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The Next Move: Aligning Acquisition for the Future



ALSO INSIDE:

7
TAKING PSC
TO THE NEXT LEVEL

12
NICK NAYAK ON
MOVING GOVERNMENT
ACQUISITION FORWARD

15
PSC'S ACQUISITION
& TECHNOLOGY
POLICY AGENDA

37
WHAT I
LEARNED AS A PIF

USING THE

“A” TEAM

**TO PERFORM
INTEGRATED
ACQUISITION
PLANNING**



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In the past, mission and business owners often would define their requirements, “throw them over the fence,” and then the contracting and contractor community would proceed with conducting activities to obtain and deliver the contracted solutions. The result: greater risks in execution often leading to schedule delays, cost overruns, performance problems, and even mission degradation. These risks stem from factors such as:

- The need to go from idea to usable capability faster;
- Rapid changes in technology;
- Reduced budget levels;
- A greater complexity in what we buy;
- Expanded legal and regulatory compliance requirements; and
- Significant changes in the workforce.

When these relatively new and growing factors are overlaid on a business as usual or status quo operating model that has delivered tremendous capability for decades, but also numerous cost and schedule overruns and delays, the picture looks troubling.

What’s needed is a paradigm that may seem recent to some, yet retro or vintage to others. That’s because it’s both. **This paradigm revolves around three main areas and provides “point of view checks and balances” for ensuring your organization is both doing the right things, and doing things right.**

1 **The decades-old proven concepts of “big A” acquisition life cycle management and integrated product team (IPT) in formulating and implementing strategies and plans to drive results.** Specifically, the importance of having an organization that leverages proven best practices from “big A” acquisition life cycle management, including the proper use of an integrated product/process team

(IPT). It should involve cross-trained specialists from multiple disciplines, such as program management, system engineering, test and evaluation, logistics, IT, budget and finance, legal, etc., as well as from multiple organizations (e.g., executive agency, oversight agency, industry). Having this type of matrixed, multi-disciplinary team can solve staffing challenges by ensuring you have the appropriate cadre of people to provide coverage for the required areas across an investment’s life cycle.

2 **The lean and agile movements and its application to the innovation and operations challenges facing the acquisition workforce community.** Folks should be well-versed in applying proven principles and practices that are reshaping and reinterpreting the nature of work (what it is, how we do it, etc.). An often perceived notion is that what is learned in one field does not or could not apply in another field. A key factor of innovation is synthesis of two seemingly disparate things, or leveraging validated learning from one area to another area.

3 **Incorporating lessons learned from team dynamics.** Since acquisition management is often referred to as a “team sport” and its success often hinges on the quality of the team, this transforming acquisition workforce should be aware of new discoveries from the evolving field of team dynamics and how to integrate them into the acquisition community.

Think big (picture) for big problems

“Big A” acquisition is a systems approach to thinking about how to fulfill an agency’s mission needs. Key tenets include expanding the definition of acquisition beyond the function of contracting or procurement. This planning translates to a budget that, in many cases, covers a period decades long. In

other words, a life cycle management approach spanning “cradle to grave.” For example, think about elements such as operating and maintenance costs as well as disposal costs when defining and designing a system from inception. With change becoming an increasing constant, the need for and ability to deliver useful capability to investment beneficiaries, sponsors, and stakeholders in increasingly shorter cycles is becoming the standard. Therefore, in addition to thinking big, thinking fast becomes a mantra for organizations as they look for ways to drive return on investment (ROI) through customer satisfaction, operational efficiency and effectiveness.

Act fast so you don’t lose the big picture

In the book “Lean Thinking,” James Womack and Daniel Jones tell a story of daughters competing with their father to see who could stuff envelopes faster—by folding all letters and then stuffing all envelopes, or by completing each letter start to finish one at a time. The father’s one at a time approach won even though intuitively it seems inefficient.

Why? Because our intuition doesn’t consider the extra time required to sort, stack, and move around the large piles of half-completed envelopes or the fact that individual performance may not improve markedly with repetition when it’s done step-by-step versus one envelope at a time. Also, imagine the letters didn’t fit in the envelopes. With the daughters’ approach, we wouldn’t find that out until almost the end, while we’d know it much sooner with the father’s method.

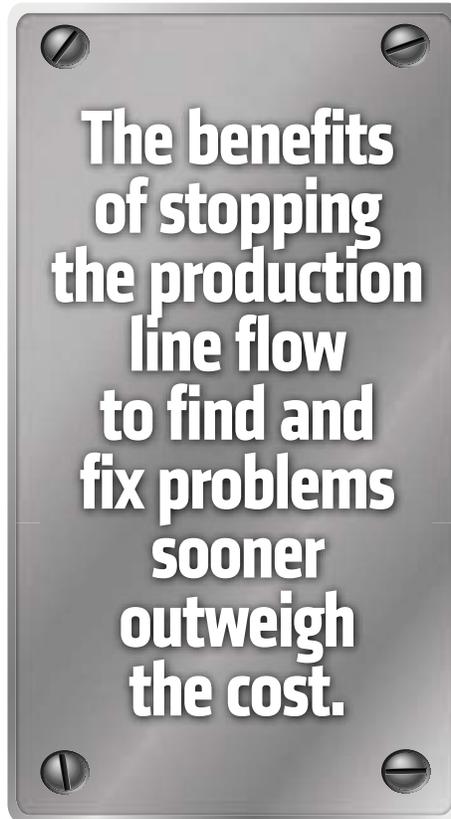
In acquisition, what if it turns out that the customers or end users have decided they don’t want the product? What if the decision maker or oversight group has decided your acquisition/program management-related strategy, plan or document is not acceptable as is, and needs significant changes? Which approach would permit you to learn this seminal revelation sooner?

continued on page 35

Being fast and big

Organizations of a larger scale such as Toyota, Amazon and even the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB) in the federal government have applied lean principles to make themselves more efficient and sustainable. Specifically, applying lean principles (when suitable) to the acquisition life cycle management framework such as retooling assets to meet emerging needs/demand, experimenting rapidly against business hypothesis, and incorporating continuous feedback loops can help your organization minimize outlays of time, money, and effort that ultimately may turn out to have been wasted if that critical information arrived too late.

In applying lean principles to transform organizations, existing systems often need to be reimagined and



restructured. Every investment in better systems, people, and tools accelerates innovation, speed and quality.

One of the most important advantages of applying lean thinking is that quality and customer satisfaction problems can be identified much sooner. This is the origin of Toyota's famous Andon cord, which allows any worker to ask for help as soon as they notice any problem, such as a defect in a physical part, stopping the entire production line if it cannot be corrected immediately. This seemingly counterintuitive technique is best summed up in the saying "stopping the production line in order to not stop production." The benefits of stopping the production line flow to find and fix problems sooner outweigh the cost. It is believed by many to be the root cause of Toyota's historic high quality ratings and low costs.

continued on page 36

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Imagine if a tiger team type of IPT is chartered to formulate strategy and planning documentation to support an upcoming milestone decision that significantly impacts the enterprise. Suppose they create this documentation in an agile way, holding “scrum” sessions, using collaboration tools, and soliciting rapid feedback from customers and stakeholders regarding products and priorities. I’ve seen this first-hand lead to faster decisions, as document development cycles are expedited, disagreements and rationale tested and then recommendations and rationale are achieved. This reimagining of the IPT may help sustain its initial intent to speed planning and execution through integrated process and product planning development (IPPD).

Understanding, appreciating, adopting and applying these lean prin-

ciples rigorously within the acquisition life cycle management community can lead to greater systemic culture change of continuous improvement and innovation, two themes that underpin the evolving Better Buying Power (BBP) Initiatives advocated by the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD).

There is no I in team – however there can be an R-O-I in it

An IPT designed intelligently can lead to effective team dynamics that drives productivity, spurs creativity and innovation, and speeds execution. With increased focus and few distractions, people with shared goals and complementary interpersonal or intangible skills can collaborate, often in real time and with remarkable effectiveness. Building intersections like rotating assignments and cross-functional tours,

and “offline” activities or events into your organization’s cultural roadmap, fosters innovation and communication, and esprit de corps. In fact, formal and informal communication, especially the patterns of team communication and the energy supplying it, have been found to correlate with tangible positive outcomes and results.

So as your organizations and clients face today’s and tomorrow’s challenges, consider an “A” team that thinks big, acts fast, and embraces collaboration.

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