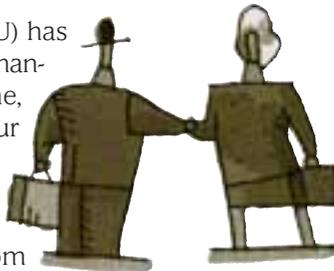
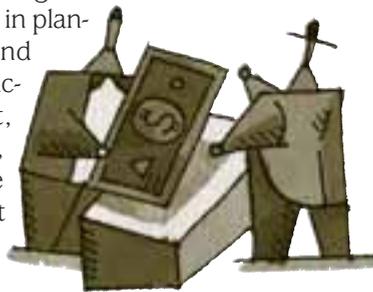
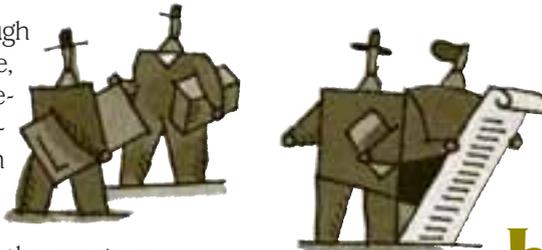


The Ideal Program Manager

A View from the Trenches

Owen C. Gadeken

Program management is a tough job. Meeting cost, schedule, and performance requirements on challenging acquisition programs takes both skill and teamwork by the project team or program office. But at the heart of effective performance is the program manager (PM). The PM plays a major role in planning the program, building the team, and managing for results. While program success can be defined as meeting cost, schedule, and performance requirements, PM success is much harder to define. Here we are looking for the key PM skills that when properly applied lead to successful program results.



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The Defense Acquisition University (DAU) has been in the business of training program managers for over 30 years. During this time, we have taken considerable data from our students on characteristics of effective PMs. This interesting perspective constitutes a view from the trenches, a perspective on program management—from those being led as well as the group being groomed to become our PMs of the future.

Leadership Exercise Yields Valuable Data

Some of the most interesting DAU data come from a leadership exercise carried out in the 14-week Advanced Program Management Course (APMC) from 1999 to 2002. In the exercise, students defined the attributes of the ideal PM leader by recalling examples of good and poor leadership they had observed from their previous acquisition experiences. The examples were written up on “yellow stickies” (3M Post-it® notes) and sorted into categories by groups of six students. The students then came up with a name for the primary skill or attribute represented by each category. The exercise concluded with the student groups sharing their top five category

names with the class and providing the list to their instructor to support this research. In all, a total of 326 student groups representing 1,956 students participated in the PM leadership exercise.

The top-rated category rankings from the APMC leadership exercise are summarized in Figure 1. In all, 72 different categories were identified, but the results clustered heavily into the seven listed in the left column. The next seven categories (*motivation/inspiration, decision making, decisiveness, mentor/coach/develop, trust, organization skills, and courage*) were ranked much lower, with 54 down to 28 student groups ranking them in their top five.

While there are a range of skills represented in the figure, interpersonal skills clearly lead the field with four of the

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top seven responses (*communication, delegation/empowerment, people skills, and team building*). This should not be surprising given the large number of people, organizations, and stakeholders involved in acquisition programs.

360 Degree Feedback Adds Insight

The logical follow-on from the key PM leadership skills identified in the APMC exercise is to assess how well Defense Department PMs actually perform on these skills in the workplace. While we have no data on current PM performance, we again have considerable data from the APMC student population who were preparing to be PMs. Every APMC student was given a 360 degree feedback report that contained a broad-based assessment of his or her performance on 24 skill factors built up from 135 separately rated job behaviors. The report was based on workplace feedback from supervisors, peers, and subordinates as well as on the student's own self-assessment. In all, 7,796 students were given 360 degree feedback reports from 1995 to 2002.

Figure 1 also contains a summary of the 360 degree feedback ratings for the most important categories from the APMC leadership exercise. When the feedback ratings were rank-ordered for the 24 skill factors, the top eight factors were considered *high*, the second eight factors *medium*, and the last eight factors as *low* in relative performance. Using this breakout, Figure 1 allows us to compare importance categories with actual performance of our APMC student population. From the figure, *integrity, people skills, communication, and competence/expertise* have both high performance and high importance ratings, indicating that APMC students are already doing well in these areas. Team building has a medium performance ranking but also ranked seventh in importance, so it may be properly balanced—in other words, no major skill development is needed.

The most striking imbalance occurs with the *vision/strategy* and *delegation/empowerment* skills. They are the second and third ranked importance factors, yet they are near the bottom of the performance ratings. This means that APMC students were not seen as having these skills, which are considered very important to their future success as PMs.

What should we conclude from this analysis? Well, going back to our original premise, these data represent both the view from the trenches on PM leadership skills as well as performance of those in the trenches who are being trained to move up to PM positions. There is good news here as well as bad news. Future PMs appear to be doing well in many of the top rated importance categories, such as *communication, integrity, and people skills*. However, the two skill areas of *vision/strategy* and *delegation/empowerment* are ripe for improvement. This should not be

surprising since APMC students may not have had significant leadership opportunities to allow them to develop and demonstrate these skills thus far in their careers. Yet there is still cause for concern since we don't want to put people in the sink-or-swim position of having to develop these skills after they get their first PM jobs.

How to Achieve Success

There are several approaches to develop *vision/strategy* and *delegation/empowerment* skills for future PMs.

Seek Job-related Opportunities

The first approach is to seek job-related opportunities. Almost any job with supervisory responsibility affords the opportunity to develop these leadership competencies. However, acquisition-related roles, such as integrated product team (IPT) lead or functional team lead, which are in the PM environment, would be particularly useful for developing these skills. The important aspect of skill development here is to try the skill and get immediate feedback either from people on your team or from others who can observe your performance. A feedback loop is critical to effective human performance, just as feedback is critical to effective performance of technical or information systems. You may also want to seek the support and feedback from your boss, another senior manager in your organization who can serve as a mentor, or perhaps an outside consultant in the emerging role of executive coach.

Take Formal Training

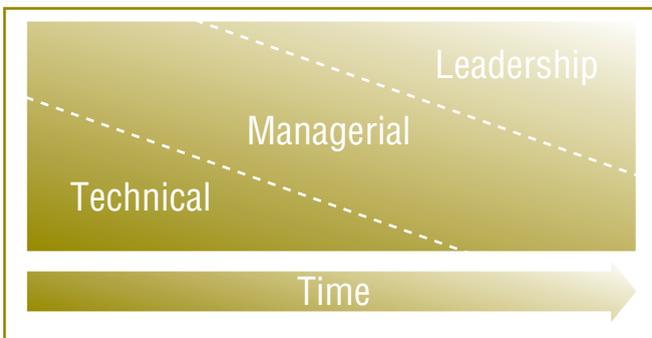
The next approach is to use the array of training opportunities available in your organization and career field. DAU, for example, offers a broad selection of PM-related courses addressing PM leadership issues. The more senior courses stress these leadership themes, but the challenge here is to get exposure to leadership issues early in your career to gain the most benefit in your initial PM assignments. Beyond the formal career development path, you should also explore outside seminars, guest speakers, and graduate coursework.

FIGURE 1. Program Leadership Skills

APMC Leadership Exercise* Importance Ratings	Student Groups	360 Feedback** Performance Ratings
Communication	224	High
Vision/Strategy	203	Low
Delegation/Empowerment	151	Low
Integrity	128	High
People Skills	111	High
Competence/Expertise	95	High
Team Building	88	Medium

*1,956 APMC students in 326 student groups
 **7,796 AMPC students

FIGURE 2. Program Management Career Balance of Expertise



Pursue Self-Development

Finally, there is the self-development approach. This may appear less viable on first glance. “How can I teach myself something I can’t do?” you ask. But experience (even unsuccessful experience) and reflection are often the best teachers. Never underestimate the power of reading, observing, reflecting, and critical thinking in developing or honing your skills. The success literature is full of personal examples of people who have pulled themselves up by their own boot straps. All of us need to become continu-

ous learners, using the above tools and processes as we adapt to the changing world around us.

The Key is People

In summary, the view of PM leadership from the trenches is a view that emphasizes people. It stresses developing a vision or strategic direction for the program and communicating that vision so people working on the program buy in to a common goal. The PM leader excels at people skills to build the team, then he or she delegates and empowers team members to take the lead in achieving key parts of the vision. Finally, the PM leader has credibility based on both competence and personal integrity.

This view of PM leadership is summarized in Figure 2, which traces the evolution of technical, management, and leadership roles in a typical program management career. We may think of program management as an effective combination of technical and management skills. But the view from the trenches is that the successful PM is first and foremost a leader. And leadership is all about people.

Editor’s note: The author welcomes comments and questions. He can be contacted at owen.gadeken@dau.mil.



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