore, gaining support from leadership can greatly enhance participation. If leadership is aware and supportive of the BrainTrust initiative, they will be more willing to allow employees to prioritize attendance over other responsibilities.

Meetings should last no more than 90 minutes, with 60 minutes being the ideal length. Restricting meetings to 60-90 minutes both limits the amount of time participants are taken away from their duties and effectively prevents group conversations from spiraling into all-day affairs. Participants leaving a 60-minute BrainTrust meeting have found that they “always have something to discuss,” which results in part from there being an artificial limit on the length of the conversation. Moreover, because the BrainTrust can often involve emotionally intense conversation, creating a limit on the scope is important for ensuring that participants return to their primary duties without feeling drained.

Membership

Creating a cohort consisting of the right mix of participants that bring with them varying experiences, and skills is fundamental to program effectiveness. Peer groups work best when participants can offer diverse perspectives and learn and grow from one another's experiences. In no event should any individual participant's own supervisor be a member of the cohort. Were that the case, the supervisee would in most cases feel restrained in their participation.

The BrainTrust creates value in connecting individuals who would not ordinarily interact with one another and who may have very different approaches to solving common problems, or who face different kinds of problems altogether. Ensuring diversity of both thought and function maximizes the value. It promotes organizational cohesiveness by forming connections between leaders in different competencies. Recruiting BrainTrust members requires careful consideration. It is essential to recruit members who are willing to share issues and experiences with the group. Therefore, the organization must be thoughtful in selecting members who will share messages the leadership wish to be amplified. The BrainTrust is not a program of general subscription. Members must be carefully selected so that they exhibit these qualities in order to ensure success. As one past participant noted, “BrainTrust is not for everyone.” For those who are a good fit, however, it presents an extraordinary value proposition.

Building Trust & Ground Rules

Once you have established interest in your organization for a BrainTrust and set some common rules for scheduling, membership criteria, and group size, it's important to build a foundation of trust and comfort within the group. The first few sessions should focus on establishing relationships between members, getting to know each other, and building trust. In order for the cohort to feel safe enough in their group to self-disclose and work through problems, the individuals need to feel sure that nobody is going to tell people outside of the group about the group's discussions. Thus, it is important to develop clear confidentiality guidelines and basic ground rules that everyone agrees with.

Developing ground rules is an important part of shaping a group's culture and encouraging trust and participation. Ground rules should serve as principles or statements of your group's values and norms. Some example ground rules are provided below:

1. **What is said in BrainTrust stays in BrainTrust.** Everything said and heard in the group is confidential and should not be repeated outside of the group.
2. **Safe space.** The group is a safe place to share work-related issues, and to obtain and provide support, information, reassurance, and encouragement. Participants should be respectful of individual choices and feelings.
3. **Silence is acceptable.** No one needs to say anything they do not wish to say.
4. **Leave work at the door.** Stay present by disconnecting from day-to-day duties. Turn off cell phones. Arrive and end on-time.
5. **Mutual Agreement:** Everyone in the group should have an opportunity to provide input into the ground rules.

Again, no two BrainTrusts are the same. Each organization must design its BrainTrust program to meet its own specific needs. These rules should be clearly understood and maintained or posted in a visible place. While it is important to set ground rules from the beginning, groups should only regard them as starting points to adapt and prioritize. Groups should feel able to tailor the ground rules to fit what is most appropriate for them.

Agenda Setting & Flexibility

A topic should be selected by the facilitator prior to the meeting and agreed upon by the participants. Members will be most engaged if the topic being discussed is something that is both meaningful and relevant. Therefore, topics should be solicited in advance of the meeting and the facilitator may want to check in with participants individually or in small groups to find out what is “top of mind” or “keeping them up at night.”

While it is helpful to have a proposed agenda, in practice, the meetings may diverge from the selected topic as the group drives the conversation. Sometimes, a group member will have a particular issue arise about which the member wishes to seek guidance from the group. Other times, the group will want to discuss an overarching organizational issue playing itself out in the “real world,” such as a reorganization. Sometimes, issues may arise in the weeks or even days leading up to a BrainTrust meeting, and the facilitator must be comfortable with discarding the prepared agenda and allowing participants to explore an emergent topic.

Further, in addition to flexibility around topic-setting, it is important that a facilitator stay open to new approaches or ideas for structuring meetings. Facilitators may even want to ask group members to share their ideas or experiences in an upcoming discussion, or invite members to present or lead an exercise or case study.

Sustaining your BrainTrust

Sustaining your BrainTrust over time can be extremely challenging. Government agencies are places of constant evolution where changes in leadership, organization structure, and even mission focus are commonplace. Maintaining consistency and stability in your BrainTrust in this environment will help employees manage these transitions, keep employees engaged and improve the organization’s retention over time.

Capturing notes on the main points from each discussion and maintaining a record of ideas, strategies, speakers, tools, and resources shared by members will allow your group to grow stronger and sustain itself over time, especially through any turnover in membership or leadership. Keep these resources updated and in a communal space with easy access for participants.

Sample Topics/Readings/Exercises

The below topics, sample readings and exercises are provided as tools to supplement the discussions within the BrainTrust. The topics, readings, and exercises can be used separately or together to provide additional depth and insight into various subject matters. These resources should be used to help foster productive discussion, and can be tailored as necessary to support your organization's mission and goals.

Sample topics

- i. Behavior change
- ii. Bias/motivated reasoning
- iii. Building coalitions
- iv. Business acumen
- v. Challenges for new supervisors
- vi. Communication (e.g., skillful listening)
- vii. Crucial conversations
- viii. Driving results
- ix. Emotional Intelligence
- x. Employee relations
- xi. Leadership fundamentals
- xii. Leadership vs. management
- xiii. Leading without authority
- xiv. Managing change (especially reorganizations and administration changes)
- xv. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs
- xvi. Negotiations
- xvii. Performance management
- xviii. Political savvy
- xix. Purpose
- xx. Resistance
- xxi. Servant leadership

Sample readings

- i. General Readings:
 1. The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People - Stephen Covey
 2. The Speed of Trust - Stephen Covey
 3. Start with Why – Simon Sinek (TED Talk)
 4. Good to Great – Jim Collins
 5. Good to Great and the Social Sectors – Jim Collins
 6. Why You Think You're Right Even When You're Wrong – Julia Galef (TED Talk)
- ii. Communication:
 1. How to Speak Up for Yourself – Adam Galinsky (TED Talk)
 2. Humble Inquiry: The Gentle Art of Asking Instead of Telling – Edgar H. Schein
 3. Crucial Conversations – Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan and Al Switzler
- iii. Change:
 1. Switch: How to Change Things When Change is Hard – Chip Heath and Dan Heath
 2. One Small Step Can Change Your Life – Robert Maurer PhD
 3. Are You Deciding on Purpose – Richard Leider
- iv. Politics:
 1. Political Savvy – Joel Deluca
 2. Building Coalitions - Jennifer Suesse and Hermina Ibarr
- v. Negotiation:
 1. Ok - Getting to Yes – Roger Fisher and William Ury
- vi. Leadership:
 1. What Leaders Do – John Kotter
 2. Servant Leadership in Action – Ken Blanchard and Renee Broadwell
 3. 9 Ways to Influence Without Authority – Russel Horowitz

Sample exercises

- i. Strength Deployment Inventory (SDI) - a reliable and validated instrument for self-awareness, motives and values, and dealing with conflict.
- ii. Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) - an introspective self-report questionnaire with the purpose of indicating differing psychological preferences in how people perceive the world around them and make decisions.
- iii. The 4 Tendencies - The indispensable personality profiles that reveal how to make your life better (and other people's lives better, too) (Gretchen Rubin) <https://quiz.gretchenrubin.com/>
- iv. DISC Assessment - a quick and simple way for you to determine your personality style. <https://www.discprofile.com/what-is-disc/overview/>
- v. Feedback 360 - a process through which feedback from an employee's subordinates, colleagues, and supervisor(s), as well as a self-evaluation by the employee themselves is gathered.

Conclusion

Agencies (or sub-agencies, offices, branches, and other organizational units) seeking to develop supervisors and managers and help them feel less isolated would do well to consider starting a BrainTrust. This informal, loosely structured, purposeful peer learning forum offers a low-cost, grass roots, bottom-up method of leader development. The BrainTrust offers interactive, experiential learning that traditional training programs rarely provide.

The pilot BrainTrust at the DHS S&T has been so successful that the workforce engagement team is planning to start a second cohort. Those looking for additional information or guidance are welcome to contact the S&T team members responsible: Mr. Kyle Graumann, kyle.graumann@hq.dhs.gov, and Dr. Christopher "Chip" Crane, Christopher.crane@associates.hq.dhs.gov.

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