

Acquisition Anonymous

Paul Kimmerly, Double Play Process Diagnostics, Inc.

Abstract. Everyone is familiar with the idea of acquisition. Acquisition is something that we all do in everyday activities. It involves obtaining products or services to address a need. In the case of government acquisition, it includes the use of supplier agreements. When basic principles are tried in government acquisition, it often does not work out as intended. Everyone has heard horror stories about cost overruns, incomplete products, botched services, fraud and cancelled projects in government acquisition. Why is that when it seems so simple to acquire products and services in everyday life? Luckily, there is a proven method to address addictive and self-destructive behavior, the twelve step program. This article offers a look at applying such an approach to improving acquisition efforts.

Introduction

Everyone is familiar with the idea of acquisition. Acquisition is something that we all do in everyday activities where it seems to come naturally. It involves obtaining products or services to address a need. In the case of government acquisition, it includes the use of supplier agreements. When basic principles are used in government acquisition, for some reason, it often does not work out as intended. The history of government acquisition provides horror stories about cost overruns, incomplete products, botched services, fraud and cancelled projects. Why is that when it seems so simple to acquire products and services in everyday life?

In the case of government acquisition, organizations often create their own problems by not paying attention to what they should be doing as an acquirer. Organizations often neglect to take care of their own activities because they are distracted by the activities of their suppliers and the impatience of customers. While the acquiring organization needs to be aware of suppliers' activities and customer concerns, they first need to focus on their own responsibilities. Acquisition starts with writing the contractual requirements, selecting the supplier and writing the supplier agreement. Acquirers often fail to include all the details needed to properly monitor the agreement. Once an agreement is reached, the acquiring organization has obligations as part of that agreement just as the supplier does. Instead of concentrating on their own activities, acquirers can become obsessed with overseeing the supplier's activities.

Obsessing over a supplier's activities can become addictive behavior. It leads to missed obligations and self-destructive actions. Luckily, there is a proven method to address addictive and self-destructive behavior, the twelve step program. The twelve steps can be used to address acquisition problems. The following program applies twelve proactive non-religious steps from Proactive Change¹ to acquisition.

Step 1: I get it: What I've been doing is self-destructive. I need to change.

It's become a cliché, but in order to fix a problem, one must acknowledge that there is a problem. Organizations need to realize that they should concentrate on controlling their own acquisition activities rather than spending time concentrating on supplier activities. The acquiring organization must acknowledge that if they get too involved in the supplier's activities they can neglect activities that will make the acquisition process go more smoothly. If acquirers fail to concentrate on their own activities, problems that arise in one acquisition effort are likely to occur in subsequent acquisitions.

Step 2: I see the big picture: The way to stop relapsing into self-destructive behaviors is to build a healthier sense of self.

Without coming to an understanding of their acquisition process and its limitations, organizations can continue counterproductive activities by sticking to the idea that "it's always been done this way." That does not mean that it's been done well. To gain a big picture understanding of the current process, guidelines or standards form a basis for comparison. Two widely accepted acquisition standards are the Federal Acquisition Regulation (FAR) and the CMMI[®] for Acquisition (CMMI-ACQ). An improvement effort for acquisition starts with a close look at the FAR or the CMMI-ACQ. The CMMI-ACQ focuses on what to do in relation to best practices from the acquisition industry. The FAR outlines the steps to be followed in government acquisition. The FAR delves into details of how activities are to be performed if specific conditions are met. The FAR can be a daunting document, but it contains an abundance of useful information. The CMMI-ACQ provides a framework for taking a big picture, holistic approach to performing acquisition activities. Simply put, the CMMI-ACQ describes what to do and the FAR describes how.

Step 3: I have an action plan: From now on, I am squarely facing everything that is in the way of feeling really satisfied with my life.

Getting a big picture view of the current process as we described in step 2 provides a good start for developing an improvement action plan. Acquisition organizations need to take an honest look at their current process to identify areas for improvement. While a government acquisition organization may claim it is following the FAR, the details of what is really going on may not be known. Before improvements can be identified, an organization should document the current state of the process as it is being performed, not the ideal process. Organizations may not want to admit that their current process differs from the ideal, but until they admit it, they cannot really begin to improve as we said in step 1. Once the current process is understood, a detailed improvement plan should be developed and used to address identified needs or concerns.

Step 4: I honestly look at the effects of my actions on others and myself.

Acquiring organizations need an understanding of how their actions are perceived by their customers and suppliers. They also need to take stock of their own actions. Customer surveys or other interactions help get an external look. For an internal look, organizations should conduct an appraisal of their current performed processes against the CMMI-ACQ or an audit against the FAR. By making an objective evaluation of their current processes, an organization can gain an understanding of processes in need of improvement and effective practices that can be leveraged to improve future acquisition efforts.

Step 5: I take responsibility for my actions.

Acquirers must understand and accept their responsibilities. The acquirer has primary responsibilities at the beginning of the acquisition process when they gather requirements, develop the acquisition plan, solicit bids and select the supplier. At that point, control of the project passes to the supplier for developing the product or service. During the development activities, the acquirer is responsible for monitoring and overseeing the supplier's activities. The acquirer cannot control supplier actions, but the acquirer has influence and provides leadership. After the product is delivered, responsibility shifts back to the acquirer. The acquirer should verify and validate the product before transitioning it to its operational environment. While all acquisition efforts involve several parties, the acquiring organization will be better able to meet their customers' needs and oversee the efforts of their supplier if they have better understanding and control over their own areas of responsibility.

Step 6: I see that my knee-jerk reactions have to do with being in the grip of more or less conscious fears.

Organizations become complacent and comfortable in doing things the way that they have always been done. However, by doing things the same way, the same problems are likely to occur. Organizations are not prepared for situations that arise and instead react from crisis to crisis if they do not have an action plan for each acquisition effort. Such a plan includes acquisition activities, supplier interactions and risk management. By reacting to every crisis without an overall plan of action, organizations can miss opportunities that will help them succeed. An established, documented and used set of processes can help an organization manage their efforts according to their plan without overreacting to each minor problem.

Step 7: I strive to find my motivation in a deeper sense of who I really am, rather than fear and defensiveness.

By identifying and using a set of measures, an organization gets a deeper understanding of process performance that enables management of current efforts and predictions of future performance. Basic measures related to size, effort, cost, schedule and defects should be defined, collected and used. Examples of measurements for acquisition include the amount of time to develop a request for proposal (RFP), the number of pages in a RFP, the number of proposals reviewed, actual versus planned schedule milestones, proposal review time, peer review defects

for acquisition documents and the amount of time to create a supplier agreement. The use of measurements brings an understanding of process performance. Without measurement and the understanding it brings, organizations can find themselves reacting rather than managing. Constant crisis management often leads to doing the wrong things and addressing the wrong problems. It can also lead to addressing symptoms rather than the root cause of problems.

Step 8: I stop blaming and feeling blamed, with a willingness to heal the wounds.

Failures often turn into a search for the guilty and may lead to blame for the acquiring organization, suppliers and even customers. Organizations should look beyond blame and accept that problems occur. Rather than focus on problems, an organization should concentrate on how to recover and avoid the problems in future projects. This allows the organization to identify the causes for problems and find ways to address them.

Step 9: I swallow my pride, and sincerely apologize to people I've hurt, except when this would be counterproductive.

Organizations should accept and acknowledge the shortcomings of their processes and begin a sincere improvement program. When a problem occurs an organization needs to acknowledge the problem to all affected stakeholders. All stakeholders, including customers and suppliers should be involved in the discussion of acquisition problems and in the development of solutions to address known problems.

Step 10: I live mindfully, paying attention to the motives and effects of my actions.

As stated in step 7, an organization should establish a measurement program to monitor acquisition activities and project results. Measurements monitor progress and allow the organization to take corrective action when necessary. Objective evaluations should be conducted to ensure that established processes are being followed. Peer reviews provide a useful form of self-evaluation. Peer reviews of acquisition documents like RFPs, supplier agreements and operational plans help an organization stay mindful of the quality of their activities. Measurements and evaluations help identify the effects of the organization's actions and lead to an understanding of what is working and what needs to be improved.

Step 11: I stay in touch with a broader sense of who I really am, and a deeper sense of what I really want.

Acquirers should acknowledge who they are and recognize their specific areas of control. Acquirer responsibilities start with the first interactions with the customer to develop requirements. Customer needs are used to develop customer and contractual requirements. The contractual requirements help identify and select suppliers. When the supplier agreement is developed, the acquiring organization must ensure that all important components are included in the agreement. If it's not in the agreement, there is no guarantee that it will happen. Once the agreement is established, the acquirer needs to ensure that they and the supplier understand the assigned actions for both organizations. The acquirer is responsible for holding up their end of the bargain.

Step 12: A growing sense of wholeness and contentment motivates me to keep at it, and to share this process with others who are struggling.

An organization can learn from measurement results, appraisals, peer reviews and evaluations. Appraisals against standards, evaluations against established processes, peer review results and performance measures of the acquisition efforts can be used to leverage successes to other projects. The organization should use the measurement program to collect historical data for future use. Successes and failures should be shared with other parts of the organization to help with future acquisition efforts.

Conclusion

These twelve steps may seem simple and straightforward. Acquisition seems that way too. In order to improve, an organization must accept that there are problems to address. Improvement means change and change does not come easy. The twelve steps presented here can help an organization address some of the counterproductive behaviors common to a lot of acquisition efforts. By following these steps, an organization accepts their responsibilities, documents current processes as performed, evaluates processes against applicable standards, measures their results, monitors to ensure that processes are being followed and gains greater control over acquisition activities. As a result, acquirers will be better equipped to address customer needs, establish supplier agreements, monitor suppliers and manage their own acquisition activities.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Paul Kimmerly worked 25 years for the different incarnations of the United States Marine Corps Technology Services Organization (USMC TSO). He spent the last 16 years as the SEPG Lead before he retired in July 2011. Paul is a certified CMMI High Maturity Lead Appraiser and Instructor for the CMMI for Development and the CMMI for Acquisition. He works as an independent contractor with the CMMI Institute teaching and observing candidate lead appraisers and instructors. He is also a member of the editorial board for CROSSTALK magazine. He contributed several articles on process improvement to CROSSTALK. The articles cover topics including organizational change, management's role in process improvement and high maturity concepts. Since retiring from government service, Paul continues to work with clients in government and private industry as part of Double Play Process Diagnostics Inc.

Double Play Process Diagnostics, Inc.

PO Box 17015

Pensacola, FL 32522

Phone: 913-220-4499

E-mail: Paul.kimmerly@doubleplayconsulting.com

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