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## **ACCOUNTABLE GOVERNMENT**

# Budgets, Performance, and Accountability—Oh My!

by Brian Green

Federal acquisition professionals need heart, wisdom, and courage to manage the government's frontline workers.

**In the iconic 1939 film *The Wizard of Oz*,** Dorothy and her new friends Scarecrow and Tin Man brave “Lions and tigers and bears, oh my!” Why take on the risk?

All three are driven by a quest for something bigger than themselves, yet fundamentally a part of them. For Dorothy, of course, it is reconnection with loved ones back home. For Scarecrow, it is the wisdom of a brain. For Tin Man, it is the compassion of a beating heart. Each is compelled to follow the Yellow Brick Road, moving forward in the face of ominous risks—real and imagined—to reach the Emerald City. What enables them to do so? Exactly the trait that Lion, who eventually joins them on their quest, is seeking: courage.

This classic tale came to mind recently as I contemplated the “deep, dark forest” of budget, performance, and accountability challenges and expectations looming before those in public management during these economically trying times. Agencies are recognizing that, in meeting these challenges and expectations, they must look to their professional acquisition workforce. Congress seems to be recognizing this idea, too. Acquisition professionals, already a besieged lot, need the wherewithal to be up to the task. From what I’ve seen, the heart is there, the wisdom is coming, and the courage is emerging.

## A Tough Job in Any Time

Consider for a moment the headlines you read each morning about what the federal government is, or isn't, doing with your hard-earned money. Homeland security. Cyber security. Healthcare reform. Energy reform. Education reform. Environmental protection. The list goes on.

These major undertakings go through an extensive funding process. The U.S. Office of Management and Budget (OMB) develops and executes the federal budget and, once Congress reviews and approves the budget, OMB allocates funding and ensures it is used in line with the administration's decisions, policies, and priorities. The U.S. General Accountability Office (GAO), an independent, nonpartisan agency, plays a significant role as well. As Congress's watchdog, it oversees how the federal government is spending these approved taxpayer dollars.

How are dollars spent and big initiatives carried out? Through agency programs, by and large. Those programs are typically colossal in scope and complexity—made up of many individual projects, like so many small cogs in a huge wheel.

So who's on the front line, being held accountable for making sure the work involved in conducting a program and its multiplicity of projects actually gets done? Acquisition professionals—those responsible for planning, scheduling, and managing all the programs and projects undertaken as well as acquiring all the products and services needed to launch them and bring them in for a safe landing.

If you simply look at it from one angle, you might say these professionals have the privilege of being part of some of the coolest undertakings in America—modernizing our air traffic control systems, keeping our food supply safe, cleaning up nuclear energy sites, improving services to the dedicated men and women of our U.S. Armed Services, and so on. You'll also see, however, that it can be an incredibly daunting job.

## Pop Quiz

What's smaller than it was 20 years ago (and expected to shrink perhaps by half over the next seven years) but handles three times as much work as then, most of it of far greater complexity?

If you said the federal acquisition workforce, you're right. That workforce is overseeing \$500 billion in contract spending in 2010 alone. However, staffing has been pared down to the bone over the past decade

or so, in part through the outsourcing of some of its responsibilities. And now, nearly 50 percent of today's federal acquisition professionals will be eligible to retire by 2017.

So there's an attrition problem and a brain-drain problem. Think about what the job entails, especially if you're the individual at the top of the responsibility pyramid: the program manager. You need to plan, coordinate, implement, and direct all aspects of a major capital investment from beginning to end.

“The [Obama] Administration is facing many dramatic challenges, and the American people expect strong leadership from the Federal Government. We must act now to ensure that mission-critical purchases are made and overseen by an effective acquisition workforce. We must bring in new talent; we must train and empower them; and, we must preserve institutional knowledge within our acquisition community.”

—Senator Daniel K. Akaka,  
Senate Committee on Homeland Security  
and Governmental Affairs hearing,  
August 5, 2009

Not all that tough, you say? Well, pepper in some ill-defined requirements. Stir in some borrowed human resources with conflicting priorities set by their boss. Add a dab of mission creep. Insert an overzealous politician or two. Chop the program budget by 15 or 20 percent. And just to make things more interesting, remove the original stakeholders and replace them every couple of years with others who may have no interest in or understanding of the program whatsoever.

The job of program manager, and any other acquisition professional, can be overwhelming and frustrating—scarce resources, little recognition, less support.

## A Tougher Job in These Times

Tough in any environment, the job has only become tougher because agency budgets have shrunk, scrutiny

has intensified, and demands for performance and accountability have ratcheted up. Let's take a look at the bigger picture.

## Budget Pressures

Today, the United States has a mounting public-debt crisis. As the economy struggles to find its footing, tax dollars fail to stretch far enough. Soon, entitlement programs such as Social Security and Medicare will be on life support. In January 2010, OMB Deputy Director Rob Nabors declared, "The fiscal trajectory we're on is not sustainable." Therefore, the administration is making tough financial decisions; its feet held to the fire by Congress and the American public.

As agency budgets are slashed, agency officials must determine where to reduce and what to cut altogether. Program managers and other acquisition professionals are feeling the heat as greater fiscal discipline is imposed. They're the ones on the line to justify what needs to be spent and to find ways to complete projects for less.

## Demands for Performance and Accountability

For the past two decades, Congress and the executive branch have taken steps to redirect the focus of agency activities and the acquisition operations that support them. The emphasis has shifted from ensuring compliance with rules and regulations to ensuring performance—achieving desired, demonstrable results cost-effectively.

President Clinton led the Reinventing Government Initiative and signed the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA) into law. The Bush administration pressed the President's Management Agenda (PMA) and assessed programs with the Program Assessment Rating Tool (PART). The Obama administration has now instituted a series of reforms, called the Accountable Government Initiative, with the aim of improving the government's performance and accountability.

Eliminating waste, fraud, and abuse in government has been a constant refrain for decades. But given the federal budget-deficit picture, it has taken on an increasingly urgent tone. Demands for achieving a balance between what the government spends and the value the public receives have climbed to higher and higher decibels.

Congress, the administration, and the American public have come to expect a more transparent view into

how taxpayer dollars are being spent and what is being accomplished. As acting OMB Director Jeffrey Zients recently acknowledged in a memo to all federal senior executives: "There is a distinct role for government in addressing [our country's] challenges, but the American people have doubts about the government's capacity to do so effectively and efficiently."

Hence a proliferation of OMB web-based dashboards aimed at giving politicians, senior executive officials, and the public alike the means of holding government—and government employees—accountable. They include

- [USAspending.gov](#); which shows, agency by agency, where taxpayer dollars are going
- [Performance.gov](#); which is a forthcoming one-stop shop for federal performance information
- [Data.gov](#); which provides a window into the activities of each agency and sub-agency.

Government agencies and their senior officials have never been under a brighter spotlight. Program delivery is out; program performance is in. Complacency is out; transparency is in. The "Emerald City of the East" syndrome—as cynical pundits have referred to Washington's penchant for throwing money at ineffective programs that run on for years, even decades—may finally be on its way to becoming a thing of the past.

## Life in a Fishbowl

What does it all mean for project managers and other acquisition professionals? They're used to being under-staffed, under-supported, and blamed for the inevitable failures. Edicts to cut contract spending, weed out inefficiencies, eliminate the use of high-risk contracting vehicles (noncompetitive contracts, cost-plus contracts, and so forth), reduce outsourced labor costs, and the like are no news to them.

Now, in addition to shouldering these demands, it is as though acquisition professionals are expected to do so with someone constantly looking over their shoulders and expecting them to report and justify all their actions and decisions. Further, in addition to being asked to identify and mitigate all the risks associated with their programs—to ensure results, results, results—they're expected to do so now. ("We need to launch by year-end!")

And what if they don't have the capability or resources? They're looking at the strong possibility of a higher-up's—or GAO's—quick decision to pull the plug on their project or pull the plug on them. It's enough to

make you wonder why anyone in their right mind would want this job in the current environment. Think Scarecrow, Tin Man, and Lion.

## Got Heart

No doubt about it: Working in acquisition management can be daunting and demoralizing. Yet, I have found those in the federal acquisition workforce to be one of the most passionate, dedicated groups of professionals with which I've been honored to associate in my career.

I've observed how the opportunity to work on some larger than life endeavors compels many to do what they do. Beyond that, most have hearts that are wired to serve. As management oracle Ken Blanchard would say, an inherent servant leadership orientation keeps them focused on doing what it takes to deliver for the American people, and a warrior spirit wills them to succeed amidst all the evidence that says they can't. Not to mention, a fun-loving attitude that keeps their spirits high even when the chips are down!

Nevertheless, passion and dedication alone won't do it. As Karen Evans, OMB's administrator for E-Government under the Bush administration, put it: "You can't will a project to succeed." No matter how much heart and soul you put into your efforts, you need an organizational environment that supports your endeavors.

## Gaining Wisdom

If there's a "Glinda the Good Witch" in Washington, D.C., her spirit dwells in the hallways of OMB's Office of Federal Procurement Policy (OFPP) and the Federal Acquisition Institute (FAI) it established. These two organizations have been working feverishly to identify the competencies the acquisition workforce needs to succeed amidst tightening budgets, heightened performance expectations, and increased accountability—and, even more importantly, make training available to these professionals so they can more readily acquire them. Those competencies can be summed up in two words: business acumen.

In 2007, Paul A. Denett, then OFPP administrator, instituted the Federal Acquisition Certification for Program and Project Managers (FAC-P/PM), which complements parallel certifications for contracting specialists and contracting officers' technical representatives (COTRs). FAI established an accompanying training blueprint.

At the center of the certification process are four business-oriented competencies—strategic thinking,

## Figure 1 | FAC-P/PM Leadership Competencies

**Strategic Thinking:** Formulates objectives and priorities, and implements plans consistent with the long-term interest of the organization in a global environment. Capitalizes on opportunities and manages risks.

**External Awareness:** Understands and keeps up-to-date on local, national, and international policies and trends that affect the organization and shape stakeholders' views; is aware of the organization's impact on the external environment.

**Entrepreneurship:** Positions the organization for future success by identifying new opportunities; builds the organization by developing or improving products or services. Takes calculated risks to accomplish organizational objectives.

**Vision:** Takes a long-term view and builds a shared vision with others; acts as a catalyst for organizational change. Influences others to translate vision into action.

external awareness, entrepreneurship, and vision—that all federal acquisition professionals need to make informed, intelligent decisions regarding an agency's major capital investments (see Figure 1). Each competency assumes a big-picture perspective. Managers must grasp the environmental factors facing their agencies, and understand how their actions can contribute to the organization's performance success.

## The VA Is in the Vanguard

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and its VA Acquisition Academy (VAAA) are leading the movement within civilian agencies to improve acquisition performance and build the business acumen of the department's acquisition professionals.

As greater numbers of troops return from deployment, the VA must step up its ability to deliver the services they need and deserve. VA's secretary, retired four-star general Eric Shinseki, has launched several major initiatives in response, including Eliminating Veteran Homelessness, Enabling 21st Century Benefits Delivery and Services, and Automation of the GI Bill.

Rather than “will” these initiatives to succeed, Deputy Secretary Scott Gould has initiated a \$60 million investment to improve the capability of the VA acquisition workforce to support their successful delivery and, over time, improve the organization’s capability to manage the taxpayer funds entrusted to it.

Through the leadership of Chancellor Lisa Doyle and Vice Chancellor Richard Garrison, VAAA has embarked on a Project Performance Improvement Program. The program centers around three weeks of intensive training based on the FAC-P/PM certification model. Its mission is not merely training and certification—it’s performance improvement. The goal is to capture and perpetuate lessons learned to improve business processes over time and create sustainable change agency-wide.

In conjunction with the training program, each acquisition professional, with oversight and support from his supervisor, is being held accountable for creating and implementing a tailored action plan. Each must identify a needed strategic change, build a business case around it, and commit to implementation.

All in all, some 15,000 acquisition professionals across the VA will participate, working collaboratively, to broaden the organization’s communication capabilities. In making this vast investment, VA is betting that as sound processes and practices are identified and shared, and honed and repeated over time, the resulting momentum will transform the agency’s performance capability.

## Congress Has Recognized the Need

Within Congress, the Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce, and the District of Columbia, led by Senator Daniel Akaka, has recognized the criticality of augmenting the ranks and improving the skills of the federal acquisition workforce. Similar leadership is being offered by Senators Susan Collins, George Voinovich, and Tom Carpe.

## Demonstrating Heart, Wisdom, and Courage

In this world, you can’t magically click your heels and complete the hard work of improving government. As the old adage goes, the harder you work, the luckier you will get.

Last year the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) became the only agency whose program, the multibillion dollar Air Traffic Modernization Program,

was removed from the GAO High Risk List. To achieve this, not only did the FAA have to address the gaps within the actual program, it also had to address broader organizational factors—cultural barriers, program management processes, and acquisition related issues—that collectively had thrust this major program into trouble and kept it on the High Risk List for almost 15 years.

In sharing FAA’s story with other agencies, Bob Rovinsky, FAA’s Director of IT Enterprise Management, validates the need for heart, wisdom, and courage in pointing out lessons the agency learned in the process:

- ✦ Heart—Identify champions at three organizational levels who are passionate about serving their constituents better by improving the organization.
- ✦ Wisdom—Implement a hard-hitting, comprehensive, point-by-point plan that identifies and addresses organizational impediments to improving performance. Make the plan transparent to the agency, OMB, and GAO.
- ✦ Courage—Keep working to overcome people’s natural reluctance to confront the organizational issues that must be addressed in improving budgeting, cost estimating, program management, and all other processes within the acquisition life cycle.

Every time I witness the extraordinary efforts under way at the VA, FAA, and other agencies, I am strengthened in my conviction that building the business acumen of the acquisition workforce must be a cornerstone of any initiative to improve organizational performance through increased fiscal discipline and individual accountability.

Winston Churchill once stated, “Courage is what it takes to stand up and speak; courage is also what it takes to sit down and listen.” It sounds like both are beginning to happen within all levels of government.

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