



# Knowledge

is the **SOURCE** of  
**BETTER ACQUISITION OUTCOMES**

An organization's collective knowledge comprises all the information, as well as experience and insight, of its leadership and its workforce. A constant challenge in acquisition is not only how to leverage that knowledge now, but also how to capture and retain that knowledge and the learned lessons for future reuse.

# edge

By **BILL KAPLAN**



**M**uch has been written about acquisition over the 40 years I have been in this profession, and much of what has been written has been repeated over the same time span. The content often covers topics ranging from the planning and execution of core acquisition processes and the training that supports that execution.

An underlying theme, and a continuing challenge, has been the inability of acquisition leadership and the professional acquisition workforce to leverage their critical and relevant knowledge about acquisition more effectively—in other words, to capture, make sense of, and retain acquisition planning and execution lessons and the derived effective practices for access and reuse. This inability is and has been a fundamental challenge that consistently marginalizes the more successful planning, execution, and desired outcomes of the business of acquisition.

A potential solution to this issue is the concept of “All Source Acquisition,” which is the integration of a highly skilled acquisition workforce that understands and executes their core processes using the right tools, methods, and effective practices to deliver the required acquisition outcomes. Through a systematic and

disciplined process of performing and learning, the workforce creates new knowledge comprising a continuously evolving base of information and functional experience that is leveraged across the organization to improve the probability of mission, customer, and stakeholder success.

All Source Acquisition is grounded in an ability to capture, transfer, and reuse the knowledge (information and experience) of the organization to measurably improve acquisition performance. All Source Acquisition enables an acquisition workforce to:

- Leverage their knowledge in ongoing business and operational activities to immediately improve mission performance (acquisition outcomes);
- Improve the workforce’s ability to learn from past challenges and successes in

program decision-making *and* requirements delivery;

- Align process, execution, and training so that the most current experience and expertise is immediately integrated into core processes and their training; and
- Create long-term value from knowledge held by the organization’s acquisition workforce and customers.

All Source Acquisition will enable a working capability at the organization, team, and individual worker level to think more creatively, to more effectively collaborate, to more easily consider different perspectives, and to challenge assumptions as a part of the way work is accomplished.

A central and supporting cornerstone of the All Source Acquisition concept is the development, stand up, and long-term sustainment of an “Acquisition Center of Excellence” (ACE). The ACE has a fundamental role in enabling and facilitating All Source Acquisition as a critical source of core subject matter expertise and experience grounded in the roles and missions of the organization.

### Challenges Are Only Increasing and Becoming More Complex

Acquisition and the environment in which we conduct acquisition are necessarily complex, especially coupled with increasing issues in process execution and the quality of this execution, as well as fewer acquisition professionals who are trained in acquisition and its execution, thus increasing the risk in our ability to more successfully plan and manage expected program outcomes.

### Acquisition Challenges Continue to Exist and Remain Unresolved

Consider the following:

- 1 | **Acquisition programs and activities can be and usually are diverse and organizationally dispersed.** They may be supported by a centralized acquisition

staff with functional acquisition support directorates that have been depleted through attrition or lack the tools, training, and experience to provide the subject matter expertise necessary to support the delivery of the quality outcomes required.

- 2 | **All acquisition is not the same.** For example, in the Department of Defense, space systems acquisition in some aspects differs from non-space major systems acquisition in how programs are planned, executed, and operated. Many acquisition processes require an adaptation of core processes, execution, and training that must be integrated into the management of the programs on a continuing and real-time basis.
- 3 | **The training and continued growth of the core skills necessary for program planning, execution, and management within the acquisition workforce could be more effective.** The gradual decrease in functional expertise and program management discipline over the past decade has resulted in greater difficulty in controlling desired acquisition outcomes.
- 4 | **Existing training needs to focus not only on concept and theory, but also must be tailored to application and implementing practices in the specific organization’s context.** For example, contracting officer representative (COR) training is available at the concept and macro level, but it is not often available, in context, at the agency or organization level. This marginalizes the effectiveness of the CORs because there are also not sources or processes to capture the learnings of the COR workforce on an ongoing and consistent basis so that, in context, experience and expertise is built into the training real time.
- 5 | **Learning lessons focused on the execution of core acquisition processes across an organization could significantly improve acquisition outcomes.** Many acquisition organizations do not

currently demonstrate a collective ability to “learn lessons” or to transfer “better practices” and then reinvest this learning into acquisition planning and policy, program planning, and program execution. There is a real and urgent need to create a consistent, disciplined, and sustainable framework for capturing, adapting, transferring, and reusing critical acquisition knowledge across an acquisition organization.

- 6 | **Learning from the execution of core processes must be consistently leveraged so that improvement in a core process also simultaneously changes training on the process.** Any change in process requires that the training reflect how the process, once improved or changed, is being executed so that the next graduates will be trained based on the most current field experience.
- 7 | **It is often difficult to quickly find knowledge when it is needed.** Finding sources of knowledge either in knowledge repositories or through expertise location is difficult not only because the sources of knowledge exist in multiple locations, but also because the technology to access, search, and find the knowledge needed, when it is needed, can be difficult to use.

### A Path Forward to Consider

#### Knowledge at the Point of Execution®

All Source Acquisition can be most successful through evolving an Acquisition Center of Excellence (ACE) as a trusted source for innovative acquisition and performance solutions and integrating the ACE with the acquisition training function. This integration can develop and provide:

- Context-relevant “fit for purpose” acquisition tools and techniques,
- Competent and relevant acquisition expertise,
- The right training, and

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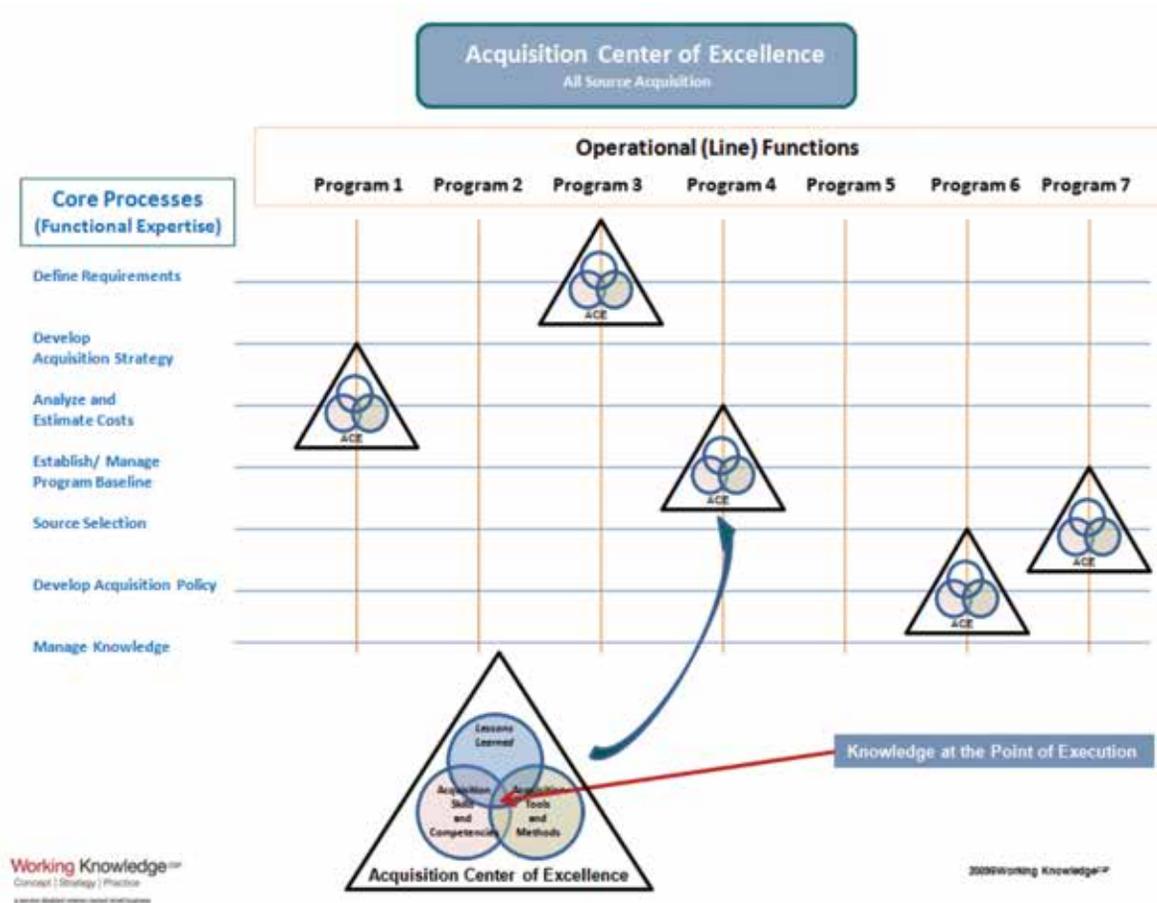


FIGURE 1.

- Practice-based lessons learned to assess, guide, and implement acquisition knowledge-based improvements that directly support the organization’s mission outcomes.

**Operating Concept for an Acquisition Center of Excellence**

In the ACE support concept pictured in FIGURE 1 above, program offices are on the vertical axis and selected acquisition core processes are on the horizontal axis. The triangles reflect the evolving “capability in context” provided by the ACE and the organization’s acquisition training organization/function, in collaboration with and in support of the program offices.

This capability is focused on specific, relevant, and integrated core process support in the following areas:

**1 | Acquisition Skills and Competencies**

- Knowledge and experience available on demand within the ACE with reach back to deep subject matter expertise in all areas of acquisition;
- Collaboration and integration with the organization’s acquisition training function to provide “learning at the point of need” to the program offices on a broad range of acquisition subjects and disciplines;
- Creating and deploying consistent and disciplined knowledge management processes to mitigate the risk of knowledge loss due to workforce attrition and the subsequent loss of the investment already made in developing new

processes and practices as well as mastering existing ones; and

- Establishing an acquisition lessons-learned knowledge base that is relevant, current, and based on experience and insight about core process execution that is readily accessible to both novice and experienced acquisition practitioners, enabling everyone to become more capable more quickly.

**2 | Acquisition Tools and Methods**

- Online access to the organization’s Acquisition Center of Excellence enables users to access, find, and apply the latest policy guidance, management directives, expert knowledge, and leading practices specific to the organization’s

acquisition and core processes. This resource, a web-based Online Acquisition Office (OAO), is provided to all appropriate users through their desktops, providing the organization a mechanism to achieve consistency in both policy and process understanding and execution across program offices. The knowledge base described here would reside in and be accessible through the OAO.

- Within the ACE organization and within the OAO would be a resource library of processes, better practices, learned lessons, tools, templates, and checklists captured and distilled from across the organization.

### 3 | Lesson Learned Processes

- Three processes for learning before, learning during, and learning after execution are introduced,

taught, and coached, to create an organic ability across the program offices that enables the organization (1) to leverage knowledge in ongoing operations to immediately improve performance, (2) to improve the program offices ability to learn from past challenges and successes in developing and managing their programs, and (3) to create long term value for the organization from reusing knowledge, experience, and insight held by the organization's acquisition workforce and its contractors.

### Value of the Concept and Approach

Knowledge at the Point of Execution, a powerful approach when delivered as a required leadership collaboration opportunity between the ACE and the program offices, can yield extraordinary benefit in managing successful acquisition outcomes. While incremental improvements may be achieved by focusing

on one capability, the real long-term benefit is derived from the synergy of enabling the ACE in all three areas: acquisition skills and competencies, acquisition tools and methods, and lessons-learned processes. The whole really is greater than the sum of its parts.

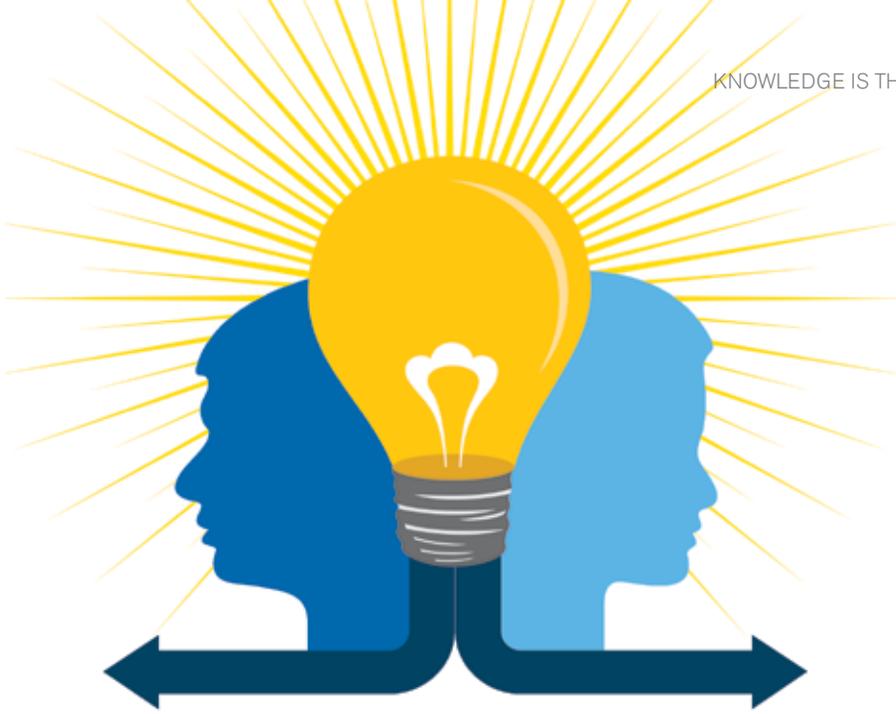
An effective ACE integrated with an effective training function and innovative, forward-thinking acquisition leadership can achieve the following:

- 1 | Mitigate the risk created through the loss of acquisition skills and training;
- 2 | Provide a consistent application of a systematic and disciplined approach that focuses on "knowledge at the point of execution" to help to assure successful mission outcomes;
- 3 | Embed "learning lessons" as a fundamental part of the acquisition planning and execution cycle while aligning process, execution, and training to ensure that the most current field knowledge

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is integrated into process execution and training is aligned with the execution;

- 4 | Consistently find and apply acquisition knowledge that is needed when it is needed for the intended purpose; and
- 5 | Improve understanding of the function and value the ACE provides the program offices areas.

### Support in Practice: An Example

#### Knowledge-Based Risk Management

This is about the ability to use learned lessons in improving decision making. The ACE would help to develop a framework where recognized risks guide knowledge capture and delivery. The operating framework would help program offices work to close knowledge gaps by providing broader access to risk information not only relating to relevant program history, but also capturing and transferring what the organization learns in managing risks on existing programs.

The ACE would help program offices focus on transferring knowledge by integrating it into existing work and acquisition core processes. Captured lessons from across the organization are made accessible in the organization's core knowledge base (knowledge repository) where anyone can search for and find what the organization knows and is learning about risk in any number of circumstances.

A specific application of this concept is through the creation of case studies, a powerful means of capturing and transferring relevant information and experience across an organization. Case studies would be a means to help transfer the context of a program and the program decisions involved to be shared with other program offices facing similar requirements or with similar acquisitions. Program offices would help shape their content. Not only would they be immediately available for reuse by program offices, they would be available as part of organization specific acquisition based training in coordination with the acquisition training function.

The approach suggested is acquisition focused and leverages not only the learned lessons from past programs, but also makes available for reuse current and evolving management "better" practices through organization documented risk management procedures. This framework is based on the recognition that identifying risks highlight potential "knowledge gaps" that may be mitigated through leveraging learned lessons. These same risks also enable focus for the collection of specific programmatic (and technical) challenges that one is likely to see again.

- Finally, ACE support of core processes associated with, in this example, risk management, recognizes some challenges in understanding risk so you can anticipate and manage it more effectively:

- In organizations with defined processes, there is a mistaken belief that if you routinely follow the process, you will be OK—it will be less risky.
- This might work well when processes are predictable—if there are complex processes or if change is possible, then following processes is not enough and it can get risky.
- Managing risk as a core process must emphasize not just information but also experience and insight so you can adapt to change quickly as it occurs...where success is more likely if you can share what you know and can reuse it quickly.
- Learning "at the speed of change" provides agility necessary to adapt to change. **CM**

For more information or to comment on this article, contact [bill@workingknowledge-csp.com](mailto:bill@workingknowledge-csp.com) or visit [www.workingknowledge-csp.com](http://www.workingknowledge-csp.com).

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**BILL KAPLAN, CPCM, Fellow**, is a member of the NCMA Board of Directors. He is the founder of Working Knowledge<sup>CSP</sup> LLC, an SDVOSB and independent consulting company with a practice in knowledge management, acquisition management, and organization performance serving clients in both the public and private sector. Through October 2009, Kaplan was the chief knowledge officer, km practice manager, and corporate ethics officer for Acquisition Solutions, Inc. (now ASI Government). Prior to this, he served as the deputy knowledge management practice manager and a senior consultant for SAIC. He completed a distinguished career in contracting and program management in the U.S. Air Force and the Department of Defense, retiring in the rank of Colonel. During his military career, he earned numerous personal and unit awards and service medals, including the Defense Superior Service Medal and the Legion of Merit Medal.

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