

The Dark and Dastardly Program Manager

Acquisition in a Mirror Universe

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I was lying in bed a few nights ago, watching the 11 p.m. news and still reeling from reading “The Rogue Program Management Art of War” in the May-June 2005 issue of *Defense AT&L*. That was good stuff, and I was wondering how to apply it to my program. I slowly drifted off to sleep then woke with a start in ...

Bunko World, a mirror universe that is opposite of ours, where the Dark and Dastardly Program Manager is the paragon of success.

My new life as a Bunko World PM faced with delivering systems to the warfighter (before the next millennium rolls around) has its challenges, but they’re not so different from the ones in the world I’m used to: increased interest from congressional oversight committees; Office of the Secretary of Defense integrated product teams;

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Service-level review teams; and the local news media. Everybody smells fresh meat and wants in on the feast.

The New Rules

The first person I meet is—fortunately—a successful D&D PM, who reluctantly shares techniques to help me keep my Bunko World program out of the spotlight and on the path to success.

“Following these steps won’t ensure that something gets to the warfighter,” my new guide tells me, “but it will keep the program alive and give you a sterling career. So listen up.

“Low-ball the estimate to get the program started. This is a bidding war and the lowest man (or woman) wins. Increased cost and schedule can be addressed in the future—preferably after the contract is signed and a senior leader has spent a vast amount of political capital supporting the program.

“Avoid lengthy planning, but vehemently defend your program as being well thought out. Have a summary PowerPoint® briefing to prove the point. They don’t need to know that’s all the planning documentation you have.

“Use the latest buzzwords and catch phrases. They may be meaningless, but the policy staff will be putty in your hand.

“Get started early. Use whatever resources are available to begin work. Going through the lengthy milestone review process has killed many a program. Be innovative; lab science and technology programs are great places to get sticky information technology efforts under way.

“Don’t let the policy wonks start throwing statutory and regulatory requirements at you. Haven’t they heard? Rules don’t apply because you’re different.

“Avoid providing clear direction when ambiguous general guidelines will do.

“Deflect blame. There’s a reason they provided you an experienced/capable staff. When things start going wrong, don’t be afraid to put the blame where it needs to be: staff, contractors, engineers, testers, chain of command, headquarters, professional staffers, other programs.

“Remember, it’s never *your* fault—they keep taking your money, and withholds ruin your spend plans. If all else fails and you overrun the contract, claim that you always thought the numbers in the original estimate were accurate.

“Avoid all decision meetings. Send the lowest-ranking person in the office or a support contractor if necessary. This gives you breathing room and permits you to convolute issues to your benefit.

“Create confusion. Keep multiple books. As the old saying goes, “Figures lie and liars figure.” There’s no reason to provide a complete picture when a snapshot justifies your position.

“Hide the bad news. If forced to tell the truth, make sure it’s on slide 54 in a 100-chart brief—and make sure it’s the deputy giving the brief. Bigger is definitely better!

“Exaggerate the status of your program. People naturally tend to believe the first thing they hear, even if it’s wrong. Make the naysayers prove you wrong.

“Your program is complex. You must save the headquarters staff from themselves. Remind yourself that discreet stonewalling is in your Service’s best interest.

“Avoid using e-mail. It can be taken out of context and used against you by hacks who want to destroy your program—and your program is the hope of your department, so it must be protected.

“Rebaseline. You’re never in the red if you rebaseline your program. This is especially important prior to milestone reviews.”

We’re Not Done Yet

I’m starting to realize that there’s a lot to learn if I’m to be a top PM in Bunko World. But my D&D PM buddy hasn’t finished.

“Get your strategy approved at the highest level possible before you brief your chain of command. You want them to know firsthand before it all gets changed through the staffing process.

“Information is power. Hoard it at all costs.

“When you need help, go to multiple sources and give as little background information as possible. This sets you on the path to get the answer you want.

“Always let it slip that your program is one of the chief’s top priorities.

“There’s good reason to take the well-traveled road. Somebody else already hit all the land mines.

“If your program comes under inspector general review, make sure you get to the inspectors first. Remember, it’s not good to be the last person standing when the music stops playing.

“Anyone can make a program look good for two years. Make sure you’re gone after two.

“Adhere to these maxims and you will be a force to be reckoned with,” concludes my Bunko World PM pundit.

Back to Reality

Huh? What? I’m suddenly awake, abruptly nudged by my spouse. Probably just as well—my dream was turning into a nightmare. “Those are stunts no program manager with integrity would pull,” I thought. “Couldn’t happen in our world ... could it?”

I drifted back to sleep with a new mission in life: to keep my program on track and make darn sure nothing from the Bunko universe ever shows up in it.

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