

From Our Readers

Point: Without Risk, No Success

I have to tell you how much I loved “The Danger of Caution” in the November-December issue of *Defense AT&L*. In our current fear-driven economic and political climate, it’s easy to think we can play it safe by avoiding risks. Yet without risk, there is no meaningful success, and certainly no innovation.

I also enjoyed the untraditional comic book-style format. What an attention-getting way to deliver the story and message! Thanks for bringing us a fresh viewpoint, in such a fresh way.

Sally Hogshead
Author, *Radical Careering*

Counterpoint: It’s Not Funny

In the November-December 2007 issue of *Defense AT&L*, there is a cartoon entitled “The Danger of Caution.” The cartoon presents “heroes” rescuing a program from peril and pushing Major Caution, the safety person, aside. I think the cartoon sends a bad message.

I have been a program manager and a safety professional. In both areas I find that we have to work with everybody to reconcile differences and build trust for executable alternatives. Sometimes there is a wide gulf between cost, schedule, performance, and safety requirements, and marginalizing hazards, before analysis can quantify risk. Hasty decisions without due process can relieve a short-term train wreck for the program office while leading to wrecks in the future for the warfighters. I think the cartoon not only does a disservice to acquisition and safety professionals, but also shortchanges an appreciation of the deliberative process that it takes to ensure the decisions we make include the best thinking to fulfill warfighter requirements within the funding and calendar parameters established by the Congress and signed into law by the president. While the cartoon does present a common misconception among the uninformed, it does not address the proper way to mitigate risk: Accept risk only when the benefits outweigh the cost; accept no unnecessary risk; anticipate risk by planning; make risk decisions at the right levels.

The Department of Defense provides a more detailed reference for recognizing and analyzing hazards in MIL-STD-882D, which all program managers, without regard to the acquisition category level of their program, have been directed to use to reduce preventable accidents. MIL-STD-882D requires program managers to recognize and analyze hazards, mitigate risk, and ensure risk is accepted at the appropriate level. Program managers may accept residual risk that is moderate or below. Serious risk must be reconciled at the program executive officer level. High risk must be reconciled at the component acquisition executive level. There is no place for cowboys and pirates in our acquisition professional community.

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The Authors Respond: When using satire, there is always the danger of being misunderstood. Dr. Smiley's letter convinced us that a few clarifying comments are probably in order. The comic's message actually echoes our article in the March-April 2007 issue ("The Pursuit of Courage, Judgment, and Luck"), which asserted that risk management is about courage and judgment, not process or personal protection. As Dr. Smiley pointed out, risk management is done to ensure warfighter success, not to protect a program manager's career, so we are all in agreement on that point.

When The Adirondack Kid and Cap'n Cannonball saw a team in trouble, they heroically went to help, without regard for their own personal/professional safety, exemplifying the Air Force Core Value of "service before self." Mr. Timid's reaction, in contrast, was entirely self-serving. He wasn't trying to help the train-wrecked team at all. He was simply trying to protect himself.

Careful readers will have noted that Maj. Caution's *real* name is Mr. Timid, and he is only *masquerading* as the helpful safety guy. Clues to his true identity: His backside is marked "well covered"; he begins most of his sentences with the phrase, "I'm afraid"; and when action is called for, he offers instead an academic lecture on the risk management process. He's an archetype of safety done wrong, and he was never intended to represent *all* safety professionals.

Mr. Timid didn't understand—as a good safety professional does—that risk management is fundamentally a mission *enabler*, not a mission preventer, and as we said in "The Pursuit of Courage," for the sake of the mission, you sometimes "have to grab the scissors and run with them."

As much fun as it is to be described as "the uninformed," we should point out that Ward has extensive professional experience in risk management and is the recipient of a matching pair of "Risk Area Manager of the Month" awards. Quaid spent several years controlling nuclear missiles and in 2007, returned from a six-month tour of Afghanistan. Both experiences provided him with significant risk and safety expertise.

While we do not advocate hasty decisions without due process, we emphatically affirm that overdue decisions delayed by excessive process are worse. The ideal, of course, is good decisions made in a timely manner.