



Illustration by Jim Elmore

The Mice in Council

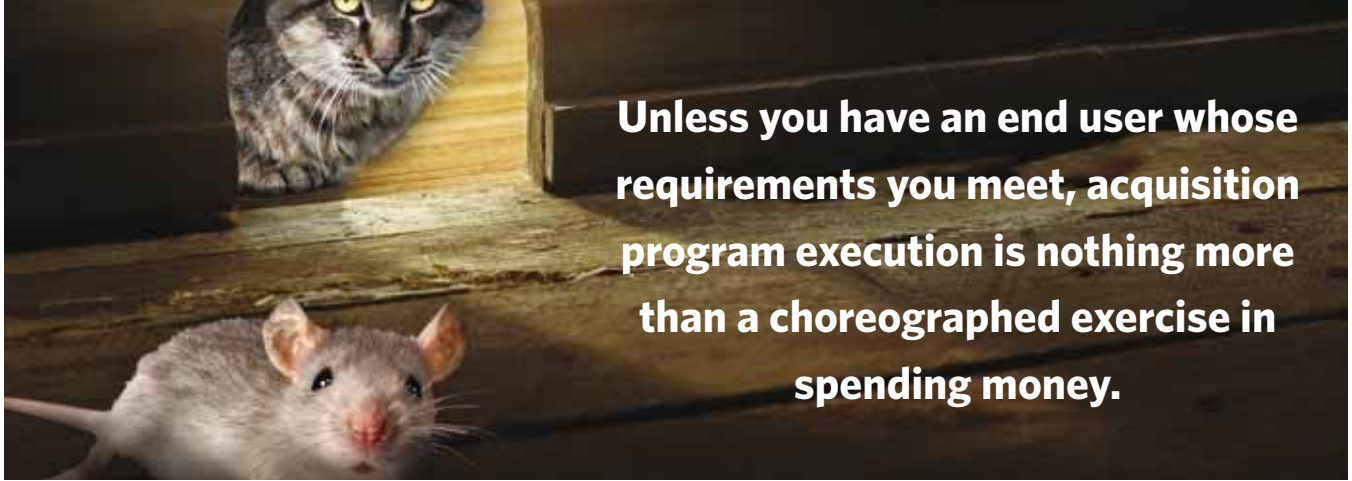
An Acquisition Fable

Edward Todd Urbansky, Ph.D.

Throughout the day, the field mice went about their lives under constant threat from the cat who patrolled their grounds and disrupted their activities. In frustration, the field mice called for a council, to determine the best course of action.

The mayor mouse called the meeting to order and announced the item for discussion. The mice continued pouring in and began to air their thoughts. One of the mice suggested tying a bell to the cat—a suggestion that was generously applauded and cheered by those assembled.

Urbansky is the senior Air Force (tribological) chemist and head of special projects at the Joint Oil Analysis Program Technical Support Center. He works on CBM issues (such as volcanic ash) that affect lubricant quality and engine wear. He is certified in SPRDE/STM, /SE, /PSE, and TST. When he is not in his laboratory, he likes to write stories for his three daughters and sometimes for his coworkers.



Unless you have an end user whose requirements you meet, acquisition program execution is nothing more than a choreographed exercise in spending money.

Just as they thought they had reached a solution, the parliamentarian mouse called for a point of order. The mayor mouse banged the gavel while the attorney mice pored over weighty books of order to determine whether proper procedure had been followed. After a long study, the lead attorney mouse affirmed the point of order and recommended to the mayor that the entire discussion begin again because the quorum had not been made until after the motion to discuss the cat. Subsequently, each of the speakers stood in turn and spoke his piece over. Again, the suggestion to tie a bell to the cat was greeted with cheers and applause. "Do I have a motion to attach a bell to the cat?" asked the chair. "So moved," cried out several mice. "Seconded," called another. "Is there any debate?" asked the mayor.

A field mouse asked the first question: "Who will attach the bell?" The councilor mice were silent at first. Then, the mayor said: "I shall appoint an administrator to commission a study to determine how best to attach the bell." The mice cheered and the meeting was adjourned.

Six months later, the administrator returned to the council. "The engineering firm has exhausted all the funds I have set aside. I require additional funds." The funds were approved and the study resumed. Six months later, the administrator returned with the results of the study: "The engineering firm has concluded that the best way to attach a bell to the cat is for one of the mice to climb up and affix it to the cat's collar."

The field mouse asked: "Who will attach the bell?" The councilor mice were again silent. Then, the logistician said: "I shall develop doctrine and training on the installation of bells on cats." The council cheered and the meeting was adjourned.

Six months later the logistician returned to the council: "My performance-based logistics contractor requires additional funding." The funds were approved. Six months later, the logistician returned: "I have prepared six manuals and four online courses. Three simulators and six instructors stand ready to train our mice on the fastening of bells to cats."

The field mouse asked: "Who will attach the bell?" The councilor mice remained silent. Then, the contracting officer said: "That is a good question, but first we must procure a bell."

The council nodded their approval, and the meeting was adjourned.

The contracting officer submitted a request for proposals, and many fine submissions came in. Some were over the mayor's operating budget, so the contracting officer returned to the council: "We have received many proposals. They vary greatly. I do not know which to select."

At that point, the field mouse asked again: "Who will attach the bell?" The councilor mice were uneasy and began to speak in hushed tones, whereupon the systems engineer spoke: "The problem is that you do not have a well-defined specification. I will write one for you." The mayor mouse said: "That is exactly what we need," and the meeting was adjourned.

Eight months later, the systems engineer returned with 500 pages of documentation that included a specification with key performance parameters, technical drawings, system engineering plan, project plan, quality assurance plan, manufacturing plan, logistics management plan, test and evaluation strategy, and schedule. The mayor spoke: "This is excellent work, but we do not know how much money to allocate for this program."

At that point, the field mouse asked again: "Who will attach the bell?"

"That is a very important question, my good friend," said the chief administrator mouse. "We shall need a program manager to determine the answer to such questions." A program manager was hired. "I need a cost estimate," said the program manager, and so a budget analyst was hired.

In 2 months, the cost estimate was prepared, and the council assembled to approve the funds. The program manager hired a financial manager who prepared the purchase requisition and delivered it to the contracting officer, who, once again, requested proposals. After 10 months, five offers were submitted. The program manager picked two firms to build prototypes and funded them up to milestone B.

The prototypes were built, the critical design review was carried out, and the program manager returned to the council in

the hopes that the milestone decision authority would authorize continuation of the program. "We have constructed two prototypes for consideration," the program manager reported. The chief administrator mouse was very impressed. "Let us move on with the engineering and manufacturing development phase. Given the importance of the product, I believe we should go with both systems," he said and signed the acquisition decision memorandum for milestone C. All of the mice on the council cheered, but the field mouse asked once more: "Who will attach the bell?" This time, the council did not even respond as the project had gained so much momentum and was employing so many of its citizens.

During the next 18 months, developmental testing was carried out and manufacturing facilities were built. A single bell was produced by each contractor. The program manager scheduled the bells for operational testing and evaluation (OT&E)—2 months ahead of schedule and just under budget. The tester took possession. He carefully examined the bells from the low-rate initial production to verify them against the specification. The craftsmanship was outstanding. All the key performance parameters had been exceeded. He examined the logistics support. It was phenomenal; everything from maintenance to training to supply had been covered. There was only one final issue: validation. Obviously, he could not place a bell on an actual cat, so he carried out extensive modeling and simulation. There was no doubt: Both products would work once installed on an actual cat. The test report was glowing. No project had ever gone so well.

The program manager was thrilled that both bells had passed OT&E. Now, there was a spare in case the first bell was damaged in use. He gleefully reported to the council the good news. A celebration was called for; performance awards were given to all; both contractors received their incentives. Roads were named for the milestone decision authority. No one even heard the field mouse ask: "But who will fasten the bell?"

The council was so impressed with the program's success that it voted to make more bells so they could be sold to other communities of mice. The mouse economy was bustling. What an industry they would sustain. The mayor even suggested: "Perhaps we could sell bells to the chickens for attachment to hawks. We shall expand from ground defensive systems to air defensive systems." Everyone cheered because the mouse industrial base could now compete favorably with the cows' dairy industry and the chickens' egg industry.

The program manager directed that full-rate production begin. The mouse factories churned out bells upon bells, which were delivered to the logistics warehouse awaiting installation or sale. Many mice were trained and readied. Everyone was happy; on top of the high employment and multi-sector growth, the cat problem was finally going to be solved.

The program manager was promoted for completing the project, the systems engineer was rewarded for preparing the vari-

ous specifications and plans, the logistician was rewarded for developing training and doctrine, the contracting officer was rewarded for procuring the material, the contractors were paid for delivering the product, the budget analyst was rewarded for developing the cost estimate, the financial manager was rewarded for staying within the budget and utilizing earned value management, and the test authority was rewarded for validating the product. Victory was declared by the chief administrator mouse. Councilors were re-elected as moneys from the contractors flooded their campaign coffers.

Except that no one would attach the bell to the cat. And so, unfortunately, the mice continued to be harassed by the cat because no user could be found. Attempts to sell bells to the chickens were unsuccessful; the chickens just laughed at the idea of tying bells to hawks. They were, after all, too chicken. Consequently, the bells were declared surplus and given to the cows.

Moral

Contracting, logistics, engineering, budgeting, testing, financial and program management cannot make a product work. Unless you have an end user whose requirements you meet, acquisition program execution is nothing more than a choreographed exercise in spending money. If no one wants the finished product, you might as well be making cowbells.

Lesson for the program manager: If you get the user involved with the integrated product team, you just might make the right product.

Lesson for the user: Don't let the experts dictate what the product will be or how it will be used. Make sure your concerns are heard and acted upon.

Author's note: When first faced with the acquisition wall chart, new DoD employees are overwhelmed with the complexity and immensity of the process. While ACQ 101 and 201 courses begin to unravel the mysteries of the acquisition process and make the wall chart decipherable, the novice needs a dramatically simplified introduction. Today's programs are so large that they take on a life of their own and risk departing from the user's original inception.

Likewise, the resident experts (whose disciplines define the various "swim lanes" on the chart) are routinely removed in time or geography from the program's original inception and have little understanding (as new employees) of how they fit into the process. Although this distance can provide a fresh viewpoint, it can also lead to displacement of the user's requirements with the expert's requirements. Even seasoned experts can begin to think this way—that they know what the user needs. In ancient Rome, a runner followed the emperor's chariot, admonishing: "Remember you are human." In this fable, we see what happens when the program fails to heed the warning to "Remember the user."

The author can be reached at edward.urbansky@navy.mil.