

CREDIBILITY: The Second Currency of Acquisition

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IN 2004, A SENIOR U.S. AIR FORCE PROCUREMENT OFFICIAL WAS ARRESTED IN A TEXTBOOK EXAMPLE of revolving door corruption, landing not only herself but also senior executives from contractor Boeing in jail," according to Samuel Perlo-Freeman's account of the Darleen Druyun scandal, which was published on the World Peace Foundation website of Tufts University's Fletcher School. That scandal (in which Druyan secured a Boeing job for herself while negotiating an increased price contract with the company) occurred some time ago, but procurement integrity issues still occur. The Navy is dealing with the "Fat Leonard" kickback and bribery scandal.

And acquisition challenges are not just highlighted by scandals. The system review by the Section 809 Panel is another in a long list of "acquisition reform" initiatives written in law to get capability in the hands of the operator for an appropriate amount of taxpayer resources. These cases and reform initiatives call into question the reputation of professionals in the acquisition career field. These are high-profile, senior-level activities, but is there something that acquirers in the field can do day-to-day to improve trust in the acquisition system? This paper contends that credibility is at the core of acquisition and procurement and can be built at the program level while providing capability to the warfighter. Hence, credibility is as important as congressional appropriation levels in getting meaningful capabilities to the warfighter.

According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, one definition of credibility is "capacity for belief." Essentially, this definition implies that the receiver has reason to believe the message of the sender. One tangible way to view

Wiest is retiring after more than 26 years of service in the U.S. Air Force. In his current position, he is responsible for execution of \$3 billion across the Future Years Defense Program to keep missile warning, missile defense, space situational awareness, and nuclear command, control, and communication capabilities operating past original equipment design life. He spent more than 20 years acquiring assets to support space in space situational awareness, space control, missile warning, and space command and control mission areas.

credibility is to compare it to a checking account, a lens I used before reading *The Speed of Trust*, the *New York Times* bestselling book by Steven M.R. Covey, while writing this article. On any given day during any interaction with a stakeholder, you may deposit or withdraw “funds” from your acquisition credibility account. Without a statement for this account, it can be difficult to know if your balance is positive or negative. However, you do find out when you’ve significantly overdrawn your account; the U.S. Air Force knew its account was overdrawn after the Druyun scandal made headlines! With the recent “Fat Leonard” scandal, the Department of Defense (DoD) account with Congress is still experiencing withdrawals even as the DoD strives to transition to a culture of performance where results and accountability matter. With scandals making significant withdrawals from the acquisition credibility account, it’s important to make many deposits. But how can acquisition programs make daily deposits into their credibility account?

The key to building credibility is, as Covey points out, making and keeping commitments. Within the Air Force Program Executive Officer (AFPEO) Digital Directorate, led by Steven Wert, building credibility is a top priority. In the Digital Directorate, making and keeping commitments is all about identifying Critical Events and tracking their on-time or early completion. Meeting these Critical Events make deposits to our account by increasing our stakeholder’s “capacity for belief.”

Using Critical Events is how AFPEO Digital measures performance of its 2019 portfolio goal to “Continue to plan and execute extremely well.” To monitor this goal, Wert asks that each program identify Critical Events to meet during the year. These Critical Events are the specific dates of significant milestones in the program within the next fiscal year. While baselining their program schedule in late summer for the next fiscal year, each program manager selects at least two events that will move the program closer to delivering high-priority capabilities to the warfighter. The guidance for selecting these events is twofold. First, the event should be as close to operational delivery as possible. Second, the acquisition community should control most, if not all, of the schedule leading up to the event. Some examples of Critical Events selected by AFPEO Digital portfolio programs include operational test certification, delivery of the first production article of a multiple end-item procurement, and significant contract awards. While the latter may not seem close to operational delivery, it can be a major step in the current fiscal year to deliver future capability. During the yearly AFPEO Digital Baseline Execution Review, each program manager baselines program Critical Events with Wert, then identifies the event to stakeholders, including Industry. These Critical Events become the AFPEO Digital commitments that lead

to either a deposit or a withdrawal from the credibility account. Once baselined as a Critical Event, the Program Executive Officer (PEO) and staff monitor progress while the divisions are responsible for tracking the events.

As the leader of the Strategic Warning and Surveillance Systems Division (the Sentinels), which is part of AFPEO Digital, I ensure that the Division focuses on achieving all of our Critical Events. We track them closely as we sustain aging ground-based radars and nuclear command, control, and communication systems that provide warning of missile attacks on North America. However, reality always gets a vote in our plans, and as we see the schedule float for a Critical Event decrease, I engage with the program office to help meet the Critical Event. Often, it only takes a phone call or e-mail from me to an external organization to help the bureaucracy move faster. Sometimes, though, it takes more than an Air Force colonel like me to keep things moving. If that’s the case, I request a “save” from the PEO and his staff. While there are certain elements that we cannot save—e.g., a technical integration issue—more often than not bureaucratic activity is the schedule driver.

Going back to the bank analogy, I request a “save” when I am concerned that there is a “glitch in the banking system” that could prevent a credibility deposit in the Sentinels’ account. With the “save” request, everyone who can do so supports actions to meet the Critical Event date. By meeting the established and publicized date for each Critical Event, the program team and the PEO increases credibility with acquisition leadership and the users by reporting “mission accomplished as promised.” Every on-time or early Critical Event becomes another deposit in the Sentinels’ and AFPEO Digital’s credibility account.

Critical Events aren’t the only way in which Wert is building the credibility of the Digital Directorate. The second Directorate goal, at its core, positions the team to build credibility now and sets the conditions for many more deposits in the Directorate credibility account in the future. Given the numerous speeches and articles from government leadership to “deliver faster” to increase our competitive space, the second AFPEO Digital goal is for “Speed and Innovation.” By asking for and tracking the number of innovative acquisition approaches—such as agile software development—Wert is driving his portfolio to “deliver faster.” This sends a clear message to senior leadership that AFPEO Digital is striving to meet its goal, and this builds current credibility. Spreading an innovative culture throughout the organization will have long-term benefits by being more responsive to the warfighter in the future, especially with the small, frequent deliveries at the core of an agile construct. The credibility benefits of the high-trust relationships built with senior acquisition leaders and stakeholders will enable AFPEO Digital to move through the delivery process faster.

I recognized Wert's focus on building credibility and the need for the Sentinels to develop that culture. It was my responsibility to get it started because, according to Edgar Schien, "leaders ... are the main architects of culture." To adjust the Sentinel culture, I started being transparent with our myriad stakeholders and told my folks to do the same. I knew that keeping the three main elements of the Acquisition System (the Joint Capabilities Integration and Development System [JCIDS]; Planning, Programming, Budgeting and Execution [PPBE] system; and Defense Acquisition System) synchronized is a challenge for every program. Therefore, being transparent enables the Sentinels to find the best way forward with the stakeholders when reality changes the plan. Transparency works because your openness shows personal responsibility for the commitment made and focuses the stakeholder team on the constraints to address in dealing with the changes. Sentinel transparency begets transparency from the stakeholders, and when everything is out in the open, the program community can develop the best way forward. Being transparent with my stakeholders, and suggesting my Branch Chiefs do the same, reaped great day-to-day benefits because, as Simon Sinek notes, trust is more important in advancing organizations than skill set alone.

When challenged by Wert to identify a Division goal, the Sentinels selected a goal that would provide transparency and enhance our credibility even more. With a diverse portfolio of systems that support and enable the nuclear command, control, and communications enterprise, Sentinel leadership decided general/flag officers should approve the system requirements we address in the coming fiscal year as well as the future system roadmap. We decided to bring the users into the selection process to help gain their understanding and support while promising to address high-priority capabilities with the funds we receive. We knew that getting customers' input on their biggest challenges at the senior officer level would focus us on delivering more desired results for them each year. Opening up the dialogue and promising to address coveted user needs will more than likely increase our stakeholder's "capacity for belief" in what the Sentinels do now and in the future.

However, I knew that being transparent would not build credibility as quickly as it was needed. To do that, there had to be results, because, as Covey points out, results create instant credibility and trust. Consequently, I established Warfighter Commitments to directly demonstrate our day-to-day efforts to support our stakeholders. The focus of Warfighter Commitments goes straight to the heart of the acquisition mission: delivery of capability on time thereby helping to keep costs in check. These Warfighter Commitments would provide another metric to show the diverse Sentinel stakeholder community that we were doing what we said we would do. While similar to the Critical Events



Sentinel transparency begets transparency from the stakeholders.

discussed earlier, Warfighter Commitments are what the Sentinels promise to deliver to the warfighter each fiscal year; they are tangible results of the way the Sentinels acquire for our customers. Established through the same process as Critical Events, Warfighter Commitments are specific capabilities that we will make sure are operationally accepted in a quarter of the coming fiscal year. Instead of a specific date, I selected a quarter because the program office does not control all actions leading to operational acceptance. Meeting Warfighter Commitments are the "results" of our daily hard work and provide tangible capabilities to the warfighter. Like Critical Events, these commitments give us an opportunity to deliver on promises and, therefore, enhance our warfighters' "capacity for belief" in what the Sentinels say they will do every day.

Being credible implies a "capacity for belief" by stakeholders, for which the acquisition community continues to strive after acquisition scandals and numerous "acquisition reform" recommendations. Each scandal makes a significant withdrawal from the intangible credibility account. Although these scandals and reforms happen at very senior levels, individual programs can build their credibility through daily actions and meeting commitments.

It is credibility that enables us to establish and sustain trust to the point where even a misspoken phrase will be overlooked. By establishing, announcing and then delivering to AFPEO Digital Critical Events and Sentinel Warfighter Commitments while maintaining transparency with both the Sentinel plans and how reality impacts them, we continue to make deposits into our credibility account. By also working closely with our warfighters and addressing their most coveted needs, the Sentinels deliver more important "results." By enhancing our stakeholder's "capacity for belief" and making frequent "credibility deposits," the Sentinels support AFPEO Digital's vision to "Innovate, deploy, win!" The dollars appropriated by Congress, along with Sentinel credibility, provide much-needed capability to the warfighter.

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