

Calling on Mission Assistance

John Higbee ■ Jesse Stewart

At the Defense Acquisition University, we spend a lot of time with incoming program managers (PMs) as they attend their courses, and help them plan strategies for achieving their acquisition goals. What's not as well known is that we also spend a lot of time in the workplace with PMs and their program teams, collaborating with them to solve issues and to capitalize on opportunities. Based on that experience, we would like to share some of the insights we've gained from these collaborations. We'll start with a short laydown of one of our core program assist tools, the Acquisition Program Transition Workshop (APTW), and follow that with insights gained from APTWs and other interactions.

So why do we need a transition workshop? It started with a joint Raytheon and DAU effort aimed at addressing how to tailor a new contract startup for an increased probability of success. How well a contract startup is conducted

Higbee is executive director for Mission Assistance at the Defense Acquisition University. **Stewart** is director of the Major Defense Acquisition Program (MDAP) at the Defense Systems Management College.

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is an accurate indicator of how well the contract will execute. The DAU-Raytheon team took a proven Raytheon program startup process, and then adapted it for general DoD use. After successfully piloting the APTW process, the APTW team was joined in a fine-tuning process by Lockheed Martin, Boeing, Harris, and Northrop Grumman. Ultimately, Dr. Ashton Carter—then under secretary of defense for acquisition, technology and logistics—signed a Directive Type Memorandum (April 1, 2011) strongly recommending APTWs for new program and contract starts, as well as for managing change in programs and their contracts as they proceed through the acquisition life cycle.

APTWs start with in-depth preparation, including interviews with the industry-government team, team surveys, and assessment tools covering pertinent issues. The surveys, interviews, and tools allow the PM

and the DAU APTW team to shape APTW content in support of the PM's goals/expectations, which also include the integrated expectations of his or her key leaders.

Lesson Learned No. 1: The PM must be seen by the government-industry APTW participants as having clear goal definition, fully committed to the APTW process, and must actively participate.

Lesson Learned No. 2: Listen to your team. Part of the thorough preparation must be consulting with the team members to obtain their inputs.

This collaborative preparation establishes actionable APTW outcomes honed by the participants, both government personnel and (where participating) contractors.



As we move into the actual workshop, the government should enter with clear expectations about contract execution for the short (next 6 months) term, and a real understanding of the integrated master plan and schedule. Normally, a key APTW activity involves industry and government collaboration on preparing a plan for a successful Integrated Baseline Review (IBR), with a parallel in-depth look at the integrated master schedule and the critical path. In support of this goal, the APTW stresses aligning both portions of the team to a well-defined RAM (Responsibility Assignment Matrix). Planned and executed well, these activities are truly a program jumpstart toward a successful IBR and successful contract execution.

So what do we see in our dialog with DoD program offices? Probably the same things you're seeing—lots of capable professionals, a fairly high turnover of team personnel. Experience is usually high at the senior levels, not necessarily so for the new or junior persons in the program. Teams often aren't aligned—either within the government or the combined government-contractor team.

Change in government acquisition also is a constant (pun intended). Change includes new policies, new contracts, coping with resources and schedule changes, downsizing, and (now) sequestration. What are some of the "golden nuggets" we've taken away from our work?

Let's take an acquisition transition workshop that addresses the need to create a major new contract:

Lesson Learned No. 3: Engaging the government and industry teams is better done earlier in the contracting cycle (e.g., via Broad Area Announcements or Requests for Information).

If the APTW happens later, as the Request for Proposal is drafted:

Lesson Learned No. 4: Align your program team to optimally support the new contract (e.g., using the product work breakdown structure).

Tell the potential bidders about your projected organization. That helps the contractor better support the

government team. It also supports rapid program IPT setup and chartering.

If these areas aren't covered early, we repeatedly see a great deal more time and energy required in the post-award effort to fully align the government and contractor.

Managing this part of the change equation is where DAU's workshop products can be of great help. Products such as joint government-contractor team charters seem simple, but defining "who is to do what, and by when" is essential to deconflicting government/industry efforts. It is also a key to gaining a common understanding of the complete body of contract work.

Roles and responsibilities aren't always clear in either legacy or new organizations.

Lesson Learned No. 5: Focus on the task at hand—setting the basic organizational structure and tying together responsibilities.

Just because things worked under the old contract, doesn't mean they will continue to do so under the new or modified contract. What the government portion of the team expects to do needs to be bounced against the contractor's concept of what his or her team is contracted to do. Contractor roles and responsibilities may have changed (e.g., shifting from development to production of a product). One tool we have found very useful in working through these changes is RASCI—"responsible, accountable, supporting, consulted, and informed." RASCI allows us to help you match your team to your contractor equivalents, the IPT duties, the communications plan, and your metrics . . . helping you get your extended team organized optimally prior to the start of the effort.

Communications issues seem to come up again and again.

Lesson Learned No. 6: Lack of clear communications always needs to be rapidly analyzed and corrected.

Team members with whom we talk keep bringing communications to the forefront. It's about their perceived lack of office or program communications, poor meeting execution,

meeting overload, and disregard of team analysis and recommendations, often resulting in “unmade” decisions or “perpetual decision revisiting.” Poor-communications root causes are never quite the same from organization to organization. Analyzing communications patterns, decision-making processes, and detailed planning becomes a key to solutions for the organization.

We also have achieved valuable insights from APTW structured interviews and surveys on how to achieve solid success in program execution.

Lesson Learned No. 7: PMs’ goals need to be viewed from the implementer’s perspective (“a view from the deck plates”) to thoughtfully build a practical, executable plan.


Lesson Learned No. 8: Managing the internal and external program success expectations must be an integral part of any successful acquisition strategy.

The DAU APTW team often talks with and surveys the contractor, stakeholders, and others in the decision chain. It’s very common for the program team to have pockets of misunderstanding or lack of trust that need fixing. Quality of data sharing can be “all over the map” within the government, with disconnects between the government team and the prime contractor and between the primes and their subcontractors.

Lessons Learned: Encourage transparency throughout the extended program.

Early program data transparency from the start improves the quality of day-to-day management in areas as various as processing CDRLs and drawings, system engineering reviews, program progress assessments, responding consistently to requests from external stakeholders, and many, many more.

The APTW, and organizational “deep dives,” are among DAU’s most complex workshops. Most of their supporting tools can be adapted for short assist visits—e.g., strategic workshops for PMs. In those short assists, we seek to understand the PMs’ and leaders’ goals, interview the teams, and build quick reaction workshops. Surveys (we have a large database of survey questions developed from looking at many programs in different life-cycle phases) can help a program office analyze organizational issues or internal issues. The surveys also may be tailored to analyze specific program activities. Program office interviews and short workshops can help identify the need for program office streamlining or issues in preparing for a milestone. In support of Better Buying Power, we also are aiding programs in the “how to” for implementing BBP initiatives.

This DAU mission assistance toolkit is focused on helping acquirers and their organizations adapt to program changes in our dynamic acquisition world. If we can be of help, please give us a call! 

The authors can be contacted at John.Higbee@dau.mil and Jesse.Stewart@dau.mil.

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