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**SYSTEMIC FACTORS INFLUENCING RISK AVERSION:
DIAGNOSING BEHAVIORS AND TAILORING
INTERVENTIONS FOR LASTING TRANSFORMATION**

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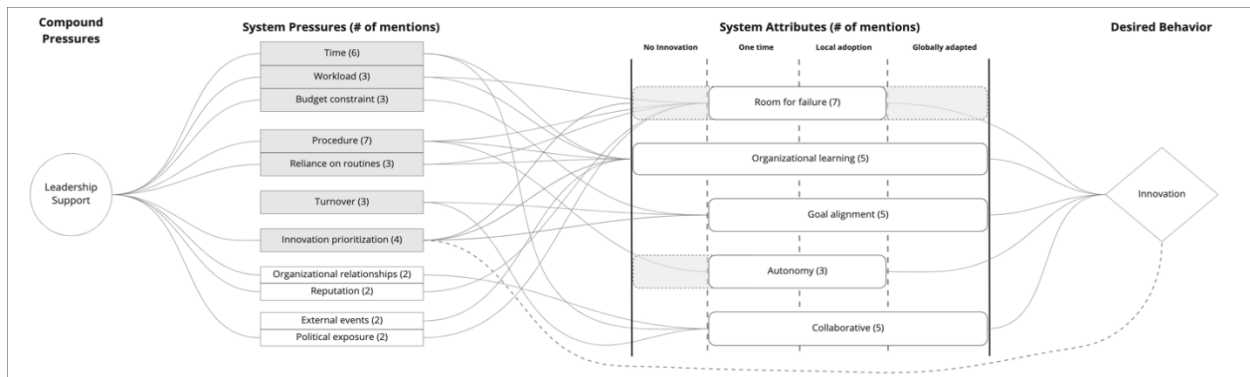
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Executive Summary

We partnered with the Air Force Installation Contracting Center (AFICC) and conducted a two-stage, small-scale pilot to: (1) uncover the systemic pressures on the acquisition workforce that impede innovative behaviors; and (2) design a program that produces interventions to address these systemic contributors.

Stage 1: Using our Systemic Contributors and Adaptations Diagramming (SCAD) interview technique we conducted 15 interviews across six USAF installations. We used SCAD data to model how the dynamics of the pressures in the system contributed to innovative behaviors. **System attributes** such as making room for failure, fostering organizational learning, aligning team goals, collaborating internally and externally, and autonomy supported innovative behavior and helped overcome obstacles to change. **System pressures** most often cited were procedure, time, and innovation prioritization. These, among others, served to strengthen and/or erode system attributes linked to innovation. **Compound pressures**, which we identified as management-led efforts, simultaneously up-regulated and down-regulated the system pressures, contributing to strengthening and eroding system attributes and influencing innovation behavior.

Model of pressures' influence of systemic attributes that foster innovation



Stage 2: Once SCAD interviews were completed, we piloted an intervention workshop with AFICC partners and staff/frontline personnel to evaluate an intervention using our IMPActS framework: Ideas behind the interventions proposed; degree of Model alignment that stakeholders have around the ideas; perceived and real Pragmatics of the intervention; availability of the relevant Actors to implement it; and sufficient resources and effort to Sustain it. Participants were asked to rate the candidate intervention on the IMPActS Framework dimensions, which led to conversations and consensus ratings for the intervention as well as co-constructed ideas on how to improve the intervention. Feedback from the participants suggest that these workshops can be easily implemented and will be valuable in creating more effective innovation interventions.

1 Study Objectives

The objectives of this research are to (1) uncover the underlying, largely invisible systemic pressures on the acquisition workforce in the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) that impede innovative behaviors; and (2) design a program that produces interventions to address these systemic contributors to incentivize lasting behavior changes leading to the kind of cultural change required to meet the National Defense Strategy.

To achieve these objectives, we partnered with the Air Force Installation Contracting Center (AFICC) and conducted a two-stage, small-scale pilot deploying our unique methodologies.

1.1 Stage 1: SCAD Interviews

Data & Methodology

We used our Systemic Contributors and Adaptations Diagramming (SCAD) interview technique (Walker, Woods, & Rayo, 2016) to identify observed patterns of pressures (expectations) and conflicts (trade-offs) that influence innovative behaviors. We used these interviews to identify situations in which the intent of DoD leadership was not translated into the actions of the acquisition workforce due to conflicts created from other systemic pressures. Through semi-structured interviews, we probed how the dynamics of the pressures or expectations in the system (e.g., regulation, policy, politics, norms) contributed both to “innovative” behavior as well as “standard” behaviors.

Fourteen SCAD interviews were completed with 15 participants across six Air Force installations. Anonymity was guaranteed as a condition of the interview; however, Major General Cameron Holt waived anonymity and non-attribution. Participant characteristics are found in Table 1. SCAD interviews were approximately one hour in length, conducted via Zoom or MS Teams, and were recorded and transcribed. Thematic pattern analysis was used to categorize a set of patterns focused on (1) the system attributes that support innovative behaviors, (2) the set of often conflicting pressures that foster and degrade these systems attributes, and (3) how a set of “compound pressures” can up-regulate and down-regulate the observed pressures.

Table 1: SCAD interview participant employment characteristics

Positions	Ranks	Functions
Leadership (5)	Military (1): Maj Gen Civilian (4): SES, NH-04 (2), GS-15	Contracting (3) Program Management (2)
Staff/Frontline (10)	Military (5): Maj, Capt, 1st Lt, TSgt, SrA Civilian (5): GS-14 (2), GS-12(2), NH-03	Contracting (10)

Findings

Innovation as a concept encompasses a wide range of behaviors, yet among study participants we identified three principal types of **innovative behavior**: (1) tool development - endeavors to create new technological tools; (2) process modification or generation - attempts to change business operation processes; (3) combined tool developments and process changes. Contrary to what may be a common conception of the effects of tool development, innovation action in

the process area which attempts to redesign or supplement existing administrative processes may have more significant impacts than other types of innovative behavior, but also incurs greater organizational effort. These efforts include **demonstrating the benefit of the new process, embedding new workflows, and implementing across multiple units**. However, successful process changes were noted by several participants, chiefly, the SPARK program, which created not only a resource pool for the development of new tools, but also established a new process-channel through which innovation can be supported.

Interview data revealed innovation efforts, even within formalized “innovation-supported settings”, are driven largely by the **voluntary effort** of the participants, and nearly exclusively performed in addition to other duties. **Pockets of innovative behavior** exist at multiple levels of the hierarchy and at multiple locations geographically, but information regarding innovative developments, either successes or failures, is rarely shared beyond the wing-level. Innovative behaviors were also more likely to emerge in response to **acute and temporary circumstances** such as a high-profile or time-sensitive requirement or a project that needs “saving” (e.g., time, cost, quality).

Figure 1 illustrates the evolution of ingraining a new acquisition process from initiating innovation (occurs or not), to sustaining (used once, or adopted by the unit), to spreading (replicating throughout the enterprise). At each transition stage, we found that there are unique obstacles that prevent new, innovative acquisition ideas from flourishing across the enterprise.

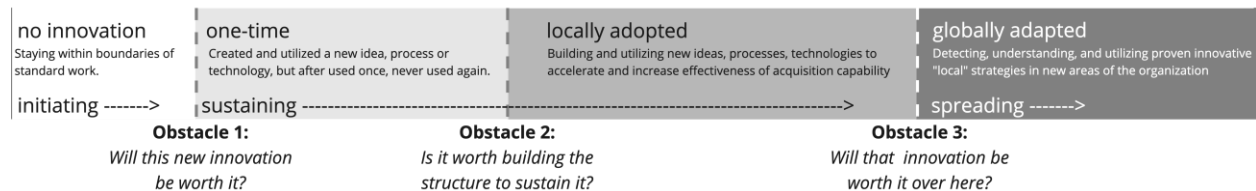


Figure 1: Evolution of ingraining new acquisition processes

Nevertheless, our pilot data revealed a small number (of likely a larger set) of systems attributes that are reliably associated with innovative acquisition behaviors that can overcome these obstacles. The most frequently cited system attributes supporting innovative behavior include:

- a) **Making room for failure and risk-taking:** Encouraging risks and creative solutions without fear of punishment for trying something new, accepting that failure is a part of the innovation process.
- b) **Fostering organizational learning:** Supporting institutional learning by keeping people up to date on new tools and methods, and using past efforts at innovative thinking and innovation-centered behaviors to guide future action.

- c) **Aligning team goals:** Ensuring people horizontally and vertically within the organization share common goals and understand their integral role in reaching goals.
- d) **Collaborating internally and externally:** Facilitating collaboration with stakeholders within the organization, externally with relevant units, and industry partners.
- e) **Autonomy:** Allowing people to have flexibility and freedom to complete work through their own means, less supervisor involvement and more personal authority over work.

Table A1 in the Appendix includes the full set of systems attributes revealed in the pilot.

Our initial work also exposed patterns of how systemic pressures (also likely part of a larger set) either strengthened or eroded the system attributes linked to innovation. Interview participants indicated the following pressures most often influenced innovative behavior:

- a) **Procedure:** Policy, process, rules, and regulation emerged as the most cited pressure on system attributes. It can both encourage change (if it is not prohibited, we can try it), and stymie it (rote adherence without creative thinking).
- b) **Time:** The default is to go fast to complete tasks quickly, in part, due to workload, which encourages status quo and slows adoption. Time can also accelerate change when there is a crisis or acute need to solve complex problem creatively or new approaches must be tried.
- c) **Innovation prioritization:** Emphasizing the organization's desire to innovate through resource allocation, messaging, policies, and/or structures put in place to support innovation.
- d) **Workload:** There is a mismatch between work requirements and availability of necessary resources (staff, expertise, etc.). Peers have little capacity to assist whether due to unclear or unsynchronized priorities; this is, in part, because the acquisition workforce has not kept pace given the growth in requirements.
- e) **Budget constraint:** Limited resources to attract the right vendors to develop and/or execute creative solutions can hinder new approaches.
- f) **Turnover:** A particularly salient issue for military personnel with frequent reassignment and/or deployment, and new leadership assignments. Personnel change can disrupt or terminate momentum, but also lead to staff slow-rolling adoption to "wait it out" for new leadership.
- g) **Reliance on routines:** Preference for status quo work routines and resisting adoption of new practices. This can be reflected by tenure, with younger/newer employees more likely to pursue change.

Notably, some of these pressures both strengthened *and* eroded one or more attributes, depending on the magnitude of the pressure. The complete list of pressures and their influence on system attributes is detailed in Table A2 in the Appendix, along with examples from SCAD interviews.

Finally, our pilot work revealed how management-led interventions simultaneously up-regulated and down-regulated the reported pressures, ultimately contributing to the strengthening and erosion of innovation systems attributes. Each of these management-led efforts, which we have dubbed “compound pressures,” modulated the more primitive, discrete system pressures in both intended and unintended ways. Staff/frontline interviews unanimously reported leadership support was a critical ingredient to innovation efforts. Weak leadership support facilitated (or did not hinder) experimentation, allowing staff more discretion and thus creative solutions occurred. Supervisors exhibiting strong leadership commitment would not only encourage local adoption but provide support and resources. Two such examples were the were the creation of a staffed innovation cell and a new acquisition innovation pipeline process called “firestarter”.

We synthesized pilot SCAD interview findings in Figure 2, which models the influence of compound and system pressures on the systemic attributes that foster innovation behaviors.

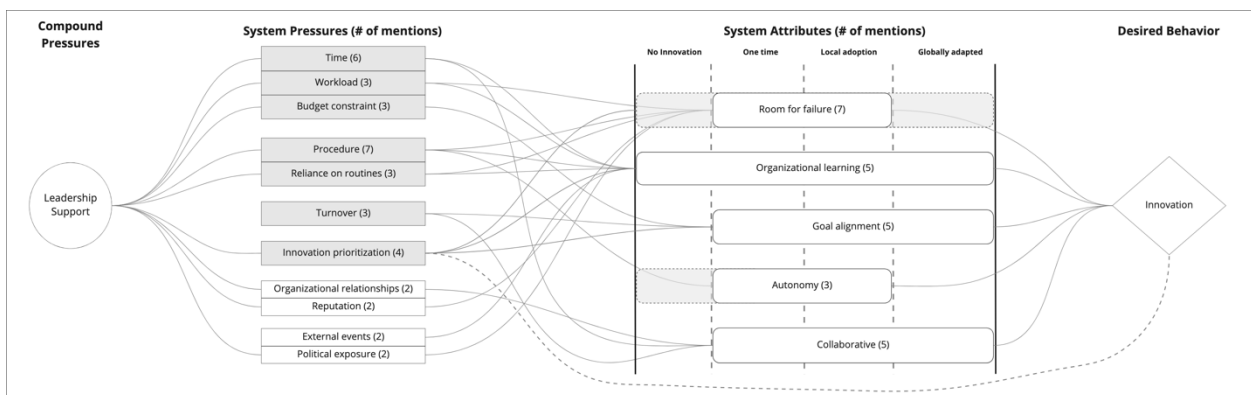


Figure 2: Model of pressures' influence of systemic attributes that foster innovation

Return on investment (ROI), a calculation of the expected financial return on a given financial investment, is helpful for businesses to maximize the value of their capital expenditures and measure the performance of their assets. A metric for the financial performance of assets is useful for companies because it allows them to make objective decisions between acquisition options and to evaluate whether a particular project or endeavor is worth pursuing. The DOD today applies some business analytics processes in its acquisition process, including market research studies, investigation of alternatives, and historical pricing analysis for existing contractors (Department of Defense, 2018). In some situations, the DOD does consider ROI through the cost savings from an acquisition to perform a specific function. This practice would be true for some acquisitions of commodities for enterprise use, such as staples like toilet paper, and for complex but well-characterized enterprise software systems such as payroll or accounting software. This process is known as Value Engineering (Gluck, 1976) and is often evaluated in the contracting process as Lowest Price, Technically Acceptable (LPTA). However, since many DOD acquisitions do not result in revenue or direct cost savings, conventional wisdom is that no return-on-investment analysis is possible for contract evaluation. We propose to

create meaningful, actionable metrics for the DOD to calculate ROI, based on how the private sector calculates ROI, but using DOD-specific metrics for return.

1.2 Stage 2: IMPActS Intervention Workshop

Data & Methodology

SCAD findings were evaluated using our IMPActS framework: Ideas (evidence, mechanisms) behind the interventions proposed, the degree of Model alignment that stakeholders have around the ideas behind that intervention, the perceived and real Pragmatics of the intervention, the availability of the relevant Actors to implement it, and sufficient resources and effort to Sustain it (Fitzgerald, 2019).

Once SCAD interviews were completed, we conducted one IMPActS intervention evaluation workshop with 2 AFICC personnel and 1 staff/frontline participant. The pilot workshop assessed the likely effectiveness of a candidate innovation intervention derived from the results of the SCAD interviews. Participants were asked to rate the candidate intervention on all of the IMPActS Framework dimensions, which led to conversations and consensus ratings for the intervention as well as co-constructed ideas on how to improve the intervention relative to any dimension that was weak.

Findings

We received unanimous feedback from the participants that the IMPActS workshop allowed for quick, valuable assessment of a potential new intervention, accelerating conversations that facilitated the convergence of multiple, sometimes conflicting, perspectives on a given intervention. This convergence of perspectives fostered insights that they said would likely not have surfaced without the structure of the workshop. The participants were enthusiastic about the workshop: an airman commented that they “saw the intrinsic value of this”, and an officer commented, “I think this is an example of something that's very much in the innovation cell's lane.” We were also encouraged that the workshop would not be difficult to justify with their leadership, with one participant commenting, “I don't really have to justify this too much to my leadership...this is what we're here for.” Taken together, their comments reflect both the lightweight/low cost of IMPActS workshop participation and the clarity of the value provided.

Participants seemed to quickly see the benefits of two facets of the IMPActS process: the directed effort toward establishing mental-model alignment and the exploration of the differences between the types of efforts and resources needed to establish an initiative and those required to sustain the effort over time. Recognizing the tendency of new initiatives to become stale over time, workshop participants seemed particularly interested in exploring what sustainment plans might look like.

2 Next Steps and Proposed Plan

Our pilot has demonstrated the potential value of both the SCAD interviews and IMPActS workshops to build a sustainable, valuable program that will (1) assess how acquisition organizations are dynamically waxing and waning with regards to innovation, and (2) create tailored interventions that specifically target the systems attributes and pressures that will be most impactful for the innovative behavior of those organizations. We propose a two-year plan that results in a sustainable, self-sufficient program that spans the Department of Defense. Details include:

Year One – Answer final questions, training internal leaders

- Creating a more detailed innovation map with more focused SCAD interviews
 - Create more comprehensive list of pressures and innovation-linked systems attributes
 - Document tradeoff patterns: how pressure conflicts are resolved, resulting in general prioritization strategies (i.e., which pressures tend to win out?)
 - Explore and document innovation success stories and pitfalls
 - Continued IMPActS workshop refinements – experimenting with frequency and participation
 - How frequently should workshops be conducted?
 - Who should participate? In what configurations?
 - Creating a program implementation plan that is sensitive to organizations’ constraints
 - Training program managers, interviewers, and workshop facilitators
 - Determining where program will fit into parent acquisition organizations
- Determining how to best integrate with Adaptive Acquisition Framework (AAF).

Year Two – Tuning and transition

- In Year Two, we run the program! We will kick it off in Q1 with the plan developed in Year One with 1-2 selected organizations, and will bring an additional 1-2 online each quarter. In the last month of each quarter, we will solicit feedback from each of the programs, and redesign as needed for the upcoming quarterly launch. At the end of Year Two, we will have 8-10 organizations running self-sustained innovation programs, and an adaptable plan that the DoD can use to launch subsequent programs across the enterprise.

References

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Appendix

Table A1: Set of reported systems attributes that support innovation

Attribute name (# of mentions)	Definition	Example from interview
Accepting failure and risk (7)	Organization encourages risks and creative solutions without fear of punishment for trying something new	P12: "There's going to be some mistakes, there's going to be something that happens. And obviously, sometimes you can't even project all of those, but realizing that that's something that could happen and understanding that, yeah, that's okay in this case because we tried something different."
Organizational learning (5)	Supports institutional learning, keeps people up to date on new tools and methods, and uses past situations as a source of information	P12: A new course was started in partnership with a business school to fill a business acumen gap and "use that knowledge to reorient and align financial incentives of industry around contractual incentives."
Collaboration (5)	Organization facilitates collaboration internally and externally with other units and industry partners throughout a project lifespan	P03: Relationships were built and maintained with industry so they could keep pace with technology and make the "science folks" a core part of the team.
Goal alignment (5)	People and groups (moving horizontally and vertically through the organization) share the same goal and understand their role in reaching the goal	P05: A scope document was introduced to the whole team at step one to make sure everyone had a "picture of the finish line" to ensure people were not going off in different directions.
Autonomy (3)	Organization allows people to have flexibility and freedom to complete work through their own means, less supervisor involvement and more personal authority over projects	P07: Contracts and teams are managed without leadership intervention which "gave a lot of freedom and flexibility to do things they thought was best" for the situation. This avoided pushback and was able to just get things done.

Table A2: set of reported systems pressures that strengthen and erode innovation attributes

Pressure name (# of mentions)	How strengthens (+)/weakens (-) innovation attributes	Example from interview
Procedure (7)	<p>Organizational learning (+/-):</p> <p>(+) Reducing the number of rules encouraged critical thinking and development of new skills</p> <p>(-) Following protocol, everything is a checklist rather than an evaluation of foundational skills and education</p> <p>Autonomy (+): Procedures that allow flexibility of execution encourages individualized solutions to problems</p> <p>Room for failure (-): Protocol provides a comfort zone that people fall back onto rather than attempting something risky</p>	<p>P01 (+): Leadership reduced the number of rules people needed to follow to encourage critical thinking.</p> <p>P05 (-): “[they] drive everything to a checklist, so the people aren't focused on developing their functional skills, they're focused on checking boxes. The government is then in turn, promoting people who don't have the foundational skills, who should become the mentors of the junior people behind them.”</p> <p>P02 (+): The FAR gave the authority to “basically do the acquisition smartly, however they saw fit, as long as it's not illegal and permissible by local policy.”</p> <p>P13: “When something doesn't fit that norm, we're risk averse in a lot of ways, and then we try to pull it back into that process that we're all somewhat comfortable with” rather than trying to innovate.</p>
Time (6)	<p>Organizational learning (-): Desire to go fast leads to reliance on current/old procedures</p> <p>Collaboration (+): Need for results in a strict timeframe encourages collaboration and communication</p>	<p>P01 (-): Organization’s default is the “go-fast model” and relies on old procedures to make sure they reach the work requirement.</p> <p>P02 (+): “Status quo is just sitting behind a computer and doing everything electronically... [we didn’t] have that time in the acquisition schedule, however, because of X, Y, Z.” and it changed to directly interacting with the site contractors</p>

<p>Innovation prioritization (4)</p>	<p>Organizational learning (+/-):</p> <p>(+) Leads to developing critical thinking skills and seeking new information on improving current practices</p> <p>(-) Prioritizing innovation increases options, which can lead to an overwhelming amount of new information</p> <p>Goal alignment (-): The people working have a primary goal of getting work done and if innovation is overly prioritized it gets in the way of that goal</p> <p>Room for failure (+): The desire to innovate allows more risks to be taken and boundaries to be pushed</p>	<p>P13 (+): "You have to get rid of your desire to see everything one way to enable that [standardized] environment, and then you have to coach people and encourage people on critically thinking about what could be, while you also insist that they have the knowledge of what is, and that combination, I think, is where innovation is born."</p> <p>P06 (-): "And then you have to know, not only all of your baseline contracting stuff, but you have to know all the new innovations too. And you have to learn all the new stuff because every day it changes and we get a new National Defense Authorization Act and it's got new rules. We get a new president and we get new executive orders that affect our contract clauses and we have to figure out how to deal with those. There's just not enough time to sit and I would say, think critically and think innovatively about what you're doing."</p> <p>P08 (-): Their main goal is to get the work done and there's a lot to be done at once. "You have to cut a new task order. You have to make a contract modification and you have all of those responsibilities. And then if you hear someone talking about, "Hey, we need to be innovative and we need to pursue this." You just don't have the time." You need to get work done and don't have time to be innovative."</p> <p>P08 (+): "However, I like to say that in the past year, especially under the [new] Chief of Staff with his model of accelerating change or use, things are changing. The culture is changing</p>
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		towards taking risk and just trying new things."
Workload (3)	<p>Organizational learning (-): With high workload additional dissemination and educational tasks are a burden and take a lower priority</p> <p>Room for failure(-): High workload decreases desire to take risks because a failed risk adds more work</p>	<p>P01 (-): Teams show reluctance to do extra learning and market research because it's "gonna take more work, they're not giving [them] more bodies to help do that more work."</p> <p>P01 (-): "And we have to ...[take] any risks we have to attempt to mitigate or solve. And all of that is work, which takes time. Right? So introducing any risk that they have to address and solve is something that people generally are not, they don't want to do because it's, it's, it's more work."</p>
Budget constraint (3)	Goal alignment (-): Unknown budgetary restrictions disrupt ability to align intentions	P03 (-) Groups agree to complete a certain action and award funding but someone above comes in and says they don't want to spend that much money.
Turnover (3)	<p>Organizational learning (-): Rotating individuals through does not develop experts with a deep understanding of foundational skills</p> <p>Collaboration (-): Constant rotation of people does not support consistent collaboration</p> <p>Goal alignment (-): When people leave the project it's hard to get a replacement with similar goals and enthusiasm about the project</p>	<p>P05 (-): "The government foundationally has this mindset, that we build individuals by rotating them and rather than developing experts and a deep pool of knowledge in the foundational skills and how to be a program manager."</p> <p>P03 (-): In military and civil service, people rotate in and out and do not develop together as a team. There is no core team.</p> <p>P04 (-): Established a new project, but then was deployed overseas and no one pushed it forward, so the project didn't go anywhere.</p>

<p>Reliance on routines (3)</p>	<p>Organizational learning (-): Becoming reliant on routine decreases the ability to embrace new information and processes</p> <p>Room for failure (-): People get attached to their way of doing things and create an environment that devalues trying new ideas</p>	<p>P01 (-): “Pockets of old school” believe if the process isn’t broken don’t fix it and actively push back against new measures. Some of the newer people embrace and encourage a departure from the old procedures</p> <p>P08 (-): “They have been in a base for 15, 20 years. And they've been doing something they've been doing since the 1999. And they're like, "No, hey, we've been doing this forever. So you don't know what you're talking about. We know what we're doing." And you end up encountering those obstacles when trying to improve a process or just trying something new.”</p>
<p>Political Exposure (2)</p>	<p>Room for failure (-): Backlash and public scrutiny make people wary of attempting new ideas in the future</p>	<p>P01 (-): Failures lead to scrutiny and public backlash. “No one wants to be a headline, so that might weigh on our minds a little bit.”</p>
<p>Reputation (2)</p>	<p>Room for failure (-): Fear of damaging their reputation and hurting their career makes people less inclined to take risks and try new things</p>	<p>P12 (-): If you can get people to trust that they can innovate “people start to emerge out of the woodwork to go try that thing they've always wanted to try but were fearful that they would get a bad reputation with leadership and that their career would stop without so much as a whim.”</p>
<p>External events (2)</p>	<p>Organizational learning (+): External events push people to learn new ways of dealing with situations and can be applied to future scenarios</p>	<p>P11 (+): Because of the events associated with COVID they learned new lessons and applied them to future situations.</p>
<p>Organizational relationships (2)</p>	<p>Collaboration (+/-):</p> <p>(+) Good relationships increase the likelihood for future collaboration</p> <p>(-) Strained relationships and lack of desire for communication decreases ability to collaborate</p>	<p>P07 (+): The team was successful because “they are very involved and closely aligned with my contracting team, which isn't always the case. Sometimes, you have your program managers and your contracting teams that are more at odds than they are working together.</p>

		<p>P06 (-): "There was so much bad blood between [my unit] and that program, our organization and that program, not specifically our team, but just in general, they did not want to hear pretty much anything we had to say. They were done with us, so that was really the barrier there."</p>
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