

CAREER DEVELOPMENT & TRAINING

Taking Care of Business: The VA Commits to Training

by Richard Garrison

Training initiative engages employees to review fundamentals in every line of operation, rids the agency of contract over-runs and high-risk programs, and improves staff skill levels.

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) faces an increasingly challenging operating environment. Veterans' demands, in terms of claims and services per client, are growing in volume and complexity. Meanwhile economic, legislative, and national security contexts present significant uncertainties. To address these challenges, VA Secretary Eric K. Shinseki has implemented Transformation 21, a program targeted toward engaging employees to review fundamentals in every line of operation, rid the agency of contract over-runs and high-risk programs, and improve staff skill levels.

According to Secretary Shinseki, Transformation 21 is "people-centric, results-driven, and forward-looking. This transformation is demanded by new times, new technologies, new demographic realities, and new commitments to today's veterans. We must be sure that valuable taxpayer dollars are invested in programs that work for our veterans."

A Strategic Vision

In the VA's FY2010-2014 Strategic Plan, Secretary Shinseki articulates a four-point strategy:

- transform the VA culture, mindsets, and behaviors
- improve program performance
- mitigate operational risks
- ensure individual and organizational accountability for improving veteran services, such as provisions of healthcare benefits.

For example, in July 2009, he suspended 45 information technology projects that individually and collectively posed major financial and operational risks to the agency and its mission.

“VA has a responsibility to the American people,” the secretary said, “to deliver quality results that adhere to a budget, and are delivered on time. They need to have confidence that the dollars they are spending are being effectively used to improve the lives of our veterans.”

Training that Transforms

At the Veterans Affairs Acquisition Academy (VAAA), a quotation is inscribed on the wall: “We are a team of trusted business advisors forging innovative acquisition solutions to serve those who served us.”

This is the mission that guides the academy’s work in helping the VA establish project management competencies and achieve the Transformation 21 objectives. Currently, the VA CIO and the executive director of Enterprise Program Management Office (ePMO) are updating policies, procedures, practices, and management structures.

The VAAA was challenged by Deputy Secretary of the VA W. Scott Gould, “to train all of the VA’s program and project managers (PMs), improve VA performance by making an immediate impact, and establish a program management culture within the VA.” The important element of this challenge was that it was not a challenge to train people, but to make improvements through training. To meet the challenge, the VAAA designed the VA’s Federal Acquisition Certification-Program/Project Management (FAC-P/PM).

Designing the Ideal Program

The VAAA designed what it considers to be “the ideal program” to train project and program managers. It believes that if an employee is managing a program and does not have the proper skill sets, there is little chance of meeting the business objectives within budget or on time. In many cases, the business objective is never fulfilled.

So, developers ensured that FAC-P/PM not only complied with the Office of Federal Procurement Policy’s (OFPP) memorandum establishing the certification requirement, but also that it remained focused on creating a cohesive and integrated training program that could deliver business outcomes to reduce costs and increase effectiveness.

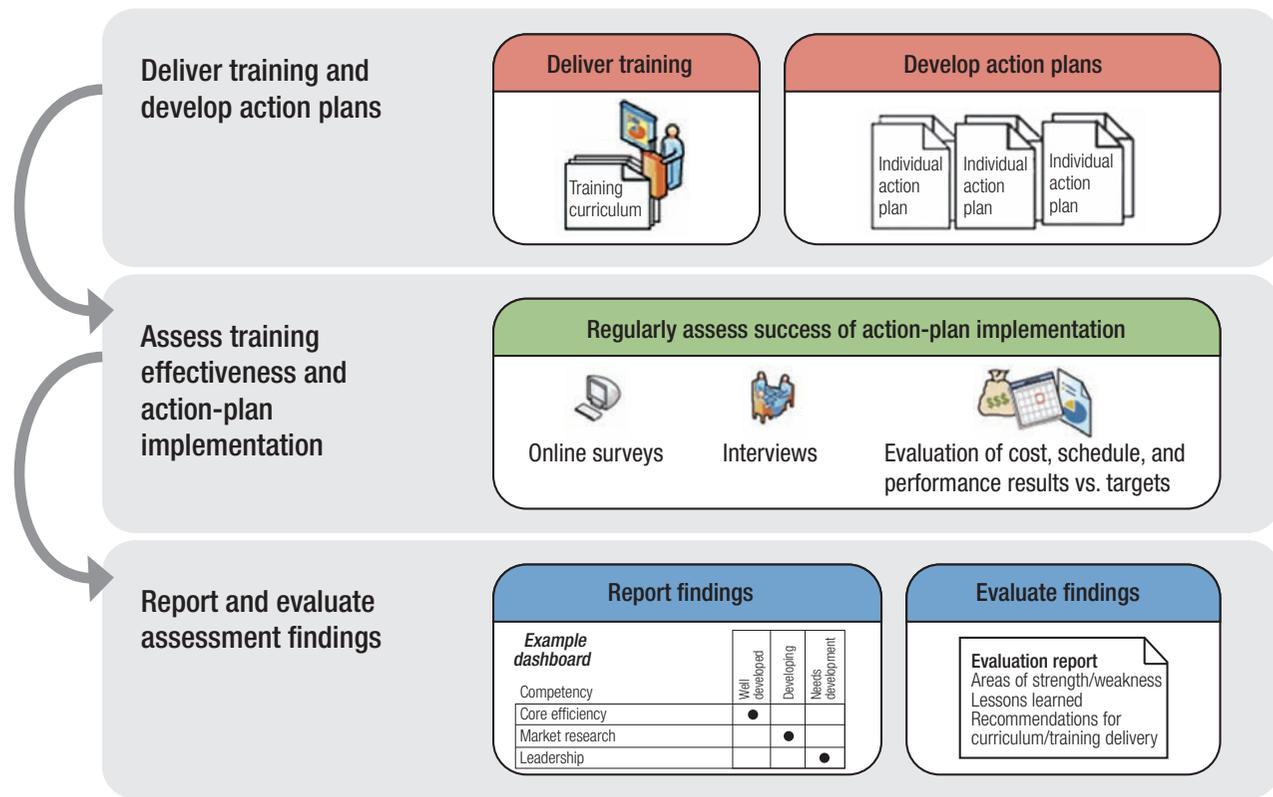
“...Agencies need to increase and improve their training efforts, and implement plans to measure the effectiveness of their training investments.” – President Obama’s Human Capital Strategies in the 2010 Budget

To start, VAAA program managers reviewed commercially available programs, as well as those that already existed within the federal government that addressed both individual and team competencies, applied learning by use of simulations, and put training to work on the job and aligned with work priorities. Specifically, VAAA program developers

- identified commercially available curriculum that aligned with training objectives
- worked with the delivery vendor to make the most important improvements to commercially available products
- developed and established an Action Plan Process through incremental improvements
- focused initial development efforts on a practical examination, which was a five-day performance test conducted in a simulated program
- began developing the exact curriculum necessary to accomplish goals.

The VAAA then moved forward by delivering what was achievable and would have an immediate impact, while focusing on incremental improvement toward the ideal training program. Finally, the VAAA validated competency mastery through a practical examination, and conducted robust evaluation of the actual impact obtained through the FAC-P/ PM development program. (See Figure 1.)

Figure 11 Impact Monitoring Process



Source: VA Acquisition Academy

Applied Learning

Rather than teaching theory, VAAA stresses putting the program manager in a scenario that replicates workplace challenges and integrates personal and leadership skills. We use this approach with all programs, beginning with the Internship School. We design situations so program managers apply these skills in the safe environment of the academy, even pushing them to the point where they might fail. We believe people learn from that, and they apply what they have learned on the job.

Action Planning

The VAAA's goal is to ensure that learning continues outside the classroom. True skill mastery is only possible if there is a direct link between classroom training and application in the workplace. We ask students to select a best practice they can apply to a current project that will add to its value. We follow and assign coaches to ensure students make progress, as well as to help them identify and remove barriers to action plans.

We tell managers, "Our students will not change the entire world, but they will pick an action plan that will

make an immediate improvement." When students apply learning on the job, they find there are returns on the time investment.

Certification Examination (Capstone)

The VAAA wants to ensure that the result of learning is a lasting behavior change. To help accomplish this, a competency-based assessment has become the final step of the FAC-P/PM training program. This hands-on exam provides acquisition professionals, their managers, and senior executives with assurance that program graduates will achieve the competency level adequate to manage and mitigate risks associated with simple, average, and complex capital investment programs at the VA.

Team Training

We all know the saying, "Give a man a fish and he eats for a day; teach a man to fish and he eats for a life time." However, it takes time to learn to fish, and if you don't feed someone along the way, they will starve. Therefore, the VAAA offers team training workshops that are

tailored to tackle specific program needs and cross a program’s lifecycle, enabling teams to address daily, weekly, and monthly challenges while continuing to build the individual competencies of its members.

Recently, the VA’s Assistant Secretary for Operations, Security, and Preparedness Jose Riojas had the VAAA conduct a custom team training workshop. Preparedness ensures the ability of the department to meet emergent national needs. The VAAA partnered with the assistant secretary and the Preparedness Initiative Team to assess program risks and performance gaps.

VAAA then developed a custom workshop that addressed the team’s competency gaps. It also provided program artifacts and enhanced project management processes that directly modified and improved program output. The team now manages its efforts with a common program vision for both of its major sub-initiatives: Homeland Security Presidential Directive Twelve (HSPD-12) and Integrated Operations Center (IOC).

Members of the Preparedness Initiative Team communicate across work streams with a consistent set of program requirements and artifacts; they share vocabulary and improve overall stakeholder communications and forge data-driven decisions. Lastly, the team delivered a much-enhanced operating plan that provides VA senior executives with the insights and confidence required to make informed decisions.

Reaching the Goal

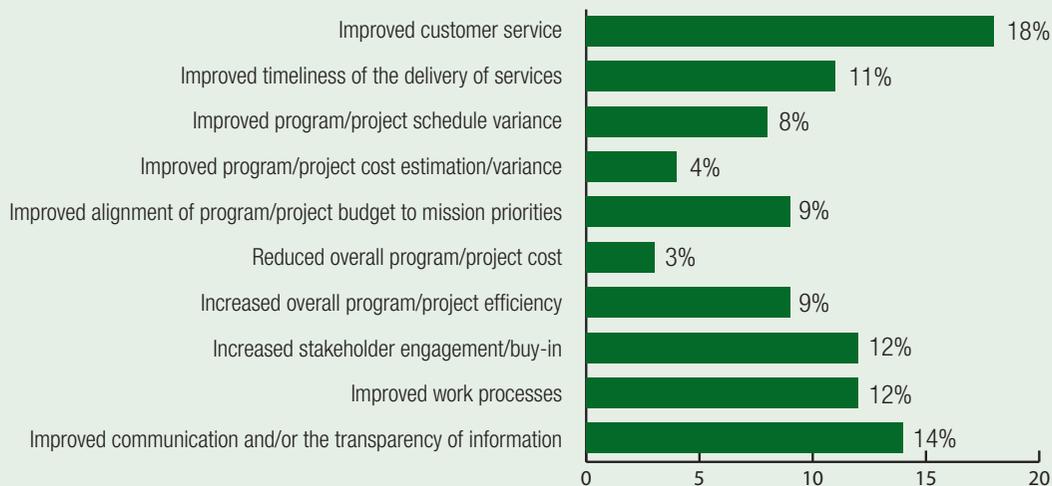
I have told my team that we all encounter problems in the work we do. I urge, “Don’t worry about finding the 100 percent solution—you will never get there.” So, we started with an application and scenario-based training program. The result of which brought us close to 60 percent of the goal.

With 40 percent still to go, the team could have been discouraged. Instead, we made moving forward an agency goal. I learned to persevere rather than waste time worrying about what could derail us. Even when you’re on the right track, if you do not move forward, the next train will run you over. And even if I heaved sighs at home, I put a smile on every day when I came to work. I look for that same enthusiasm, willingness to make a difference, and usable skills in my team members.

And it’s worth noting that the team was not restricted to federal employees. The VAAA ensures a close partnership with all of its vendors. For example, over 12 months of development, we established a high-quality partnership with Management Concepts, who created the FCA-P/PM’s practical examination.

For the VA to be successful, performance improvement is essential. Internal and external stakeholders—the IG, the GAO, and OMB—have to agree that we are actually making improvements. During our impact

Areas of Improvement: Performance, Cost, and Schedule Impact



Source: VA Acquisition Academy

monitoring analysis, improvements to VA operations have been categorized into four areas:

- 1| maturing program or project management activities by a) adopting a management structure; b) formalizing a project management practice; or c) improving an existing one
- 2| integrating cost, budget, and performance management methodologies in existing program or project management activities
- 3| improving buy-in and ensuring the organization is aligned to program or project goals by strengthening the communication processes and the strategic or organizational alignment
- 4| institutionalizing training concepts on-the job by enhancing FAC-P/PM self-learning or staff learning.

As of December 2010, 70 percent of surveyed program participants indicated that their action plans are making a positive impact to the cost, schedule, or performance of their program, project, or capital investment. In addition, 82 percent of participants selected improvements that are directly improving program or project management artifacts, processes, and procedures. Finally, 96 percent of students say the curriculum aligns with the skills they need to be successful in their job.

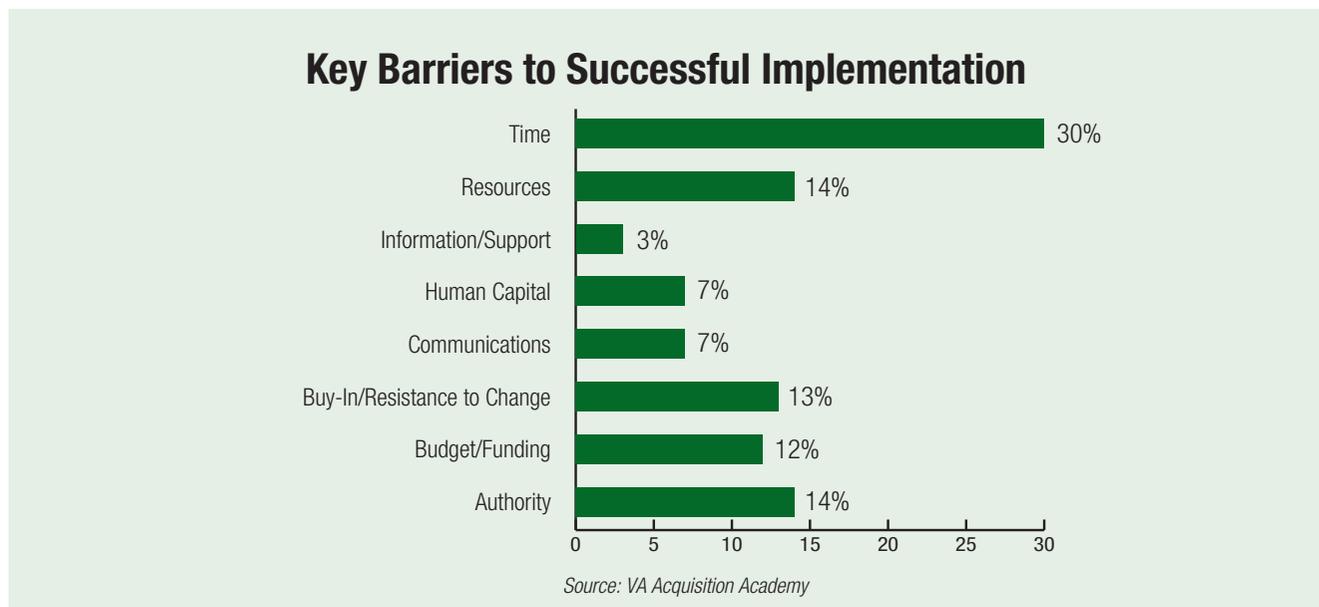
As participants come into the FAC-P/PM program, the VAAA asks in what ways and for what reasons was your program currently failing. We return to them after six, nine, and 12 months to see how the course has affected their performance on the job.

Results show that after the course, an increase of 26 percent of program managers are performing in ways that lead to success, such as defining requirements correctly, measuring performance, and controlling schedule and cost to a baseline. Our secret: We concentrate on one thing at a time. You do not change the world overnight.

After having built a program of foundational knowledge of incremental program management, we are now focusing on expert-level training, which covers in-depth knowledge of specific organizational processes and procedures. It's like learning to play football: First you learn foundational skills, then you learn the skills that go into mastering your team's playbook. If you don't know what end zone to go to, you will never score.

Reviving the Base Realignment and Closure Initiative

The leading practices taught in the VA's FAC-P/PM training program have enabled several VA acquisition professionals to revive struggling programs. One long-delayed \$200 million construction project associated with a Base Realignment and Closure initiative has been recharged with the aid of a new project management process: the Integrated Master Plan (IMP).



The IMP, which had not been in place prior to the VA's FAC-P/PM training program, has provided unprecedented visibility and re-established formal procedures, communication, and accountability with key stakeholders. Implementation of earned value management (EVM) techniques has helped identify underperforming areas and take corrective actions.

According to the initiative's supervisor and participants, they were largely successful because the FAC-P/PM training forced them to step back and look at the big picture. With new perspective, they found that they were better able to choose appropriate project management strategies to fix project failures.

Addressing Barriers to Learning

With any culture change, the first barrier is buy-in. It's been our experience that coaching and performance support tools help break down the barriers between the classroom and the worksite.

For example, when one student asked to participate in the program, the supervisor replied, "Oh, you are drinking that FAC-P/PM Kool-Aid." Today that supervisor is not only sending his entire staff to training, but he also has enrolled himself after observing how the VAAA supports participants on the job to ensure that learning has become integrated into day-to-day activities.

Also, Gould asks every senior leader to come to a one-day workshop that explains project management, demonstrates what the VAAA is doing, and shows what they can do to actively support the program. Since senior executives have participated in the one-day training, our numbers have skyrocketed.

The VAAA has also learned that although people are always looking for training in advanced systems, fundamental skills such as communication are often what people need. We help project managers learn to speak to one another across disciplines. Project management fundamentals cut across IT, construction, health products, and services management. As one project manager said to me, "I just did not know how to speak their language."

Working Across Agencies

Currently, FAC-P/PM is a VA program. But it has been designed as a transferrable model. If it works at the VA, it will work at other agencies. But the VAAA also can serve other agency's needs.

The benefit to the VA is to spread fixed costs over many students; the benefit to other agencies is to improve

effectiveness and lower costs. If program managers from other agencies agree with this focus on fundamentals, they stand to benefit from the lessons we have learned. Already, several other organizations have signed up for VAAA educational opportunities, including the U.S. Department of Education and the FBI.

The important element of this challenge was that it was not a challenge to train people, but to make improvements through training.

Introducing FAC-P/M to a broader audience makes economic sense. For our part, we want to increase collaboration among federal agencies. I would like to develop a Center of Excellence—to apply the development work at the VA to the entire federal civilian and military marketplace. Our job is to ensure that people ask to come here. It makes sense to invest in people who can reduce costs to VA—or to any other federal agency. This is not simply "check the box" training. Students connect with gusto.

Gould (co-author of *The People Factor: Strengthening America by Investing in Public Service*) tells his team, "I did not achieve anything because of me. I am making a difference because I brought the right people on board." These trainers, for us, provide the link between the classroom and the real world.

As for me, I knew I had to make a lot of changes to accomplish this mission. I brought on every single team member and now feel that I have an outstanding team—a team makes all the difference for me. There are naysayers and brick walls, but VA employees have the dedication to make FAC-P/PM a success.

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