

# Tactical Basics for Assistant Program Managers (APMs)

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**H**ighly complex programs, now commonplace in the acquisition environment, are capable of delivering a knockout punch to even experienced APMs. These programs are usually backed by a juggernaut of time-sensitive funding, immature technology, and an unforgiving schedule. How can program executive officers (PEOs) and project managers help you? What can be done to set the conditions for success? What can you do to help yourself?

SSG Calvin Esslinger scans a ridgeline near Combat Outpost Munoz in the Paktika province of Afghanistan, Nov. 15, 2009. Regular interaction with contractors and program support agencies is the acquisition equivalent to OPs/LPs, providing management insight and collaborative solutions to common programmatic challenges. (U.S. Army photo by SSG Andrew Smith.)



There are no easy answers to these questions, but APMs can draw parallels to tactical basics learned as company grade officers. Five tactical basics that relate well to acquisition operations are:

- Fire support to always include supporting artillery.
- Intelligence oversight.
- Observation posts and listening posts (OPs/LPs) for early warning.
- Adequate reserves.
- Operation with appropriate tactical mass.

Transforming these tactical basics into acquisition-centric terminology enables the APM to:

- Employ project manager top cover and PEO oversight.
- Obtain program and contractor-specific situational awareness (SA).
- Interact directly with the contractor and program support agencies.
- Possess adequate fiscal and schedule reserves.
- Build a right-sized workforce with the right skill sets.

### Employ Project Manager Top Cover and PEO Oversight

In many tactical situations, fire support can dramatically alter events on the battlefield. In an acquisition environment, the APM can employ project manager top cover and PEO oversight to the same effect. Sometimes even the best managerial skill, leadership, and personal commitment are not enough to avoid setbacks. As an APM, you must be prepared for the inevitable negative events that will happen in one (if not all) of your programs. Developing a rapport with your project manager can greatly mitigate these realized risks. Quickly notifying your project manager of problems and then engaging in hasty problem solving can yield several viable courses of action. This cooperation ensures your project manager is a key stakeholder in the program. APMs should also strive to provide



APMs can draw parallels learned as tactical commanders to effectively manage their projects. Here, SGT Trent A. Ogden, a tactical commander with 301st Chemical Co., and interpreter Ashur Elisha discuss security measures in Baghdad, Iraq. (U.S. Army photo by SGT John Stimac.)

information to PEOs so they can intervene, if required.

Work with your project manager to schedule periodic office calls or program reviews with your PEO to ensure he or she has oversight on your program's identified risk areas. PEOs are often extremely busy and don't have enough time to "drill down" into each program in their portfolio. Selecting the right information to provide the PEO is challenging and should be done in close coordination with your project manager. Preparation for PEO-level meetings is time well spent and will pay dividends as your program moves forward.

### Obtain Program and Contractor-Specific SA

Tactical commanders require intelligence oversight to visualize upcoming engagements, predict the enemy's behavior, and plan for future actions. Similarly, APMs who obtain program and contractor-specific SA will benefit from widened program perspectives and effective contract and contractor management.

Every program has specific focus areas. These areas can range from Earned Value Management metrics to performance of a problematic circuit card assembly. In some cases, APMs incorrectly assess these areas of emphasis based on a narrow perspective. APMs must be able to view these specific areas of emphasis from the government's

perspective and through the eyes of the contractor. These unique, but complementary, viewpoints increase SA by enabling a reflective assessment of the areas of emphasis. As a bonus, these reflective assessments often reveal previously invisible program nuances.

APMs must also be familiar with their contractor's business rules, business processes, and personnel management. Having a basic understanding of these three areas is vital for effective contract and contractor management and results in a more accurate prediction of contractor behavior. Because contractor personnel management is often a source of acute friction in many programs, ensure your contract includes the appropriate clauses to enforce personnel stability.

### Interact Directly With the Contractor and Program Support Agencies

APMs can also greatly enhance their SA by interacting directly with the contractor and program support agencies. Employing OPs/LPs have undoubtedly provided commanders at all levels reaction time and maneuver space. Regular interaction with contractors and program support agencies (e.g., the Defense Contract Management Agency (DCMA), Defense Contract Audit Agency (DCAA), etc.) is the acquisition equivalent to OPs/LPs, providing management insight and collaborative solutions to common programmatic challenges.

It seems obvious that direct interaction with the contractor would result in management insight, but many APMs fail to recognize the importance of engaging with their contractor counterparts. APMs should be granted unfettered access to their contractor counterparts. Although formal weekly teleconferences, monthly in-progress reviews, and quarterly program reviews should be the norm, interchanges should also include informal meetings and working group sessions. Collaboration should become more frequent during critical program events.

Sometimes APMs distance themselves from other government agencies because it is perceived that any collaboration, beyond what is required by law, will consume valuable time (and, therefore, funding). Certainly, unscheduled U.S. Army Test and Evaluation Command, DCMA, and DCAA requirements can adversely affect any program, but early inclusion of these agencies as program stakeholders can enhance required relationships and mitigate the negative effects of unscheduled intervention. Interaction and collaborative problem solving usually requires additional time and money, forcing the APM to request access to his/her fiscal and schedule reserves.

### Possess Adequate Fiscal and Schedule Reserves

Adequate reserves allow a commander to take decisive action when his/her forces are overmatched. Adequate fiscal and schedule reserves allow an APM to offset developmental shortfalls, understand test and evaluation anomalies, and compensate for production problems. Although not strictly authorized, fiscal reserves of 3–4 percent of total budget are common. Ensure you are funded with the right “type” of money in the right years.

More funding is usually not effective unless it is accompanied by more time. Building a schedule reserve is an art and a science. APMs should look

to experienced acquisition professionals within their project manager shop, examine similar programs, and obtain guidance from their PEOs and project managers as they develop schedule reserves. Similar to employment of the tactical reserve, knowing when to employ fiscal and schedule reserves is one of the most important recommendations the APM can make. Just as tactical commanders must carefully consider the impacts of employing their reserves, APMs must carefully assess the risks of using fiscal and schedule reserves. Although the ability to deftly employ fiscal and schedule reserves is important, nothing is as critical as the program management office (PMO) workforce.

### Build a Right-Sized Workforce With the Right Skill Sets

Appropriate tactical mass is essential to the commander striving for operational environment superiority. In comparison, building a right-sized workforce with the right skill sets is critical for program success. In many cases, more people do not equal better performance. APMs must be prepared to objectively evaluate workforce requirements and provide direct feedback to their project managers. This candid assessment may result in reorganizing the workforce or modifying relationships with external agencies such as DCMA or DCAA. Even if your PMO is optimally staffed, having employees with the wrong skill sets can be a detriment to your operation.

The right skill sets are a key aspect of any workforce and are especially important to the APM. Employees, both government and contractor, must possess the basic skills to accomplish their assigned duties and responsibilities, but must also be capable of working in integrated process teams and working groups, possibly outside their individual comfort zones. APMs should be prepared to sponsor training or allow the workforce to attend resident courses to expand their skill sets. It may be inconvenient to have one of your employees



CPT Steven Belford, project manager for the 225th Engineer Brigade, briefs a DOD contractor during the final inspection before Maya Road in Baghdad opens to military and Iraqi civilian traffic. (U.S. Army photo by LTC Patrick Simon.)

in class or attending training for 1 or 2 months, but it will be much more difficult (for the APM and employee) to “learn as you go” during a 3–5 year acquisition effort.

Many other tactical concepts can be transformed into acquisition-related task program management methods. The five discussed in this article provide a solid base for APMs faced with greater responsibility and increasingly complex duties. Employing these APM tactical basics does not ensure program success, but keeping these concepts in mind will allow you to keep your boss informed, develop mitigation plans, prioritize your efforts, and maximize your limited time.

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