



What Does It Mean to Be “a Defense Acquisition Professional”?

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One of the seven goals of Better Buying Power 2.0 is to improve the professionalism of the total acquisition workforce. I thought it might be useful to provide some specificity about what I have in mind when I talk about professionalism. The following is based on various experiences over my career, including some formal education on the nature of professionalism in the military, including at venues like West Point and the Army War College, in my on-the-job training in program management and systems engineering by various Air Force colonels in the Ballistic Missile Office, and by mentors in the Army’s Ballistic Missile Defense Systems Command. I don’t intend this to be an academic discussion, however, but a hands-on practical application of the term “professional” in the context of defense acquisition.

Defense acquisition professionals have a special body of knowledge and experience that is not easily acquired. Other professions such as attorneys, physicians, and military officers also have this characteristic. The situation for defense acquisition professionals is analogous. This characteristic applies equally to professionals in program management, engineering, contracting, test and evaluation, and product support, to name our most obvious examples. One should no more expect a lay person to make good judgments about something in these acquisition fields—be it a program structure, a risk mitigation approach, or the incentive structure of a contract—than one would expect an amateur to tell a lawyer how to argue a case, or a brain surgeon how to do an operation, or a brigade commander how to organize an attack. No one should expect an amateur without acquisition experience to be able to exercise professional judgments in acquisition without the years of training and experience it takes to learn the field. Like these other highly skilled professions, our expertise sets us apart.

Defense acquisition professionals set the standards for members of the profession. One of the reasons we are establishing

“qualification boards” for our various key senior leader fields is to infuse a greater element of this characteristic into our workforce. Our senior professionals should know better than anyone else what it takes to be successful as a key acquisition leader. A professional career-field board will make the determination, in a “peer review” context, whether an individual has the experience, education, training, and demonstrated talent to accept responsibility for the success of all, or a major aspect of, a multibillion dollar program. This is not a minor responsibility. These new boards are an experiment at this stage, but I am hopeful that they will take on a large share of the responsibility for enhancing and sustaining the expected level of preparation and performance of our key leaders. The boards will be joint, so that our professional standards are high and uniform across the defense Services and agencies. Setting standards for other members of the profession also encompasses the development and mentoring responsibilities that leaders at all levels, including AEs, PEOs, and other acquisition leaders, take on to strengthen and maintain the profession. They know that their most important legacy is a stronger—and more professional—workforce than the one they inherited.

Defense acquisition professionals know how to deal with complexity. The problems we have to solve are not simple—we are developing and fielding some of the most complicated and technically advanced systems and technologies in military history. It is therefore an illusion to believe that defense acquisition success is just a matter of applying the right, easily learned “cookbook” or “checklist” approach to doing our jobs. There are no fixed rules that apply to all situations, and as professionals we know that a deeper level of comprehension is needed to understand how to make good decisions about such issues as technical risk mitigation, what incentives will best improve industry’s performance, what it will take to ensure that a product is mature enough to enter production, or how much testing is needed to verify compliance with a requirement. It is not enough to know acquisition best practices; acquisition professionals must understand the “why” behind the best practices—that is, the underlying principles at play. Many of our products consist of thousands of parts and millions of lines of code. They must satisfy hundreds of requirements, and it takes several years to bring them into production. Understanding and managing complexity is central to our work.

Defense acquisition professionals embrace a culture of continuous improvement. The concept of continuous improvement should apply to our own capabilities as individuals, to the teams we lead, to the processes we create and manage, and to the acquisition outcomes we seek. Better Buying Power is built on the idea of continuous improvement, of measuring performance, of setting targets for improving that performance, and striving to reach them (“should cost” for example). We are willing to examine our own results and think critically about where we can achieve more, and we have the courage

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and character to learn from our mistakes and to implement constantly ideas for better performance. As leaders we encourage these behaviors in the people who work for us and who collaborate with us.

Defense acquisition professionals practice and require ethical standards of behavior and conduct. Our ethical values guide how we interact with one another, with our supervisors, with industry, and with stakeholders including the public, media, and Congress. An Under Secretary whom I worked for decades ago told me once that when you lose your credibility you have nothing left—and you won’t get it back. We must speak truth to power about problems within our programs and about ill-advised guidance that will lead to poor results. Successful acquisition requires a culture of “telling bad news fast,” and that values accountability without a “shoot the messenger” mentality. Finally, it is particularly important that we treat industry fairly and with complete transparency.

I hope that this doesn’t all come across as either preachy or aspirational. I believe that these are realistic expectations for defense acquisition professionals. I believe that they go a long way to defining what being a professional really means. My West Point class (1971) motto is “Professionally Done.” I have always thought that this is a pretty good motto, and a pretty good way to look back on a successful career or a completed project, including in defense acquisition. 