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LEADERSHIP COMPETENCIES FOR THE USAF
ACQUISITION COMMUNITY

by

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Preface

This research paper started as a very personal effort. As a career acquisition officer, I've worked with the entire range of program managers from the truly outstanding to the barely functional. I began this research as a way to investigate this phenomenon in pursuit of an answer that would explain why some program managers (specifically USAF system program directors) are perceived to be very good leaders while others are not. I wondered whether a common set of leadership competencies could be attributed to the system program directors that are perceived to be very good leaders.

Along the way, I discovered that I was not the first person to ask this question. In fact, I discovered the question has been asked previously by a variety of researchers and institutions. Thus, I shifted my focus to look for consistent themes in the previous research in hopes of defining a set of acquisition leadership competencies that should be expected of all system program directors. I hope this paper makes a strong statement that these acquisition leadership competencies do exist and provides a baseline for future research efforts as well as USAF policy.

My search for an answer would not have been possible without the guidance of my advisor, Lt Col Tom Gaylord, who was a great resource and a willing participant in several lengthy discussions about where this research effort was headed. To him, I can merely say thank you.

Another heartfelt thank you goes to the staff of the Air University Library. They truly are the backbone of an exceptional resource for students. They deserve much more credit than they get.

Abstract

This paper is about leadership in the USAF acquisition community and within the USAF program offices designated with the responsibility of “acquiring quality products that satisfy user needs with measurable improvements to mission accomplishment and operational support, in a timely manner, and at a fair and reasonable price.”¹

The paper concludes there are four acquisition leadership competencies that should be required of system program directors in addition to the education, training, and experience standards established by DAWIA and directed by DODD 5000.52-M.. The four acquisition leadership competencies are as follows:

1. the ability to develop and articulate a vision for the program,
2. interpersonal communications skills that build trust and institutional commitment both within the program team and with other organizations,
3. the ability to build a team of subordinates, both tapping all their potential for current efforts and developing them into the next generation of leaders,
4. the willingness to assert all authority necessary; and to perform the job energetically and with a sense of urgency.

These competencies should be considered the minimum required set of acquisition leadership competencies an individual must have demonstrated to be considered for the position of system program director

Notes

¹ DODD 5000.1, E3.1.1, 4 January 2001.

Chapter 1

A Call for Leadership

While the Air Force has produced some truly outstanding leaders, they appear to have emerged serendipitously rather than from deliberate development.

—Lt Col Nancy Weaver, USAF

This paper is about leadership. It is about the leadership that some researchers suggest the USAF needs and the leadership that other researchers assert the USAF doesn't have. Most important, this paper is about identifying leadership competencies that should be embedded into the culture of the USAF in support of the efforts to transform the Service into the 21st century force envisioned in *America's Air Force Vision 2020*.

More specifically, this paper is about leadership in the USAF acquisition community, within the USAF program offices designated with the responsibility of “acquiring quality products that satisfy user needs with measurable improvements to mission accomplishment and operational support, in a timely manner, and at a fair and reasonable price.”¹

This introductory chapter sets the stage for the discussion and analysis found in Chapters Two and Three. It includes a review of current leadership definition efforts within the USAF as well as a summary of recent civilian community research that closely parallels the leadership issues currently being considered in the USAF. Chapter Three

contains an analysis of previous research on the topic of leadership in the USAF acquisition community and this paper's finding that despite varying contextual situations, different audiences, and different purposes for conducting the research in the first place, there is a consistent theme in the previous research. The analysis of four previous research efforts, which are explained in Chapter Three, demonstrates there are common acquisition leadership competencies required of system program directors. Chapter Four concludes that these leadership competencies should be criteria against which future candidates for the position of system program director are considered and judged.

This conclusion is significant because of its relationship to other ongoing efforts within the USAF. Both the Air Force Doctrine Center and the Developing Aerospace Leaders Support Office are attempting to define USAF leadership and the types of leaders that the USAF needs. Both of these efforts are discussed later in this chapter.

In addition, the personnel chosen to serve as system program directors from within the USAF acquisition community must also meet the general USAF leadership criteria required of all officers. This fact was emphasized in December 2001 when the Chief of Staff of the Air Force (CSAF) directed the Air Force Materiel Command to integrate its process for identifying potential candidates for the position of system program director into the USAF Command Screening Board process.²

This paper suggests the leadership competencies required of a system program director are the same leadership competencies that should be required of any senior leader in the USAF. Therefore, if the Air Force Materiel Command develops potential candidates for the position of system program director who have demonstrated the common leadership competencies identified by this paper, those candidates will also

presumably meet the USAF-wide leadership definitions to be established by doctrine and the DAL Support Office.

An Introduction of Terms

While this paper is intended for a specific audience—the USAF acquisition community—it is important to provide a common set of terminology for all potential readers’ understanding. Two basic terms are important.

First, the term *USAF acquisition community* is used in this paper to refer to the personnel who work in system program offices and execute acquisition programs for system program directors. This definition intentionally excludes personnel who work for the Assistant Secretary of the Air Force (Acquisition), the Headquarters Air Force Materiel Command, and other acquisition-related headquarters and staff functions. They are not included because the focus of the research is on the leadership required to conduct a “funded effort, directed by Headquarters USAF, to provide a new or improved material capability in response to a validated need.”³ Specifically, the focus is on the leadership of a system program office.

Second, the term *system program director* is intended to mean “the program manager vested with full authority, responsibility, and resources to execute an approved acquisition program on behalf of the Air Force.”⁴ This definition was chosen to focus the research on the senior leader responsible for an acquisition program. Although the leadership competencies identified in this paper should be taught to and developed in the other program managers who work for the system program director, they should not be absolute requirements until a person is considered for the position of system program director.

Leadership As a Research Topic

What a daunting task it is to begin a research effort on the subject of leadership. The source material is overwhelming. A general, electronic databases search on the topic of *leadership* and *leadership development* produced a list of well over 1000 books, magazine articles, and professional journal citations published within just the past few years. In addition, despite the fact that fundamental research on the subject of leadership seems to be generally characterized into a few broad subject areas, the results of these research efforts often seem to be widely divergent. Also, it seems like countless consultants, retired corporate executives, and retired senior military officers have all written their own books extolling their personal leadership philosophy. Here again, the different products can be widely divergent. Each author has his or her own terminology and way of explaining something. Yet common themes do appear.

This paper concludes that in the specific case of the USAF acquisition community, the research is not as divergent as it might initially appear. In fact, despite different contextual elements, research methodologies, audiences and objectives, four different research efforts reached essentially the same findings.

Examples of Current Leadership Research Efforts

As the previous part of this chapter suggests, leadership is a widely researched and discussed topic. The present research effort considered a variety of current publications addressing leadership and leadership development activities. In this part of the chapter, several examples of current leadership research are introduced. The first two examples are current USAF efforts. The others represent current leadership research focused on the civilian community.

The USAF Developing Aerospace Leaders Project

The Developing Aerospace Leaders (DAL) Support Office was established by the CSAF in 2000 “for the sole purpose of ensuring [the Air Force] and our Nation have the senior leaders necessary to fulfill long-term leadership requirements.”⁵ “DAL is focused on developing an aerospace leader who understands the full spectrum of aerospace operations to include the development, support, employment, and sustainment of aerospace power.”⁶ The DAL Support Office maintains an Internet Web site that was reviewed as part of the current research. In addition, the author talked to the DAL public affairs officer and the acquisition officer in the DAL Support Office.

“The mission of the DAL Support Office is to promote the deliberate and systematic development of future Air Force leaders.”⁷ While the DAL initiative is still in its infancy, two of their initial ideas were approved by the CSAF for implementation. They are

the identification of specific, required transformational leaders. These leaders are categorized currently as combat operations, mobility operations, information operations, force support, and materiel and represent the senior leaders necessary to envision, develop, support, employ, and sustain our Air Force for the next 15-25 years, and

[the development of] a competency-based development model emphasizing two categories of competencies, occupational (specific to functional training and certification), and universal (those skills/attributes relevant to all airmen).⁸

Two points about these initial ideas are relevant to the current research. First, the DAL initiative is attempting to identify a set of competencies for aerospace leaders that includes an attempt to define leadership.⁹ This is important, because it implies the USAF does not currently have a service-preferred definition of what it means to be a leader. While the current research is focused on leadership in the acquisition community, perhaps it will contribute to the effort DAL is attempting to complete.

Second, the DAL Support Office's use of the term *transformational* is different than established by James MacGregor Burns in 1978.¹⁰ Burns and subsequent researchers on the topic of leadership use the term *transformational* to distinguish one form of leadership from that called *transactional*. In this more academic sense, *transformational* means leadership that seeks to “provide vision and a sense of mission, instill pride, communicate high expectations, demonstrate high standards of ethical and moral conduct, coach and mentor.”¹¹

The term *transactional* leadership implies a more managerial style of leadership. This managerial style might include an “exchange of rewards for effort and promise rewards for performance.”¹² It might be implemented through “management by exception, watching for deviations from rules and standards, taking corrective actions when necessary.”¹³

The DAL Support Office seems to be using the term *transformational* to refer to the contextual element that current USAF leaders will be expected to operate in—that is, a time period in which the US military is transforming into the force envisioned in *America's Air Force Vision 2020*. This distinction is important, because as this paper is being written, transformation seems to be a popular buzzword in the military dialect (it certainly has been used a lot by various guest lecturers at ACSC). If the DAL Support Office hopes to influence the future development of leaders in the USAF, one of the first tasks they should accomplish is to define what style type of leadership they hope to influence.

Development of USAF Leadership Doctrine

The USAF Doctrine Center is currently in the process of developing Air Force Doctrine Document (AFDD) 1-3.¹⁴ The present research considered this activity and discussed the doctrine development with a representative of the Air Force Doctrine Center. As of the writing of this paper, the development of AFDD 1-3 remains an internal activity within the Doctrine Center's doctrine development and review process; AFDD 1-3 will be published no early than 2003.¹⁵ The discussion with the Doctrine Center indicates they hope to provide guidance to the USAF that includes a definition what a leader is and an explanation of what leaders do.¹⁶ One hopes it provides sufficient understanding to help all airmen, regardless of rank, lead the USAF in the 21st century.

Leadership Research In the Civilian Community

Research, writing, and consulting on the topic of leadership is big business in the civilian community. For example, "*Business Week* estimated that approximately \$12 billion was devoted to executive education—just one of many forms of leadership development"¹⁷ in 1995 alone. The following paragraphs summarize a few key points that represent some of what that money is paying for.

Conger and Benjamin, leadership consultants in the civilian community, wrote a book in 1999 that attempted to assess the current state of leadership development in corporate America and to identify examples of successful leadership development programs. They found that "leadership is scarce," and that most organizations are forced to develop their leaders from within.¹⁸ Thus, like the USAF, many organizations are trying to select and train future leaders around a common understanding and definition of leadership.

Two examples Conger and Benjamin cited as best practices from successful leadership development programs, are highlighted here because they support this paper's implied thesis that organizations or professions can identify a common set of leadership competencies that are important to successful conduct of that profession. The two best practices are: "(1) Leadership development should be built around a single, well-delineated leadership model, and (2) the participant selection process should use clear criteria."¹⁹ The first best practice is reflected in the efforts of the Air Force Doctrine Center to define a single, common leadership doctrine for all members of USAF. The second best practice suggests the DAL Support Office's competency model will be most useful for defining the clear criteria required in the selection process of future leaders.

In 2001, Fulmer and Goldsmith, who were also examining leadership in commercial industry, found that two of the best practices used by American corporations to choose and develop future leaders are: "(1) to grow leaders internally; and (2) to attempt to identify the leadership pool by means of some criteria."²⁰

These two best practices are highlighted here because they accurately state the leadership development challenge within the USAF also. The USAF, which assesses all its future leaders at the entry level, rather than acquiring them at some intermediate level, must also grow its leaders internally. In addition, the USAF must select its potential pool of leaders based upon some criteria. Defining exactly what this criteria is, is partly the objective of both the DAL Support Office and the Air Force Doctrine Center activities.

Two other examples of recent civilian community research, which are applicable to understanding the leadership development challenge in the USAF in general as well as the acquisition community, are the work of Avolio and Thite. Avolio's ideas on

leadership place him in a category Weaver (a RAND National Defense Fellow writing on leadership for the 21st USAF) labeled “the intellectual progeny of Burn’s transformational theory.”²¹ In 1999, Avolio suggested the idea that leadership could be viewed as a system with inputs, outputs, and a process. In Avolio’s model the inputs are people and other resources; the process is the context in which the people and resources interact over time; and outcomes are the levels of motivation and performance expected to be achieved. Within this model, Avolio asserts “transactions often form the basis for effective transformational leadership to augment.”²² This assertion supports the current research’s finding that the management process skills (transactions), acquired as a result of the education, training, and experience criteria directed by DODD 5000.52-M, are necessary for program management, but not sufficient to make a good system program director. This finding is supported by the work of Thite, who concluded in 1997, “transformational leadership was better suited for leading technical project teams as compared with transactional leadership.”²³ The argument for the use of transformational leadership in the leading of technical teams will be further explored in the next chapter.

Notes

¹ DODD 5000.1 (4 January 2001), E3.1.1.

² Telecon with AFMC/DPO (January 2002).

³ AFPD 63-1, attach 3 (31 August 93), 8.

⁴ Ibid., 10.

⁵ Developing Aerospace Leaders Web site Homepage, on-line, Internet, 16 November 2001, available from <http://www.dal.af.mil>.

⁶ CSAF NOTAM 01-02, Developing Aerospace Leaders Website, on-line, Internet, 16 November 2001, available from <http://www.dal.af.mil/article2.htm>.

⁷ Developing Aerospace Leaders Web site Homepage, on-line, Internet, 13 March 2002, available from <http://www.dal.af.mil>.

⁸ Developing Aerospace Leaders Web site Homepage, on-line, Internet, 13 March 2002, available from <http://www.dal.af.mil>.

Notes

⁹ Telecon with DAL Support Office (15 March 02).

¹⁰ James M. Burns, *Leadership* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978).

¹¹ B. M. Bass, *Leadership, Psychology and Organizational Behavior* (New York: Harper, 1990), 22.

¹² *Ibid.*, 22.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁴ Telecon with USAF Doctrine Center (February 2002).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Quoted in Jay A. Conger and Beth Benjamin, *Building Leaders: How Successful Companies Develop the Next Generation* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1999), 1.

¹⁸ Jay A. Conger and Beth Benjamin, *Building Leaders: How Successful Companies Develop the Next Generation* (San Francisco, CA.: Jossey-Bass, 1999), xi.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Robert M. Fuller and Marshall Goldsmith, *The Leadership Investment: How the World's Best Organizations Gain Strategic Advantage Through Leadership Development* (New York: American Management Association, 2001).

²¹ Lt Col Nancy E. Weaver, "Developing Aerospace Leaders for the Twenty-First Century." Project Air Force (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2001), 11.

²² Bruce J Avolio, *Full Leadership Development: Building the Vital Forces in Organizations*. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1999). 61.

²³ Mohan Thite, "Leadership Styles in Information Technology Projects." *International Journal of Project Management* 18, no. 4 (Aug 2000): 242.

Chapter 2

The Requirement for Leadership in the USAF Acquisition Community

Where have all the leaders gone?

—Major Dennis Drayer, USAF

The previous chapter established that transformational leadership is beneficial to the leading of technical project teams. Within the Department of Defense there is no better example of leading technical project teams than the acquisition community. This chapter explores the quest for leadership in the USAF acquisition by examining the discussion of leadership versus management in the USAF acquisition community. There are numerous examples of the discussion in relevant professional literature. This chapter introduces some of the most recent examples and presents evidence to demonstrate that there is a common belief that there is a requirement for leadership in the USAF acquisition community.

The Official Policy Answer

Does the acquisition community want leaders? This is an interesting question because, although numerous authors suggest it does, regulations and guidance appear to be saying something different. Perhaps the problem is an incorrect presumption within the defense acquisition corps that experience as a manager equates to leadership.

A Review of the Acquisition Regulations

The DOD acquisition system is governed by the 5000-series documents. These are: (1) DOD D 5000.1, *The Defense Acquisition System*; (2) DOD I 5000.2, *Operation of the Defense Acquisition System*; (3) DOD I 5000.2-R, *Mandatory Procedures for Major Defense Acquisition Programs and Major Information System Acquisition Programs*; and (4) DOD 5000.52 and 5000.52-M, *Acquisition Career Development*.

The USAF supplements the DOD 5000-series with Air Force Policy Directive 63-1 and Air Force Instruction 63-101. In addition, both the Defense Acquisition University and the Assistant Secretary of Air Force (Acquisition) maintain extensive Internet Web sites that include any number of articles, information, and current periodicals related to the professional development of the defense acquisition corps, of which the USAF acquisition community is a subset.

A review of all of these sources found many references to management skills but absolutely no reference to leadership or leadership competencies. For example, DODD 5000.1 states as its purpose to “provide mandatory policies and procedures for the management of acquisition programs”¹ In addition, the same document says “it is essential that the program manager have...requisite management skills and experience.”² The title *program manager* itself emphasizes management, not leadership. Indeed, the word *leadership* does not even appear in the text of the DOD documents at all.

To be fair, the purpose of the documents are to define processes for managing acquisition programs in accordance with federal statutes; however, it seems incredible that there is no official recognition of the need for leadership in any major acquisition policy or regulation.

The Defense Acquisition Workforce Improvement Act

Some of the emphasis on management as opposed to leadership referred to previously might be related to the implementation of the Defense Workforce Improvement Act (DAWIA). Included as part of the Defense Authorization Act for fiscal year 1991,³ “[The Act] called for establishing an acquisition community and professionalizing the acquisition workforce through education, training, and work experience.”⁴ In 1999, this legislation affected approximately 150,000 DOD personnel, including uniformed military officers and enlisted personnel as well as DOD civilians—approximately 33,000 of these people are USAF personnel.⁵ A later part of this chapter shows that recent research suggests this large community needs leadership in addition to the professional development offered by DAWIA.

The DOD implementation of DAWIA included the creation of DOD 5000.52, which provides specific education, training, and work experience requirements for each acquisition career field. The DOD Regulation does not, however, address any leadership competency requirements. The lack of leadership requirements was highlighted by Major Edward Brolin who wrote of the DAWIA requirements, “It is mandatory to be a good manager in the acquisition field; having good leadership skills is nice, but only desired.”⁶ He drew this conclusion on the basis of a review of 5000.52-M, which includes leadership training in the requirements for program manager as desired but not mandatory.

Garcia et al. reached a similar conclusion in a review of the first five years of DAWIA implementation. In their discussion of program manager selection, they noted “DAWIA specified minimum experience and training requirements for personnel in program manager, deputy program manager, and PEO positions. The law is silent,

however, on what means should be used to select individuals to fill these senior acquisition positions.”⁷

The Requirement for Leadership Exists

Despite the recent emphasis on management competencies, two recent ACSC research efforts by USAF acquisition community officers—both of which examined the topic of acquisition reform—suggested that there are current requirements for leadership in the USAF acquisition community. In 1997, Major Robert Green asserted that leaders must create, support, and facilitate five core competencies in order to successfully implement acquisition reform.⁸ Also in 1997, Major Curtis Muechika concluded that leadership was one of four key elements of organizational change required to successfully implement acquisition reform⁹

When Did the Need for Leadership First Appear?

Lt Col Jerry McMahon, then a USAF program manager, wrote a paper in 1989 summarizing a formal meeting of active program managers, tasked by the Under Secretary of Defense (Acquisition), to explore fundamental problems with the acquisition process. Among many findings, Lt Col McMahon reported that “Achieving acquisition reform is certainly a leadership challenge.”¹⁰

In 1992, Major Dennis Drayer wrote an article for the journal *Program Manager* titled “Where Have All the Leaders Gone?”¹¹ in which he suggested that the senior leadership of the DOD Acquisition and Technology community needed to refocus on leadership instead of management. In particular, he suggested the following observation to distinguish between leadership and management: “Successful entrepreneurship and

effective corporate leadership involve risk taking (in contrast to management, which tries to eliminate risk.)”¹²

In addition, Drayer cited a comment attributed to an industry executive in Kotter’s 1988 book, *The Leadership Factor*. The executive said “In the past we didn’t need many leaders. But now, in a more competitive environment, we surely do. What we have currently is a couple of good managers who can lead, a lot of very good managers who can’t lead, and hordes of great administrators.”¹³ This sentiment is certainly related to the tone of the times that was established “in 1986 when the Packard Commission first said ‘an unreasonably long acquisition cycle—ten to fifteen years for our major weapons systems—is a central problem from which most other acquisition problems stem. [The Commission] believes it is possible to cut this cycle time in half.’”¹⁴

The previous quote is taken from a speech Mrs. Darleen Druyun, the Assistant Secretary of the Air Force for Acquisition and Management, gave in February 2001 as the keynote address at the AIAA Defense Reform 2001 Conference. Often cited as a leader in the era of acquisition reform, Mrs. Druyun offered a vision of additional changes that must be made to the defense acquisition system to carry it forward into the 21st century. She included a great example of leadership (in the USAF acquisition community) during the Gulf War. She referred to the team that designed, tested, and delivered the GBU-28 bunker-buster munition that destroyed the underground bunker at Iraq’s Al Taji Air Base and contributed to the rapid conclusion of the Gulf War.

Ironically, however, Mrs. Druyun’s vision for the new acquisition system includes what are fundamentally process changes to the system. The vision does not include leadership competency development. The conclusions of the present research are based

on a belief that one of the primary responsibilities of leaders such as Mrs. Druyun is to grow her own replacement(s)—leaders who can continue the successes of the USAF acquisition community that she chaperoned in her own era.

The requirement to grow future leaders is one of the consistent themes identified in the next chapter. The next chapter reviews three different approaches to defining leadership competencies in the USAF acquisition community. The chapter also reviews the work of a recent USAF researcher who was attempting to define the state of leadership in the USAF in general and to recommend corrective courses of action to respond to the situation as perceived.

Notes

¹ DODD 5000.1, *The Defense Acquisition System* (4 Jan 01), 1.

² Ibid.

³ Public Law 101-510, “National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 1991,” Title XII, *Defense Acquisition Workforce Improvement Act*, 5 Nov 90 (Sections 1701-1764 of Title 10, United States Code).

⁴ Andrea Garcia, et al., “The Defense Acquisition Workforce Improvement Act: Five Years Later,” *Acquisition Review Quarterly* (Summer 1997), 295.

⁵ Allen V. Burman, et al., “Identification of the Department of Defense Key Acquisition and Technology Workforce” (Jefferson Solutions, April 1999).

⁶ Major Edward M. Brolin, “Development and Selection of Leaders in the Acquisition Career Field.” Research Report no. 97-0329. Maxwell AFB, Ala.: Air Command and Staff College, 1997.

⁷ Garcia, et al., 301.

⁸ Maj Robert S. Green, “Organizational Change for Acquisition Reform: Proposed Core Competencies.” Research Report no. 97-0607D. Maxwell AFB, Ala.: Air Command and Staff College, 1997.

⁹ Maj Curtis K. Munechika, “Acquisition Reform: This, Too, Shall Pass...?” Research Report no. 97-0385. Maxwell AFB, Ala.: Air Command and Staff College, 1997.

¹⁰ Lt Col Jerry R. McMahan, “Acquisition Reform Revisited.” *Program Manager* 18, no. 5 (Sep-Oct 1989), 27.

¹¹ Major Dennis Drayer, “Where Have All The Leaders Gone?” *Program Manager* 21, no. 5 (Sep-Oct 1992), 26-32.

¹² Ibid., 27.

Notes

¹³ Quoted in Major Dennis Drayer, "Where Have All The Leaders Gone?" *Program Manager* 21, no. 5 (Sep-Oct 1992), 26-32.

¹⁴ Quoted in the Keynote Address of Mrs. Darleen Druyun, Defense Reform 2001, Washington, D.C.(14 February 2001).

Chapter 3

Consistent Themes in the Research

Defense acquisition has always been, is now, and I believe will remain in the future, principally a human endeavor. And while we can create a lot of processes, use a lot of tools by which to improve and speed up our work, all the important things sooner or later come down to people, their intellectual abilities and their capability to work with other people. Those out there who think it's otherwise have something to learn.

—Brig Gen James Feigley, USMC

This chapter considers the findings of four different leadership research efforts. Three were specifically focused on the DOD acquisition community. The fourth focused on leadership in the entire USAF. The first part of the chapter reviews the findings of the four different research efforts. The second part then asserts that despite being written in different times and very different contextual settings there are consistent themes in the conclusions

Four Different Leadership Research Efforts

The Defense Systems Management College Study

The Defense Systems Management College (DSMC) “was established in 1971...to provide systems acquisition education and training for the people responsible for acquiring weapon systems.”¹ The DSMC mission includes research.

In 1989, DSMC, supported by Charles River Consulting of Boston, conducted a “study of the competencies (technical expertise, management and leadership skills) possessed by effective program managers in the defense acquisition process.”² The purpose of the study, which included extensive interviews with 52 program managers, was to “analyze the job’s outstanding performers and identify what they do that makes them so effective.”³

The program managers selected for the study were nominated by their respective service major acquisition commands. The nominations included a classification of the program managers into two groups—“a group of outstanding (top performers) along with a contrasting group of effective or more typical performers.”⁴ To further validate the nomination process and classifications, which were completed by Program Executive Officer–level personnel (the next echelon of acquisition leader senior to the USAF system program director) from each service, the research team conducted a competency survey on each nominee.⁵

The DSMC team used an approach “to job competency assessment developed by McBer and Company.”⁶ The team chose to look for competencies because the research team believed that while “a systematic approach to job analysis should consider both tasks and competencies, the inclusion of the competency dimension pushes beyond the minimum job requirements to what makes for superior performance.”⁷ The team defined competencies as “the characteristics of the person. They describe what the person brings to the job that allows him or her to do the job in an outstanding way.”⁸

The DSMC study identified 16 competencies shared by the 52 program managers who were interviewed. Of the 16 competencies, analysis “revealed that the subgroup of

outstanding program managers scored significantly higher on six of the competencies”⁹ than their peers did. The six competencies, with the definitions developed by the research team, are as follows:

1. **“Sense of Ownership/Mission:** sees self as responsible for the program; articulates problems or issues from broader organizational or mission perspective.”
2. **“Political Awareness:** knows who influential players are, what they want, and how best to work with them.”
3. **“Relationship Development:** spends time and energy getting to know program sponsors, users, and contractors.”
4. **“Strategic Influence:** builds coalitions and orchestrates situations to overcome obstacles and obtain support.”
5. **“Interpersonal Assessment:** identifies specific interests, motivations, strengths, and weaknesses of others.”
6. **“Action Orientation:** reacts to problems energetically and with a sense of urgency.”¹⁰

Air Command and Staff College Student Researcher—Major Brolin

In 1997, Major Edward Brolin, a USAF acquisition officer, wrote a research paper for the Air Command and Staff College titled “Development and Selection of Leaders in the Acquisition Career Field.”¹¹ Major Brolin’s paper was a response to a trend he perceived, during the 1990s, in the USAF acquisition community. “This trend manifests itself in senior personnel who have keenly developed managerial skills, but lack some of the most basic military leadership traits.”¹² Major Brolin drew a distinction between the role of manager and leader and asserted that “Air Force Materiel Command (AFMC), the major command responsible for acquisition in the USAF, had emphasized management skills to the extent that they had completely excluded leadership qualities as selection criteria for program director billets.”¹³

Major Brolin’s recommendations to improve the situation he perceived are relevant to the current research. He recommended AFMC create a leadership assessment center to

evaluate, develop, and provide “an objective measure of leadership ability that [could] be factored into the selection process”¹⁴ of future system program directors. Most important to the current research, Major Brolin advocated that AFMC’s Assessment Center use the DSMC competencies identified in the 1989 study as core competencies. In addition, he recommended that the following five additional traits be added to the DSMC competency list: “

1. “Communications (both written and verbal)”
2. “Supervision”
3. “Teaching and counseling”
4. “Decision making”
5. “Professional ethics”¹⁵

It is important that Major Brolin noted that the DSMC competencies have an “acquisition twist to them,”¹⁶ whereas the five additional traits, which he took from the US Army’s Leadership and Development Program (LADP), are more universal. In addition to suggesting the assessment center develop an objective measure of leadership ability, Brolin suggested “The goal of the AFMC Assessment Center should be to develop leaders for all levels in the Air Force, with some tailoring for the unique environment encountered in AFMC.”¹⁷

Major Brolin’s choice of terminology is important to note. He used the labels *trait* and *competency* interchangeably, although he did finally call the complete list (the DSMC 6 plus the LADP 5) the recommended “AFMC Assessment Center organizational leadership competency list.”¹⁸ This lack of terminology distinction was not significant to his research, which focused on the utility of an AFMC Assessment Center, but it is relevant to the current research, because the distinction between management skills and leadership competencies is the point of this paper. This paper notes Major Brolin’s

acknowledgement that his list includes “some management type functions.”¹⁹ This last point is examined in the second part of this chapter.

Air Command and Staff College Student Research—Major Delano

In 1999, Major Kenneth Delano, another USAF acquisition officer, wrote a research paper for Air Command and Staff College titled “Critical Success Factors for DoD Program Managers.”²⁰ The purpose of his research was to identify “critical success factors...(management, leadership, process) critical to an [acquisition] organization’s success.”²¹ Having just experienced a period of acquisition reform in the mid 1990s, he was looking for factors “program managers [could] implement within the framework of the current acquisition system, vice the multiple attempts to reform the system itself.”²²

Major Delano applied an analysis technique called factor analysis to a literature survey to search for critical success factors. This technique measures the frequency of occurrence of key factors in a literature survey so that “a numerical consensus can be determined as to the relative importance of each key factor.”²³ Before conducting the literature survey, he identified two lists of potential critical success factors. The lists were acquisition critical success factors (9 potential factors) and human resource factors (11 potential factors).

The two most critical factors found in Major Delano’s research were well-defined system requirements (an acquisition critical success factor) and program manager skills (a resource critical success factor). The first factor is really an input into the acquisition process. The second, however, is very important to the current research because it supports this paper’s basic presumption that the system program director (and the

competencies that he or she does or does not have) are the most important element in the success of an acquisition program.

Working with the previous ideas of Price & Valentine,²⁴ as well as Abrahamsan,²⁵ Major Delano noted that “first and foremost, the program manager must realize that success lies in how effectively he or she leads, motivates, and supports the people assigned to the program office.”²⁶ Delano defined the program manager skills needed to accomplish this challenging task in a discussion in his paper. He did not provide a specific list of skills or competencies. The following list is the product of the current research, organizing Delano’s words into a list format:

1. **“The program manager is the program’s leader and manager:** he or she is in charge; the first and most important function is to have and to communicate a vision of where the program is going.”
2. **“The program manager is the program’s advocate:** the program manager must garner support for the program at higher levels.”
3. **“The program manager must have team-building skills:** The program manager must have the ability to communicate well with all types of audiences. Communicating effectively includes both speaking and listening skills.”
4. **“The program manager must be able to lead through challenges:** the program manager must navigate the program toward successful completion of its goals.”
5. **“The program manager must motivate the team:** the program manager must hire quality people and be adept at identifying the audience and adapting communication styles to effectively transmit his or her message.”
6. **“The program manager must be assertive:** the program manager must take the authority needed to perform the job.”²⁷

Again, note the use of terminology. Major Delano refers to “the ability and skills of the program manager.”²⁸ These could equally be called competencies as DSMC and Major Brolin called their selected lists. This similarity and consistency of theme is the subject of a later part of this chapter.

National Defense Fellow—Lt Col Weaver

In 2001, Lt Col Nancy Weaver, a National Defense Fellow, wrote a paper titled “Developing Aerospace Leaders for the Twenty-First Century.”²⁹ The point of her paper was to explore the “advantages to adopting emerging leadership philosophies into the Air Force culture...[because] leadership doctrine, leadership development programs, and the human resource management system must be aligned to support these changes in leadership philosophy and practice. This is critical in order to build Air Force leaders with a clearly recognizable set of competencies and attitudes that thrive throughout an entire career regardless of a particular career path or assigned location.”³⁰ Lt Col Weaver’s paper covered three primary topic areas. They were: (1) a historical perspective of leadership and management in academic theory, (2) challenges facing the USAF that suggest a new leadership paradigm is necessary, and (3) specific recommendations for changes in USAF leadership development efforts.

Lt Col Weaver stated “Most people who equate leadership with good management model their leadership practices based upon readings and research published in the industrial era of the twentieth century.”³¹ This presumption about leadership presents challenges in the 21st century. The recruiting and retention challenges in an all volunteer military, coupled with the challenge of increasing diversity of backgrounds and experiences in the military members, make the USAF more comparable to current information technology companies than to the traditional brick and mortar industries of the US Industrial Era. The example Lt Col Weaver used is the difference between US Steel and Microsoft Corporation. She pointed out that whereas US Steel’s most important assets are its factories and capital equipment, Microsoft’s incredibly diverse and all volunteer employees are its most valuable assets.³²

In response to this view of the USAF that includes the recognition that individuals are an important resource, Lt Col Weaver made three recommendations. One of her recommendations was to infuse “transformation leadership concepts into USAF leader’s development, teaching, encouraging, and rewarding officers who develop vision, tap their subordinates’ potential, build trust and institutional commitment, and help develop the next generation of leaders”³³

While Lt Col Weaver’s research did not explicitly define the previous ideas as leadership competencies, the present research presumes to do so. Thus, the leadership competencies that could be derived from an understanding of the work of Lt Col Weaver are as follows.

1. the ability to develop vision,
2. the ability to tap their subordinate’s potential,
3. the ability to build trust and institutional commitment, and
4. the ability to develop the next generation of leaders.

Lt Col Weaver did not provide additional definitions or information as to the interpretation of the four competencies delineated above, because she was not trying to provide a final, specific answer for the USAF.³⁴ Rather, she recommended the USAF define the purpose of leadership, from which doctrine could be defined and behavior matched to it. In addition, she recommended the concepts of transformational leadership, advocated by Burns and subsequent research, provide the basis for the USAF’s leadership definitions and doctrine.³⁵

Consistent Themes in the Research

The four leadership research efforts outlined in the previous part of this chapter represent a wide variety of academic scholarship. They were conducted at different time

periods and in different contextual settings. In addition, each of the research efforts was approached from the slightly different personal perspective and motivation of its respective author. Despite these differences, the findings and conclusions made by the previous researchers are strikingly similar. The following part of the chapter examines the similarities in findings and makes a case for the consistency of central themes.

Analysis of the Four Previous Research Efforts

The four research efforts summarized previously were written in three distinctly different time periods that influenced each author's perspective. The DSMC study was conducted in 1989—right at the end of the Cold War. For most of the 1980s, US defense acquisition activities enjoyed a plethora of funding and support during the go-go defense era of the Reagan and [senior] Bush administrations. All of the program managers interviewed as part of the DSMC study were products of an environment that included strong national support for the DOD and virtually unlimited resources for the development of new systems.

Majors Brolin and Delano wrote their papers after experiencing a very different environment. Acquisition reform, defense budget reductions, and do-more-with-less philosophies were key influences to the defense acquisition system in the 1990s.

Lt Col Weaver, who was not writing for the acquisition community uniquely but rather for the entire USAF, wrote from the perspective of envisioning the future at the dawn of the 21st century.

In addition, each researcher (or research team in the case of DSMC) had a different set of professional experiences from which to draw. DSMC has a formal research mission as part of its charter to serve the defense acquisition community. In this context, they

applied a formal research methodology with the assistance of a support contractor experienced with professional business consulting. Most important, the DSMC research study identified leadership competencies by interviewing people whom were identified by independent assessment as proven program managers .

Majors Brolin and Delano were both Air Command and Staff College students at the time of their research. As such, they can be considered representatives of the USAF acquisition community at the school. However, the reality is that both conducted their research from the perspective of a mid-career officer. This certainly makes them qualified to comment on their own experiences but probably limited their ability to have enough breadth of experience to reflect on the leadership requirements in the USAF. In addition, Majors Brolin and Delano arrived at their conclusions in very different ways. The purpose of Major Brolin's paper was to advocate an AFMC Assessment Center as a leadership development tool. His choice to use the DSMC defined program manager's competencies in his notional scenario of how an Assessment Center might work was a secondary issue to his research effort; An assessment center needs some criteria upon which to assess its students. Major Brolin chose the DSMC program manager competencies as the criteria for his proposed assessment center to use. This choice reflects a judgement on his part that the DSMC competencies were sufficient.

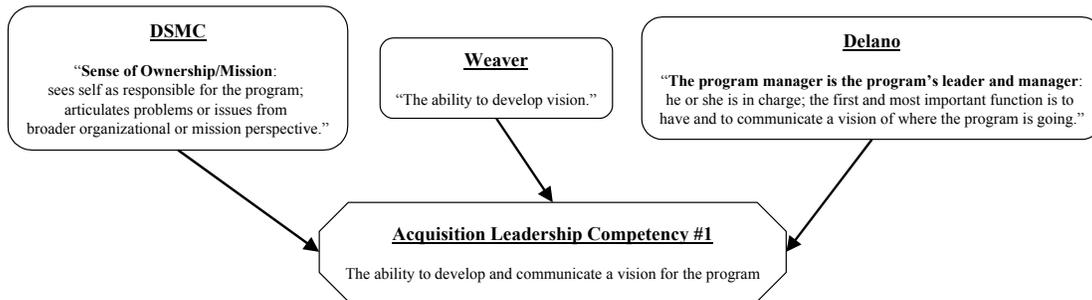
Major Delano's research effort was an attempt to define critical success factors that contribute to a successful acquisition organization. His finding that program manager skills are important because he did not set out to prove this point initially—it was the conclusion, not the purpose, of his research.. His personal definition of program manager skills was motivated by the findings of his research.

Lt Col Weaver was a National Defense Fellow at the time of her research effort. She had already been identified by the USAF as a rising senior leader with the potential to continue to contribute to the institution. Her research reflects the more senior perspective of an individual who brings a broader view to the question at hand. Her research reflects a more studied academic understanding of leadership and management theory than does the work of Brolin or Delano. She introduced for the first time the terminology of transformational leadership and all of the academic research that supports it. In addition, her research was not limited to the acquisition community as were the other three.

Four Acquisition Leadership Competencies

Each of the researchers identified previously presented a definition of the competencies required of a successful USAF leader; three of them specifically focused on acquisition community leaders. Despite the use of different terminology, when one examines the previous research carefully a set of common themes appears. The findings of the professional DSMC survey are similar to the findings of the two mid-career acquisition officers as well as to the observations of the more senior officer writing about USAF leadership in general.

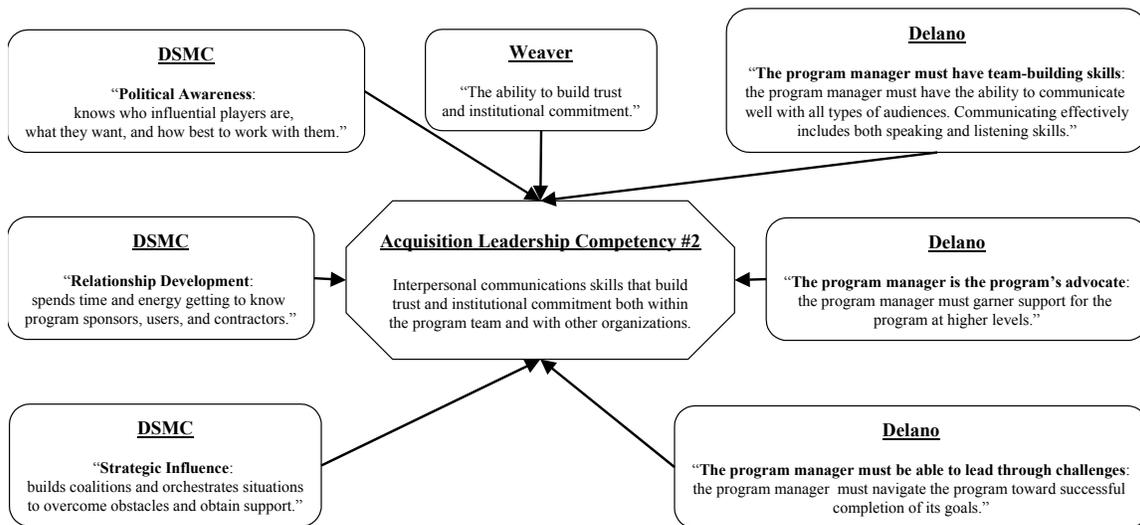
The present research finds there are four common themes in the previous research. These common themes are called acquisition leadership competencies. Each of the four are explained next.



Sources: Gadeken, Owen C. “Results of DSMC’s Program Manager Competency Study.” *Program Manager* 18, no. 5 (Sep-Oct 1989): [22-25]. Delano, Maj Kenneth J. “Critical Success Factors for DoD Program Managers.” Research Report no. 99-039. Maxwell AFB, Ala.: Air Command and Staff College, 1999. Weaver, Lt Col Nancy E. “Developing Aerospace Leaders for the Twenty-First Century.” Project Air Force. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation. 2001.

Figure 1 Acquisition Leadership Competency #1

The first acquisition leadership competency is *the ability to develop and articulate a vision for the program* (fig 1). This acquisition leadership competency is derived from three ideas identified in previous research. In 1989, the DSMC study found that successful program managers “articulate problems or issues from broader organizational or mission perspective.”³⁶ In 1999, Major Delano asserted a similar conclusion. He stated “the first and most important function [of a program manager] is to have and to communicate a vision of where the program is going.”³⁷ Lt Col Weaver also used the term vision in 2000, when she said, the USAF should be “encouraging and rewarding leaders who develop vision.”³⁸

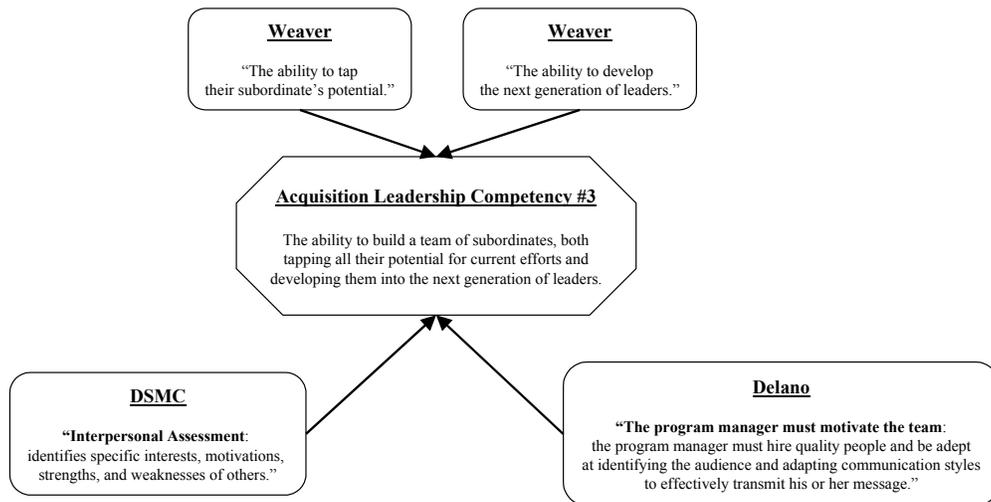


Sources: Gadeken, Owen C. "Results of DSMC's Program Manager Competency Study." *Program Manager* 18, no. 5 (Sep-Oct 1989): [22-25]. Delano, Maj Kenneth J. "Critical Success Factors for DoD Program Managers." Research Report no. 99-039. Maxwell AFB, Ala.: Air Command and Staff College, 1999. Weaver, Lt Col Nancy E. "Developing Aerospace Leaders for the Twenty-First Century." Project Air Force. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation. 2001.

Figure 2 Acquisition Leadership Competency #2

The second acquisition leadership competency is *the interpersonal skills that build trust and institutional commitment both within the program team and with other organizations* (fig. 2). This acquisition leadership competency is derived from seven ideas identified in previous research. In 1989, the DSMC study identified three competencies of successful program managers that relate to building trust and institutional commitment. The three competencies were: "(1) knowing who influential players are, what they want, and how best to work with them; (2) spending time and energy getting to know program sponsors, users, and contractors; and (3) building coalitions and orchestrating situations to overcome obstacles and obtain support."³⁹ In 1999, Major Delano asserted three similar competencies. They were: "(1) the program manager must be able to garner support for the program at higher levels; (2) the program

manager must have the ability to communicate well with all types of audiences; and (3) the program manager must navigate the program toward successful completion of its goals.”⁴⁰ In 2000, Lt Col Weaver said, the USAF should be “encouraging and rewarding leaders who build trust and institutional commitment.”⁴¹

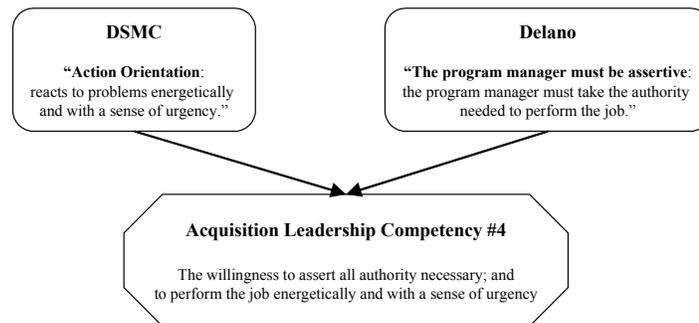


Sources: Gadeken, Owen C. “Results of DSMC’s Program Manager Competency Study.” *Program Manager* 18, no. 5 (Sep-Oct 1989): [22-25]. Delano, Maj Kenneth J. “Critical Success Factors for DoD Program Managers.” Research Report no. 99-039. Maxwell AFB, Ala.: Air Command and Staff College, 1999. Weaver, Lt Col Nancy E. “Developing Aerospace Leaders for the Twenty-First Century.” Project Air Force. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation. 2001.

Figure 3 Acquisition Leadership Competency #3

The third acquisition leadership competency is *the ability to build a team of subordinates, both tapping all their potential for current efforts and developing them into the next generation of leaders* (fig. 3). This acquisition leadership competency is derived from four ideas identified in previous research. In 1989, the DSMC study found that successful program managers “identify specific interests, motivations, strengths, and weaknesses of others.”⁴² In 1999, Major Delano asserted “The program manager must motivate the team; the program manager must hire quality people and be adept at

identifying the audience and adapting communication to effectively transmit his or her message.”⁴³ Lt Col Weaver identified similar competencies in 2000, when she said, the USAF should be “encouraging and rewarding leaders who tap their subordinate’s potential and who develop the next generation of leaders.”⁴⁴



Sources: Gadeken, Owen C. “Results of DSMC’s Program Manager Competency Study.” *Program Manager* 18, no. 5 (Sep-Oct 1989): [22-25]. Delano, Maj Kenneth J. “Critical Success Factors for DoD Program Managers.” Research Report no. 99-039. Maxwell AFB, Ala.: Air Command and Staff College, 1999.

Figure 4 Acquisition Leadership Competency #4

The fourth acquisition leadership competency is *the willingness to assert all authority necessary; and to perform the job energetically and with a sense of urgency* (fig. 4). This acquisition leadership competency is derived from two ideas identified in previous research. In 1989, the DSMC study found that successful program managers “react to problems energetically and with a sense of urgency.”⁴⁵ In 1999, Major Delano stated “the program manager must take the authority needed to perform the job.”⁴⁶

These four acquisition leadership competencies represent common themes in the previous research. The implications of this finding are examined in the next chapter.

Notes

- ¹ DSMC internet website, <http://www.dsmc.dsm.mil/aboutdsmc/dsmcgen.htm>.
- ² Dr. Owen C. Gadeken, "DSMC Studies Program Manager Competencies," *Program Manager* 18, no. 1 (Jan-Feb 1989): 42.
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ Ibid., 43.
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ Ibid., 42.
- ⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸ Ibid.
- ⁹ Dr. Owen C. Gadeken, "Results of DSMC's Program Manager Competency Study," *Program Manager* 18, no. 5 (Sep-Oct 1989): 23.
- ¹⁰ Dr. Owen C. Gadeken, Mr. Bernard J. Cullen; and Ms. Nora F. Huvelle. "Program Managers with the Right Stuff." *Program Manager* 19, no. 3 (May-Jun 1990): 27.
- ¹¹ Major Edward M. Brolin, "Development and Selection of Leaders in the Acquisition Career Field," Research Report no. 97-0329. Maxwell AFB, Ala.: Air Command and Staff College, 1997.
- ¹² Ibid., 2.
- ¹³ Ibid., 7.
- ¹⁴ Ibid., 10.
- ¹⁵ Ibid., 24.
- ¹⁶ Ibid., 23.
- ¹⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁸ Ibid., 24.
- ¹⁹ Ibid.
- ²⁰ Major Kenneth J. Delano, "Critical Success Factors for DoD Program Managers," Research Report no. 99-039, Maxwell AFB, Ala.: Air Command and Staff College, 1999.
- ²¹ Ibid., 2.
- ²² Ibid.
- ²³ Ibid., 10.
- ²⁴ Price and Valentine as cited in Delano, 1999.
- ²⁵ Abrahamson as cited in Delano, 1999.
- ²⁶ Delano, 24.
- ²⁷ Ibid.
- ²⁸ Ibid., 23.
- ²⁹ Lt Col Nancy E. Weaver, "Developing Aerospace Leaders for the Twenty-First Century," Project Air Force (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2001).
- ³⁰ Ibid., 1.
- ³¹ Ibid., xi.
- ³² Ibid.
- ³³ Ibid., 56.
- ³⁴ Telecon with Col Weaver (February 2002).
- ³⁵ Ibid.
- ³⁶ Dr. Owen C. Gadeken, Mr. Bernard J. Cullen; and Ms. Nora F. Huvelle. "Program Managers with the Right Stuff." *Program Manager* 19, no. 3 (May-Jun 1990): 27.

Notes

³⁷ Delano.

³⁸ Weaver, 56.

³⁹ Dr. Owen C. Gadeken, Mr. Bernard J. Cullen; and Ms. Nora F. Huvelle. "Program Managers with the Right Stuff." *Program Manager* 19, no. 3 (May-Jun 1990): 27.

⁴⁰ Delano.

⁴¹ Weaver, 56.

⁴² Dr. Owen C. Gadeken, Mr. Bernard J. Cullen; and Ms. Nora F. Huvelle. "Program Managers with the Right Stuff." *Program Manager* 19, no. 3 (May-Jun 1990): 27.

⁴³ Delano.

⁴⁴ Weaver, 56.

⁴⁵ Dr. Owen C. Gadeken, Mr. Bernard J. Cullen; and Ms. Nora F. Huvelle. "Program Managers with the Right Stuff." *Program Manager* 19, no. 3 (May-Jun 1990): 27.

⁴⁶ Delano.

Chapter 4

Conclusion and Recommendations for Additional Research

All's well that ends well

—William Shakespeare

Conclusion

The current research, explained in the preceding chapters, examined the question of leadership in the USAF acquisition community. It considered the scope of other research on related subjects as well as current internal USAF efforts to define leadership. The current research then identified four previous research efforts that examined the issue of leadership in the USAF, three of them specifically focused on the acquisition community. Finally, the paper asserts the findings of each of the previous research efforts include common themes.

These common themes should be considered required acquisition leadership competencies the USAF commits to developing in future acquisition leaders—our program managers at all levels who strive to become our system program directors. Acceptance of this conclusion acknowledges the DAWIA standards for program managers are necessary conditions to be satisfied, but they are not entirely sufficient. Experience, education, and training by themselves are not the complete measure of the potential to succeed as a program manager. To be considered a system program director

candidate, potential personnel should also be evaluated on their demonstrated skill and ability in the following four required acquisition leadership competencies:

1. the ability to develop and articulate a vision for the program,
2. interpersonal communications skills that build trust and institutional commitment both within the program team and with other organizations,
3. the ability to build a team of subordinates both tapping all their potential for current efforts and developing them into the next generation of leaders,
4. the willingness to assert all authority necessary; and to perform the job energetically and with a sense of urgency

These required acquisition leadership competencies should be considered the minimum desired set of competencies an individual must have in order to be considered for the position of system program director. They should be used in addition to the education, training, and experience criteria that are outlined in DAWIA and directed by DODD 5000.52-M.

These acquisition leadership competencies are also potentially applicable to all USAF leaders. They should be considered by the DAL Support Office and the USAF Doctrine Center as a baseline for further development of USAF policy as well as leadership expectations.

Recommendations for Further Research

At least one additional question should be considered relative to the current research. The question is: “Is the USAF currently selecting personnel who meet the proposed acquisition leadership competency requirements?” All the previous research suggests these competencies have been a consistent theme in the acquisition community for many years. Perhaps this consistency implies the current senior leaders in the acquisition community are already selecting personnel for the position of system program director

with these competencies in mind. The only missing piece would then be finding a way to institutionalize the competencies into the leadership development programs for the acquisition community.

An interesting research effort would be to conduct 360-degree feedback assessments on each of the current system program directors in the USAF to evaluate how well they demonstrate the four acquisition leadership competencies. The findings of the survey might also be compared to professional assessments (annual officer performance reports) completed on these officers by the Air Force Materiel Command or the Assistant Secretary of the Air Force (Acquisition).

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