



# CENTER FOR DEFENSE MANAGEMENT REFORM

GRADUATE SCHOOL OF BUSINESS & PUBLIC POLICY

## After Transformation: Adverbs in Lieu of Verbs

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In CDMR's last essay, Dr. Brook raised the question of sustaining management reform through the transition of presidential administrations. He ended as he began by noting that the next reform agenda will necessarily be about something other than "transformation," but left the theme of that reform agenda unstated. Given that the defense department has made measurable progress transforming its management practices, and given that the next administration will distance itself from the term, what reform agenda might exploit those gains while taking a fundamentally different stance? I suggest a reform theme that is both managerially sound and politically viable.

The theme of transformation, of course, has been change. It has been far-reaching; the *Enterprise Transition Plan* notes that "No aspect of defense should be left untouched if we are to maintain a competitive advantage."<sup>1</sup> Transformation has been called compelling, imperative, urgent, necessary, vitally important, and perpetual: "First and foremost, transformation is a continuing process. It does not have an end point," and it has also emphasized creativity: "At its core, our transformation strategy is a strategy for large-scale innovation."<sup>2</sup> No destination exists other than broad, utopian visions of "transforming business to help today's modular, agile, technologically-advanced joint force respond rapidly to emerging situations and changing missions."<sup>3</sup> However, a strategy of continuous change without destination is one that could be easily criticized and one that a subsequent administration is not likely to perpetuate.

I would suggest to the next administration, however, that valuable progress has been created under transformation and that they should exploit those gains and improve upon them. I would recommend they inject a qualitative element. The new reform agenda should focus on a positive future grounded in competence, not just a different future grounded in fears of obsolescence. They should adopt an adverb in lieu of a verb. Transform how? Proficiently.

Every one of DoD's 17 items on the GAO's list of programs at high risk for fraud, waste and abuse can be eliminated if defense executives, managers, and front line employees are proficient at what they do. They do not necessarily need to do different things: they need to do things well.

Why proficiency? Reform agendas should envision positive outcomes, and proficiency connotes a number of positive images. A proficient employee is competent

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Defense *Enterprise Transition Plan*, September 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

and skillful; they are familiar, practiced, or accomplished; they are experts. Proficient comes from a Latin root meaning “to accomplish, make progress, or be useful”; such a definition improves transformation by emphasizing a requirement that the *change* be useful. Not simply movement, but beneficial movement. Not just velocity, but progress.

Proficiency is more than competence. Whereas competence is good enough, proficiency is qualitatively more. In the field of education, Dreyfus’s work identifies stages of skill development with a clear leap from competent to proficient.<sup>4</sup>

Proficiency may also advance transformation’s creativity. To capitalize on innovation, an organization must be proficient to implement those new concepts. Without proficiency, any transformation will simply sustain excessive opportunity, agency, and transaction costs.<sup>5</sup> So, proficiency is both necessary for innovation as well as a source of economy.

Proficiency depends not only on the richer information flows from business systems, as emphasized in the transformation agenda, but on a deeper understanding of the decision process. This includes better information along with an understanding of the causal relationships within an organization and between the organization and its environment. Having information about how to ride a bicycle is different from being able to do it.

An agenda of proficiency could exploit the good work done under the transformation agenda and continue to push those reforms further down the road by supplying additional direction and guidance. Simultaneously, it could satisfy the need for political distance between the former agenda and the next one. History does not need to repeat itself and recent gains need not be lost.

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<sup>4</sup> Dreyfus, S. E. (1982). “Formal models vs. human situational understanding: Inherent limitations on the modelling of business expertise. *Office: Technology and People*, 1, 133-165.

<sup>5</sup> McGrath, R. G., M-H Tsai, S. Venkataraman, and I. C. MacMillan “ (1982) “Innovation, Competitive Advantage and Rent: A Model and Test,” *Management Science*, 42 (3): 389-403.