

The Don Quixote Complex

by Terry Little



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Terry Little is in the civil service with the Department of the Air Force, where he has been a program manager for five major defense acquisition efforts. He entered the Air Force in 1967 and served on active duty until 1975.



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Prelude to a Mistake

I've made plenty of mistakes in my career, but the one that I think of as providing the greatest learning opportunities occurred while I was program manager of a large Department of Defense (DoD) project designated by Congress as an acquisition reform program. I was told I would have my department's support to try almost anything—so long as it wasn't illegal—to improve acquisition in DoD.

One of the things that came to me was to emulate a practice used by many commercial companies, profit sharing. I wanted to establish a way for the people working for me to share in the savings of the program. As I saw it, it was a win-win situation. I was sure the savings were going to be enormous, and I believed it would stimulate my people to be more creative, innovative, and give them a greater sense of ownership over the outcome of the program. I said to myself, "Self, you could look really heroic if you got this approved and your people got a big fat bonus all because of your brilliant idea."

Thus I set off on my Don Quixote quest to get approval.

Despite My Best Efforts

When I went back to tell the people in my department, I found their reaction to be a little too cool for my tastes. Suddenly they were backing off when I started talking about pay-for-performance incentives. But that didn't matter to me. I already had fallen in love with my idea and was determined to get approval at the Pentagon no matter what.

I commenced to making trips from Florida to Washington, DC every week, talking to various people in the Pentagon, explaining what I had in mind and why it was such a wonderful idea. All I needed was to get approval, I believed, and there would be this big cash payment for the people who worked for me.

Over the next two years I spent almost half my time in Washington. I got so carried away that my boss came up to me and told me to stop this. "This is not your job," he said. "You've got to get back to your program."

I told him, albeit in a polite way, "No!"

So carried away did I get with my brilliant idea that I decided to try and see the Secretary of Defense himself. The Secretary of Defense, no matter who he is, is a serious man. Fortunately, he was also patient with me. I managed to get an appointment on his calendar for a 15-minute meeting. I explained my proposal. He listened, and then he said, "Well, I need to talk with my staff about this."

My stomach dropped when he said that. Finally, there was this horrible realization for me. All along I thought I just had to get to the right person. Here I thought I had him. When he said this to me, unenthusiastic as everyone else I talked with, I knew that I was finished. I knew this because the people he was going to talk with were the same people I had talked with before I got to see him.

What I Learned as a Result

To push the system is the right thing to do, but whenever you make a decision you always have to weigh the cost. I had in my mind that I was doing this for all the right reasons, that I was doing it because I was standing up for the people who were working for me, the people who worked 10 to 12 hours a day, the people who came in on weekends. Because they respected me and I was leading them, I felt motivated to keep pressing forward. But once it became about me, about my success, I lost sight of the fact that I was responsible for them back home in Florida, where the real work of the project was being done. The cost of pushing on the system, in this case, far outweighed the benefits.

What I learned derives from three big mistakes I made.

Mistake one: I lost focus. I forgot what my job was and why I was there. The whole time that I was devoted to my campaign to bring profit sharing to everyone on my team the real work of the program unfortunately suffered, so much so that when we moved into the next phase it was almost terminated because of things that weren't done in the previous phase. The major reason for this neglect was because I was spending so much of my time at the Pentagon.

Mistake two: I didn't realize it at the time, but I persisted at this for so long not because I was impassioned about trying to help my people. Instead, it became about keeping my ego from being bruised. I persisted because I couldn't admit that I had failed. I couldn't admit that this hill was too tough to climb. I closed my eyes to everything except my own focus and my own desire to be recognized for achieving this thing that nobody else had ever done. That was clearly wrong.

Mistake three: After this was all over and I looked back and saw that it was my fault that the program experienced so many difficulties, I felt disgusted with myself. I thought constantly about what I had done, how I could be so stupid, and it took nearly a year for me to come to some kind of peace with myself. For a year it made me draw in and not want to push anymore, it made me timid and risk-averse, and that is a crippling state of mind to be in for a project manager.

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I learned three major things from this experience. One was how important it is to maintain your focus no matter how attractive it might seem to go after something that's not quite within the focal plane. Two, how important it is to separate your ego, that is, your self-worth, from your job. Three, how critical it is when you do make a mistake—and when you are trying to do anything at all you are going to make mistakes—to forgive yourself immediately and move forward. Yes, you need to forgive yourself immediately, not six months later, not a year: immediately. By not forgiving myself I was only compounding the other two mistakes.

The irony of it all is that I did get approval to start a profit sharing program, but only for civilian employees. Uniform military were prohibited. Because not everyone could participate, we decided not to implement it.

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