THE RIGHT STUFF - REVISITED

A Competency Perspective of Army Program Managers

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What are the characteristics that distinguish the most successful program managers from their peers? One of the most extensive studies of successful program managers — *The Right Stuff: Results of DSMC Program Manager Competency Study* — identified 16 competencies in its Program Manager Job Competency Model.[1]

This 1989 DSMC study defined a competency as an attribute of a program manager that underlies effective performance. Specifically, the DSMC Program Manager Job Competency Model included 10 core competencies for program managers, and six competencies that distinguished the most successful program managers.[2]

This article presents the results of research recently completed at the Naval Postgraduate School, which evaluated the competencies identified in the original DSMC study from the perspective of the Army's current major acquisition program managers.[3]

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Coaching — senior officers must coach junior officers to reach their potential.

The results of this study are based on survey data obtained from program executive officers (PEO), program managers and acquisition students. Administered to over 220 acquisition personnel, the survey elicited a response rate of 80 percent. The survey asked each respondent to review the 27 competencies from the original DSMC survey. They were then asked to select the nine most important characteristics of the "ideal" program manager, and the nine least important characteristics.

Initially, surveys were administered to Army PEOs and their deputies. These individuals were asked to identify those program managers who best characterized the competencies they had previously identified as most important for an "ideal" program manager. Of the 34 Army program managers, they selected 18 as "successful" and 16 as "average."[4] Of the 25 program managers who responded to the survey, 11 were successful, and 14 were average. Figure 1 reflects the results of the data obtained from both successful and average program managers.

Program Manager Competencies

The Naval Postgraduate School (NPS) study validated 14 of the 16 competencies identified in the original DSMC study. Figure 2 provides a comparison of the original and revised Job Competency Models.

The results of the NPS study indicate that all program managers share 11 competencies. Additionally, five competencies appear to distinguish the most successful program managers. In order to gain further insight into why and how these competencies were ranked, the seven successful program managers, who were se-

Self control — treat people with decency, and they will bend over backwards for you.

lected by more than one PEO, were interviewed. The 16 competencies from the revised Job Competency Model, their definitions, and insights gained from these interviews are provided below. **(Note: An asterisk (*) indicates the competencies that distinguished the most successful program managers from their peers.)**

Competency No. 1

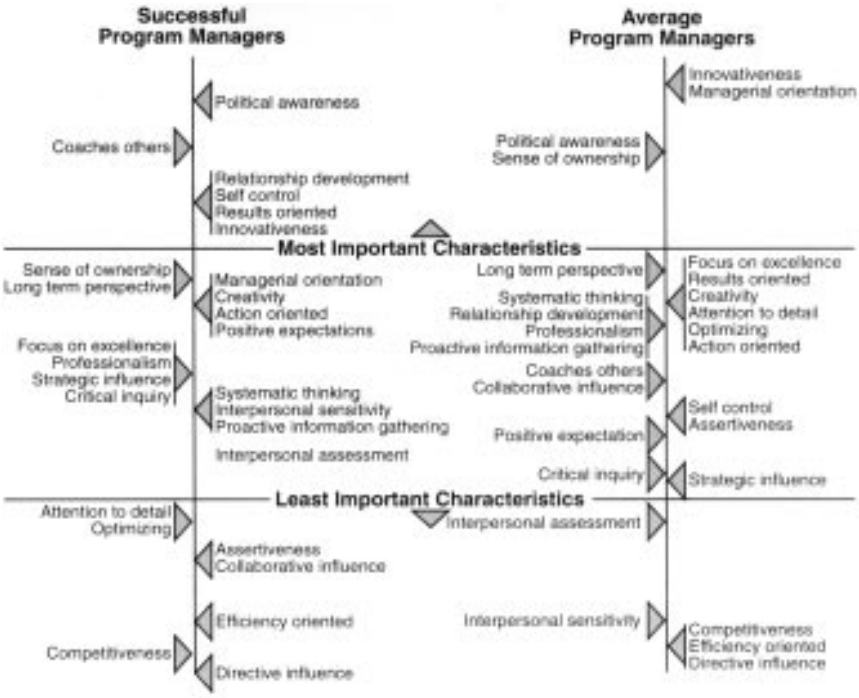
Political Awareness: Knows who influential players are, what they want, and how best to work with them. Politics affects every aspect of an Army program. Whether this is right or wrong, program managers must operate in this environment. As one program manager remarked:

> If you are not politically astute about the Pentagon, Congress or other Government agencies, you will never understand their agenda, your program will fail, and you will never know why it failed.

Program managers learn very quickly how politically sensitive their programs are. Of importance for program managers to understand is the fact that trade-offs have been made at the Army, DoD and Congressional levels just to keep their programs viable. As one program manager stated:

> You may have to concede many times on small issues just to keep your program alive; lose the battle to win the war.

FIGURE 1. Program Manager Competency Interval Scale



Competency No. 2

Coaches Others (*): Providing others with performance feedback and suggestions to improve their capabilities. As the Acquisition Corps evolves into a profession, the ability of junior officers to learn from their superiors will help them avoid many of the mistakes of the past. If program managers do not train the people who will one day fill their positions, they are performing a disservice to the Acquisition Corps, the taxpayer and the individual. As one program manager stated about one of his junior officers:

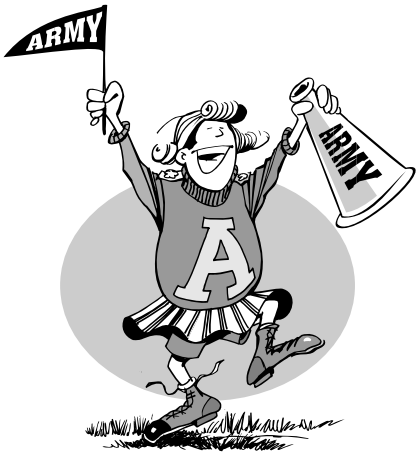
There are no cookbook solutions, only plans.

> This guy is going to be a program manager one day; it's my job to coach him and let him develop to his potential.

Competency No. 3

Developing Relationships (*): Spends time and energy getting to know program sponsors, users and contractors. A program manager has daily interface with a variety of people from outside his organization. Each of these people will have their own agenda, priorities and resource constraints. To be successful, program managers must be able "...to pick up a phone, explain what [they] need done, and because of the relationship [they have] established with these folks, expect a response."

Building relationships does not happen overnight. Program Managers must take the time to visit and cultivate old and new relationships with key personnel affecting their programs. These key personnel include people from the Pentagon, the test community, contractors and the user. Many program managers stated that they obtained positive results for their programs merely by working the



The PM is the program's number one advocate and cheerleader.

relationships they previously established with various agencies. As one program manager stated:

> This may sound like the "good-old-boy" network, which it is, but the Army is personnel- and staff-intensive, so interpersonal relationships, the ability to work with others, is a must.

Competency No. 4

Self Control (*): Remaining calm and unemotional in stressful situations. Several of the program managers who were interviewed said that they knew program managers who were "screamers" and who got angry very quickly. While this may work in the short term, program managers who resort to such actions will never be able to count on those people to "bend over backwards for them in the long term." Most program managers agreed that losing your temper is not wrong as long as you understand beforehand the consequences of that action.

Competency No. 5

Innovativeness: Champions and pushes new ways of meeting program requirements. The acquisition business has no "cookbook" answers; therefore, the Army hires program managers to "manage unique situations effectively." Program managers must remember, however, that the solution that worked yesterday may not work tomorrow. Thus, the primary responsibility of the program manager is to find out what will work, and do it.

Competency No. 6

Results Oriented (*): Evaluates performance in terms of accomplishing specific goals or meeting specific standards. One of the most important parts of a program manager's job is making each program work and getting it fielded. As one program manager stated:

> Everything you do [as a program manager] has got to be focused on results, results, results.

To get a program fielded, program managers must "put marks on the wall"; otherwise, events will dictate the course of the program. By focusing on results, program managers have a way of setting priorities and measuring the results of their programs against a specific standard.

Competency No. 7

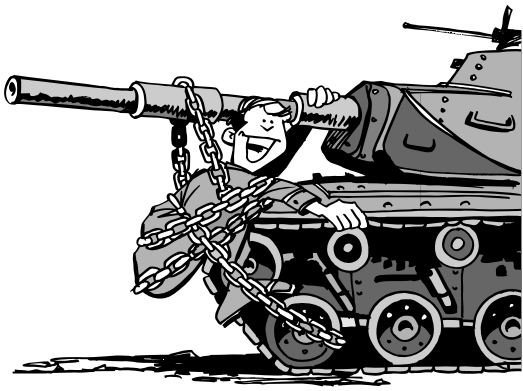
Sense Of Ownership/Mission: Sees self as responsible for the program; articulates problems or issues from a broader organizational or mission perspective. Sense of Ownership is important from the perspective that one of the primary roles of program managers is to be their program's number one advocate and cheerleader. One program manager put it this way:

> If program managers are not out there "leading the charge" for their systems, they are probably performing a disservice to the taxpayer and the soldier.

FIGURE 2. Comparison of DSMC and NPS Competencies

Original Competency Model	Revised Competency Model
Sense of ownership (*)	Political awareness
Political awareness (*)	Coachers others (*)(@)
Relationship development (*)	Relationship development (*)
Strategic influence (*)	Self-control (*)(@)
Interpersonal assessment (*)	Results-oriented (*)
Assertiveness (#)	Innovativeness
Managerial orientation	Sense of ownership
Results-oriented	Long-term perspective
Critical inquiry	Managerial orientation
Long-term perspective	Action-oriented
Focus on excellence	Focus on excellence
Innovativeness	Strategic influence
Optimizing (#)	Critical inquiry
Systematic thinking	Systematic thinking
Action-oriented (*)	Proactive information gathering
Proactive information gathering	Interpersonal assessment (*)

Notes: (*) Indicates a competency that distinguishes a successful PM.
(@) Indicates a competency that was added to the PM Job Competency Model.
(#) Indicates a competency that was deleted from the PM Job Competency Model.



A PM should never become too attached to his program.

A negative aspect of this competency is that Sense of Ownership might imply, to some people, that the program belongs exclusively to the program managers. Program managers should never become personally attached to their programs. They must keep the attitude that "... if the Army says that they don't want the program, I personally don't want it." This allows them to establish the credibility of their programs based on each program's capabilities, without others viewing their actions as personal or vindictive. So program managers must be committed to selling the Army's programs, not their personal programs.

Competency No. 8

Long-Term Perspective: Anticipates and plans for future issues and problems. Most program managers agreed that the most commonly used tool for focusing on a Long-Term Perspective was the DoD six-year budget process. One program manager stated:

> If I had a [financial] problem today, I couldn't fix it in 1994 if my life depended on it, without severe turbulence, because I don't have the money to do it. The 1995 budget is essentially locked...it would take a miracle to change it now. So 1996 is your first year to impact. Without a long-term perspective I can't do that.

According to current program managers, what distinguishes program managers from their peers is their ability to identify a crisis that will not occur until two years from now. Successful program managers must be able to shape events so that the crisis is manageable when it does occur.

Competency No. 9

Managerial Orientation: Gets work done through the efforts of others. Program managers don't have time to do everything themselves. A program manager's job is to "steer the ship," keep their action officers "heading in the right direction," and then empower their subordinates to complete the mission.

A PM's job is to "steer the ship."

One of the key aspects of Managerial Orientation is that it forces program managers to take the time to understand the strengths and weaknesses of their personnel. By understanding their subordinates' capabilities, program managers are able to place those personnel into positions that maximize their strengths and minimize their weaknesses. By empowering their subordinates to accomplish specific missions, program managers have the time to focus their efforts on resolving the major problems before they become crises.

Competency No. 10

Action-Oriented: Reacts to problems energetically and with a sense of urgency. A program's performance is directly tied to how action-oriented its program manager is. To quote one program manager:

> You don't need me if I'm not action-oriented, because I'm paid to respond to a crisis.

The very nature of the role of program managers means that they must deal with crisis on a day-to-day basis.

Most of the examples cited by program managers concerning this competency focused on dealing with crises that pertained to the program's budget. One program manager put it this way:

> When the Pentagon calls and says that you have two hours for an answer, they are not throwing "wolf bait." You have got two hours to get them an answer before the window of opportunity closes. If you don't respond, you have just lost the battle — battles which normally equate to money.

Competency No. 11

Focus On Excellence: Strives for the highest standards regardless of circumstance. Many of the program managers felt that it was easy for people to say that they focus on excellence, but it was much harder to actually do it. As one program manager stated:

> I've never been in a situation in this business where there was an excellent solution. Everything is a trade-off.

So the program manager strives to provide the user and the taxpayer with the best product he can within the constraints of cost, schedule and performance.

Competency No. 12

Strategic Influence: Builds coalitions and orchestrates situations to overcome obstacles and obtain support. Strategic Influence plays an important role in the external environment of a program. It affects how a program is funded, staffed and fielded. Program Managers can't get their programs fielded by themselves. They must be able to build coalitions and partnerships, and be able to effectively use them to weigh in for their program when the time comes. One program manager said that the key to building an effective coalition was to:

> ...come across as a sincere and honest person, yet willing to stand up for what you think is

right; then they will probably be willing to compromise if you don't have a dogmatic approach to things.

Competency No. 13

Critical Inquiry: Explores critical issues that are not being explicitly addressed by others. Program managers are responsible for understanding the political environment within which their programs exist. Their skill in understanding other people's agendas, building coalitions, and getting their programs fielded depends on their ability to ask the hard questions "up front and early." This Critical Inquiry, asking the "what if" questions, allows program managers to discover the rationale behind certain answers. As is often the case, program managers can gain more insight from understanding the rationale than from the answer itself.

Competency No. 14

Systematic Thinking: Organizes and analyzes problems methodically. The acquisition of a major weapon system is a complex process. The program manager must not only coordinate the program through its current phase, but also plan for the program's growth throughout its life cycle. The program manager must be able to methodically lay out a plan that will allow the program to get through a particular event as well as future events.

Competency No. 15

Proactive Information Gathering: Systematically collects and reviews information. Very few people are willing to come up and tell you that they have a problem. When something goes wrong, people will tend to "sit on the news, trying to make it better, or hoping the bad news will go away." One of the program managers put it this way:

> If a program manager is not proactive, he cannot get his job done. A program manager that is not out finding his problems is in the reaction mode. If I am reacting to a problem, it means it's already here. Already here means I better have the financial ability to do it, which means it's too late. If I'm reacting to a problem, it means that it's probably already over my head.

Always look for that window of opportunity that wins the battle.

In short, an effective program manager must find out about problems before they happen.

Competency No. 16

Interpersonal Assessment (*): Identifies specific interest, motivations, strengths and weaknesses of others. Program managers must be cognizant of their own strengths and weaknesses as well as those of their subordinates. One program manager stated that the reason he hired a specific deputy was to balance his own weaknesses.

> I am weak in program management, budgeting, cost estimating and contract negotiating. He is an expert in those areas. This balances my own style of management by walking around.

By understanding subordinates' capabilities, program managers will be better able to manage their programs. They will understand when to "get out of their way" and when they are in danger of "focusing on a few trees in the forest." In short, interpersonal assessment is the ability to "understand and work with people."

Summary

The primary role of an Army Acquisition Category I (ACAT I) program manager is to direct the development and production of a weapon system within the constraints of cost, schedule and performance. In order to successfully accomplish this, the program manager must exhibit certain competencies. His ability to integrate these competencies into the management of his program plays an important part in the success of that program. The revised Job Competency Model identifies 16 competencies that current Army ACAT I program managers identified as being important to successful program management. While these 16 competencies can't be seen as a "cookbook" solution for future program managers, they do provide a blueprint of the leadership and managerial skills needed to become an effective program manager.

Endnotes

1. Gadeken, O C., "The Right Stuff: Results of DSMC Program Manager Competency Study," *Program Manager*, September - October 1989.
2. Cullen, B. J., and Gadeken, O. C., *A Competency Model of Program Managers in the DoD Acquisition Process*, Defense Systems Management College, Ft. Belvoir, Virginia, 1990.
3. Mc Veigh, Bryan J., *Army Program Managers: A Competency Perspective*, Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, California 93942-5002, September 1994.

4. It is important to understand that nonselection as a successful program manager did not mean that program managers were poor performers. For the purposes of this study, a degree of full competency as a program manager was assumed.