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The Courage Imperative

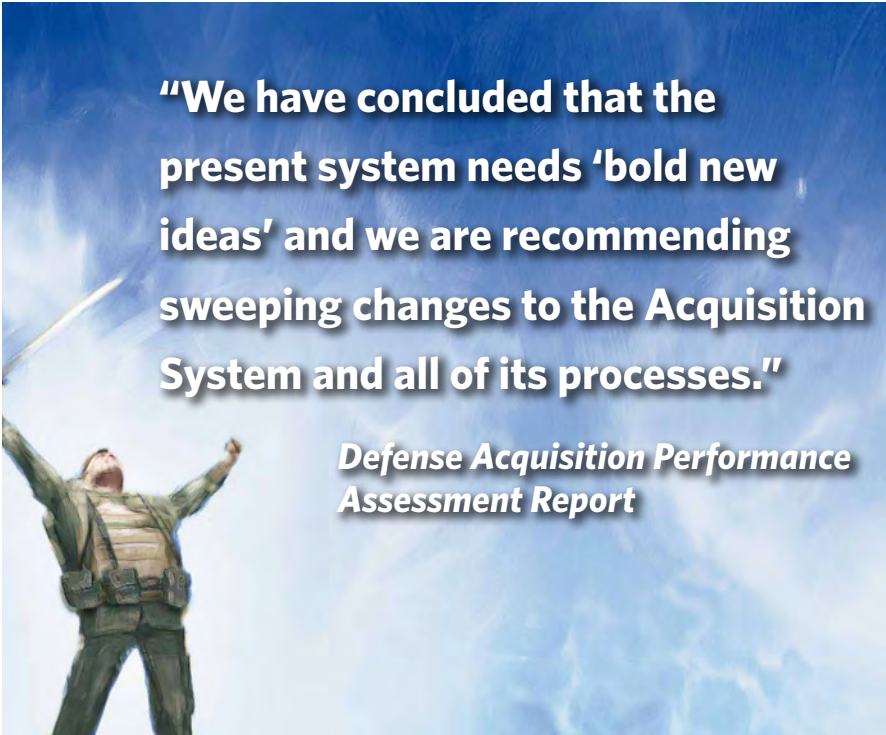*Maj. Dan Ward, USAF*

n 2006, the Defense Acquisition Performance Assessment (DAPA) report called for Bold New Ideas and Sweeping Changes. It may be indelicate to say so, but I'm not sure we've seen them happen yet—not in a big way, and not on the scale the report's authors seemed to think necessary.

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Illustration by Jim Elmore

> **"We have concluded that the present system needs 'bold new ideas' and we are recommending sweeping changes to the Acquisition System and all of its processes."**
>
> *Defense Acquisition Performance Assessment Report*

Since that time, we have, instead, seen a continuing emphasis on process-centric approaches to acquisition and relatively minor changes to existing policies.

To be sure, there have been some changes in recent months. The Government Accountability Office (GAO) even complimented the Department of Defense for making progress in some areas. However, revising a few policies to place more emphasis on something we were doing already is not particularly new or bold, nor does it constitute "sweeping changes." These little changes might be good ideas, and they might be helpful—but they don't exactly meet the challenge laid down by the authors of the DAPA report.

The F Word

This got me wondering: Why has the acquisition community not adopted bold new ideas? Why have we not implemented sweeping changes? Why have we been so content to fiddle around the edges instead of driving to the heart? Surely it's not because we can't think of any new ideas—there is no shortage of proposed changes that are Bold, New, and Sweeping. Surely it's not because change is difficult—we do difficult things all the time.

I do not know for certain what is getting in the way, but I suspect that one of the major (and no doubt many) roadblocks is the F word. Fear.

Make no mistake, when it comes to making changes in the way the acquisition community does business, there is much to fear. The fears are reasonable and well-founded. They are understandable and justified. But fear should not be the driving factor in our decision making. It makes sense to fear bold new ideas, but it makes no sense to allow that fear to hold us back.

For decades, the Defense Department relied on large budgets, long schedules, and huge bureaucracies to deliver complex weapon systems. However successful that approach may have been in the past (a point to be debated elsewhere), its future viability is doubtful. There is a wide consensus that reform is needed. Sweeping change is needed. Bold new ideas are needed. And frankly, that scares the hell out of a lot of people.

Untested ideas often have unintended consequences. That's scary. Change is doubly scary when it involves moving away from ideas based on certainty, control, and predictability and toward a trust-based, people-centric approach. It is understandable and rational to fear the unpredictable. However, the supposed certainty and predictability of the traditional acquisition approach is merely a comforting illusion wrapped in statistical models. The actual outcomes of the traditional approach leave much to be desired.

We Are Our Own Worst Enemy

Defense acquisition is currently guided by a modernist scientific management worldview. It values metrics, processes, and assurances of optimized efficiency. Constraints are avoided, and complexity is pursued. This enterprise is frustratingly unable or unwilling to recognize the role it plays in its own failure. Bottomless budgets, endless schedules, and armies of highly educated technologists applying rigorous scientific methodologies have been consistently unable to deliver top-priority systems like the Crusader artillery, the Comanche helicopter, the A-12 Avenger, the Future Imagery Architecture satellites, the KC-X tanker, the CSAR-X helicopter, the Future Combat System, and ... the list goes on.

We squeaked by on fielding systems like the V-22 and F-22 (neither of which was anywhere close to its original schedule, budget, or performance), all the while insisting that strict processes, formal structures, and tight controls are essential keys to our success. We have consistently overspent budgets by billions of dollars and slipped schedules by decades, all the while whining that if we could just have a little more time and money, we could get it right. The truth is, while unproven approaches are justifiably scary, maintaining the current trajectory leads to entirely predictable failures, which is not much better. Actually, it's probably worse.

It is time to screw up our courage, look reality in the face, and answer some hard questions. What did all our analysis get us? What benefit was there from our formal structures and reviews? Would things really have been better if we'd spent more time and money? Is complexity necessary and inevitable? How many of our scientific predictions, either programmatic or technical, came true on our Big Important Projects?

Let's ask that question again: How many of our scientific predictions came true?

Accurate long-term predictions are an expensive pipe dream. Our current reliance on them is a prime opportunity for change. I suggest a two-part alternative: First, we must require much shorter timelines on projects. Second, we should move away from programmatic predictability and toward programmatic reliability, preferring to trust rather than know, and relying on teamwork rather than paper-work. We should place our bets on small teams of disciplined and talented people to be the source of our success, rather than counting on rigorously defined processes executed by interchangeable "human resources." We should emphasize and reward communication more than compliance, and we should foster creative professional discipline rather than demanding conformity.
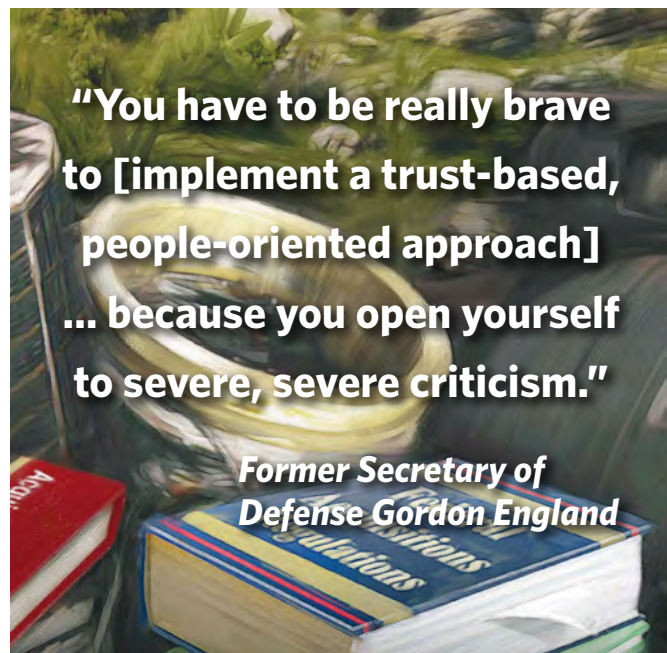
What Are We Scared Of?

Innovation, by its nature, is criticism of the status quo, and many people fear criticism. Bold New Ideas hold within their core an assertion that previous ideas are now inadequate and must be replaced (however meritorious or effective they might have been in the past). But those earlier ideas were the product of actual people—people who are often still in positions of power; positions they have held for a long time and achieved precisely because of their decisions and ideas. And those are the very ideas we are criticizing and offering to replace with our own Bold New Sweeping Changes.

While some people fear receiving criticism, others fear to give it. Too many of us are reluctant to speak up against the Big Programs—which inevitably have powerful, high-ranking patrons—and express ideas contrary to those held by Big Bosses. There is an impression that parroting the party line is expected and rewarded, if not demanded. There is even, in some corners, a belief that people may "speak up but not out," as if the truth were not fit for the light of day and must only be whispered in confidential settings.

Many who see problems are, indeed, reluctant to speak up for fear of being viewed as disloyal or inappropriate. But the dangers of speaking up are often grossly overstated. The truth is, we *can* speak the truth out loud, and we *must* speak the truth out loud. Our fears of painful consequences seldom come true, and even if they do, it's better to suffer for doing the right thing than to be rewarded for doing the

opposite. Silent compliance with things we know are wrong is not admirable. It's cowardly. Yes, speaking up about problems should be done diplomatically, but an excess of discretion and propriety does a disservice to all involved.

The DAPA report bemoans DoD's current "oversight philosophy based on lack of trust." The fear reaction to a trust-based approach is at once real, understandable, justifiable … and unbecoming. Yes, such an approach may underperform. Yes, it will fail at times. But will it be much worse or more expensive than the current approach? We don't know, and that is scary. But can we afford to not find out? Can we afford to let our fear hold us back? I think not. We can do better if we are willing to conquer our fears. It would be unseemly to do otherwise.

> "You have to be really brave to [implement a trust-based, people-oriented approach] … because you open yourself to severe, severe criticism."
>
> *Former Secretary of Defense Gordon England*

In testimony before the House Armed Services Committee on June 3, 2009, former Secretary of Defense Gordon England commented on the difficulty of such a trust-based, people-oriented approach. He said, "You have to be really brave to do that, because … you no longer have the same degree of comfort. [In] my experience, people will shy away from using those authorities, because you open yourself to severe, severe criticism."

In response, Democratic Rep. Jim Cooper of Tennessee pointedly asked, "But, Mr. Secretary, aren't our Services all about bravery?"

There is a well-warranted fear of criticism, fear that one's life work might appear shabby or ineffective. Those aren't unreasonable fears. Change advocates must be sensitive to such concerns. Proponents of innovation, of Bold New Ideas, will always induce a certain amount of fear in the

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defenders and progenitors of the status quo, however much they strive to do otherwise. They must, therefore, move forward gently.

Perhaps influenced by this particular fear, some leaders try to assert—against overwhelming evidence and widespread consensus among objective observers and analysts—that the acquisition process isn't really as broken as some people say; that sweeping changes are unnecessary. They seem to believe that a person who spent a career in DoD is somehow more able to objectively assess his or her own performance and the necessity (or not) for change than an external agent like the GAO.

To be sure, the GAO misses the boat sometimes. Its analysts may not be as completely objective as we would like them to be. They are human and have their own points of view, biases, beliefs ... and their own fears. However, a case can be made that GAO personnel still produce a more objective and accurate analysis of the DoD acquisition community than DoD can. Assertions to the contrary carry a significant burden of proof.

It makes sense to fear bold new ideas, but it makes no sense to allow that fear to hold us back.
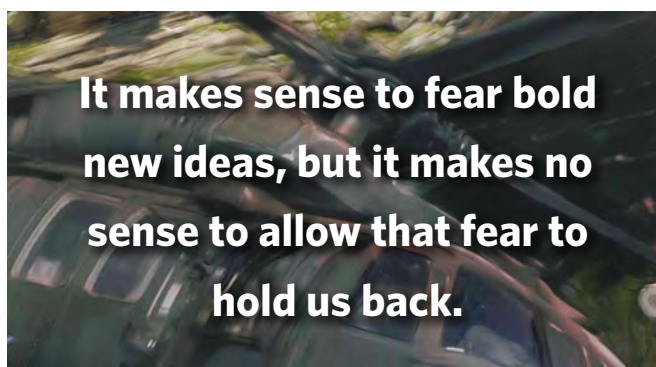
It's All About Courage

We don't like to think about fear or acknowledge the role fear plays in our decision making. It's scary to be afraid. It's embarrassing. We would rather believe we are driven by nobler motives. We would rather not accept the notion that fear is at the root of our reluctance to change. We must face the reality of fear's presence, nonetheless. Change and uncertainty are fear-inducing, but we should deal with fear by being courageous, by putting service before self, and by working together. Courage is something the military is supposed to know about, as Rep. Cooper reminded us. Courage is supposed to be our hallmark. Let us show our courage when it comes to making meaningful change. Let us start by acknowledging that it's scary, and let us be patient and firm with those whose courage falters.

I suggest that we, the acquisition community, look long and hard at our performance and at the results we actually provide. That we focus on our outcomes and not be content to bask in our compliance with the required processes. Accept the insights and criticisms of outside observers. Accept our own contributions to the current situation and our own

culpability for the failures around us. Accept the reality of fear. If this sounds like the beginning of a 12-step program, that's because all forms of recovery have a common need for courage. The fearful, the timid, and the apathetic will never achieve sweeping changes. Those who are satisfied with the status quo will never implement Bold New Ideas nor lead the acquisition community to new levels of performance.

Seeking to cure our ills through a more strenuous application of older solutions or bigger doses of previously ineffective medicines is unlikely to be effective. The DAPA report got it right: We need Bold New Ideas and Sweeping Changes, and we need the courage to see them through.

Brave New Acquisition World

How encouraging, therefore, to see the Air Force's recent Acquisition Improvement Plan (AIP) propose several divergences from our recent glide path. For example, instead of casting process perfection as the foundation of future success, the AIP identifies "trained, educated and experienced people" as the true source of improved performance.

In a huge departure from DoD's traditional preference for large budgets, the AIP boldly opines that "the majority of requirements might be satisfied at lower cost." With admirable honesty, it humbly points out, "In the interest of perfecting the procedures, we allowed the process to become overly complicated." That echoes the DAPA report's observation that "complex acquisition processes do not promote program success—they increase costs, add to schedule and obfuscate accountability." The AIP's explicit embrace of simplicity; its frequently stated preference for low-cost, rapid-development efforts; and its emphasis on people over process are significant—and potentially scary—changes.

Yes, there is much to fear. We might be wrong. Again. We might fail. Again. We might be blamed for past failures, and we might deserve that blame. Again. Along the way, we might make uncomfortable discoveries about ourselves and our ideas, about our incompetence, and about our culpability. Where there is much to fear, the need for courage is great.

As for me, I fear the continual use of methods that didn't work yesterday and are unlikely to work tomorrow. I fear we will continue to be satisfied with making little tweaks and trims around the edges, rather than the sweeping changes we need. I fear we will give in to the temptation to seek personal rewards rather than providing service. I fear the outcome of failing to change our behavior, failing to change our value set, failing to redefine what we reward and what we pursue.

On a more personal note, I fear these very words may hurt some people. I fear they may hurt me. I fear being wrong

more complexity, and more oversight. I must admit, the weapons we field are world-class and unmatched by any adversary, potential or imagined. Those weapons are the result of the ideas, people, and methods of the past. But as the stock market analysts tell us, past performance does not guarantee future performance, and in the same vein, the GAO's Michael Sullivan stated in his September 2008 testimony to Congress, "DoD is not receiving expected returns on its large investment in weapon systems. … Our work shows that acquisition problems will likely persist until DoD provides a better foundation for buying the right things, the right way." The title of Sullivan's report is *Fundamental Changes Are Needed To Improve Weapon System Outcomes*, and it corroborates the DAPA assessment quite closely.

I think the DAPA report and the numerous GAO reports and testimonies are probably correct. I believe things are not as good as they should be, not only programmatically and financially, but also operationally and technically. I believe change is indeed needed—sweeping change, driven by Bold New Ideas. That kind of change is scary, so courage is needed; courage coupled with gentleness and empathy for those whose ideas must be replaced.

I think that if any group of people can summon the courage required to make these changes, it is the U.S. military. Who's with me?

about all this, because that would be embarrassing. I also fear being right, because that would mean a lot of hard work is ahead of us. And right or wrong, I fear getting negative reactions to such an impassioned expression of what I believe. But even more, I fear the consequences for my character if I do not express these beliefs.

And most of all, I fear lives will be lost because of our failures.

If I am wrong about all this, it should be very easy to demonstrate my error. Just point to the Bold New Ideas and Sweeping Changes that have been implemented across DoD in the years since the DAPA report came out. Point to high-impact examples of successful challenges to conventional thinking. Point to the abandoned policies and approaches of the past. Maybe all these things happened while I wasn't looking, or in times and places I was unaware of. They certainly happened in some places and on a certain scale, but I'm not sure we have quite achieved the level of improvement the DAPA report called for. For that matter, I'm not sure we even got close.

Or maybe the DAPA report was wrong. Maybe what the defense acquisition community needs is more of the same: more process, more dollars, more time, more analysis,