

Wanting It

Acquisition Lessons from Cheesy Cinema

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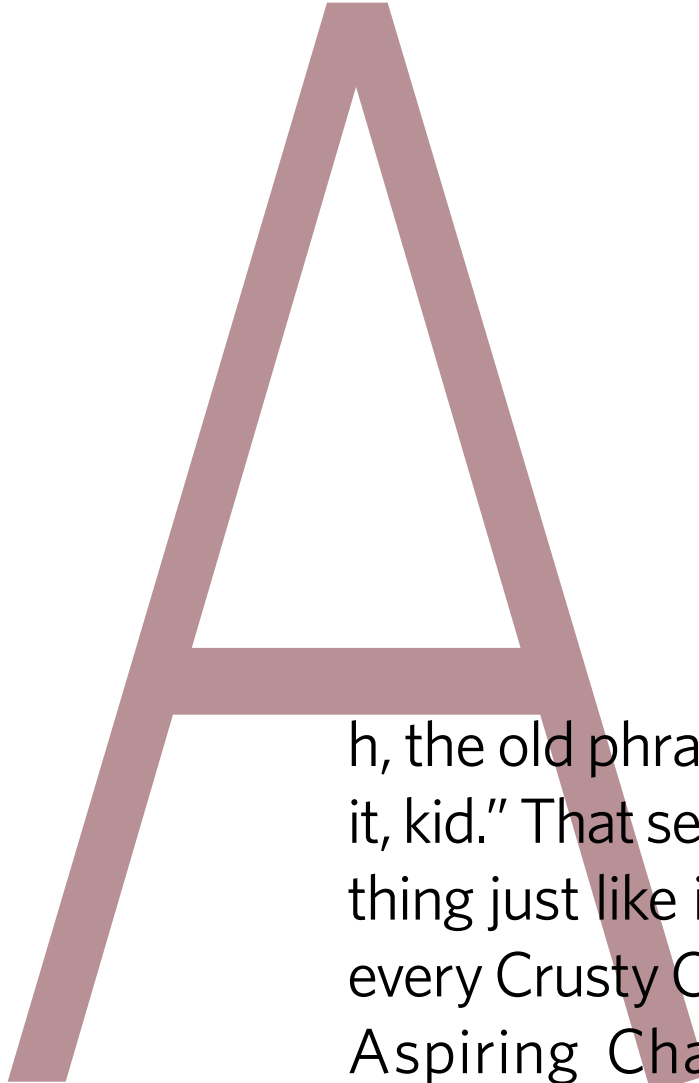
FADE IN:
INT. BOXING GYM, LATE AFTERNOON
CLOSE UP OF CRUSTY OLD COACH IN
PROFILE, CIGAR STUMP BETWEEN
TEETH.

COACH

If yer gonna be a champ,
ya gotta want it, kid.

CUT TO NARRATOR SITTING IN
OVERSTUFFED CHAIR NEAR FIREPLACE,
SMOKING PIPE.





h, the old phrase “Ya gotta want it, kid.” That sentiment, or something just like it, is expressed by every Crusty Old Coach to every Aspiring Champion in every cheesy inspirational movie about a fighter, musician, actor, dancer, or wizard. Whether the hero is a young hopeful or a washed-up has-been, he or she inevitably

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faces daunting odds and imposing rivals. The only way to come out on top is through a brief period of hard work, generally represented by a training montage featuring a series of attractively lit, picturesque settings, accompanied by stirring music.

But before the training montage can begin, there is always the moment where, with clear eyes or through tears, the actor uses a scientifically calibrated and rigorously focus-group-tested facial expression to convey to all watchers that he or she does, indeed, “want it.” This generally involves slowly raising the head from a downcast to an upright position, squaring the jaw and/or shoulders, and adopting the Eye of the Tiger. Ideally, it should be raining when this occurs. Once the desire is suitably established, the training montage can begin.

Let’s now rewind the film a bit and put ourselves in this movie. By “ourselves,” I mean the defense acquisition community. Consistent with the Hollywood formula, we’ve been told for years that we’re bums. We take too long, spend too much money, and deliver systems that don’t live up to their promises. We’re slugging along under a history of failed projects, epic cost overruns, unseemly delays, Nunn-McCurdy breaches, bad press, sustained protests and ridiculously expensive toilet seats. That’s enough baggage to slump the shoulders of any aspiring hero. But somewhere, deep down in our hearts, we know we can be champions. And so the words of the Crusty Old Coach echo in our ears: “Ya gotta want it, kid.”

CLOSE-UP OF NARRATOR

But do we really want it? For that matter, do we even really know what “it” is?

CUT TO BOXING GYM FROM PREV. SCENE

NARRATOR

See, at the point in a movie when the coach makes that fateful statement, the objective is generally clear. The hero wants to beat the scary Ethnic Bad Guy Du Jour, get cast in the lead role, or Show Someone The Money. What about us? In our movie, what achievement are we reaching for?

Such a simple question, so many possible answers. Let’s consider a few, shall we?

CUE STIRRING MUSIC

Does the defense acquisition community define excellence as developing weapon systems that represent the highest performance and highest degree of technology possible, with a dazzlingly complex cohort of shiny knobs and gadgets? Or are we seeking to build an environment in which projects never have an overrun, delay or Nunn-McCurdy breach; where protests are rare and are never upheld? Or is there some other target upon which we should fix our sights, some other “it” we should want? It’s not clear we have a consensus.

On the one hand, we talk a lot about reducing spending. Then we turn around and insist project expenditure rates stay sufficiently high that we don’t leave any money on the table at the end of the fiscal year. We talk about reducing development timelines, but when problems arise we tend to insist that we could fix things “if we just had a little more time.” According to the Government Accountability Office, the DoD says we shouldn’t spend more than five years developing a system ... but 68 percent of the time our initial schedules exceed that five-year window.

We talk about wanting to maximize the bang for the buck, then we measure professional development based on how much more money we’re overseeing today than we were at this time last year, with only cursory attention paid to operational capabilities. There’s plenty of talk about tailoring our processes in order to reduce the time and complexity of weapon system development efforts, with simultaneous determination that no steps be left out.

We make a lot of noise about wanting to be faster, cheaper, and better. Then we turn around and mock the concept of “Faster, Better, Cheaper,” insisting that program managers must “pick two.” Such a cynical perspective is entirely incompatible with the role of Aspiring Hero. If there’s one thing we’ve learned from Hollywood, it’s that we’re all going to wear silver jumpsuits in the future. But if there’s two things we’ve learned, it’s that cynicism is for villains. And trust me, if the Crusty Old Coach heard you talking all cynical like that, why, he’d sock you a good one

Let me suggest that acquisition excellence should be described as follows: delivering affordable systems that are available when needed and effective when used. The three key words are “affordable,” “available,” and “effective.” Don’t forget to stop by the souvenir shop on your way out of the theater and pick up an Affordable, Available, Effective™ coffee mug. We also have a nice collection of reasonably priced t-shirts for sale.

See, the point isn’t to hit the budget target someone set for the program seven years ago. It’s not about whether the system includes the most advanced technology possible. Those are programmatic and technical goals and they’re fine as far as they go. However, we don’t do acquisitions to satisfy the interests of program managers and engineers. We need to

set our sights on operational goals, the stuff the warfighter cares about. Most of the time, the warfighters don't give a fig whether we're on budget or how cutting-edge the system is. They just want to be able to buy it, have it and use it. They want stuff that's affordable, available, and effective. So when the Crusty Old Coach asks if we "want it," that's the "it" that should come to mind.

Which brings us back to the movie metaphor. An important part of the process for every Aspiring Hero is to get out from under the burden of negativity. Sure, the character appears to be a 98-lb weakling who can't sing/dance/fight, and who gets sand kicked in his face, but a closer look reveals a champion lurking beneath the surface. Once again, the Crusty Old Coach is the key. "Your father died before you were born, kid," he says, gazing off into the distance. "But I knew him and he was the best. You've got his eyes/voice/feet/hands." Or maybe the transformation begins with a simple line of dialogue such as, "You're a wizard, Harry."

Please don't let the press reports and conventional wisdom fool you. The defense acquisition community is full of Jedi Wizard Dancers who do champion-level work developing and delivering systems that are Affordable, Available and Effective. Want proof? Just look at the systems the Air Force recognized at the 2010 Acquisition Transformation and Leadership Awards.

CUE STIRRING MUSIC AGAIN. SWITCH TO SOFT FOCUS & BEGIN SUCCESS MONTAGE

The Acquisition Oscars went to a Joint Urgent Operational Need project called BACN (Battlefield Airborne Communications Node), a project by the Rapid Capabilities Office, and a Big Safari program that delivered an aircraft called Project Liberty in seven months. Or consider the amazing accomplishments of the Army's Rapid Equipping Force, which has quickly and inexpensively delivered over 550 systems in six years, ranging from robots to vehicles to a translator device to a "Tactical Garbage to Energy Refinery." Not to be left out, the Navy has its very own Rapid Technology Transition Office ... well, you get the picture. No doubt every one of these projects and organizations deserves its own article, but for now, we'll just cue a slow fade-out of the montage.

END SCENE. CUT TO NARRATOR WALKING THROUGH ATTRACTIVELY LIT, PICTURESQUE SETTING.

Bear in mind, these award winning systems weren't produced by following the standard processes and procedures.

Ah, the old phrase "Ya gotta want it, kid." ... But do we really want it? For that matter, do we even really know what "it" is?

It's just like in the movies. Unconventional approaches executed by unconventional people using unconventional training methods produce world-class results. Wax on, wax off. Punch the side of beef. Run through a swamp with a wrinkly green muppet on your back. Jump around your office and scream a Memorable Catchphrase™ into the telephone.

If Affordable, Available and Effective is the "it" we want, we'll have to move away from the status quo. Specifically, we'll need to put serious effort into simplifying and streamlining our processes, organizations, requirements, and technologies—the weighty burdens we've accumulated over the decades. And we'll have to stop relying on schedule increases and budget growth as our primary problem solving techniques.

See, if there's one thing we've learned from Hollywood, it's that there's no crying in baseball. But if there's two things, the other is that the Imposing Rival, for all his or her advantages (money, looks, talent, strength, prestige) can always be beaten by a suitably scrappy underdog. So it's all the more important that we not rush to assume the villain's mantle and all the corner office accoutrements that go with it. Overengineered solutions that require endless schedules, bottomless budgets and enormous organizations aren't all they're cracked up to be. The best outcomes are often the result of creativity driven by constraints.

Hugh MacLeod explained this in his brilliantly profane book *Ignore Everybody*, "Meeting a person who wrote a masterpiece on the back of a deli menu would not surprise me. Meeting a person who wrote a masterpiece with a silver Cartier fountain pen on an antique writing table in an airy SoHo loft would seriously surprise me." He's got a point there. So let's not underestimate the potential achievements of small teams with tight schedules and budgets.

Look, Cheesy Inspirational Movies don't end up with happy endings because the Aspiring Hero suddenly becomes as rich and well equipped as the Imposing Rival. Fancy tools, lots of money, big support staffs, and other traditional sources of advantage aren't the key to winning. Far from it. What actually happens is that the hero decides he or she

DEFENSE AT&L SAYS GOODBYE TO CAROL SCHEINA



In September, *Defense AT&L* said goodbye to managing editor Carol Scheina, who is leaving the workforce temporarily to spend time at home raising her son, Will, born in July.

Scheina served as managing editor from August 2007, during

which time, she was a strong force for change. She drove a major design change that moved the magazine from a two-color to a full-color publication and introduced a magazine survey process to better understand the needs of the readership. Since these two initiatives, the magazine has been recognized with four awards for publications excellence: the Apex Award for 2009 and 2010, the International Association of Business Communicators Silver Inkwell Award for 2009, and the National Association of Government Communicators Blue Pencil Award for 2010.

Before coming to DAU, Scheina spent four years at the Defense Information Systems Agency as a speechwriter and subsequently as publications team leader, managing a creative team responsible for the production of all the agency's publications. She was also managing editor of *Inside DISA* and *The Grid*, the agency's internal and customer newsletters respectively.

Scheina holds a master's degree in English, professional writing and editing, and a bachelor's degree in English, nonfiction writing and editing with a minor in electronic journalism.

Carol and her many contributions will be much missed at *Defense AT&L* magazine, but we are happy to know that our loss is Will's gain.

Judith Greig
Contributing Editor

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really wants "it," and then works hard to develop and reveal previously unseen talent. Ya gotta want it, and then ya gotta do the training.

And speaking of training, this is where we depart somewhat from the Hollywood success model. The whole training-montage-as-path-to-success is a convenient storyteller's shortcut, but it's not an accurate depiction of the effort required to become great. The truth is, it's hard to excel. It takes time, a lot of time. Malcolm Gladwell's book *Outliers* suggests it takes approximately 10,000 hours to become an expert. Now, nobody has the time to sit through a 10-year movie and I for one am glad film makers compress all that rehearsal into a five-minute clip. But don't be fooled—if we really want to succeed, it ain't gonna happen right away.

The fact that we can't become experts in five minutes notwithstanding, there is still a lesson to be learned from all these films. To paraphrase G.K. Chesterton, we don't watch Cheesy Inspirational Movies because they tell us barriers exist, but because they tell us barriers can be overcome. Sure, it's hard—but it's not impossible. And as the Crusty Old Coach tells us, the first step is to want it.

So tell me ... do ya want it, kid?

Well do ya?

ROLL CREDITS.

The author welcomes comments and questions and can be contacted at daniel.ward@pentagon.af.mil.