

# The Swing of the Pendulum

*L.S. Kove*

**E**arly in my Department of Defense career, an experienced mentor compared the way we do business in acquisition to a pendulum. It swings all the way to one side but always comes back to the other. He told me that was how the Department was and always would be. All you could do was try to forecast what direction the pendulum was going and manage accordingly.

I have come to realize we need to aim for that pendulum to come to rest somewhere in between. This middle ground consists of a balance of the buyers' common sense born from expertise, experience, and an awareness of all their options.

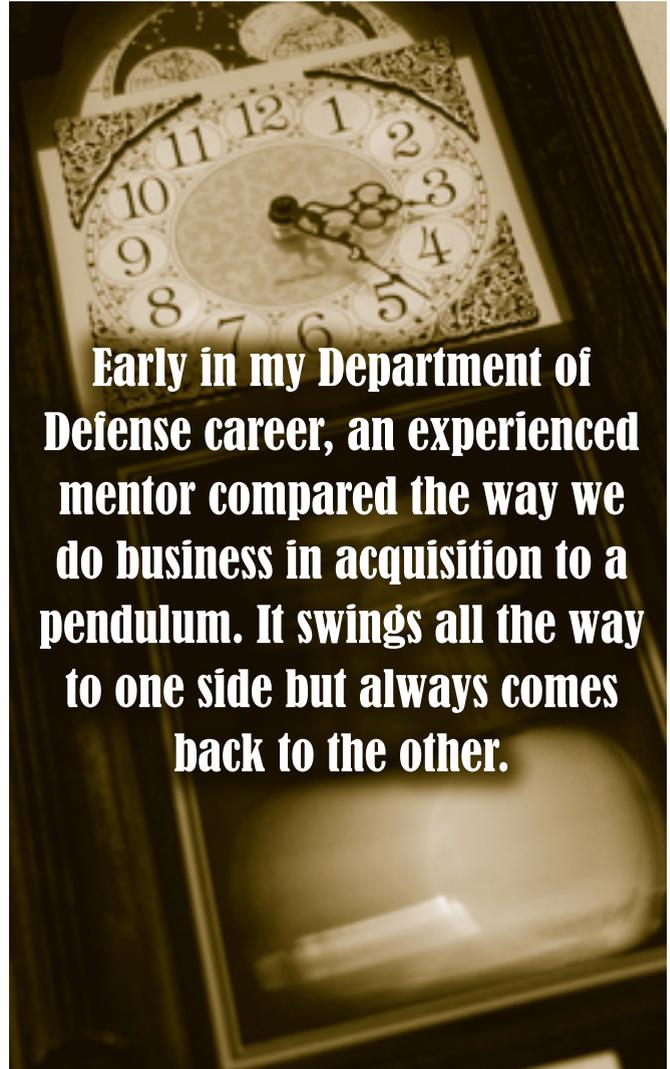
## **That was Then**

In the early days everything was policy-driven. Each policy led to many more policies, leaving you lost in the policy labyrinth. We called this "The Teardrop Effect" because a teardrop just keeps falling down. These policies seemed to create an endless stream.

Boilerplates are structured examples, designed as tools to be plagiarized. Every acquisition paperwork type (funding justifications/formulas, planning, and contracts) and specific acquisition area had tailorable boilerplates that were updated to match the latest policies. Although nobody captured the processes in those pre-personal computer days, we had plenty of them, and we had them down to a bureaucratic science. Even source-selection methodologies were concise. A senior person always accompanied the junior person in his or her first few source selections. In this way, the junior person was taught the process. The investment in on-the-job training was resource-intensive, but it paid off very well. Mentoring was an important ingredient to teaching the "hows."

There was a sharp division between industry and government then. We were all reasonably friendly, but there was no doubt that we, the government, were in the position of buyers and they, the contractor, were in the position of sellers. Certain lines could not, and should not, be crossed. Those acting as buyers served as the government's agent to get the best price and quality deal possible; while those acting as sellers served their company's bottom line, aiming for a profit while providing

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good products and/or services. And all was based upon the requirements as outlined in contracts that relied heavily on very specific policies and their related regulations.

We had experts, usually with at least 20 years of acquisition experience, who really knew their stuff—and when they didn't know the answer, they knew who did. They knew their policies and acquisition requirements as well as what things should cost for any procurement within their purview. And this was before the ability to model costs through computer programs.

## **This is Now**

Complicated as those days were, I never realized how much I would miss them until now, when the pendulum

has swung to such an extreme the other way. “Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler,” said Albert Einstein. The acquisition business has gone to simpler, and there are legitimate concerns about the result. Acquisition methods and processes were once so established they had practically a scientific accuracy. We have replaced this state with loose guidance; innovation is constrained by dollars; and very few performance factors ultimately translate into contractual requirements.

How has the denigration of the once well-known policies and processes affected industry? Even though some of the policies (specifications and standards) are no longer included in contracts because they were considered too complicated, industry sometimes still uses the recommended processes anyway. Why? Simple: they made sense then, and they make sense now. A good example is the logistics support analysis from which database tools were designed so contractors could capture product design details as well as produce reports and other related deliverables for their logistics customers. Attempting to justify why he was loading his logistics support analysis into his Eagle database, one contractor said to me a few years ago, “How else are we going to figure this stuff out?”

Before working in civil service and while employed by a prime contractor, I read many of the government’s standards and specifications associated with the contracts I was working on. They gave me a reasonable idea of what my customer’s expectations were. These days, expectations are often—to some degree—proposed, negotiated and renegotiated, then later refined. It’s actually a more complicated process driven by over-simplification. There is significant risk when policy-driven requirements are turned into guidance. To some extent, everyone—contractor and government alike—is playing a guessing game, with only a few able to comprehend the rules.

### **This isn’t Wal-Mart**

Buying for the DoD to support the warfighter is not the same as going into a retail shop. Our prime contractors and their vendors are not Wal-Mart. The acquisition of a weapon system is a complicated business. Innovation can be a wonderful feature, but without some degree of policy, process, calculated measurements, and structure, all parties often end up with a common feeling of dissatisfaction. Even worse, each party is vulnerable to adverse findings in all kinds of potential assessments, peer reviews, or audits that may increase costs and cause delays in scheduled implementation. The embarrassing mistakes get worse when they are uncovered by the news media and result in bad publicity and the possible cancellation of the acquisition.

When we had standards and specifications guided by mandated policies and regulations galore, production costs for items as simple as hammers and toilet seats oc-

asionally soared into the thousands of dollars each, creating a media frenzy. These days, a lack of specifications, regulations, and well-mentored buyers, coupled with increased dependency on sole-source acquisitions, place the government in a situation ripe for over-spending and, of course, its related bad press.

Some would make the case that sole source acquisition provides for increased economies of scale, efficiencies through the commercial innovative process, and hence cost savings. If a seller, because of internal corporate pressures, is most concerned with the bottom line, why give the buyer a better deal? Some would respond, “Companies are going to offer the best deal to retain the customer.” However, when a company is chosen as the seller for life, and competition does not exist, there is no pressure to be competitive. In order to accomplish true economies of scale and cost savings, competition must remain and be adequately planned for the long-term strategy.

### **What’s the Future?**

Where do we go from here? Obviously we don’t want to return to over-regulation, but on the other hand, under-regulation is not working either. We need to manage expectations and have a professional understanding of the boundaries. Even in the old days of excessive regulation, we were able to build in modifications to allow for innovation. The key was awareness of what you were buying.

There are three basic types of buyers: the expert, the amateur, and one in between. A knowledgeable buyer, a real expert, is always the best. Courses that teach the acquisition milestones and the other “whats” don’t create experts; they create buyers who only know the “what.” Experts learn the “hows” from mentors—as happened in the early days. But these days, with a significantly leaner workforce, most potential mentors are often so busy doing, they don’t have time to teach. This is hurting the acquisition community. Corporate knowledge cannot be captured completely within a database; much of it is based on situational awareness. Additionally, who has time to fill up a database? Certainly not those with corporate knowledge, who are, as we know, too busy working.

Then we come back to policies and regulations. To some degree, more are needed than we have today. People are writing acquisition documentation that is often incomplete to the point that it is sometimes nothing more than filling in a check mark on your acquisition to-do list. That is not the purpose of the paperwork. It’s about identifying the requirement, visioning, planning, buying, formatting, testing, and implementing. When it is done well, it’s so innovative that it’s practically an art form. There is much pride taken in successful acquisition. Best of all, our customers, the warfighters, are happy.

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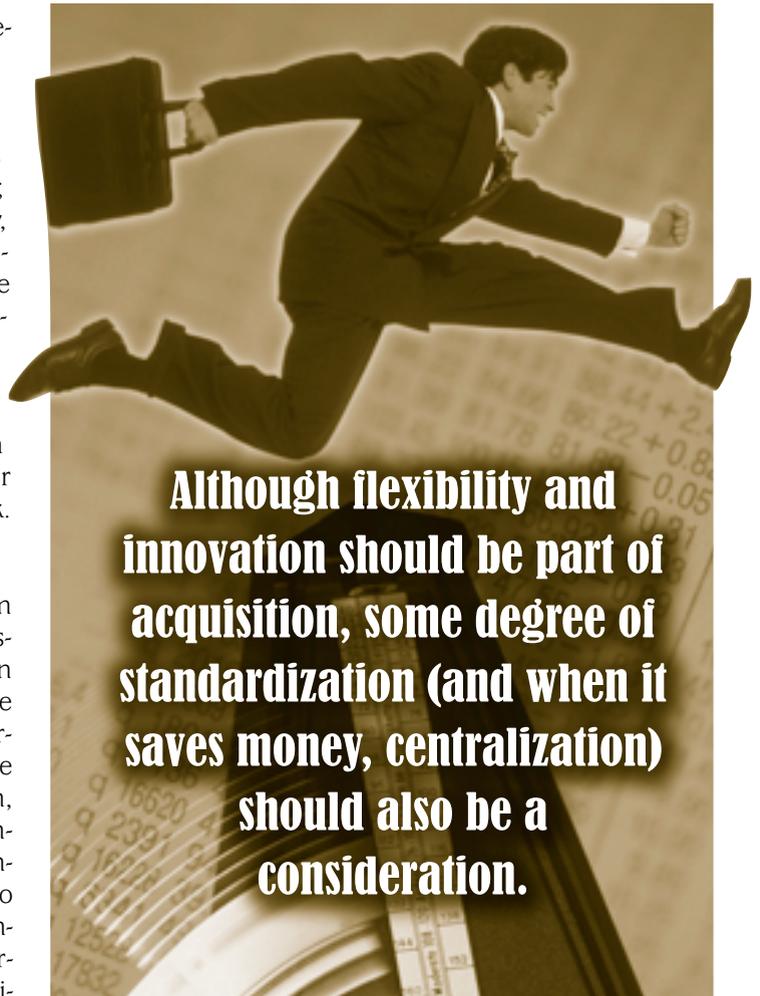
have individual conversations with senior leaders, stakeholders, a subset of interviewed program managers, and program managers who were not interviewed (but are still high performers). Including these individuals in the validation process enables the review of what has been summarized; demonstrates that they were heard; and allows for the clarification of any issue, controversy, or differentiation by level, function, or geography. Including high-performing program managers who have not been interviewed in the validation process helps ensure the findings apply to a broader audience. If the organization is relatively large, it is necessary to use a more structured process to validate the competencies and success profile—focus groups or online surveys can enable validators to review each component, rate it for accuracy or importance, and capture additional feedback.

### **Establish Proficiency Requirements**

Proficiency requirements indicate how skilled program managers need to be on different competencies. By establishing proficiency requirements, the organization can conduct a bench-strength assessment as well as provide developmental and career feedback to individuals interested in becoming program managers. To establish the proficiency levels, first determine the scale (e.g., high, medium, low, no knowledge or skill). Then use a consensus-driven focus group process (composed of high-performing program managers or their supervisors) to review each of the competencies and determine the minimum proficiency level required for successful performance in the role. The individuals providing the proficiency ratings need to use the full range of whatever proficiency scale is involved and assign high proficiency levels only to those competencies where it is truly critical for job success to have high capabilities. People in focus groups or those being interviewed will often state that it is necessary for program managers to be highly proficient in all of these competencies; but it is necessary for them to think through this process carefully so that the proficiency information will have meaning and can guide people's learning. For example, the competency of "influencing senior stakeholders" may exist in both the Program and Project Manager Success Profile, but in this instance, because program managers are more likely to need and use this competency, they would require a higher level of proficiency than project managers. Assigning the highest required proficiency level to only the most important or consequential competencies will create targeted training to develop successful program managers.

*The last article in this three-part series will explore the alternatives available when creating a program manager development program.*

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There are acquisition boilerplates floating around and being reused, but they are often neither tailored appropriately nor current. The acquisition community needs clear guidance with logical updates, as well as boilerplates that are kept current by subject matter experts. The Department of Defense needs to make this investment before all those with the institutional knowledge have retired, leaving behind—at best—professionals guess-timating their way through the mysterious maze of acquisition. Although flexibility and innovation should be part of acquisition, some degree of standardization (and when it saves money, centralization) should also be a consideration.

In the end, there's never any mistake so horrible that we can't learn from it. So let's take a lesson from the past and never again swing the pendulum from one extreme to the other. Instead, let's strive to keep it somewhere in the middle, where acquisition is based on a balance of policy-driven processes and the accumulated knowledge and experience of many mentors.

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