Getting Comfortable with Being Uncomfortable

Best practices for increasing agility and speed within Navy and Marine Corps acquisition programs

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Senior leaders within the DOD have increasingly challenged Navy and Marine Corps acquisition professionals to leverage creative leadership and process innovation to significantly reduce the time required to deliver new and critical warfighting capabilities to the Operating Forces. Recent broad changes in acquisition program execution flexibility, such as those found contained within the National Defense Authorization Act of 2016, provide program managers new tools and authorities to reduce acquisitions administrative lead time (e.g., contracting, accounting, reporting, and other statutory requirements). Despite the strong mandate and new authorities to move faster, Navy and Marine Corps acquisition programs continue to develop and field capabilities with protracted timelines, measured in years vice months. In order to outpace our adversaries' ability to field increasingly lethal warfighting products, ensuring the security of United States' national interests, American taxpayers require Navy and Marine Corps acquisition leaders to embrace and leverage agile acquisition practices.

So why does it take so long to deliver capability, even as new acquisition tools—designed solely to induce flexibility and produce speed—are readily available? For the past twenty years, the acquisition workforce has grown accustomed to prioritizing "process over product," which values administrative compliance over speed of delivery. However, new and innovative acquisition methods and tools are already beginning to disrupt the old paradigm. Thus, when program managers attempt to apply new agile approaches to streamline and eliminate process constraints, the larger acquisition bureaucracy often slows the effort by attempting to revert to traditional tools, consciously or unconsciously, seeking a more acceptable comfort level. Yet, some disruptive-minded acquisition programs are beginning to experience success in changing the comfort level and accelerating the pace of capability development and delivery.

A F-35B Lightning II from VMFA-121 performs a vertical landing during field carrier landing practice at Ie Shima Island, Okinawa, Japan. *(Photo by LCpl Alexia Lythos.)*

An AV-8B Harrier launches from the flight deck of the USS* Kearsarge *(LHD-3) on a combat mission in suppport of Operation INHERENT RESOLVE.* *(Photo by MCS2 Ryre Arciagar.)

A modern example of a program "doing things differently" to increase acquisition speed may be found within the aircraft engine foreign object damage (FOD) mitigation pilot project at the AV-8B Harrier Program Office (PMA-257). Partnering with Naval Air Systems Command propulsion and power engineering (NAVAIR-4.4), the combined team has sought to research and field solutions to reduce FOD rates by 75 percent while increasing engine and aircraft readiness by a commensurate magnitude.

As a first step in the research program, the team utilized a non-traditional Broad Agency Announcement (BAA) contracting strategy to rapidly award two different technology development contracts totaling $17 million dollars (including options). In addition to simply securing the right technology to further develop into a comprehensive FOD mitigation solution, both contracting actions required, on average, less than eleven total weeks from start to award. Traditional contracting methods projected 12 to 24 months as the total time required to achieve the same awards; however, by applying agility through leveraging non-traditional acquisition tools, the team cut the contract lead time by 90 percent. Additionally, the Harrier program continues to explore and apply agility to increase fielding speed. Acting as the first NAVAIR program to do so, the Harrier program is in the initial stages of attempting to leverage rapid fielding offerings found in middle-tier acquisition strategies. Thus, once its FOD mitigation technology completes fielding, the program will have likely provided the Operating Forces solutions in less than two years, cutting out three additional years from the traditional acquisition process.

For other programs seeking to increase the pace of the acquisition process, the PMA-257 example offer's an excellent acquisition agility roadmap to follow. Specifically, program managers should consider incorporating PMA-257's three key best practices to achieve similar milestones in speed. First, holistically prioritize urgency and agility over process compliance and comfort level. The team dedicated itself to leveraging all available tools while tactfully mitigating risk to increase delivery speed and product performance rather than forsaking these opportunities for the sake of process compliance and risk aversion because of individual stakeholder comfort level. Second, identify those organizations considered to be the "best in the business" and replicate their agility efforts. The team sought out and repeated the best practices from both major commercial entities and other government organizations to gain efficiencies quickly and avoid decreasing speed by "reinventing the wheel." Finally, inform and engage senior acquisition executives concerning your efforts and leverage their authority to breakdown debilitating bureaucratic and process barriers. When faced with bureaucratic barriers inhibiting speed, the team regularly sought out and received senior executive support to accept risk and overcome stopping points. Ultimately, by employing these best practices, leaders of other major Navy and Marine Corps acquisition programs can rapidly deliver critical warfighting products to the Operating Forces.

Getting Others Comfortable with Urgency

The FOD mitigation program achieved increased acquisition speed by holistically prioritizing speed and urgency over process compliance and stakeholder comfort level. From the beginning of the effort, capability delivery speed was the first priority. Team leaders emphasized a cultural paradigm of "leaning forward" and "product over process" in all phases of the project, such as requirements generation, resourcing, contracting, engineering, testing, and industry engagement. Leaning forward and product over process became more than just simple tag lines; rather, the team viewed urgency both as the driving force behind its specific project and central to ensuring that Naval aviation remains competitive and dominant.

Team leaders constantly reminded external stakeholders of the sense of urgency required and the need "to do things differently" to better support the Operating Forces. Oftentimes, external stakeholders maintained an active "fear of failure" mentality and viewed increased speed as increasing the probability of failure. This triggered their actions to slow down the acquisition process to a pace more suited for their comfort and control. In contrast, the FOD mitigation team perceived speed as an asset to capitalize on emerging opportunities and increase the probability of success. For example, when challenged by a supporting agency re-

garding the requirement for increased speed, the FOD mitigation project lead responded,

> If my team moves five times faster than you and we fail three times, we still deliver the product to the field faster than you, and because we learned from failure early on, we also deliver a much better end item to the fleet.

Enabling stakeholders to embrace speed as an enhancement, vice handling it as a challenge, changed their overall sense of purpose and comfort level. Also, when a supporting element stated it wanted to move faster but had no tools or methods to do so, the leaders of the FOD mitigation program walked it through multiple agile approaches, to include Federal Acquisition Regulation (FAR) Part 35, Middle Tier and other Non-FAR possibilities. In the end, the FOD mitigation team did not accept "no" as a reasonable response to speed; rather, it professionally challenged the acquisition support establishment to see speed as an opportunity and provided guidance toward several non-traditional vehicles to improve their comfort level of applying new acquisition methods to achieve required schedule acceleration.

The FOD mitigation team also optimized and complemented its priority for speed and product by intelligently applying acquisition risk mitigation and acceptance. The team found that external stakeholders often wanted to "gold plate" and organically develop emerging FOD mitigation capabilities. This would require out-of-scope funding and additional time to develop and test. However, team leaders mitigated these risks to the schedule by ensuring the use of stable requirements and leveraging commercial off-the-shelf (COTS) technology solutions. First, team leaders accurately assessed and recognized when a given capability was "good enough," enabling them to employ a rapid schedule supporting the delivery of 75 percent of a capability several years early—rather than deliver 100 percent of the capability 5 years late. Second, the team created strategic partnerships with industry to leverage COTS products. As opposed to spending significant time and resources attempting to use government organic means to develop a solution, the team asked industry to bring COTS solutions to it now for rapid assessment and implementation. In addition to reducing schedule and technological maturity risk, COTS enabled the team to reduce development costs by using a proven system that was adapted for a military environment. By skillfully dealing with risk, the team ensured other stakeholders became more comfortable with increasing the pace of the research program.

Marine F402 engine mechanics with VMM-163 (Recon), 11th MEU, prepare an engine for installation on an AV-8B Harrier aboard the USS* Boxer *(LHD-4). *(Photo by LCpl Dalton S. Swanbeck.)*

Conduct R&D: "Rip-off and Deploy"

The FOD mitigation team sought to implement its research program as quickly as possible to rapidly realize readiness gains and minimize costs because of engine damage during a period of intense enterprise-wide readiness challenges. However, the team initially had little experience with leveraging non-traditional contracting methods designed to increase speed. The initial contracting strategy offered for the research program focused on employing traditional contracting vehicles such as a full and open competition, where the program identifies a requirement, contractors compete to meet the requirement, and the program selects and awards. Typically, this contracting process requires 12 to 24 months simply to reach an award while still requiring many additional months beyond award for test and fielding. With a bold internal team requirement to be on contract within three months, the one-to-two year contracting schedule—and those methods supporting it—was determined to be unacceptable.

To better understand potential options and avoid "reinventing the wheel," the FOD mitigation team found and interviewed program management professionals at the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), which are known as the Government's subject-matter expert for contracting actions supporting agile research programs. The DARPA representatives recommended that the team employ a FAR Part 35 BAA to achieve the level of speed required for the trial. As an agile contracting vehicle, the BAA enables the program office to broadly offer its "problem" to industry rather than issue a singular requirement; industry responds to the Government's "problem" with solutions via white papers—which are evaluated individually and not against one another for technical importance to agency programs and funding availability. This contract method significantly reduces time required to award as a traditional

An AV-8B Harrier with VMA-231 conducts aerial refueling during Exercise Bayou Thunder off the coast of Louisiana. *(Photo by Cpl Cody Rowe.)*

open competition is not required. It also enables industry to offer a wide range of potential solutions to a broad problem area, rather than simply forcing industry to compete against a singular defined requirement. Finally, the BAA offered the team a rapid path to award during a period of unpredictable end-of-fiscal-year funding challenges.

Locating, interviewing, and borrowing proven, expedited acquisition methods from those recognized as the "best in the business" opened the eyes of the FOD mitigation team to the potential for non-traditional contracting vehicles and their ability to meet or exceed the rapid award goal. This is an example of Assistant Secretary of the Navy for Research, Development, and Acquisition James F. Geurts' concept of conducting "R&D" or "rip-off and deploy." Instead of being on the learning curve, R&D enables acquisition leaders to get well in front of the learning curve. This was the case for the mitigation team, where, within days of the DARPA meeting, it discovered an emerging local Program Executive Officer, Tactical Aircraft Programs BAA effort to increase aircraft readiness. Using this vehicle, the FOD mitigation program awarded the two different contracts. Without seeking out and applying DARPA's BAA contracting recommendations, the FOD mitigation program would likely be many months behind its present pace.

Leverage Senior Executives as "Barrier Busters"

Finally, the FOD mitigation team regularly informed and engaged senior acquisition executives regarding its accelerated efforts and, when required, leveraged executive authority to break down debilitating bureaucratic and process barriers. In recent years, senior leaders have challenged the acquisition workforce to increase the pace of delivering lethal capability to the Operating Forces. Along with this challenge, executives have armed the acquisition workforce with decentralized power and authority by reducing reporting burdens, delegating decision making to lower levels, and eliminating cumbersome regulations.

The mitigation team consistently provided feedback to the executive level regarding the impact of these changes. For example, with the initial success of the BAA contracting effort, team leaders provided vignettes and roadmaps for others within the Program Executive Officer to conduct R&D actions. BAA success also enabled executives to present the team with new opportunities to achieve greater speed by applying additional external funding or other resources for future agility efforts. These interactions enabled the team to obtain more support and increased the number of opportunities available for future program growth.

However, engaging executive leadership also provided the FOD mitigation program with much-needed advocacy in the face of emerging obstacles and barriers to speed. Though many on the ground level have welcomed and embraced the recent acquisition community transformation, those comprising of the "frozen middle" have generally resisted the pace of change and act as a barrier to acquisition process and strategy innovation. On some occasions, the FOD mitigation program encountered process barriers governed by the frozen middle. Rather than wait for weeks or months to resolve the impasse, team leaders brought these barriers to the attention of executive level. In nearly all cases, the FOD mitigation team retained the initiative, as senior executives guided and directed the frozen middle to support the "speed to the fleet" priority efforts. If the team failed to keep executives informed, it would likely still be battling the frozen middle rather than capturing emerging opportunities to expand efforts and move faster.

Conclusion

A requirement exists to outpace our adversaries in the development and fielding of lethal capabilities. Using the recent senior executive mandate to exploit creative means to achieve greater speed and agility, program managers have an emerging opportunity to accelerate the pace of their acquisition efforts by using the FOD mitigation program agility roadmap. Prioritizing product over process, conducting R&D actions, and leveraging senior acquisitions executives' authority to break down debilitating bureaucratic and process barriers offers Navy and Marine Corps program managers an initial starting point for greater speed and flexibility toward accomplishing their mission.

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