

Marching an Army Acquisition Program Toward Success



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Negative headlines are rarely balanced with news of successful Army acquisition programs. The Army has hundreds of acquisition programs, many of which are successful. As students at the Industrial College of the Armed Forces (ICAF), we conducted a research project to assess successful Army acquisition programs in order to identify characteristics that led to their success. Our findings can be adopted by other program teams, within the current acquisition construct, to improve their likelihood of success.

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Programs Assessed

The research team selected five programs from a list of more than 50 programs provided by Army program executive offices (PEOs) to the Office of the Assistant Secretary of the Army for Acquisition, Logistics, and Technology. After excluding quick-reaction capabilities and rapid-acquisition programs, which do not follow a traditional acquisition process, we chose the following programs as the representative sample for our research:

- Force XXI Battle Command Brigade and Below (FBCB2)
- C-27J Joint Cargo Aircraft (JCA)
- Non-Maneuverable Canopy (T-11) Personnel Parachute System
- UH-72A Lakota Light Utility Helicopter (LUH)
- Warfighter Information Network-Tactical (WIN-T)

The research team used a structured interview process with three groups of stakeholders: Army program management teams, their industry partners, and external stakeholders, including the Office of the Secretary of Defense.

As the interviews progressed, six characteristics emerged that significantly improved the chances of success for these programs. Government program manager (PM) leadership, and the program team environment they fostered, was the single overarching characteristic that had the greatest effect on the success of these programs. Furthermore, the leader's ability to foster an environment that allows a program to thrive depends upon having the right people, achieving unity of effort, being product focused, maintaining stable requirements and employing the right program approach. Each program management team implemented these elements in a different manner, yet all used a combination of them to succeed. We address each of these characteristics in turn.

Leadership: The Common Denominator

"This may sound simple, but the first characteristic that separates the really successful PMs is their leadership. They set the tone, they should be decisive, and have a vision."

Effective leadership forms the foundation of any successful program, and is therefore the basis for all other elements that follow. The best analogies to arise from the interviews are that of the conductor or the task force commander. Both are knowledgeable in their crafts as they synchronize the efforts of those who support them. They know what their subordinates do, but are not necessarily the experts in the specific tasks. The most successful acquisition leaders are the people who know what "right looks like," but realize they don't know everything. They are driven, but relatively humble. They are open to the opinions of (and willing to be influenced by) others. They demand open, honest communication so that decisions are not suboptimized. The leaders of the programs we assessed exemplified these behaviors.

This is not to say their efforts are perfect, or that their programs are problem-free. They all have challenges. The dif-

ference is that they have created environments where their government/industry/stakeholder teams are able to respond appropriately, and deliver.

"The purpose of a PM is to move your program forward. The guys who are usually successful are the guys who just have it in their heart that they own their program, and in their three or four years on the program they move their program forward. Not just play the piece, but to play it all the way to the crescendo."

The Right People in the Right Place at the Right Time

"All successful PMs will likely feel like they can put their team up against anyone."

To take the analogy of the task force commander one step further, just as a good battlefield commander senses where he needs to go to best influence the battle, so do effective acquisition leaders know when and where to focus to best influence their program. Having the right people on the team provides the freedom to go where they need to go. The right people free up the PMs to focus less on the day-to-day execution, and more on those things only they can do, thereby having a greater impact on the program's success over the long run. The right people are able to advise the PM appropriately, then execute their tasks effectively once a decision is made.

While some may consider skills and experience to be one in the same, one PM cautioned:

"The acquisition background of your logisticians and engineers, the backbone of the PM Office, must be high. Experience is the key. Training cannot be substituted for the value of acquisition experience."

Another point that surfaced during the course of our interviews was affirmation of the criticality of our assistant program managers (APMs). The capabilities of these junior leaders are just as important as a PM's set of qualifications, although the latter have often been the focus of other studies of program success. The successful programs we assessed were characterized by PMs who delegated appropriate programmatic authority down to their APMs, and ensured that these subordinates knew they were responsible for the program from an execution (cost, schedule, performance, and risk) perspective. This is taking good people and utilizing them in a manner that provides the best chance for achieving program success.

Unity of Effort: It Takes a Tribe

"They (PMs) really understand how to keep the whole program—their side, the contractor side, the user side, the Pentagon side—synchronized as sort of the conductor of the whole program."

This collective approach to successful product development was echoed time and time again throughout this research. Program management teams spoke in terms of unity of effort, where all members of the team had to pull together toward a common goal to achieve success. For the majority of the



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the programs. Even the most rigid staff sections are sometimes willing to compromise if they believe flexibility might result in the near-term delivery of a needed capability.

program management teams, effective communication was the key to creating the common understanding needed for unity of effort. Communication kept all members informed of challenges, progress, and goals. It was the glue that held the team together and kept it moving toward the goal.

Industry partners referred to the value of teamwork in product development efforts. From an industry perspective, that teamwork was enabled not only by communications but also by mutual understanding and a sense of partnership. Effective communication involves candid conversation—the ability to pick up the phone and call a counterpart to discuss both good and bad results.

Each of the senior leaders interviewed also spoke of the importance of teamwork. One cautioned not to rush to failure, and to invest the time up front to understand the needs and capabilities of each member of the team. The early investment of time spent building the team and cultivating mutual trust pays big dividends when the pace of development picks up after product launch.

Product Focus: Keeping Your Eye on the Ball

Miles of hallways, thousands of offices, and legions of employees await virtually every development program the Army launches. These Pentagon offices are created to review documents, identify risks, and prevent mistakes. No doubt, Pentagon staff sections are good at what they do, but they are not designed to speed a capability to the force. However, on the wall in virtually every office are pictures of systems successfully fielded to users. These pictures are the key to navigating the labyrinth of Pentagon oversight agencies. To succeed, product developers must focus attention on near-term capabilities rather than long-term concepts.

The same is true throughout the acquisition system. Program management offices generally referred to this as being product-focused. Across the board, it was a key to success because it created a common reference point and near-term goal. It tied the user to the process, thereby helping create paths around obstacles that might otherwise have derailed

For the industry partners, product focus helped create the momentum that reduced the time to get the product to market. Speed wins from an industry perspective. Programs that are slow to develop often become bill-payers during Pentagon budget drills, and unsatisfied customers often walk away. For these reasons, a unified focus on the delivery of a product or capability is an essential element of any successful development effort. External stakeholders also recognize the value of maintaining a product focus. Current policy and directives promote the use of shorter timelines to encourage more realistic requirements. They also emphasize incremental development so that stretch requirements can be deferred to future increments, giving technology more time to mature. Best practices also encourage the early development of prototypes to illustrate that concepts are in fact achievable. For external stakeholders, there is no substitute for the knowledge gained through demonstrating the actual hardware in a development effort.

Realistic and Stable Requirements

“The requirements are the foundation upon which the program is built, and if that foundation is weak, the whole house of cards comes tumbling down.”

If asked to enter into a binding agreement to deliver an unspecified product in a fixed period, most reputable businesses would decline the offer. Nevertheless, at times, that is exactly what DoD asks of the defense industry. Granted, the capabilities desired must be documented at the start of development, but that is often just a launch point on a longer journey. It doesn't take long before the word of a new capability gets out, and new requirements creep in.

The successful program management teams in this study were all well aware of the dangers of unstable requirements. Many knew from experience that unanticipated requirements could easily turn an executable program into a poster child for failed acquisition. For that reason, most attributed much of their program success to reasonable and stable requirements. Some reduced their risks of new “discoveries” by incorporating only mature technologies. However, this stability was never a given. Success for most came down to having a strong leadership team that resisted attempts to incorporate new requirements, and a flexible strategy that allowed for emerging needs to be deferred to later increments.

Industry teams put an equal value on stable requirements. Stable requirements allow industry to plan and allocate resources most efficiently. Getting the program right up front was a common theme among the industry partners in this study.

Requirements also were a key consideration for the senior leaders in this study. Most leaders suggested placing more emphasis on the early planning stage in order to better understand the exact requirements of a program. Here again, emphasis was on setting up the program for success. Programs with well-defined, and therefore adequately resourced, requirements were recognized as more likely to deliver on time and within cost.

The Right Approach: Tailor the Process to the Product


Taking the right approach to a program involves creating an appropriate acquisition strategy. The strategy must then be translated into a contract that makes sense to industry, incentivizes it to perform, and provides the government with mission-enhancing products at a good value. All the programs in this study tailored their process approaches to their specific acquisition needs.

Mutual understanding is extremely important. In times of resource scarcity and looming budget cuts, we must minimize wasted resources (cost and schedule overruns, canceled programs). One major factor that will help is truly understanding the perspective or “value proposition” of our business partners. While it may seem counterintuitive to take a contracting process that is already too long, and possibly make it longer, it takes an investment in time, up front, to get this right. This is especially hard to enforce when it seems we always “need the product *now*.” One way to help satisfy this factor, without adding much additional time, is to invest in such mutual understanding *before* the knowledge is required.

Several industry and government PMs touted the benefits of the Training With Industry program. Short of this, the Defense Acquisition University could develop a course that explains details of what motivates industry, how industry perceives risk and payoff, and even how it uses charge numbers. [Editor’s Note: In the spring of 2013, DAU will launch a new course, ACQ 315—Business Acumen, to be taught by DAU professors with industry experience.]

While our acquisition leaders do not need to be experts in this area—they have functional experts as advisers—better education will allow them to create mutually beneficial business arrangements. Furthermore, basic DAU contracting courses should be mandatory for our acquisition professionals, and not simply optional courses taken for certification.

Understanding our business partners demands that we talk. We must do the right thing, but we must not be so afraid of either protest or results of oversight that we shut down precisely at the point where we should communicate more. Multiple industry leaders felt that government behavior indicating fear of protest was increasing.




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Change is constant, and we rarely get our programmatic strategies 100 percent correct right from the start. Fundamental to success is the ability to *adapt* the approach or acquisition strategy as major changes occur.

Conclusion

This research started with the premise there were characteristics that made some programs more successful than others, and that the most essential elements of success would be recognized across the entire development community. In fact, that appears to be the case. Essentially, we confirmed a well-established principle: Successful programs are built on a firm foundation. The creation of that foundation starts with realistic and stable requirements. It then grows in depth as the right people are selected to achieve those requirements and is strengthened by a sound strategy that focuses the team on the product rather than the process of acquisition. Along the way, strong leaders keep the team together, pulling in unison to achieve a well-defined goal. They communicate, clarify, direct, and inspire.

While this may sound idealistic, Army acquisition teams are making this happen every day. We don’t talk about these efforts as often as we should, and we often get bogged down in our shortcomings—more focused on preventing mistakes than promoting success. We can, however, change this paradigm. The Army knows how to cultivate leaders who understand their tradecraft; leaders who study what works, but, more important, why it works. It is that understanding of the art of acquisition that arms our decision makers with the knowledge required to develop the right approach, the insights needed to select the right people, and the confidence necessary to push back when unrealistic demands are levied. We must continue to cultivate acquisition leaders who study their tradecraft—for, despite what is often heard inside the Beltway, when properly structured and effectively led, Army acquisition programs succeed. 

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