

# Back-to-Basics for the Defense Acquisition Workforce

## *Empowering the Workforce Today and for Their Future!*

A Message from Honorable Alan Shaffer  
Deputy Under Secretary of Defense  
for Acquisition and Sustainment  
and DoD Senior Acquisition Leaders

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### Why change?

On September 2, 2020, the Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition and Sustainment, the Honorable Ellen Lord, announced the Back-to-Basics (BtB) initiative – the first major reform of the defense acquisition workforce management framework since the early 1990’s. Our world has changed and the future promises even more change. This reform initiative shifts our focus from how we have equipped the workforce in the past to getting back to the basics of acquisition with a sharpened focus on workforce readiness and how we can equip Department of Defense (DoD) component acquisition professionals for the future - *Empowering the Workforce Today and for Their Future*.

We will equip the acquisition workforce through 2030 and beyond by pivoting from a thirty year old “one size fits all” certification construct to a component and workforce-centric tailorable, continuous learning construct. This change is part of *taking care of our people* - leadership’s highest responsibility. BtB change means equipping the workforce to be ready, with agility, innovation, and the speed of relevance, to develop, procure and sustain, today and for the future, operational capability and overmatch in the competition of great powers. In addition, we must adhere to the tenets of affordability. Budget reductions for acquisition workforce training and development also create the imperative for a focus on the lean “basics” that empower the workforce for success.

The current acquisition workforce management framework has been in place since implementation of the Defense Acquisition Workforce Improvement Act (DAWIA) of 1990.

DoD's longstanding implementation of DAWIA and the framework have served the acquisition workforce community well, but after 30 years, we believe it is essential to transform and modernize our approach to equipping the acquisition workforce. We can and must provide the workforce an improved framework and tools to successfully deliver capability to the force at the speed of relevance. Much like the acquisition system itself, our workforce management framework has grown to include excessive requirements and doesn't have the flexibility to respond to diverse and changing demands in a complex and dynamic environment. The recently implemented DoD Adaptive Acquisition Framework increases flexibility, reduces OSD requirements, and empowers program managers to choose the pathway that meets their program needs. Similarly, the BtB initiative is part of our shift to modern talent management for the acquisition workforce for their current and future success – starting by streamlining the OSD acquisition certification structure, reducing OSD-required training and creating a 21<sup>st</sup> century job-relevant learning environment. Acquisition leaders and workforce members will have new flexibility at the local level to tailor training and professional development.

There are several factors driving our transformation, many outside of the acquisition professional's direct sphere of influence.

- **Great Powers Competition:** The United States won the Cold War with the fall of the Berlin Wall (1989) and the dissolution of the Soviet Union (1991) and entered the period of the peace dividend that flowed into the War on Terror (2001). In brief, the United States and its Allies had a 25-year period without a near-peer adversary. As highlighted in the 2018 National Defense Strategy, the United States is now involved in a conflict of great powers. This conflict requires increased performance across our acquisition system – meaning, the acquisition community must embrace agility, innovation and speed in developing and delivering capability at the speed of relevance. Simply, the acquisition cycle time for fielding new operational capabilities in China and Russia may be faster than in the United States. In a competition of great powers, speed matters. In fact, the “Adaptive Acquisition Workforce” is, in large part, a response to the need for agility and speed in what the Department fields. Providing the workforce with the right tools, authorities, and flexibilities to develop, acquire and sustain operational capability

at the speed of relevance is a central tenant and impetus of the BtB – Empowering the Workforce Today and for Their Future.

- **Focus on the “Basics” that Empower the Workforce Today and for Their Future.** A central dynamic to almost all business or technical management longstanding structures, public or private, is that over time, the structure can lose effectiveness in supporting the critical path to mission success. Even if the current acquisition workforce training and development structure has served us well, a 30-year-old structure requires review—which is what Secretary Lord challenged us to do. And, for acquisition, we asked these questions:
  - Does our implementation of DAWIA through today’s certification and training framework best equip the workforce for acquisition success - can we do better?
  - Does the current three-level certification framework – which motivates early career “done, for the rest of my career” make sense – can we do better?
  - Does 650 hours of certification training for the contracting workforce make sense – the contracting community has moved out and is planning a reduction of the current 650 hours of certification training to 250 hours. This will free up training bandwidth for the contracting professional for job-relevant training and on-the-job experience.
  - Does it make sense to keep adding and treating arguably key acquisition-related knowledge areas and practices as if they were substantive acquisition career fields – can we do better?

Under *BtB - Empowering the Workforce Today and for Their Future*, we put in place an empowering framework that establishes priority on six major acquisition functional areas while providing the workforce new job-relevant credentials and point-of-need training. As the senior acquisition leader steering group examined the functional areas, we concluded that six of the 20 functions supported, merit highest priority as key career-type functional areas that develop, procure, and sustain operational capability. The six functional areas are: Program Management, Contracting, Life Cycle Logistics, Engineering and Technical Management, Test and Evaluation, and Business – Financial

Management / Cost Estimating. This does not mean some of the previous functions are not still important, but they are not standalone. For example, we have created training for the Small Business Management function historically performed by contracting professionals. In the improved BtB framework, we will create a Small Business credential that will be widely available across all functional areas - providing flexibility more broadly across the workforce.

- **Budget Realities:** During Defense Wide Review 1.0 and 2.0, led by Secretary Esper, the DoD reduced funding for the Defense Acquisition University and the Defense Acquisition Workforce Development Account over \$200M annually. This represents approximately 50% of the pre-Defense Wide Review levels. The Secretary examined many areas within the Department of Defense, and through hard decisions, identified resources to shift for delivering near term operational capability essential to NDS priorities. *BtB*, in the light of reduced budgets, adds to the imperative that we innovate and equip the workforce with the basics that best empower them to achieve acquisition success.
- **Continuous Learning:** The way the world is accessing knowledge and training is in an ongoing revolution. As described in The Economist special report “Lifelong Education – Learning and Earning,” 14 January 2017, the education model that boomers and millennials grew up with – block learning, with long courses leading to a degree is being supplanted by a model of continuous learning. Educational models are changing, and we need to adapt and provide the acquisition workforce with rapid delivery and flexible training offerings. This means reforming our training away from block learning in long courses to continuous learning, often delivered virtually. Most professions now have a mandate for continuous learning with some degree of coursework every year. This is true of doctors, lawyers, accountants, professional engineers, and others, all who require continuous learning. As we improve the system of acquisition workforce training and development through BtB, we are taking the opportunity to adapt and provide increased point-of-need, often virtual, job-relevant training and credentials as part of a continuous learning culture. Using this design will lead to a better trained,

more agile acquisition workforce. This training framework will, in turn, empower the workforce to more rapidly deliver operational capability to the force.

- The case for change is strong. *BtB - Empowering the Workforce Today and for Their Future* is executing our fundamental leadership role – to take care our people. We are positioning today's and future acquisition professionals to provide capability that allows us to dominate and win in the great power competition - so vital to our nation.

## What are the changes and how do they impact the workforce?

Every employee is important, and every minute of their time matters. For the acquisition workforce professional *BtB - Empowering the Workforce Today and for Their Future* means lean certification requirements, continuous learning, and more time for job relevant training and credentials. The acquisition workforce functional structure will be simplified to the six functional areas identified above. It is important to note that aligning the workforce to six functional areas does not diminish the work performed by any employee - the work performed and the people who perform it remain critical to achieving DoD's mission. Streamlined certification requirements will include lean acquisition core training (that all will take; similar to the former DAU ACQ100, now streamlined as the new ACQ1010 course) and lean functional area-required training. Functional Area Leaders are planning reduced certification levels. Our current three certification levels construct requires that individuals spend significant time in training, mostly early in their career, to achieve certification. This longstanding approach had the effect of early career employees focused on completing enterprise-required training and missing out on valuable On-The-Job training and experience so critical to successful learning and performance. Lean certification requirements mean reduced training hours and more time for On-The-Job training, work experience, and achieving job-relevant credentials. For example, for Contracting, DoD's senior contracting leaders are planning that certification levels will be reduced from three to one, resulting in a reduction in certification-training hours from 650 to 250 hours. The six functional areas will be supplemented by credentials in the BtB framework, allowing for training in important areas across functions (for example, small business) when it's relevant for an employee's job or career needs.

By design, the streamlining of certification demands on the workforce provides more ability to shape teams and tailor individual development to need. The new construct provides more flexibility to component acquisition leaders, program managers, supervisors, and the workforce member to tailor training and development requirements with “makes sense” specialty training and credentials. The Defense Acquisition University has already fielded six new credentials, with over 7,000 enrolled today and 28 more credentials in development. The initial new credentials include: Program Protection (Cybersecurity), Services Acquisition, Agile, Program Protection, Digital Engineering, Intellectual Property and Data Analytics. Some credentials will apply primarily to one functional area, while some will be cross-cutting and apply to all six. The key is more flexibility to tailor to need. DAU is also leveraging the private sector, for example, by increasing access to private sector training through use of COURSERA – with access funded by DAU for the workforce.

### What's Next?

Following from Secretary Lord's 2 September 2020 memo, teams are working implementation planning details for deployment of the new framework by 1 October 2021. Through her memo, Ms. Lord established the streamlined functional areas, designated new Functional Area Leaders, and established a new senior leader team – the Defense Acquisition Workforce Leadership Team (WLT) – chaired by myself as Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition and Sustainment, and other Service and Functional Area senior leaders. The team, supported by the President of Defense Acquisition University and Executive Director, Human Capital Initiatives, is providing hands-on planning guidance to a supporting team of subject matter experts. The Functional Area leaders are supported by a joint functional Task Force and each is planning implementation details for their respective functional community.

During FY 2021, functional leaders will operate in a very transparent manner and the Services/Agencies will in turn strive to keep leadership and the workforce informed. Acquisition professionals already certified to their position requirements should stay focused on relevant professional currency. This is different for everyone, taking into account job needs, individual experience, education, and current and future work within the relevant acquisition

framework. For those acquisition professionals working toward their current certification requirements during FY 2021, the current grace period extension provided by Secretary Lord on 1 April 2020, from 24 months to 36 months, provides more flexibility to complete certification requirements. Individuals should discuss their development with their supervisor as part of their professional development planning.

The Office of Human Capital Initiatives, on behalf of the Defense Acquisition Workforce Leadership Team, will provide monthly updates on implementation, to include FAQs and other online resources, at <https://www.hci.mil/btb.html>.

Planning for *Back-to-Basics – Empowering the Workforce Today and for the Future* – is about empowering you – defense acquisition professionals. You prove over and over again that acquisition professionals are critical to the National Defense Strategy lethality and readiness. Your senior leaders care about you and your success. The following senior acquisition leaders are part of the Defense Acquisition Workforce Leadership Team contributing to this initiative and this article.

Honorable Alan Shaffer, Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition and Sustainment

Honorable Jeff White, Principal Deputy to Assistant Secretary of the Army for Acquisition, Logistics & Technology

Honorable Kevin Fahey, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Acquisition

Mr. Jay Stefany, Principal Civilian Deputy to the Assistant Secretary of the Navy for Research, Development and Acquisition

Ms. Darlene Costello, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Air Force Acquisition, Technology & Logistics

Dr. Sandra Magnus, Deputy Director for Engineering, Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Research and Engineering

Ms. Jackie Ferko, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense, Product Support

Mr. James Woolsey, President, Defense Acquisition University

Ms. Misty Cedano, Director, Acquisition Workforce and Talent Management, Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition and Sustainment