

The Rogue Program Management Art of War

Ward & Quaid's Excellent 8½ Axioms

Maj. Chris Quaid, USAF ■ Maj. Dan Ward, USAF

All the exaggerations are right, if they exaggerate the right thing. (G. K. Chesterton "On Gargoyles")

So you're a program manager with a problem. You've got no money, no support, your senior leadership doesn't know who you are, your subordinates want to quit, your peers want to get you fired, you get no respect and no travel budget, and when you go to the beach, you just know that big ol' Arnold Schwarzenegger look-alike will be kicking sand upon your puny 98-pound self. Sound familiar? Keep reading!

And Now For The Rest Of The Story...

But wait, there's more. Deep within in the very grain of your fiber, you absolutely, positively know your unfunded, unkempt, unloved, uncared-for program will change the face of the planet, ensure world peace, and preserve the American Way of Life. It might even restore balance to the galaxy ... if it could only be funded, kept alive, and nurtured. As the PM, that's your job, and it's a problem.

What to do, what to do? Start by asking some possibly scary questions, such as: In spite of the low pay, long hours, lack of respect, sleep deprivation, and bone-crushing bureaucracy, will this program make a positive, significant difference in the lives of my customers? In other words, is it worth fighting for? If I do not pursue this effort to the best of my ability, can I live with the consequences of my failure to act? Do I want to pursue a low-risk, low-payoff effort, where courage, creativity, and passion are not necessary (and indeed might even be detrimental)? Or do I want to spend my professional life



pursuing meaningful goals, doing things that stretch, challenge, and maybe even scare me? Will I be primarily motivated by fear and therefore seek safety, or will I be primarily motivated by a desire to make a difference, and therefore face danger head-on?

We're Here To Help.

Submitted for your consideration are the following 8½ Axioms of the Rogue Program Management Art Of War. They are based on our own experiences as well as experiences of others who will remain nameless for their own protection. These axioms work most of the time, but there is no money-back guarantee. In fact, some of this may even get you in trouble. But it just might be worth it.

So proceed at your own risk. And may The Force be with you.

Quaid is assigned to the Technical Executive Office of the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency, and **Ward** is assigned to the Air Force Research Lab in Rome, N.Y.

1.0. Have the Mission Imperative and maintain a persistent, consistent awareness of Why You Are Here.

- This means you *must* grasp the Big Picture, and that takes some serious effort. Dig around, talk with the air staff, talk with the warfighters, read the newspaper, and make sure you really grasp exactly how/where/when/why this project or system fits in to the customer's overall mission objective. Maybe it doesn't, and if that's the case, *move on!*
- Keep in mind the volumes and volumes of formal requirements for any given system are often a mixed bag. Some are legit and some are questionable. Some may never be wholly satisfied, and some never should have been written in the first place. What matters most is the mission objective/purpose/goal as defined by the mission executor.
- The PM above all others must believe the Program is Real. Share your vision. Make a bold plan. And take the Army 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment's motto to heart: NSDQ (Night Stalkers Don't Quit).

2.0. Always, always, always do what's right for the customer, the mission, the taxpayer, the government, and yes, even the contractor.

- Every day, in every way, take the ethical, honest, right, and "high" road. Integrity is non-negotiable and absolutely essential. If you disagree, please stop reading now and go resign. Immediately. We're *not* kidding.
- Understand that you will occasionally get kicked in the teeth for doing the right thing.
- Also understand there is something profoundly cool about getting punished for doing the right thing. Wear those battle scars proudly ... and beware of those without such marks.

3.0. The bureaucratic rules, policies, and procedures were not created for you, so do not play by them or expect them to help you.

- A significant percentage of processes you encounter were not created with your particular task in mind, so be willing to create your own to meet your program's and your customer's needs. This does not contradict Axiom 2.0, not even a little bit.
- If it's not statutory, it's waivable (and even if it is statutory, there are usually many ways to interpret the law). Sometimes it does hurt to ask the question, but ask anyway. Sometimes it's better to ask forgiveness than permission. This also does not contradict Axiom 2.0, not even a little bit.
- Original, innovative programs require original, innovative program managers to take original, innovative actions. One more time: this does not contradict Axiom 2.0, not even a little bit.
- You must be creative, resourceful, agile, and aware of your environment, and you must be able to adapt to changing, unpredictable circumstances (like having all your funding cut). Flow like water around barriers and

roadblocks. And don't take no for an answer when you know the right answer is *Yes*.

- Fully use and empower both your subordinates *and* your customers. If you treat them well, they'll take care of you too.

4.0. Make friends, alliances, and networks. Networking is working! (We think we've said that somewhere before.)

- Merge with other rogue programs to form a "program confederation," swap war stories, and share tactics, resources, encouragement, and support.
- HR (human resources) is everything—if by HR you mean *talent*. PR (public relations) is everything—if by PR you mean *storytelling*. Get the best talent you can onto your team in whatever way you can (not neglecting Axiom #2.0, not even a little bit). Tell the best, most gripping, interesting, and honest story you can. Few roadblocks can stand up to an onslaught of focused talent and compelling stories.
- Leverage and cannibalize existing programs. No sense in re-inventing the wheel—unless it needs to be re-invented (it often does!).

5.0. Assume significant risk will be required in order to be successful.

- Assume a percentage of the risks you take will turn out badly and will hurt profoundly.
- No fear. Ever, ever, ever. Don't be afraid to fail; don't be afraid of pain; don't be afraid to speak up; don't be afraid to challenge the status quo; don't be afraid Col. X and Dr. Y will get mad at you; and especially, don't be afraid of doing the right thing. On second thought, go ahead and be afraid—just don't let fear hold you back.

6.0. Find grant money and unusual customers with resources in search of your deliverable. We promise they are out there. The trick is to find them, and it can be done!

- Establish close relations with your customers, operators, or whatever label applies to your user base. Know them, love them, take care of them, and for gosh-sakes listen to them.
- Listen to the users.

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IN MEMORIAM

The Defense Acquisition University and the entire defense acquisition workforce extend our deepest sympathy to the family, friends, and colleagues of two defense contracting officers who were killed in a rocket attack on the U.S. Embassy compound in Baghdad on Jan. 29.



Barbara Heald, 60, of Falls Church, Va., was working and living in Saddam Hussein's former palace within the Green Zone on the day of the attack. As a defense contracts negotiator for the Iraq Project and Contracting Office, she served the people of the United States and Iraq by contracting for and delivering services, supplies, and infrastructure identified within the \$18.4 billion Iraqi Relief and Reconstruction Fund.

A native of Stamford, Conn., Heald volunteered to serve in Iraq after retiring from the Department of Agriculture. She spent much of 2004 in Iraq aiding the reconstruction and had recently returned to Iraq for a second stint.



Lt. Cmdr. Keith E. Taylor, USNR, 47, of Irvine, Calif., was also living and working in the Green Zone while serving with Commander, U.S. Naval Forces Central Command Detachment Iraq. As a contracting officer for the Iraqi reconstruction effort, Taylor's job was to award, monitor, and close out contracts for road improvements, schools, and water treatment plants.

A native of Jacksonville, Fla., Taylor was a member of Naval Supply Support Battalion 1 out of San Diego, Calif. Arriving in Baghdad on Oct. 6, 2004, this was his second mobilization. Taylor's first mobilization for Operation Iraqi Freedom lasted from February to June 2003, serving with Naval Air Force Pacific. His second mobilization was to have ended on March 30.

Assistant Secretary of the Army for Acquisition, Logistics and Technology Claude Bolton held a Pentagon memorial service for Heald and Taylor on Feb. 3 at the 9/11 Memorial Chapel.

- Listen to the users. Listen, listen, listen, listen, listen. Ask good, deep, probing, persistent questions, and listen some more. Then, go do.

7.0. Trust people.

- 'Nuff said. (For those who insist on more, check out "The PM's Dilemma," *Defense AT&L*, May-June 2004.)

8.0. Ensure leaders at the highest level are aware of your program.

- Don't cut the middle-management reviewers out of the loop entirely, but don't let critical information stop half-way up the food chain either.
- Top cover = Good. Mid-level blockages = Bad (but not insurmountable).
- Disagreements about the viability and value of a program are inevitable. A general rule of thumb is to assume the warfighter/user is correct, even if he or she disagrees with some in your chain of command.
- When elements of your chain of command disagree about the viability of a program, the highest ranking person is often correct. *But not always*. This can be determined by reviewing the previous bullet and going along with whoever agrees with the warfighter.
- This means you may need to develop selective hearing occasionally and accept the consequences thereof. It is probably a good idea to enlist the support, assistance, and top-cover of the person whose opinion is in agreement with the warfighter—as well as the warfighter, of course.

8.5. Many people will try to shut you down or tell you no.

- The question is whether they ever had the authority to give you a "yes" in the first place. (That piece of programmatic wisdom comes from none other than Oprah Winfrey.) If a person or review board has no authority to give you a "yes" but is very willing to tell you "no," then why did you seek their approval in the first place? Seek out and focus on authorities who can grant you a "yes."

Funding and its Antecedents

Some within the DoD acquisition community are fond of saying "If it ain't funded, it ain't." There is a kernel of truth here, a partial truth, but we recommend adding the word "yet" to the end of that statement, or maybe "as far as *you* know." The thing is, the cynicism and tunnel vision of the "if it ain't funded" attitude is extremely limiting. How many of our most useful programs, inventions, and concepts would never have occurred if we all had to wait for the legitimacy of real programmatic funding?

Leadership is required here, and we're not talking about people in positions of formal authority. You must overwhelmingly convince your peers, subordinates, superiors, and critics that your program is here to stay and their

lack of vision, enthusiasm, and support does not deter you or dismantle the reality of what you are delivering. When faced with skeptics or naysayers, use their real underlying concerns and self interests as your ally. Make sure the faint-of-heart risk avoiders understand what could occur if they fail to act upon the mission imperative (see Axiom 1.0).

The Kantian concept of avoiding pain and maximizing pleasure can be a motivator and should be leveraged, not only for the poor guy in the foxhole who needs the system for his (and, increasingly, her) survival, but also for the well-dressed acquisition professional, warm and dry behind a desk, who must understand that this system development or acquisition also contributes to his or her own survival.

Courage, My Friend

In the land of the free and the home of the brave, where ingenuity and resourcefulness are core elements of our national character, the very concept of waiting for permission through formal bureaucratic funding is practically un-American. It hamstringing those great patriotic survival skills of creatively adapting, overcoming obstacles, enduring hardships, and persevering to establish meaningful solutions. Anyone have a problem with that?

It all comes down to flexibility, integrity, creativity, and moral courage, which are some of the most important attributes of a leader. The Scitor Company has its employees ask, "Is it reasonable, is it fair, and does it make good business sense?" Not a bad set of guidelines for the rest of us.

Now Hold The Phone!

Naturally, some readers will find this approach subversive and over the top, to which we can only reply, "Yup. That's kinda the point."

The DoD of 2005 does not need more of the keep-your-head-down-and-don't-make-waves kind of attitude. Not in this war. Not at this time. Not against this adversary. Our military transformation has made great headway but is not complete. The acquisition, technology, and logistics community could use a few cage-rattling, status quo-defying, over-the-top ideas. We absolutely cannot afford to rely on the more orderly, submissive, predictable approaches of the past. Now is the age of creative, innovative rogue leaders, not conventional, by-the-numbers managers.

Sure, the official policies matter and should be understood. Yes, the program office memorandum exists for a reason, and sometimes the system actually works as advertised. Nobody denies that. We are not advocating anarchy here. We simply want to point out that sometimes the system breaks down—and where does that

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leave the warfighter? Sometimes things go wrong in ways the Received Orthodoxy is unable or unwilling to remedy. That's where these 8½ axioms come into play. On the fringes, in the gaps and cracks of an otherwise well-oiled machine. As Lawrence Wilkerson wrote in *Joint Force Quarterly* (Summer 1997), "People accustomed to studied routine must be capable of quick and decisive departure from that mindset to be repeatedly successful. Order must tend to chaos ... in order to intuitively adapt, triumph and endure."

This rogue approach won't work all the time or apply to every project. It isn't intended to, even though the core principles expressed here are in fact universal. Every PM, rogue or conventional, needs to

- 1.0. [Focus on the Mission](#)
- 2.0. [Maintain Integrity](#)
- 3.0. [Be Creative, Resourceful and Agile](#)
- 4.0. [Network](#)
- 5.0. [Bravely Accept Risk](#)
- 6.0. [Listen](#)
- 7.0. [Trust](#)
- 8.0. [Keep People Informed](#)
- 8.5. [Avoid the Naysayers](#)

Gee, when you put it that way, these axioms don't sound so barbarically roguish after all.

The cage-rattling, status quo-defying authors welcome comments and questions. They can be reached at christopher.n.quaid@nga.mil and daniel.ward@rl.af.mil.