

BEYOND LEGACY THINKING

Delivering real speed to the fight

by
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INTRODUCTION

Transforming acquisition into a true Warfighting Acquisition System requires abandoning legacy thinking and applying a standardized, proven Organizational Development (OD) approach grounded in maneuver warfare principles. Shackleton Group's Corporate Maneuver Warfare® provides that pathway, translating time-tested warfighting logic into disciplined execution that delivers real speed to the fight, not incremental improvement.

Today's acquisition system is structurally slow, culturally resistant, and operationally misaligned with the pace of modern conflict. This is not merely the result of external pressure or new leadership mandates; it is the predictable outcome of decades of bureaucratic drift, risk aversion, and fragmented reform efforts. The recent Acquisition Transformation Strategy correctly defines what must change, but it leaves unresolved the most critical requirement: how to execute transformation at speed, at scale, and with durability. That gap is organizational, cultural, and leadership-driven, and it cannot be closed through restructuring alone.

The requirement is clear: critical products and services must be delivered with real speed to the fight, not incremental improvement or legacy thinking. This article recommends a rapid and proven approach to achieving that transformation, organized around three objectives: explaining why restructuring is imperative, defining the nature of effective solutions, and demonstrating why Corporate Maneuver Warfare® provides the approach to accelerate delivery and embed enduring cultural change.

WHY IT'S IMPORTANT

A pressing need for change has emerged within the acquisition community. It would be shortsighted to suggest that this transformation is driven solely by Department of War (DoW) leadership or other external forces. The reality is more uncomfortable: the community itself has created the conditions that now demand reform. For decades, the system has evolved into a bureaucratic monolith complex, slow, and resistant to change. The DoW's recent directive simply acknowledges what insiders have long recognized: the culture must shift, and it must do so quickly.

The acquisition community's challenges are not unique. They mirror those of many government agencies that have become self-perpetuating bureaucracies; systems that increasingly serve themselves rather than their mission. Our experience over the past 25 years, is that the environment has been shaped by multiple actors: Congress, the Pentagon, warfighters, uniformed professionals, civil servants, contractors, and manufacturers. Together, these force-

shave produced a culture that is often unleadable by those seeking reform, yet quietly adept at avoiding change by those intent on preserving the status quo.

On November 7, 2025, the Secretary of War released a memo outlining the Acquisition Transformation Strategy. While the document sets forth strategic objectives, the what, it does not provide the how. The vision is clear: a system that delivers capabilities to warfighters with speed, efficiency, and cost effectiveness. What's missing is a standardized, proven approach for achieving those outcomes. A gap that underscores the central role of OD as the engine for real and sustained transformation.

OPPORTUNITIES

This mandate represents more than a directive; it is an opportunity to re-engineer the acquisition system by applying OD as it was intended. Not the "touchy feely" blindfolded trust fall variety, but the disciplined engineering of systems and structures that ensure the correct development and delivery of products and services, and do so with speed, efficiency, and effectiveness.

The mandate acts as a forcing function, compelling leaders to abandon the "that's the way we've always done it" rationale and embrace change. Legacy thinking equates to irrelevance in the path forward, and if this mandate makes one thing clear, it is that speed now takes precedence over perfection. Resistance is not only futile it is costly. As the old maxim reminds us, perfect is often the enemy of good enough. When warfighter readiness is at stake, timely delivery matters more than flawless execution.

CHALLENGES

The transformation strategy identifies structural and mechanical obstacles but leaves leadership challenges largely unaddressed. These include the need to communicate clear outcomes and timelines, manage widespread anxiety about personal and organizational impact, and provide standardized methods for consistent execution. Restructuring alone will not drive the cultural and behavioral shifts required for success; that will require steady, confident, and well-informed leadership.

At the same time, it is essential to establish timelines that are aggressive yet achievable. A two-year window to execute a full transformation roadmap is demanding, but it is also realistic and necessary to maintain momentum without sacrificing coherence. By contrast, expecting organizations to reorganize and consolidate PEOs into PAEs within 30 days, and to produce a complete transformation roadmap within 60 days, risks driving superficial compliance rather than thoughtful planning. Under such compressed timelines, Services and acquisition organizations may feel compelled to "answer the mail" rather than design solutions that can actually be executed. This will create churn later, as teams must unwind hastily assembled plans and rebuild them into something workable during implementation.

A more deliberate approach allows organizations to develop solutions that are both sound and sustainable. For example, allocating 60 days for PAE identification and 120 days for an approved transformation roadmap strikes a more balanced pace; faster than the Army's initial effort to meet similar requirements, yet measured enough to avoid chaos. The goal is not to slow progress, but to ensure that speed does not come at the expense of viability. Thoughtful timelines are a critical component of successful transformation.

True transformation demands a clear definition of the future state, an honest assessment of the current state, and a standardized roadmap to bridge the gap. Without tested tools, templates, and models, the risk is fragmentation, different organizations pursuing change in different ways resulting in confusion rather than progress.

THE LEADERSHIP IMPERATIVE

OD is often neglected because it is difficult, time consuming, or misunderstood. Yet ignoring it is equivalent to launching a mission without a plan relying instead on heroics that exhaust resources and burn out personnel. Effective leadership requires macro management: setting direction, justifying resource allocation, and establishing guardrails that provide leaders the latitude to succeed without constraining execution.

Leadership indifference toward organizational maintenance, change, or transformation, whatever label one prefers, is a hallmark of failed programs, organizations, and bureaucracies. This indifference often stems from wide swings in leadership approaches, cultural inconsistency, time constraints, and a fundamental misunderstanding of organizational systems and their inherent flaws. Over decades of hands-on observation and engagement, we have repeatedly encountered leaders who viewed OD as a waste of time, believing their personal leadership ability alone would suffice. While this may generate short term heroics, it lacks the durability required for long-term success.

At best, such indifference translates into ultra-low prioritization at subordinate levels ("Why add workload if it's not important to my boss?"). At worst, it results in active malicious compliance executing the letter of an initiative while deliberately undermining its spirit. The outcome is predictable: failure at enormous cost to the taxpayer. Only disciplined leadership, reinforced by OD and embraced at all levels, can deliver enduring transformation.

Recognizing why change is essential is half the battle. The harder and more consequential task is determining how to implement solutions that are both practical and proven.

THE NATURE OF EFFECTIVE SOLUTIONS

The key to successfully leading an organization through major transformation is ensuring the effort is structured and deliberate, rather than something that simply unfolds. Attempting to move an organization from its current state to a desired future without a methodical, sequential approach inevitably results in disorder and often leaves behind unintended consequences such as confusion, redundancy, and a frustrated workforce.

Planning and executing transformation are, first and foremost, OD challenges. They cannot be solved in silos or by aggregating isolated technical fixes. Transformation planning must be approached from a macro-OD perspective that integrates individual, organizational, and technical dimensions into a coherent whole. Using an established organizational model ensures that all five components Strategy, Structure, People, Leadership, and Results are addressed.

Identifying required changes is only the first step. A successful and enduring transformation plan must exhibit the specific, tangible characteristics below. In this environment, all roads do not lead to Rome. Only disciplined approaches produce lasting results.

STANDARDIZED AND PROVEN APPROACH

Major structural and cultural transformation is not the time for experimentation. When time is critical, organizations cannot afford to "figure it out" as they go. A practical, objective approach proven in comparable environments must be standardized across the enterprise to ensure consistent and reliable outcomes.

INCLUDE THE HOW

Visionary targets are necessary but insufficient. The plan must articulate how objectives will be achieved, at least at a high level. This includes defining exit criteria and providing a standardized execution methodology. Absent this guidance, well intentioned improvisation at lower levels produces inconsistent, non-standard, and untraceable results.

REALISTIC & ACHIEVABLE MILESTONES

Transformation does not occur overnight. A credible plan defines three phases: Pre-Transition (planning), Transition (implementation), and Post-Transition (sustainment). Leadership must be prepared to step off quickly with a 60% solution, but not before ensuring the Pre-Transition Phase allows sufficient time to define the future state and chart a clear path forward. This initial alignment is essential to standardized execution and adjustments can be made along the way for optimization.

TRANSFORMATION AS A MANDATE

Leadership must define and enforce consequences for non-compliance. In mature bureaucracies, resistance is inevitable. Once execution begins, the time for debate has passed; that train has left the station. At that point, every member's role is to shovel coal and help drive the transformation forward. Those unwilling to align need to find a different train.

TOP-DOWN STRUCTURE

The most effective structures are product and service oriented, with clearly documented roles, responsibilities, and relationships (R³), and explicit decision-making criteria at all levels. Organizational resources and strategies must be aligned to product and service delivery; all other functions exist solely to support execution. Traceability to higher level strategy is the only justification for the activity of subordinate functions. Absent that strategy, subordinate func-

tions have no target to adequately define their structure and ensure traceability. This OD principle holds regardless of organizational size: bottom-up restructuring is an exercise in futility.

COMMUNICATION IS KING

Transformation is inherently stressful. While planners may understand risks and mitigations, the broader workforce often experiences uncertainty. Nothing fuels resistance faster than silence. From the outset, leadership must communicate commander's intent and the transformation roadmap. Clarity and connection to the plan reduce anxiety, improve morale, and accelerate adoption.

CULTURE AND BEHAVIOR

Restructuring enables but will not facilitate the changes required. Without a deliberate leadership strategy as robust as the structural redesign itself, the transformation risks becoming a paper exercise. The systemic contamination of legacy culture and behaviors will persist unless actively addressed. True transformation requires leadership actions executed in parallel with structural change to reinforce cultural alignment and behavioral expectations.

While these principles define what effective transformation must look like, success ultimately depends on who can execute them at speed and at scale. Translating disciplined OD into consistent, enterprise-wide action requires a partner with proven methods, operational credibility, and the ability to deliver results not theory.

CORPORATE MANEUVER WARFARE® – A TAILOR MADE SOLUTION

Abandoning the core operating principles forged in our most demanding operational environments is not only misguided, but also counterproductive. These principles endure precisely because they were tested under unforgiving, high risk, and rapidly changing conditions. Maneuver Warfare and Warfighting doctrines¹ are not theoretical constructs; they are time tested approaches refined through experience where failure carried immediate and unacceptable consequences.

Yet, when organizations transition from operational environments into acquisition or corporate settings, there is a persistent and deeply flawed assumption that these principles no longer apply. Nothing could be further from the truth.

While cost, risk, and outcomes may be measured differently in business and acquisition contexts, the underlying dynamics of complexity, uncertainty, speed, and human behavior remain the same. The conditions that

demand maneuver, adaptability, decentralized execution, and disciplined leadership do not disappear, they simply manifest differently.

¹ William S. Lind, *Maneuver Warfare Handbook* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1985). MCDP 1 *Warfighting*.

Corporate Maneuver Warfare® represents the deliberate translation of these proven warfighting principles into organizational design and execution. It applies the same logic that has increased the probability of success for Marines for over 250 years to the challenges of large, complex enterprises. By grounding transformation in these operational tenets, it's facilitated approach helps leaders cut through bureaucracy, accelerate decision making, and align organizations to act with purpose, tempo, and intent, delivering real speed to the fight rather than incremental change. We've been blessed over the years working with several senior leaders that proved the approach works in developing and improving the acquisition programs they led. Success inevitably rested on involving the right people at the right levels and letting them develop and own their own long-term solutions.

Purpose built to address exactly the gap identified in the Acquisition Transformation Strategy, Corporate Maneuver Warfare® translates strategic intent into disciplined execution. Where most transformation efforts stall at vision or structure, Corporate Maneuver Warfare® delivers the how in a standardized, proven OD approach designed for complex, high consequence environments where speed matters.

Corporate Maneuver Warfare® brings a warfighting mindset to acquisition transformation. Its methods are not academic or experimental; they are field tested in large, bureaucratic organizations facing urgent operational demands. We provides leaders with practical tools, templates, and execution models that combine decades of experience with the power of AI to enable rapid organizational analysis, and accelerated alignment of strategy, structure, leadership, and behavior without disrupting mission continuity.

Critically, the Corporate Maneuver Warfare® facilitated approach eliminates fragmentation. By applying a common OD framework across the enterprise, they ensure that transformation efforts move in unison rather than devolving into disconnected local initiatives. This standardization accelerates decision making, improves traceability to strategic objectives, and delivers measurable progress toward real speed to the fight.

Finally, Corporate Maneuver Warfare® reinforces leadership accountability by treating transformation as a mandate not a suggestion, and supports it with clear milestones, defined roles, and enforceable expectations. The result is not change for change's sake, but a durable Warfighting Acquisition System that delivers critical products and services faster, more predictably, and at lower risk to mission success.

CONCLUSION

The mandate to transform acquisition is clear, and the cost of delay is no longer theoretical it is operational. Incremental adjustments, legacy structures, and uncoordinated change efforts cannot deliver the speed and reliability required by today's warfighting environment. What is required is a deliberate shift to a Warfighting Acquisition System; one engineered to deliver critical products and services with real speed to the fight.

This article has outlined why transformation is imperative, defined the characteristics of effective and enduring solutions, and demonstrated why a standardized, proven OD approach is essential to success. When executed with disciplined leadership, clear accountability, and a common framework, transformation becomes achievable rather than aspirational.

The question is no longer whether acquisition must change, but how quickly it can be made to perform. Organizations that act decisively applying tested methods and enforcing alignment will deliver capability faster, reduce risk, and sustain warfighter advantage. Those that do not will be left behind. Real speed to the fight demands nothing less.