

# Contracting Officer Leadership

## The Essential Ingredient

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**T**HE FUTURE SUCCESS OF AMERICA'S NATIONAL SECURITY REQUIRES dramatic improvement in "cost, schedule and performance" of today's defense acquisition system to meet present and future threats. Getting there mandates early and proper identification of acquisition need; better risk assessment through well-defined requirements; a rapid, proactive acquisition process delivering quality solutions while navigating and leveraging public law and regulation; and a mission-driven culture and environment supportive of productive organizations that attract the nation's finest public- and private-sector expertise.

Managing within the defense acquisition system to deliver the best and latest capabilities of highest quality and technological superiority requires a robust corps of smart, hard-working, dedicated professionals. This public-private sector acquisition field includes expertise in finance, engineering, logistics, law, information technology, human resources and technical disciplines from almost every field imaginable, as well as superior knowledge and leadership in project/program management and other acquisition professions.

One of the most crucial roles within this system is that of the contracting officer (CO). This person is the link by which formal contractual communication flows between the Department of Defense (DoD) and industry support. The CO is vital to successful acquisition programs. Thus, there also is a long list of attributes that they must have. They must understand and apply seemingly endless laws and regulations governing how the federal government and DoD acquire more than \$500 billion worth of supplies and services each year. This involves not only understanding and judiciously interpreting the ton of laws, regulations, policy letters, requirements, standards, interpretative guidance, management initiatives, local procedures and legal precedent, but properly leveraging this myriad guidance to get stuff where it is needed fast! Every CO action

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affects system cost, schedule and performance further down the line.

COs need a general knowledge of the Federal Acquisition Regulation (FAR) and Defense FAR Supplement and all of their complex supplemental guidance and must understand everything from market research, cost and price analysis, acquisition planning, source selection procedures, business clearances, pre-award surveys, financial audits, technical reports, award fee plans, responsibility determinations, etc., etc. They must properly format and prepare formal documentation to justify their acquisition decisions. The contract file in a federal acquisition (indeed any public expenditure of appropriated dollars) must “tell the story” about the judgment and rationale used to arrive at those conclusions.

Clearly, this requires multiple competencies. These include understanding and applying complex external and internal rules, regulations and policy; knowing the high-level technical requirements of their programs; having written and verbal communication proficiency, and more. Before things are reduced to writing, all manner of face-to-face communication occurs—and not only between the CO and the contractor. Communication flows internally between the CO and their CO representative; program or project manager, legal counsel, technical writers—indeed, everyone on the acquisition team. The CO must know how and when to guide the acquisition team through compliance with the myriad and seemingly conflicting objectives of the government acquisition process. This leads immediately to the need for COs not only to be articulate, but diplomatic and team oriented; in short; able to influence and work well with everyone concurrently with supporting positive program (cost, schedule and performance) outcomes.

Thus, COs must obviously be good at many things. Today's training appears to provide most of what is necessary to excel at these requirements. But is it? Today's acquisition education and training requirements emanate from the Defense Acquisition Workforce Improvement Act (DAWIA) and implementing guidance, authorizing training requirements for contract specialists from entry and as they rise the ranks in preparation for receiving their “warrant” (tailored, written authority to procure and manage contracts within specific, predefined authorities and limitations). DAWIA is the framework for defining experience, knowledge, and training requirements for the defense contracting workforce.

In addition, the Office of the Secretary of Defense imposes qualifications on a CO with a warrant above the simplified acquisition threshold. Along with that, a senior contracting official must have at least four years contracting experi-

ences before assignment to a “critical acquisition position.” These positions are a subset of the acquisition workforce specifically designated by component acquisition executives based on the criticality of that position to the acquisition program, effort or function. Each Service and DoD agency provides additional procedural requirements prior to obtaining a CO warrant.

Leadership acquisition courses offered to DoD contract managers today include the following:

- ACQ 450 Leading in the Acquisition Environment
- ACQ 451 Integration for Decision Makers
- ACQ 452 Forging Stakeholder Relationships
- ACQ 453 Leader as Coach
- ACQ 401 Senior Acquisition Course (competitive selection to the Eisenhower School)

There has been considerable research and skill gap analysis in this area. Leadership competencies sometimes also were included, but not always emphasized. While iterations of acquisition reform have occurred via statute, regulation, policy, reorganization and enhanced training requirements, we know that dramatic acquisition improvements have not materialized. Skill gaps were determined; knowledge and certification requirements defined; courses created and then modified over time.

One survey documenting issues facing practitioners in the field discovered the workforce believed they were not equipped to meet demands of the acquisition environment. They concluded that successful operation requires workforce ability to shorten the learning curve; modern tools appealing to changing workforce demographics; and cultural changes that encourage critical thinking.

- 10 percent believed it takes more than 20 years to become proficient.
- 18 percent believed it takes more than 15 years to become proficient.
- 10 percent cited formal acquisition training as their primary avenue for learning. While classroom training supplies foundational acquisition knowledge, it is not translatable to day-to-day practice. Respondents preferred more experienced colleagues or reference tools for those questions.
- 46 percent confirmed experienced colleagues are their primary source of acquisition information.
- 44 percent use reference tools as their first choice.

So where is contracting success found? It lies beyond historical focus areas. Today's formal structure, including education and training requirements, is not the end of the story. We must recognize the crucial leadership and management skills, as well as key personal attributes, necessary to be a successful CO. Contract management

Proficiency in new technologies is only one part of the 2022 skills equation. “Human” skills such as creativity, originality and initiative, critical thinking, persuasion and negotiation will likewise retain or increase their value, as will attention to detail, resilience, flexibility and complex problem-solving. Emotional intelligence, leadership and social influence as well as service orientation are also set to see particular increase in demand relative to their current prominence today.

—World Economic Forum’s 2018 report, *The Future of Jobs Report 2018*

professional training emphasizes technical acquisition knowledge but must better leverage existing leadership qualities and provide advanced leadership development. Such competency investment should include that offered to DoD’s program management community.

Results—good and bad—in acquisition today emanate from leadership experience and proficiency levels in “soft skilled” competencies such as innovation, communication, teamwork, passion, integrity, character and more.

Combined with organizational support, accountability, common duty to mission and minimal bureaucracy, a viable pathway to the future success of our acquisition programs and national security becomes clear. The envied culture embodied in today’s successful, nontraditional, innovative private firms, and seen historically in government during significant national imperatives, requires nurturing to improve government and defense program outcomes. That includes superior leadership from our contracting community, because they are responsible for so much internal coordination and communication, as well as the formal contracts and informal relationships with industry, to make that a reality.

It’s clear when talking to contracting leaders that understanding and leveraging technical guidance is indispensable, such as that obtained through the FAR, Deskbooks, DoD policy and procedures, information technology support, etc. But possessing those unique, inherent “soft” skills is where great COs come from. As in most career fields, those personal traits will shine if given the right environment. Prescribing targeted acquisition policy and procedure to any given acquisition scenario only goes so far. Such an approach will tie the hands of contract and program managers (PMs). Judgment and discretion, as vital attributes of leadership, must ultimately dominate.

We have seen that revising acquisition laws and regulations, or undergoing yet another reorganization, miss the mark, absent great leadership. Great COs relate to the PM; are true “business advisers” to the program and use their leadership skills more than actual authority to make their PM successful.

Although against conventional wisdom, analysis indicates we must reassess past decisions associated with professionalizing the contracting workforce. Standards established did not achieve what they were intended to do and created unintentional adverse consequences. The risk-averse culture within acquisition professionals is not news. The rules must be revisited. An example is the need to rethink the hiring criteria used to select candidates for contracting positions. Considering candidates with a wider variety of educational and professional backgrounds beyond business may enhance the pool of talented candidates available for the contracting field, while looking at past leadership experience. Have they led people, such as in clubs, church, scouts, student government? Indeed those places may be where our future leaders are to be found. History suggests that specific formal education may not result in great leaders. Some of the best recent leaders in DoD contracting did not have today’s advanced business degrees. A degree is a measure of education, but it might be in almost anything. Leaders are both born and developed. That, however, does not diminish the need for proficiency in the technical skills of contracting.

A good leader must have the ability to manage up, as well as down. Tone is set at the top. Leaders must lead! COs must be at that top level, but only by having earned their right to be there. The National Contract Management Association’s Contract Management Body of Knowledge (CMBOK) considers Leadership the most important competency.

Whether via formal training, mentorship or guidance from existing leaders who take the time to work with and for their team, the acquisition community must work to ensure COs develop in all ways as contracting leaders. Those of us fortunate to have run into great leaders in our career often shine over those without those inspirational models.

One characteristic may include the need to move around for diverse experiences, versus deep familiarity with one or two agency cultures and mission. Creating good leaders requires exposure to different contracting environments, cultures, people, contract types, commodities and missions. Staying in one place for a long time minimizes those experiences. COs need multiple developmental experiences. Mobility can be hard, but moving emerging leaders around can be good. Those that self-initiate usually are ahead of those who stay put for too long. Similarly, COs

The labyrinth of complicated procurement legislation for federal acquisition can be daunting and, as a result, the field attracts individuals who excel at technical aspects such as analysis and legal review.

Nevertheless, those skills are not the only ones that acquisition professionals need. Negotiating the best contracts, attracting new service providers, and streamlining and simplifying the federal acquisition process requires more than technical knowledge. Agencies need creative acquisition leaders who excel at “soft skills” such as communication and collaboration. However, the technical nature of acquisition jobs sometimes leads agency leaders to assume (that) acquisition professionals do not need to be expert in communication and other skills to do their jobs well. That notion can close doors to leadership development opportunities for these professionals.

—Rachel Verlik, a coach with the Partnership for Public Service “Leadership Excellence for Acquisition Professionals (LEAP)” program geared to develop agency contracting officers into leaders

need not be experts in all program aspects, but they do need the ability to evaluate technical problems and risk assessment for their customer to arrive at the contract solution. What is the degree of failure? How can he or she, as the CO, create evaluation criteria to assess particular technical characteristics? A good CO will figure that out. Once involved in making decisions that make their PM successful, their perspective changes and leadership competencies are developed.

The following are anecdotal quotes from experienced contracting colleagues and leaders:

*COs must relate to the PM. They are advisers with the authority to make the PM successful.*

*To be a leader you have to be a good follower.*

*You must be able to manage up as well as down.*

*The attitude of “we’re gods” is wrong.*

*If leaders do not show interest, then the others cannot. Leaders must lead!*

*I believe that leadership was not a specific requirement. Some classes might require it, but no real leadership training was available.*

*Leadership training was not available. I was lucky to run into leaders during my career.*

As a career-long contracting professional, I had and continue to have the opportunity to work in many different contracting organizations, on many unique programs, with many diverse missions and cultures. In many cases, prior to entry on duty, I was not experienced or familiar with the particular supplies or services the organization acquired; specific contracting rules or regulations unique to them; or any special organizational structure or reporting mechanism they had. The key to any success I had in each contracting environment was the ability to establish credibility through the leadership attributes discussed in this article.

Each contracting office is “unique” in several respects. Thus, while contracting technical knowledge can be somewhat transportable, depending on the contracting strategies employed in any given product or service line, leadership qualities are completely transportable. Program conflict or drama with the programs I supported was minimal so long as the contracting leadership I provided included credibility, integrity, dependability, perseverance, communication and other aspects of leadership.

Leadership style is unique to each individual and only attained through successfully demonstrating acceptance of responsibility, backed by technical knowledge. Not all of today’s contracting managers possess those capabilities, but many do. It is past time to recognize that leadership is that quality most lacking in contracting success and that it is a vital necessity. Only then, with the support, cooperation and leadership of program, project and other agency leaders, can we kick-start Defense and other government agency acquisition programs into high achievements. Leadership also must come from senior government leaders in the Executive Branch and Congress, but it is leadership at the program level that will make things happen.

The time is right for massive change. America’s national and economic standing in a global hyper-competition is on the line. Our military require agile, technologically superior equipment faster than our adversaries. We have tweaked acquisition rules, organization structure and course requirements for years and addressed needs via competency assessments. The data reports are in! Our COs must have the leadership qualities, traits and skills to acquire products and services in an urgent, war-life footing, as was the case in past world conflicts and the race to the moon. Developing solid contracting leaders must be a priority today! To repeat the title of an April 2018 article in *Contract Management* magazine, “Leadership is not Optional in Contract Management!” What are we waiting for?

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