

Four Rs: Basic Training for Success

Wayne Turk

Way back when—before the time of many readers—there was a kids’ saying: “Readin’ and ’ritin’ and ’rithmetic/Taught to the tune of a hickory stick.” To those three Rs, we add a fourth, and we have these essential skills for program managers: *readin’*, *’ritin’*, *’rithmetic*, and *rhetoric*. You need to bone up on these basic subjects, as well as increase your technical expertise, to help ensure your success as a PM and make sure your contemporaries—or juniors—don’t pass you by.

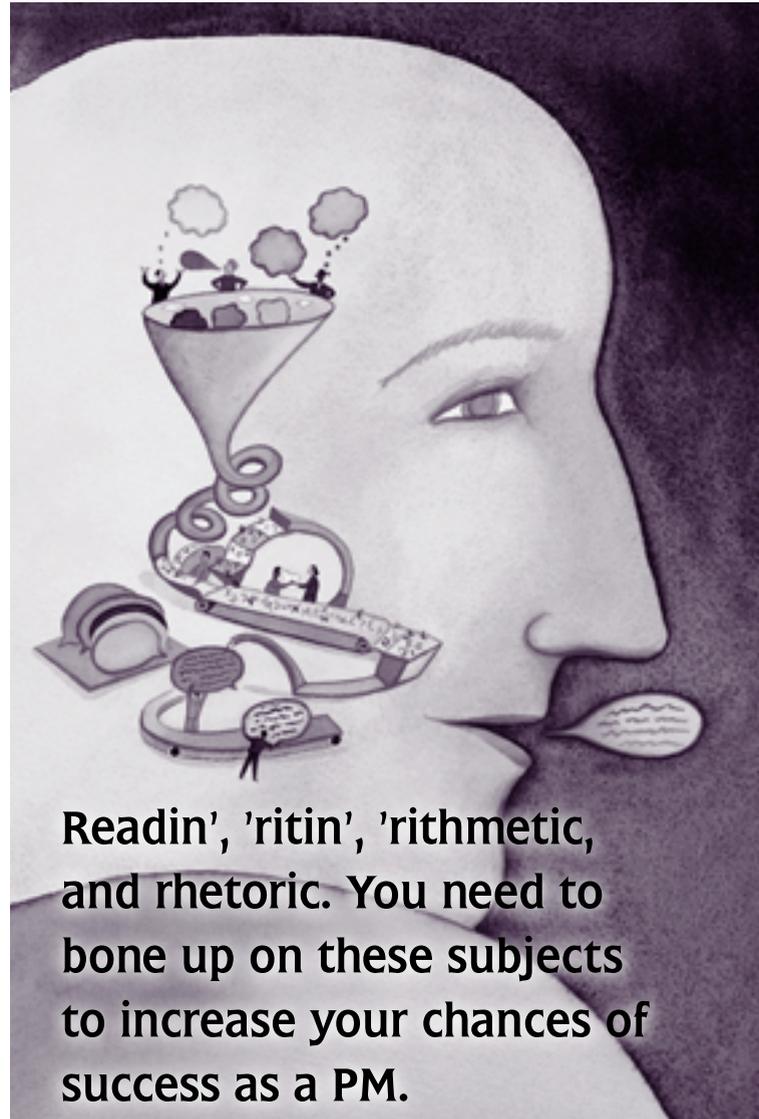
Some of you are not going to like what this article says. That’s because I am going to tell you to take some of your “free time” (as if you had lots of free time) and use it for some work- and education-related activities. All of those activities fall into the category of school or continuous learning. For some readers, continuous learning is a must, but for the rest it is voluntary. We’ll hold off on the “official” continuous learning discussion and focus on the four Rs. This article won’t really delve deeply into technical expertise improvement since that varies by individual and project needs.

Readin’: A Mind Expander

We’ll start with reading. Even if you have been out of school for a while, it’s to be hoped that you have been reading. If you’ve been working on continuing education, a degree or advanced degree, or certifications, you had no choice. Whether in or out of school, though, professional reading is one key to your success. Technology is changing, and changing quickly. It is escalating at an exponential rate (a hint of ’rithmetic already). You need to know what changes are happening and the best practices in your field, and you need to learn from others’ mistakes.

Don’t just read in your field, though. Other books or articles can change your perspective or give you new ideas. There is a need for people to develop broad effective information literacy skills because of the explosion of available information in the Internet age. Eclectic reading habits widen your horizons and help you to be a better manager.

All of the Services, as well as schools, organizations, and other groups, have professional reading lists. Take the following quote from the professional reading list of Peter J. Schoomaker, the Army chief of staff. Take out the words



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“Army” and “war” and you could substitute any Service and almost any field of endeavor. It is very apropos to practitioners in the program management field.

The Professional Reading List is a way for leaders at all levels to increase their understanding of our Army’s history, the global strategic context, and the enduring lessons of war. The topics and time periods included in the books on this list are expansive and are intended to broaden each leader’s knowledge and confidence. I challenge all leaders to make a focused, personal commitment to read, reflect,

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and learn about our profession and our world. Through the exercise of our minds, our Army will grow stronger.

'Ritin': Making Words Count

PMs are having to write more and more. For credibility and career progression, you need to do it well. It is a learned skill. As a PM (or in almost any other position), you are going to have to prepare work products: papers, reports, plans, and other deliverables that are prose. They may be technical, but they are prose none the less. Even if you don't write them, you will have to edit them. You are responsible for their content, format, and readability. You get the credit (maybe shared with others) or the boos, depending on their reception.

Learn to write well. Documents that are readable, understandable, and accurate are what's needed. Grammar, spelling, format, and readability are almost as important as, and sometimes more important than, content. (Why more important? Because a poorly written sentence can sometimes say the exact opposite of what you meant.) Accuracy in what you write is crucial to get the right outcomes—a decision, funding, schedule extension, or just acceptance of the document by the powers-that-be. Simpler is better. Don't use buzzwords, jargon, or three long words where one short one will do the same job.

'Rithmetic: It All Adds Up

Many would say that 'rithmetic may be the least important of the four for PMs. Don't be so sure. Mathematics underlies every facet of science, technology, and engineering from computer games, cellular phones, and the Internet to medical diagnostic tests, the design of new products, and the completion of projects. It is not just an academic subject. Math skills are used in the real world. Computer science and engineering are seeping into all aspects of work and life, never more so than today. And project management involves math on a daily basis. Every PM has funding, costs, and other math-related activities to worry about. Most have to worry about math within the project itself, whether it is the engineering, testing, deployment, logistics—or simply figuring out how many people are needed to get the job done on time.

As important as the math itself, there are also the skills associated with it. Attention to detail in every part of your project is necessary. Critical thinking skills associated with math help with planning and problem resolution. Accuracy (already mentioned in association with writing) is very important. Logic, in a mathematical sense, allows you to lay out problems and find solutions, something you do every day. It is all related to math (or 'rithmetic). It may not be necessary to take a math class, but it certainly wouldn't hurt to bone up or take a class in finance, costing, or financial management. Those are areas that can really help you as a PM.

Rhetoric: Simply Speaking

There are classical definitions of rhetoric, and when I say classical, I mean all the way back to the great Greek and Roman philosophers. Plato described rhetoric as "the art of winning the soul by discourse." According to Aristotle, it is "the faculty of discovering in any particular case all of the available means of persuasion." And Cicero said, simply and directly, that rhetoric is "speech designed to persuade."

Briefings happen all the time. PMs have to brief upper management, stakeholders, users, the team, and seemingly the world, on a recurring basis. Briefing skills can be learned. Practice makes perfect. Dry run your briefings—in front of someone if you can. Learn to relax. Be organized. Speak slowly and clearly. Don't read your slides to the audience. (For more detailed pointers, check out "Aristotle and the Art of Successful Presentations," *Defense AT&L*, May-June 2006.)

But we need to expand the rhetoric definition to include all oral communication. PMs have to be able to communicate well one on one as well as to a group. And as well as persuasion, rhetoric covers appraisals, fact-finding, reporting, problem resolution, and so on. Try to get feedback on your oral communication skills—honest feedback with constructive criticism. Ask the people you interact with: your peers, your supervisor, and those who report to you. If you don't know that you aren't communicating well, you can't fix the problem.

The Learning Never Stops

Continuous learning is a requirement in the acquisition field for some people. So you can kill two birds with one stone – learn things that will be helpful to you and meet requirements for continuous learning (if your position demands). Even if you aren't in one of the positions requiring continuous learning, it is worthwhile. That also goes for contractors.

The Continuous Learning Policy says that every two years, acquisition personnel in Defense Acquisition Workforce Improvement Act (DAWIA) billets who are certified to the level of their position, must earn 80 continuous learning points to meet the Continuous Learning Policy requirements issued by the under secretary of defense (acquisition, technology and logistics) on Sept. 13, 2002. Even if your position doesn't require continuous learning points, your success and career progression do require that you continue learning. If you don't take courses, at least do the professional reading and bone up on the four Rs. They're basic training for success.

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