

Part I – “The What”
Selection of Federal Project Directors (FPD)
Defining the Leadership Traits/Skill Set for a Successful
Federal Project Director

1) What is the issue?

There is a need to better define the Office of Science (SC) expectations for the leadership traits/skills for Federal Project Directors (FPD), particularly those that manage the larger Level 3 and Level 4 projects. This document (Part I) addresses “what” leadership traits/skills are needed. A second paper (Part II) discusses “how” a FPD “obtains” and then “demonstrates” that they possess these traits/skills.

2) Why is this an issue?

Recruiting and selecting capable FPDs for the largest projects (Level 3 and Level 4) has been difficult and frustrating for both SC Headquarters (HQ) and the field. Consistent with DOE Order 413.3A, the Acquisition Executive is responsible for approving the appointment of the FPDs. Many of the desired leadership traits for these Senior FPDs are behavioral and, therefore, subjective and difficult to measure. A lack of DOE project leadership, in the form of competent and capable FPDs, can create difficulties in the management of these projects and result in increases in SC project failures leading to:

- a requirement for more resources than planned to complete projects (as these are the largest projects, even a small percentage change can have a large dollar impact)
- a negative reflection on SC’s reputation
- likely impact SC’s ability to get funding for future projects
- requirement for M&Os to work harder to overcome lack of competent and capable FPD (FPD does not provide value added)
- additional requirements for the next SC projects to get approved in an attempt to make sure that this problem never happens again

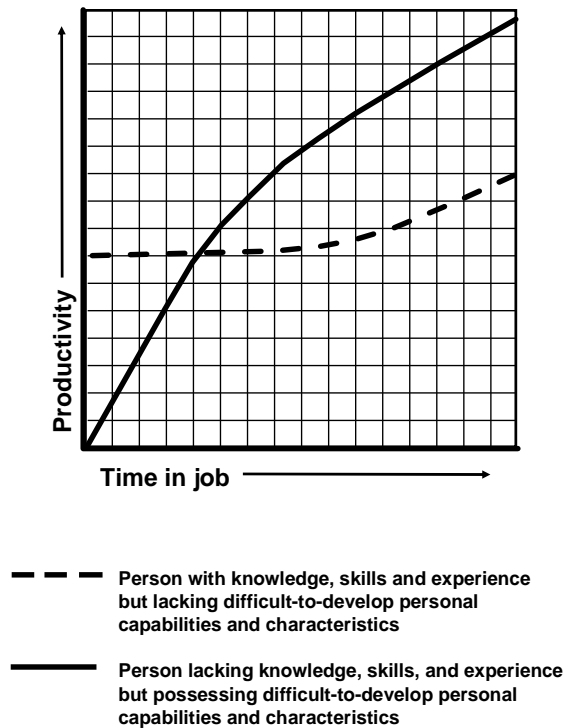
SC managers see a variety of leadership skill levels within their staff. Few have “demonstrated” that they have mastered the requisite skills to be a leader; whether it is a team leader, a supervisor, or a FPD. There are staff members with potential, who with some training, experience, and mentoring will be able to develop and demonstrate the requisite leadership skill set. Unfortunately, there is not a well defined process where HQ, the Site Office Manager, and the FPD understand the FPD leadership requirements and how the attainment of these leadership requirements can be adequately demonstrated.

3) What can be done about this issue?

Leadership requirements for these senior FPD positions need to be more clearly defined. How these leadership traits can be demonstrated also needs to be better described. This information will be useful to the upcoming FPDs, as well as to their supervisors. In addition, specific programs (developmental assignments, mentoring, and training) can be put in place that allow potential FPDs to demonstrate or acquire the necessary leadership skill set.

It has been observed that leadership skills may be more difficult to acquire, as they fall under “personal capabilities and characteristics”, than some of the more technical project management skills. See the chart below. (Source: Dr. Owen Gadeken, Project Managers as Leaders, Army R&D Magazine, 1997.)

PERSONAL ATTRIBUTES ARRAYED BY EASE OF DEVELOPMENT



4) Where should the discussion start?

First, there needs to be understanding of the higher level objective for selecting FPDs. The overall SC objective is to select competent and capable FPDs who will maximize SC’s ability to successfully manage SC projects. For this study “competent and capable”

means that they have the requisite project management technical skills, as well as the leadership skills. “Successful” implies effectively and efficiently achieving the approved project baseline. To ensure that this is a manageable study, the focus will be on the specific FPD leadership skills.

Next, leadership needs to be defined. According to the American Heritage Dictionary to “lead” is defined as “to show the way; to guide or direct in a course; to guide the action or opinion; to play a principle or guiding role; to direct the performance or activities; to act as a commander, director or guide; to afford a passage, route or course; to tend toward a certain goal or result; an example; and to lure along a particular course.”

The role of the FPD also needs to be defined with an understanding that leadership has situational aspects. To summarize, the FPDs role is to be the “Owners’ Representative” for the assigned project. FPDs serve as the single point of contact between DOE and the contractor, typically as a Contracting Officer’s Representative. FPDs lead the Integrated Project Team and are responsible and accountable within DOE for ensuring the success of the assigned project. FPDs add value to the successful completion of the project.

One last definition that will be used throughout the study is “demonstrate”. To demonstrate is “to prove or make evident; to describe or illustrate by practical application; to display; to make obvious or apparent.”

An initial list of leadership skills and abilities from SC Management (Dan Lehman and Pat Dehmer) listed critical attributes for a capable and competent FPD. (Source: Dr. Owen Gaden, Project Managers as Leaders, Army R&D Magazine, 1997.) The initial list of desirable attributes includes:

- a) Strongly committed to their mission
- b) Long term and big picture perspective
- c) Both systematic and innovative thinkers
- d) Selective in involvement with project issues
- e) Find and empower the best people for the project team
- f) Focus heavily on external stakeholders
- g) Thrive on relationships and influence
- h) Proactively gather/analyze information and insist on results

Mike Holland also contributed a list of attributes:

- i) Demonstrate Functional Competence – professional skills, productivity, and effectiveness
- j) Demonstrate Problem Solving Ability - critical thinking, takes appropriate action
- k) Demonstrate Personal Leadership – accountability, motivation, ethical behavior
- l) Builds Partnerships – respects others, builds consensus
- m) Communicates Effectively – with all levels of the organization and with all stakeholders

- n) Be Innovative – generate and encourage new ideas
- o) Be Resilient – deal constructively with pressure, be optimistic, maintain focus, adapt to the unexpected

While these leadership traits apply to all FPDs, in general, the larger the project the more these leadership skills will be tested.

5) What approach was selected?

The 8 criteria ('a' through 'h') provided by Dan Lehman and Pat Dehmer (above) was compared with Mike Holland's list to determine if anything in the 8 criteria needed to be modified (clarified or revised to better fit the SC circumstances) or expanded upon to better define the desired attributes. A number of reports/reviews of the DOE Project Management System were examined and the criteria used by the Project Management Institute was also reviewed.

6) What should the final product look like?

The final product should be a consensus, detailed list of leadership attributes for senior FPDs. This list should be clear enough that SC HQ is satisfied that achieving the items on the list will mean that the likelihood of identifying a successful FPD will be maximized. Also, the Site Office Manager can then use the list for recommending the selection of a FPD and for development and training needs. The list should provide clearer expectations for SC staff seeking to become a senior FPD. Finally, it is important to consider how a FPD can obtain proficiency in the essential FPD leadership skills.

If this was an easy task such a list would have been available long ago. Leadership attributes will continue to contain some subjectivity. There is no single test that will remove all the subjectivity. The overall objective is to make the FPD selection process better and to reduce the level of uncertainty associated with such a selection.

7) Initial Draft Product

a) Are strongly committed to their mission by demonstrating that they:

- 1) actively serve as a single point of contact between DOE and the project with responsibility, authority, and accountability for project results
- 2) can clearly articulate their responsibilities and authorities for project success and provide clear examples of their execution
- 3) are driven to achieve successful project results
- 4) place project mission above personal goals and ego
- 5) ensure that the contractor understands the DOE expectations for the project (interprets, provides more detail, provides examples, etc.)
- 6) are viewed as providing a fair and impartial assessment of contractor project performance

- 7) understand the key issues facing project success and takes actions when needed to ensure that the contractor is performing up to expectations
- 8) can clearly articulate their own contributions to project success
- 9) know when to engage the Site Office Manager, SC HQ Program Manager, and/or Laboratory Management to become involved in significant threats to project success that are outside the control of the FPD

b) Have a long term and big picture perspective by demonstrating that they:

- 1) understand and can articulate the importance of the project in the overall SC R&D Program strategy
- 2) understand and can articulate the importance of the project in the overall success of the Laboratory
- 3) understand and can articulate what is needed for the project to be successful
- 4) understand and can articulate what are the primary risks and threats to project success
- 5) understand and can articulate what it means to DOE and the Laboratory for the project to fail
- 6) understand and can articulate how they, as a FPD, participate in the project management process to enhance the success of the project
- 7) understand and can articulate the role of the contractor and their relationship to DOE
- 8) maintain overall focus on achieving a successful project
- 9) provide informative and timely reporting to their management and to SC HQ
- 10) ensure the contractor understands DOE expectations
- 11) display effective negotiation skills

c) Are both systematic and innovative thinkers by demonstrating that they:

- 1) are not afraid to make decisions (knows when there is sufficient information to make a decision or risk is manageable) and then can support and defend those decisions based on sound logical thinking
- 2) are actively involved in key project decisions
- 3) can describe and defend major project actions in terms of ensuring project success
- 4) actively participate in SC reviews of the project
- 5) can provide an objective assessment of the project
- 6) can be counted on to develop innovative solutions to problems

d) Are selective in their involvement in project issues by demonstrating that they:

- 1) can identify important issues that threaten project success and then take an active role; does not get bogged down in non-critical issues; can tell the difference
- 2) ensure corrective actions are implemented for important issues
- 3) actively participate in contingency planning

e) Find and empower the best people for their project team by demonstrating that they:

- 1) can delegate authority to IPT project team members and hold them accountable for results; however, they understand that they, as the FPD, are still responsible for the results
- 2) ensure adequate support is available from the Site Office or Support Center to assist in identifying important issues and working them to a satisfactory resolution
- 3) successfully motivate the IPT

f) Effectively engage external stakeholders by demonstrating that they:

- 1) identify those stakeholders who can jeopardize project success; understand their issues and develop strategies to deal with those issues to ensure these issues do not jeopardize the success of the project
- 2) build partnerships with stakeholders and work to build a consensus where it is needed for the project to be successful
- 3) ensure permits and other regulatory requirements are met
- 4) understand OECM requirements and develop a reasonable strategy to meet/respond to these requirements

g) Thrive on internal relationships and influence by demonstrating that they:

- 1) work closely with the “responsible SC HQ Office” and Acquisition Executive to ensure that they understand project status and issues and what actions need to take to support the success of the project
- 2) keep responsible SC HQ Program Office informed on key project issues that could jeopardize project success
- 3) ensure their Site Office management understands project status and issues
- 4) solicit assistance where needed to ensure project success
- 5) accepts and responds positively to feedback and criticism and strives to demonstrate improved performance

h) Proactively gather/analyze information and insist on results by demonstrating that they:

- 1) have logical problem solving capabilities; can articulate how the solution was developed from data
- 2) ensure expectations for project success are understood by their management and how these expectations are being achieved
- 3) take the initiative on identifying potential issues and possible contingency plans
- 4) hold the contractor responsible for overall performance; fairly evaluates contractor project performance

i) Possess functional competence by demonstrating that they:

- 1) have obtained required project management technical skills in a timely manner that are consistent with managing assigned project
- 2) understand and can apply key elements of the DOE Orders on Project Management to assigned project
- 3) sufficient skills that can be used on SC project review committees for other projects
- 4) viewed as productive and effective FPDs
- 5) exercise balance and judgment during stressful times
- 6) come well prepared for project meetings

j) Possess communication and knowledge sharing skills by demonstrating that they:

- 1) have good verbal and writing skills in order to articulate project expectations, achievements, issues, and proposed solutions
- 2) can be counted on to provide compelling presentations during Project ESAAB reviews or other project reviews
- 3) routinely reflect on causes of project successes or failures and actively and effectively share these lessons learned

8) What are the negative traits that need to be avoided (viewed as “lacking leadership” traits)?

There are several traits that potential FPDs need to avoid as they are an indication that the FPD lacks the requisite leadership traits, such as:

- a) serves only as a pass-through between DOE and the contractor performing the project (no demonstrated value added)
- b) cannot be counted on for impartial judgments on project performance
- c) is not actively involved in the project issues or decision-making
- d) does not appear to be responsible and accountable for assigned projects
- e) considered a good follower but not a leader
- f) cannot answer important questions about the project
- g) attitude and entitlement issues: “I have sufficient time in grade to qualify for the FPD position, so it should be mine and I can learn all I need to know after I get the job.”
- h) inability to articulate DOE expectations to the contractor
- i) poor communication skills (written and/or verbal)
- j) poor negotiation skills
- k) adds unnecessary burdens to the contractor by requiring the contractor to develop and produce materials that are the FPD’s responsibility