



# Get VOCAL!

## Growing Profits Through Customer-Supplier Relationships

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## CHAPTER TWO

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VOCAL is a customer engagement process that builds strong relationships and delivers results where two or more partner companies cooperate to drive key improvements through the use of executive sponsors, joint teams, and “no-surprises communication,” especially in complex, higher-risk engagements when normal business processes cannot do so.

VOCAL partnerships normally last from 18 to 24 months and then naturally fade out when problems are solved, communication links are established, and normal business processes are adapted to handle the new, ongoing responsibilities.

I caution executives, however, that they cannot stop weeding the garden after the formal VOCAL process is dissolved. In other words, it’s crucial for their partner companies to continue addressing the root-cause issues that were responsible for putting the partnership in jeopardy in the first place. If they neglect or stop the positive behavior that fixed the problems, the weeds will grow back, and an excellent opportunity to make permanent improvements will have been squandered.

Figure 2-1 is the “bubble chart.” It shows how the joint team structure makes VOCAL work. It includes the four key elements of the structure: executive sponsors, core team, joint working teams, and the steering team.

**FIGURE 2-1** VOCAL joint team structure (copyright © 2004, Cisco Systems, Inc.)

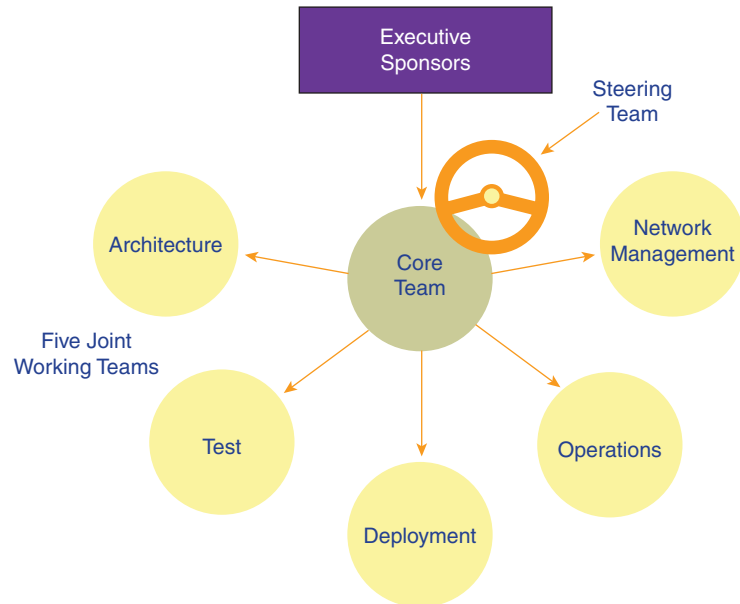


Figure 2-1 is a generic example model of a full-scale VOCAL engagement between strategic partners in the data, voice, and video Internet networking industry—in this case, an equipment supplier like Cisco and its service provider or enterprise customer.

Although the titles of the teams shown in Figure 2-1 represent real life in the networking industry, VOCAL and its principles can be used to advantage in any industry in which companies want to rapidly evolve

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from the outmoded but all-too-common supplier-customer relationship, which is often adversarial, to a strategic partnership while solving complex challenges together.

The first of the four key VOCAL elements, *executive sponsors*, provide overall leadership, strategic direction, and accountability for the relationship. The sponsors work through a *core team* that is the glue that holds all the teams together and keeps them on track. The core team holds regularly scheduled executive reviews to have the working teams account for their progress.

The *joint working teams* take their overall direction from the core team and work with both strategic and tactical issues. Each team has a co-leader and members from each of the partner companies. The teams have concise charters, lists of deliverables, and regular meetings to drive actions.

The *steering team* holds brief checkpoint meetings, usually no longer than 30 minutes at a time, to discuss the state of the process and agree on ways to improve it. It is a small team, no more than three to five members, consisting of the supplier's VOCAL program manager, his or her program management counterpart at the customer, and the supplier's account manager, at a minimum.

All four VOCAL elements—executive sponsors, core team, joint working teams, and steering team—must be formed and active for the process to succeed.

## Leverage the Big Shots

The executive sponsors and the level of support they provide, and how they provide it, determine the success or failure of the VOCAL process. They should be senior enough to provide the clout necessary to effect cultural change and real action, usually vice presidents or senior directors. They should be the type of people whose words are taken seriously and who have a vested interest in the outcome of the partnership. They also need to back up their words with action—not just lip service—by providing VOCAL team leaders and members rewards for compliance and penalties for noncompliance with the requirements of the process.

Executive sponsors also need to be willing to delegate real authority to the program managers and co-leaders of the joint working teams. After the sponsors approve the general direction and boundaries for the teams, they need to allow the teams to make meaningful decisions within those boundaries.

## Captain Hook's Folly

I was a young ensign and division officer in the U.S. Navy during the Vietnam War in the early 1970s when I struggled to learn how to delegate responsibility and decision making to the enlisted men who were the subject matter experts under my authority. I had some very good senior officers who knew how to delegate effectively. Others did not.

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One who didn't know how to delegate well was my commanding officer aboard a guided missile destroyer home ported in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. I referred to the CO as Captain Hook (but not to his face) because his leadership philosophy was to motivate his officers through fear and intimidation.

Fear does inspire urgency, strict compliance with orders, and the short-term performance improvements. But it doesn't lead to long-term excellence, innovation, flexibility, or the retention of talent in the Navy. I had considered making the Navy my career, but one reason I decided to leave the service was Captain Hook's demonstration of how a ship-board tyrant could make life miserable for all those around him.

I probably took more than my fair share of cheap shots, temper tantrums, and criticism from the captain because I was the ship's navigator and my duty station was at the chart table on the bridge, not far from the captain's chair. If you spent much time on the bridge, you were exposed and fair game for the CO's tirades.

Late one night, he caught one of my fellow junior officers relaxing in the captain's chair during the officer's watch underway on the bridge, a real faux pas. The officer had incorrectly thought the captain had gone to bed for the night. Nobody sits in the captain's chair except the captain. Hook put the unfortunate young officer "in hack," restricting him to his bunk room for a day to contemplate his sins. The junior officer was wrong to flaunt naval tradition and discipline. The punishment was designed to teach us all a lesson through fear.

I was on the bridge one afternoon when the ship was operating underway off the Hawaiian coast when the captain looked around for Ensign Reed, who served as the ship's photographer as one of his many duties. Hook wanted some pictures taken of the operations and was miffed when Reed wasn't immediately available. The captain turned to the Bosun's Mate of the Watch, a third-class petty officer, and growled, "Tell Ensign Reed to get his ass to the bridge!"

The Bosun's Mate is responsible to pass the captain's messages over the ship's public address system, a system of loudspeakers in every section of the ship. The Bosun was no fool; he knew a direct order from the captain when he heard one. The Bosun clicked on his microphone and announced, voice booming throughout the ship, "*Ensign Reed, get your ass to the bridge, sir. Ensign Reed, get your ass to the bridge!*"

Captain Hook, with a scowl and look of disbelief on his face, swiveled around in his chair and glared at the Bosun. I was standing at the chart table and had to turn away, not wanting the captain to see me trying to smother a laugh. The other officers on the bridge were struggling to stay under control. Within seconds, Ensign Reed came stumbling onto the bridge in a panic, face flushed, trying to stuff his shirt into his pants, looking like he had just witnessed the apocalypse. All for a photograph.

When you govern your people through fear and intimidation, beware of what you ask for. And don't expect them to innovate or use any good judgment on your behalf. That's not delegation. VOCAL works best

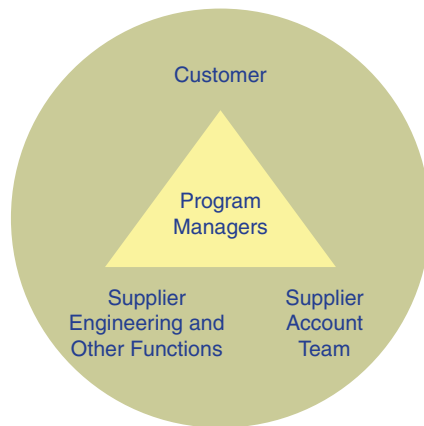
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when the executive sponsors set the strategic direction and program boundaries; empower their team leaders with authority, visibility, ownership, and accountability; and then let them do their jobs.

## The Core Team

The joint core team, Figure 2-2, is the glue that holds the VOCAL team structure together.

**FIGURE 2-2** VOCAL core team (copyright © 2004, Cisco Systems, Inc.)



Core team membership comes from the four organizations shown at the corners and in the middle of the triangle in Figure 2-2. Each partner company provides executive sponsors, working team co-leaders, and program managers. Sales team leaders and development engineering managers come from the supplier.

One program manager is provided from each company to join forces and provide the facilitation and logistics support needed to jump-start the process, build momentum, and sustain it over time. The executive sponsors create the train tracks and give the train its first push in the right direction. The program managers keep the train on the rails by coaching team leaders, scheduling executive reviews, reporting overall program status, and escalating any major obstacles or problems that threaten the engagement.

The core team has a three-fold role. It is first a communication and coordination body for which the executive sponsors provide a strategic framework, boundaries, and direction for the overall engagement. It provides the high-level charters and priorities for the joint working teams. It makes sure that no significant overlaps or gaps exist between the activities of the teams.

Second, it is a review body to which the working team co-leaders are accountable to report tactical plans and progress against the delivery of key solutions and initiatives at regularly scheduled executive reviews.

Finally, the core team is the convergence point at which the members ensure there is a single voice communicating overall progress and direction within the partnership and “no surprises” communication with regard to any technology, reliability, or schedule risks.

## Joint Working Teams—Where the Rubber Hits the Road

The working teams within the VOCAL customer engagement model, shown arrayed around the outside of the core team in Figure 2-1, are where the real hands-on work gets done. The working teams take their overall direction from the core team and work both strategic and tactical issues. They have team charters, lists of deliverables, interim milestones, and target dates and regular meetings to drive actions.

Every joint working team is headed by co-leaders from each partner company, appointed by the executive sponsors. It's the responsibility of the co-leaders to finalize a team charter, recruit the appropriate team members, schedule and conduct meetings, lead the team to identify priority objectives and milestones, drive action items, publish agendas and minutes, distribute reports, and present status updates at executive reviews.

It's the “jointness” of the working teams that makes them successful. In addition to having a co-leader from each partner company, it must have members from each company, along with appropriate representation from the supplier's account sales team. There are many examples where VOCAL joint working teams succeeded in achieving their objectives, a couple of which are discussed in the following subsections.

## Joint Working Teams at National Data

I was asked by the Cisco account team to implement the VOCAL process at a company I'll refer to as National Data. National's senior vice president in charge of the network was anxious to improve the “availability” of his network. Network availability is the amount of time the network is up and running to conduct customer data traffic. Low availability means the network's equipment is dropping data traffic for some reason and causing downtime. These are periods when the customer does not have access to the network or the data on it.

National Data's network was operating at about 1500 defects per million (DPM)—almost 9 hours of total network downtime per year—with a goal to operate at no more than 10 DPM or only 5 minutes of network downtime per year.

The team and I implemented the VOCAL process at National Data by working with the customer and the Cisco account team and development groups to recruit executive sponsors, form a core team and five joint working teams (architecture, network management, test, operations, and reliability).

The operations and reliability teams took on the daunting task of making huge reductions in the defects per million in the network. The two teams immediately began a two-pronged attack—reactive and proactive, respectively—to address weaknesses in network performance.

The joint operations team met every day for half an hour for many months to find ways to slash mean time to repair (MTTR), the amount of time that transpires from the time network traffic goes down until it

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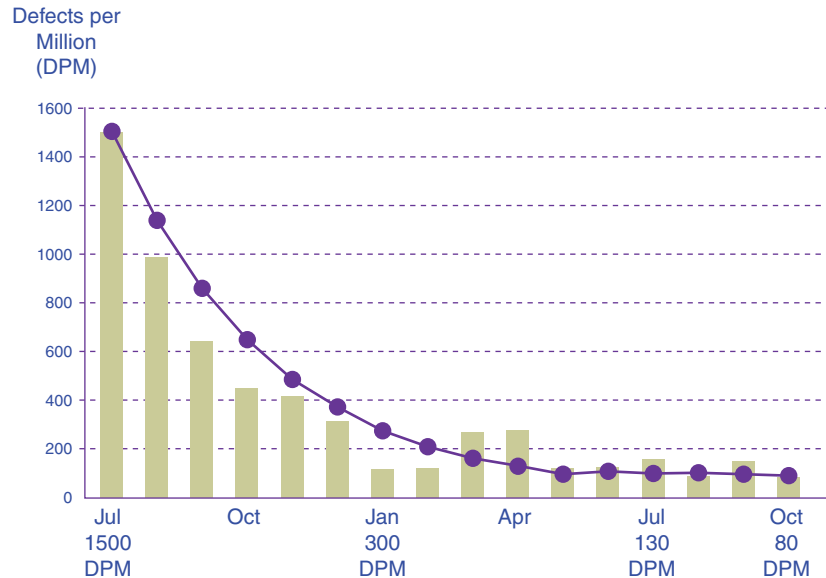
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is restored. Attacking MTTR is a reactive measure, one that focuses on how to minimize damage to customers after the network goes down. On the other hand, the reliability team, co-led by Reginald Chatman, a seasoned and professional Cisco program manager, implemented proactive measures, ones that improve the robustness of hardware and software aimed at preventing the network from going down in the first place.

Figure 2-3 shows how the two joint Cisco-National Data VOCAL teams, over the span of 15 months, dramatically reduced the downtime of National's network from a monthly average of 1500 DPM to 80 DPM. It took another 9 months to drive the DPM down to 30, very close to National's goal of 10 DPM.

**FIGURE 2-3** National Data DPM reduction (copyright © 2004, Cisco Systems, Inc.)



During the overall two-year period, the operations team cut the average MTTR from almost seven hours per unplanned outage incident to less than one hour. They accomplished this by evaluating trouble calls in the field, categorizing symptoms of unplanned events, identifying root causes, and implementing corrective actions such as equipment sparing policies, troubleshooting and escalation guides, and field training for technicians.

In parallel, Chatman's reliability team drove the Cisco development engineering groups to design and release new software features in the operating system that would reduce the chances of a network outage from occurring in the first place.

After the first nine months of all five VOCAL working teams demonstrating results heading in the right direction, National Data's senior vice president announced that the teams "had made damned fine progress."

When the teams had reduced network downtime to 30 DPM or less on a sustained basis, National's reliability manager said that "there is no better example of cooperation than that which exists between Cisco and National Data on the issue of network reliability and availability. We now have the most reliable IP network in the world."

It was the jointness of the VOCAL working teams—Cisco and customer working together—that gave them the focus, knowledge, and momentum to achieve significant results. Neither the customer nor Cisco could have accomplished as much working alone or blaming the other for the problems.