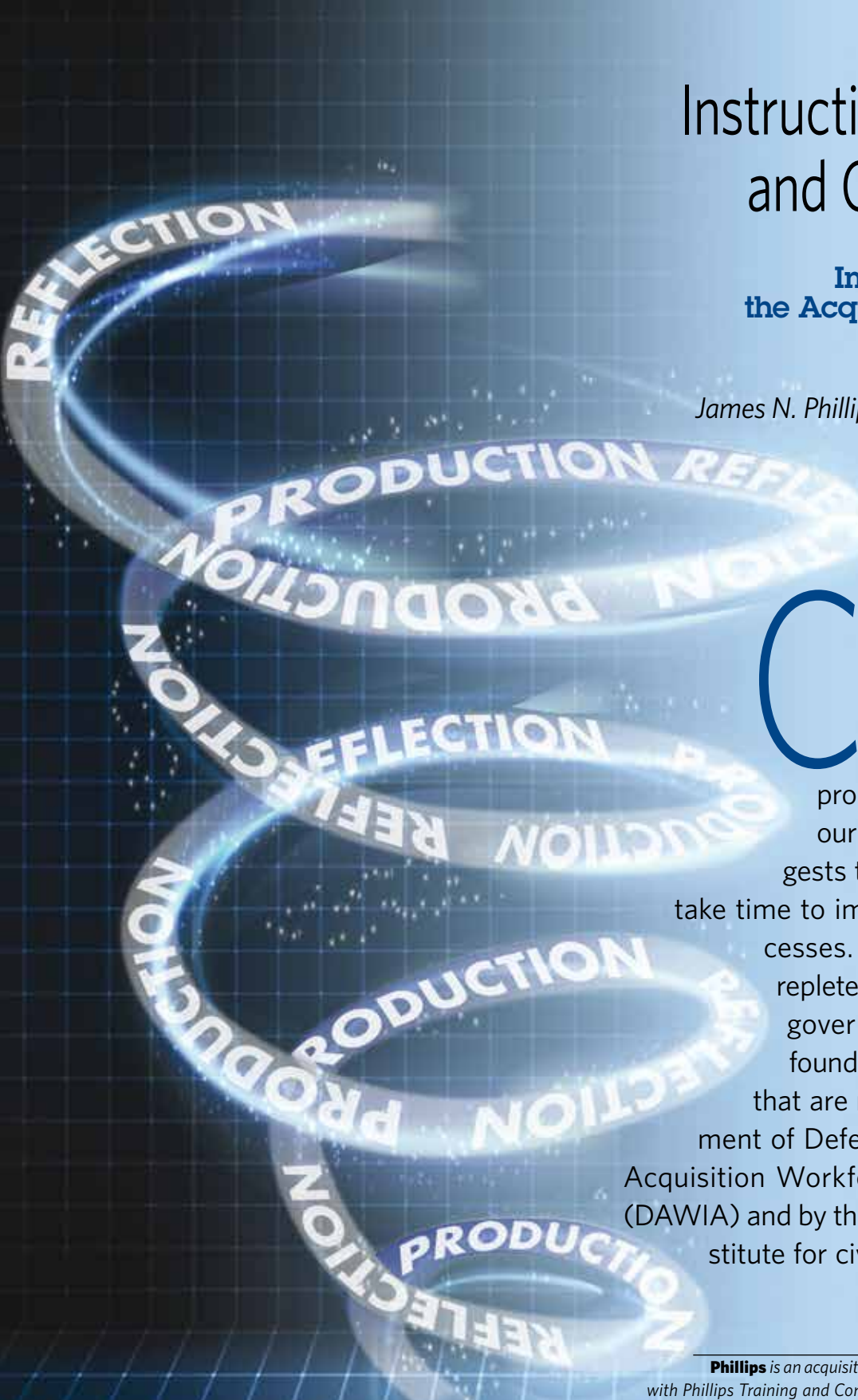


Instruction, Direction and Correction

Improving the Acquisition Culture

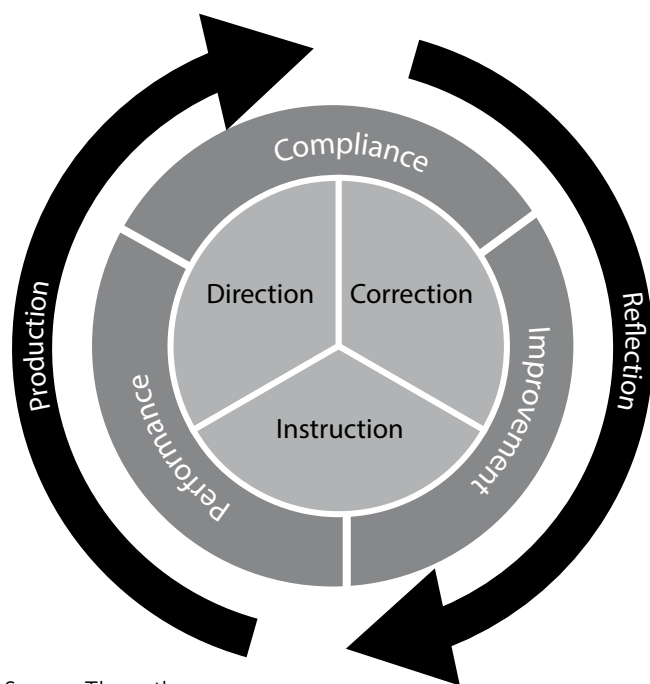
James N. Phillips Jr., DBA, PMP, CFCM



Criticism of the acquisition profession commonly focuses on sustained performance and positive outcomes. The problem appears to be that our acquisition culture suggests that it is unnecessary to take time to improve people and processes. The acquisition field is replete with courses offered by government and industry on foundational learning subjects that are required by the Department of Defense under the Defense Acquisition Workforce Improvement Act (DAWIA) and by the Federal Acquisition Institute for civilian agencies. With so

Phillips is an acquisition professional and managing consultant with Phillips Training and Consulting Inc., with more than 25 years of acquisition experience and has frequently published articles in *Contract Management* and *The Federal Manager* magazines. He holds a doctorate in Business Administration from the American Meridian University in Florida, and a masters in Public Administration from Troy University in Alabama. He is a certified Program Management Professional and a Certified Federal Contracts Manager.

Figure 1. Supervisory Management Wheel



Source: The author

many courses available, why are there still problems with acquisition performance and outcomes?

Perhaps the answer lies in a holistic understanding of how managers and supervisors value learning, both foundational and applied. Presently most training is linked to the attainment of certifications—i.e., DAWIA Level III or Federal Acquisition Certification in Contracting (FAC-C) Level III—rather than building the professional’s qualifications. The current thinking seems to be built on the assumption that acquisition professionals are to be regarded as universally competent once they are FAC-C Level III or DAWIA Level III certified.

This belief is rooted in the faulty notion that certification equals qualification. This tendency to focus on the certification leaves out the unique contribution that qualification brings. So how do we bridge the gap between foundational learning and applied learning?

The Value of Reflection

A colleague once shared with me a pertinent perspective:

Would we allow a newly minted second lieutenant start to fly a \$100 million aircraft without first completing specific training?
So why would we allow an inexperienced contracting officer to “fly” a \$100 million procurement?

In fact, the pilot would never fly the jet without having been qualified on a simulator. However, the expectation is not the same for contracting officers and their acquisi-

tion teams. In 2015, I created the Supervisory Management Wheel (hereafter referred to simply as Wheel) to help better understand the relationship between Outcome (Production) and Continuous Improvement (Reflection). I particularly wanted to study the opposite side of the coin—Reflection—which includes critical thinking, problem-solving, and continuous improvement.

Outcome is based on performance, which is linked to foundational and workflow learning and Continuous Improvement is found in Reflection and is rooted in performance learning. The Wheel is a model and offers plenty of overlap to its application, so it serves as a guide and not as an absolute.

The Wheel’s Center

The Wheel begins with three fundamental actions that any supervisor or manager must conduct when managing outcomes. These actions are Instruction, Direction, and Correction. Instruction is where foundational learning and certifications reside. Instruction is the “how to” part of performance in a theoretical sense. Direction, on the other hand, reflects actual performance of work or applied knowledge. It is in Direction that the supervisor defines work-flow to standardize practice and outcomes. Finally, in Correction, performance learning occurs! This is where the system corrects and improves itself by questioning its methods and practice. It is in Correction that continuous improvement resides.

The First Ring Segments

The first ring segments overlap the actions of the center, for instance, the fruit of Instruction and Direction is Performance. Performance suggests foundational learning, and workflow learning to produce an outcome. Compliance combines both Direction and Correction, suggesting workflow learning and performance learning; and the Improvement segment completes the ring.

Improvement combines the elements of Correction and Instruction, in that order. Improvement is the fruit of Correction and Instruction updating. It is in the Improvement segment that challenges to work processes are brought to light and that there is continuous improvement analysis. Consider the following scenario:

Julie is a contracting officer with a DAWIA Certified Level III (Instruction) and assigned to an important project for her agency (Direction). After receiving her marching orders, Julie discovers that the agency’s process, which she was following, no longer makes sense in the situation. Julie reviews the matter and then offers alternatives that will reflect certain performance economies (Correction). After discussing her work with her supervisor/manager, Julie is able to document the file and make the changes in the process.

Julie is required to follow the prescribed contracting processes. Julie also is empowered to question the processes and is encouraged to offer alternative solutions for consideration.

Production-Reflection Balance

Finally, two arrows encircle Wheel, and these involve Production and Reflection. The arrows suggest the Wheel has a dynamic characteristic similar to the ebb and flow of outcomes; it is the consummate yin and yang relationship. In contracting, there are times to produce and times to reflect, a fact that Julie understood.

One often hears talk about work-life balance. It is recognized that balancing work and personal life is essential to a healthy employee and positive outcomes. Similarly, an understanding is needed that another balance must be struck when an employee is at work. Supervisors and managers must allow for time to reflect, which is captured in the phases illustrated in the Production-Reflection dynamic relationship found in the Wheel.

This balance is theoretical. Unfortunately, the scale often is tilted toward the Production phase rather than giving equal time in the Reflection phase where continuous improvement lies and where performance learning occurs. Reflection supercharges understanding and re-energizes the willingness of the individual to exercise greater initiative. In his book *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, the late Dr. Stephen Covey noted that one of the habits is "Sharpening the Saw," which is particularly relevant here. In "Sharpening the Saw," Covey reminded the reader of the importance of down time and preparation for work. Deliberately taken down time affords time to reflect, recharge, and renew a person's view of his or her work.

Discussion

The Wheel is a conceptual model, an image of ideal operational culture and its interrelationships. It lays out in simple imagery key actions and relationships on which supervisors and managers of acquisition personnel must focus.

Acquisition excellence does not happen in vacuum. Acquisition excellence is created when the culture within the contracting department and acquisition community takes time to reflect. This means analyzing past performance by using critical thinking skills to formulate a plan for the future. This may sound familiar as it reflects the PDCA (Plan-Do-Check-Act) and is captured in the Sprints used in Agile Software Development.

The Reflection phase is where continuous improvement occurs and is tested and recommended for implementation. Following Lean principles, there must be time set aside to reflect so that learning can occur. For the contracting supervisor and manager, this is where cataloging Corrections and Compliance concerns can be turned into learning moments where Improvement may occur. Consider the following scenario:

Joseph is a contracting officer with a DAWIA-certified Level III and was recently reassigned from a station level contracting shop to an important contract in the F-35 program office. While Joseph was certified, he was not fully qualified for his new role as he had no program environment background.


In his new assignment, the program manager (PM) made certain that he had instruction on the basic understanding of the program and its contracts (Compliance segment). The PM then ensured that Joseph had applied his new knowledge of the program on challenging, but familiar, contracts so that Joseph could understand how business was done at the program office. Finally, Joseph was given more complex contracts and had greater responsibility for the outcome. Joseph was learning and applying the lessons learned to future contracts (Improvement segment), and sharing the lessons learned with his colleagues and helping them along (Performance segment).

Ideas on Reflection

The Reflection phase includes lessons learned, which is a retrospective understanding of prior actions, and simulation, which is a prospective view of what is to come. Both lessons learned and simulation will aid in developing greater contracting situational awareness when facing new procurement actions. Supervisors and managers must use both to prepare acquisition professionals for the challenge of new procurement, and this can best be performed during the Reflection phase.

Final Thoughts

The Wheel should be a staple item for all supervisors and managers, as well as mentors and coaches. It visually conveys an understanding of the relationship of the Reflection phase to the whole of employee development. The design of the Wheel illustrates the many overlapping elements. The Wheel when viewed from the center presents interconnected building blocks necessary for good outcomes. When viewed from the outside in, the Wheel presents a tapestry of interconnected relationships that are crucial for sustaining outcomes.

Supervisors and managers create meaningful and relevant learning opportunities when the learning is planned. I found the Wheel most useful in its elevation of the value of the Reflection phase to the same level as the Production phase. The Production phase is designed to produce, not change on the fly. Production is the fruit of foundational learning, instructions, standard work, leading to a positive outcome; whereas Reflection focuses, improving the outcomes either by better compliance or improved processes. As referred to earlier, in the "down time" of Reflection critical thinking is performed and alternatives are discovered. This is the home of continuous improvement and also where simulation lives. The second lieutenant mentioned above definitely would be put in a simulator before actually flying the \$100 million aircraft. We should make certain that the same deliberate, planned learning occurs before a contracting officer jumps into a \$100 million procurement. In final reflection, the Wheel provides acquisition professionals a balanced understanding with which to work (Production) and to prepare for work (Reflection). 

The author can be contacted at james.n.phillipsjr@gmail.com.