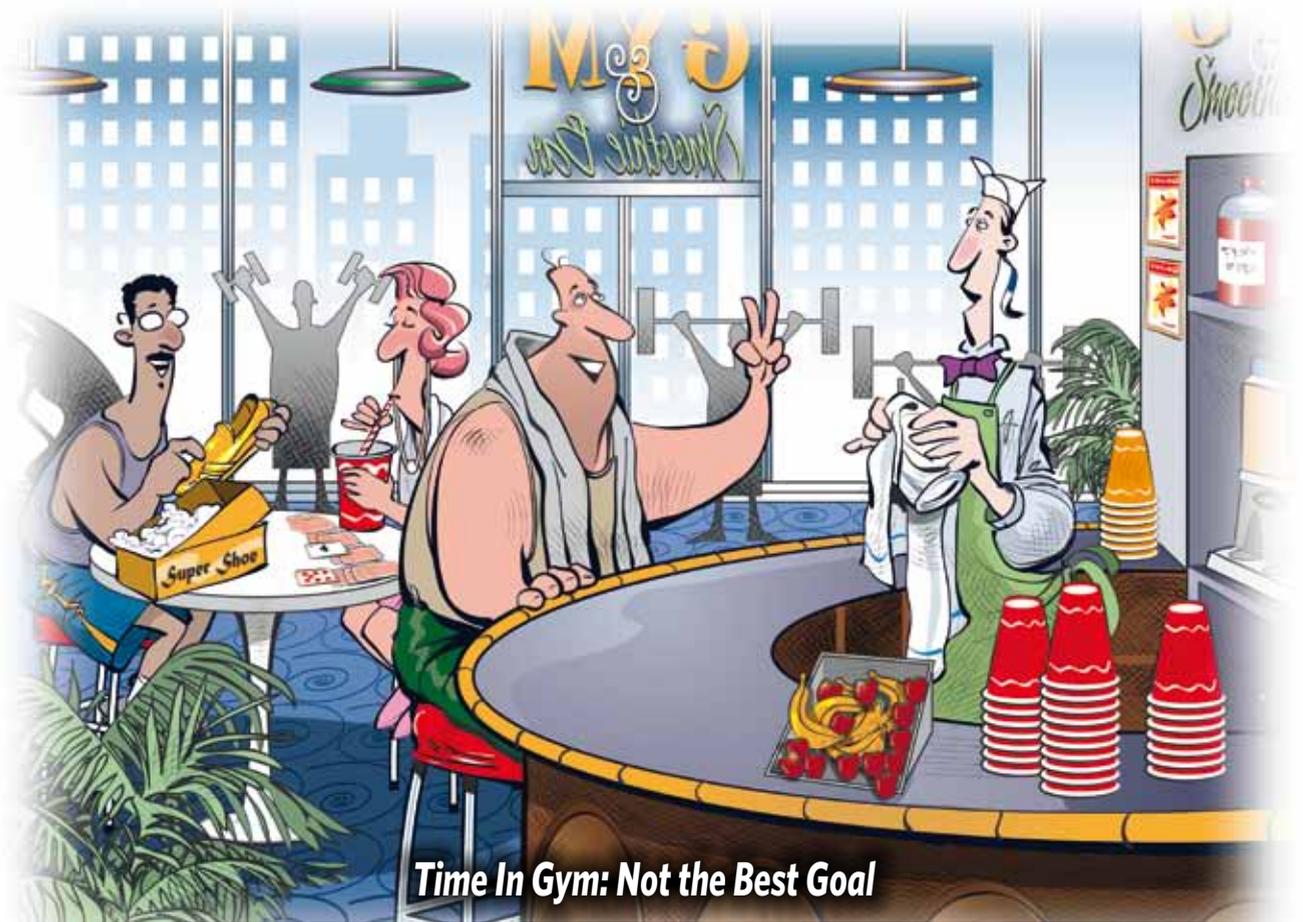


# The Goal of Defense Acquisition

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recently asked a couple of dozen colleagues an apparently simple question: "What is the goal of defense acquisition?" Their responses were remarkably diverse. Some people emphatically asserted the answer was simple and sent me short goal statements. Others insisted the question was complicated and submitted lengthy replies. A few jokers sent answers that shouldn't be published here, even though I confess they made me laugh. As I perused the stack, it was interesting to see so many different perspectives. Interesting, but also a little disturbing.

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## Confusion about the goal causes counterproductive behavior which actually moves us away from where we want to go.



A goal is the organization's purpose for existing—the thing it was created to do. If the organization does not achieve its goal, it has failed. So the question "What is the goal?" is a fundamental one, and divergent goal definitions are a bad sign. Ideally, an organization's goal directs its activities and measurements and defines the very heart of organizational success. Without a goal, we don't know if we're doing the right thing or making meaningful progress. Of course, an organization may have multiple goals and sub-goals, but at the end of the day, there needs to be a single, over-arching, tie-breaker goal—a Most Important Thing, if you will.

Here's why this matters: Confusion about the goal causes counterproductive behavior which actually moves us away from where we want to go. So the fact that no two people proposed the same goal statement probably means we've got a problem.

The inspiration for this little research project came from Eli Goldratt's business novel *The Goal*. This book is widely regarded as the original source for the Theory of Constraints, but as the title indicates, the concept of goal identification is central to the story. In fact, goal identification just may be the most important concept in Goldratt's story, and indeed it is the pivot point for much of the novel's drama.

To be clear, the results of my admittedly unscientific experiment weren't entirely dissimilar. As you might imagine, many of the proposed goal statements included some variant on "achieving cost, schedule and performance objectives." But Goldratt's book argues strongly that such goal statements aren't quite right.

In *The Goal*, the main character (Alex) makes the startling observation that efficiently producing quality products is not the goal of a factory, nor is it to advance the state of the art of technology. Instead, he realizes that the goal of a factory is simply this: to make money, now and in the future.

Goldratt argues that if a factory makes quality products efficiently but unprofitably, it's failed. If it uses or develops advanced technology but doesn't make money, it's failed. The only true success for a factory is to make money, because without profit, the factory won't survive.

This analysis began to cast a little doubt on all those acquisition goal statements that echo the "achieving cost, schedule, and performance objectives" concept. That type of goal sounds suspiciously like "efficiently produce quality products," which is firmly rejected in *The Goal*. I started to wonder: If efficient production of quality products is not the goal of a factory, maybe it's not the goal of the defense acquisition enterprise either. So I decided to take a closer look.

Imagine if the acquisition community efficiently delivered quality products that didn't line up with operational needs. That would be a failure, right?

Similarly, what if we meet the cost and schedule objectives, but they were too high in the first place, resulting in systems we can't afford? Or what if the development costs are on target but the operational costs are unsupportable? Clearly, a system can be "on budget" and still be an unaffordable failure.

What if one program delivers on time and on schedule but drives all sorts of problems and delays into a dozen other programs? What if the delivered system can't integrate with the rest of the operational environment? What if we optimize one system at the expense of the larger system-of-systems? What if we improve engineering in a way that hurts logistics? Fail, fail, fail, fail.

Maybe we just need to adjust the goal statement. We could add lots of phrases like "in response to user needs" and "in an integrated fashion" to the cost/schedule/performance goal, ending up with a statement that is both more comprehensive and more cumbersome. Is the goal of defense acquisition to "deliver affordable, war-winning, sustainable, effective, integrated, compatible capabilities on-time and on-schedule, without driving expensive changes into the operational environment"? Or does even that phrasing leave out critical aspects? I suspect the solution isn't to pile on more phrases, caveats, and nuances. The longer the statement is, the more likely we haven't quite defined the goal yet.

Which brings us back to Goldratt's book. He argues that a factory's goal is "to make money, now and in the future." We may agree a factory is supposed to make money, but clearly, that is not the goal of acquisitions, at least from the government side. We're not in the profit business.

Just what sort of business is the acquisition community in? True, acquisition involves providing products and services, sort of like a commercial entity, but not for the purpose of selling them at a profit. Is there perhaps something we make instead

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of money? Some greater goal? What if the thing we make, our equivalent to a factory's profit, is national strength?

Perhaps the primary goal of defense acquisition is this: make America stronger, now and in the future.

Let's test that thought. Is it sufficient to achieve that goal if we don't achieve any others? And are there any activities we could undertake in support of that goal that would ultimately be counterproductive?

The act of efficiently producing quality goods serves that goal, just as it serves a factory's profit motive. Delivering systems that work, meet genuine needs and can integrate with other systems also serves that goal. These sub-goals are important, but they can't be allowed to trump the main goal.

If we optimize a part at the expense of the whole, we could make the nation weaker, which does not support the goal. Keep in mind that counterproductive optimization of a part can be inadvertently justified using cost/schedule/performance goals, but we avoid this pitfall if we define the goal as making the nation stronger.

This does not mean the Defense Acquisition Workforce shouldn't care about efficiency, quality, or advancing the state of the art. A manufacturer can't ignore those things, either. It just means none of those activities are THE goal. And if those are not the goal, perhaps we need to take a closer look at the way we define and measure progress, at our metrics and our activities.

Let's step away from the factory metaphor for a moment. Instead of a factory, whose goal is to make money, we could consider a gym. What is the goal of exercise? Why do people work out? Sure, some people do it for fun, some for their mental health, some as a way to socialize and some just because they like wearing spandex. But imagine for a moment that a group of people decided their goal was to get fit (understanding that the generic concept of "fitness" can be defined in several ways). How would fitness as a goal shape their behavior? How would it shape the things they measure, monitor and track?

It is certainly possible to spend a lot of time in the gym and still be out of shape, so it would be pretty silly to use Time in Gym as a primary metric and expect that hanging around the smoothie bar will erase those love handles. Further, I could spend buckets of money on expensive gear, clothing, and equipment and still be a slug, so Money Spent on Fitness probably isn't a great metric either. I can have fun and socialize in the gym without getting any slimmer, stronger or swifter, so if fitness is the goal, then Number of Cool People Met and Enjoyment Level aren't great metrics or central activities either.

If the goal is fitness, doesn't it make sense to move our bodies around in particular ways, then, depending on the type of fitness we're aiming for, to measure how many pounds we've lost, how far/fast we can run, or how much weight we can lift? We could even get all scientific and measure stuff like resting pulse rates and blood pressure. Measurements like this indicate whether we're getting fitter, right? And if we don't see the results we were aiming for, it's time to find a different way to move our bodies, because the current motions aren't effective. I hear there's an opening in the spin class.

Keep in mind: Defining the goal as fitness doesn't mean you can't ever have fun, meet people, wear stretchy pants or spend money like crazy. It just means those things aren't the goal. In order to be meaningful, our metrics and activities must be connected to the goal, so those things shouldn't be at the heart of what we do or how we monitor progress.

If you ever read an airline magazine, you've probably seen advertisements for the ROM exercise machine, which promises to whip you into shape with a 4-minute workout. It only costs \$14,615, which is apparently quite a bargain. I have no data and no opinion as to the veracity of the ROM claims. For all I know, the thing works great. Or maybe not. I only mention it because I can imagine some people might feel bad about spending that much money on a piece of equipment they'll only use 4 minutes a day.

I'd like to gently suggest that dollars spent divided by time used is a bad way to measure fitness—because it doesn't actually measure fitness. As we've seen, the amount of time and money you spend are unreliable indicators of how fit you're getting. The real question is whether or not the thing made you bigger, sleeker, or tougher. Or maybe you're just going for a lower

resting pulse. Again, “fitness” has many definitions, and we’ll need to be precise with what we mean by that term. Once we’ve defined it sufficiently, it’s important to make sure our activities and measurements are aligned with that goal.

Maybe the ROM isn’t for me. Perhaps I can get an equivalent level of fitness by spending \$15 on a pair of used running shoes and putting in countless hours on the track. That’s where an analysis of alternatives comes in. If I’ve got plenty of time to work out and not a lot of spare cash, running might be the way to go. If I’ve got more money than I know what to do with and no free time then sure, buy a ROM. In either case, the thing to keep in mind is that the goal is fitness, not spending time or money.

While time and money are interesting aspects of the situation, there’s no sense in trying to figure out if I got my money’s worth in terms of dollars spent per hour used. The real question is whether I’m in better shape or not. Fitness per dollar or fitness per hour are both fine metrics. We could even get all mathematical and measure fitness per dollar-minute and compare multiple options. The key is to include the goal—fitness—in the calculation somewhere.

OK, back to defense acquisition. If the goal is to make America stronger, then the acquisition enterprise is sort of like a national gym. It’s full of wonderful machines that target different parts of our metaphorical anatomy; some exercise our airpower biceps, while others exercise our seapower pecs, our spacepower delts, our ground-based quads, and our highly coveted Marine Corps six-pack abs. We even have stuff that make our cyberpower gray matter swifter and smarter.

As we use these machines to crank out new acquisition programs, it’s important to ask a few critical questions: What is the goal? Do we have the right goal? Are our metrics and behaviors aligned with the goal?

The interesting thing is, the protagonist in Goldratt’s book didn’t so much decide his factory’s goal as discover it. Like a Platonic form, the goal possesses a higher kind of reality, independent of whether it is explicitly recognized or accepted by mere mortals. Thus, the question of the goal of defense acquisitions is not one for senior leadership to answer alone. The responsibility lies with us all, to seek to understand the goal. To ensure our activities and measurements support it. To ask the questions.

I don’t know if “Make America stronger, now and in the future” is really the right goal for the acquisition enterprise. For all I know, there’s a much better goal statement out there, and maybe there’s even a wide consensus on what that statement is. Maybe Goldratt is completely off-base, entirely irrelevant to defense acquisition, or both. Maybe efficient production of quality products is exactly the right goal. Or maybe not. I suspect Plato would agree it’s a question worth considering.

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