TEN SURE-FIRE WAYS TO CREATE PENTAGON PROBLEMS

A Humorous Look at Maintaining a Good PEO Staff-PEM Relationship

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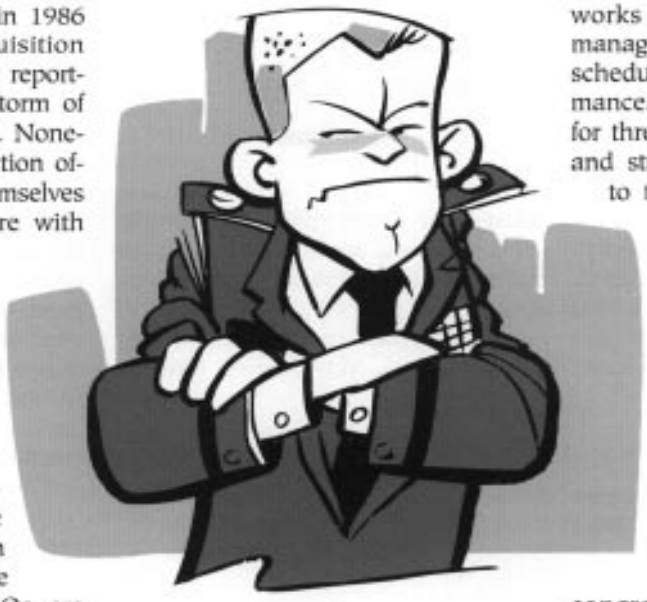
Establishing the Program Executive Officer (PEO) structure in 1986 to streamline the acquisition system program director reporting chain touched off a firestorm of debate that is still simmering. Nonetheless, Air Staff and PEO action officers (AOs) must concern themselves less with structure and more with making structure work.

Few commentaries exist on the PEO staff-Program Element Monitor (PEM) relationship. Thus, this article points out ways to refresh the rapport needed to make any team relationship work effectively by highlighting sure-fire ways to problems. We begin with a brief description of the relationship. The USAF PEOs are responsible for program *execution*, while the PEM's boss, the Mission Area Director (MAD), is responsible for representing the program to the Air Staff, the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) staff, and to Congress.



1. Be Rigid
2. Don't trust

In theory, this means that the PEO works issues affecting day-to-day management of a program — cost, schedule, supportability and performance. The PEOs were established for three reasons: to provide a direct and streamlined chain of command to the Service acquisition executive, to keep the program director informed of developments "inside the beltway," and to free program directors from frequent trips to Washington so they can manage the program.

On the other hand, the MAD is responsible for coordinating all aspects of the program with those outside the execution chain — funding, congressional reporting and responses, staff coordination, and the like. However, we all recognize there is no clean break of responsibilities. To start our humorous journey, we can examine some of the many interpretations of the roles in Figure 1.

It is easy to see how these different perspectives would affect how one treated the relationship. Not surprisingly, we propose to use our version of the truth — that which would emphasize teamwork — to move into

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the meat of the ten sure-fire ways to disaster.

How could you ensure strife, argument and disaster in the environment of overlapping responsibilities? Here are our thoughts, broadly lumped into three categories — Roles and Missions, Interpersonal Skills, and Professional Courtesy.

3. Take things personally

4. Limit personal interaction

I. Roles and Missions

— Sure-Fire Way to Problems #1: *BE RIGID.* Make sure you view roles and missions as inviolate with no possibility for crossover. For added disastrous results, apply this rule every time you're on leave or temporary duty. Ensure the program office fears crossing the lines you've drawn, too.

— Sure-Fire Way to Problems #2: *DON'T TRUST.* Too much trust can be trouble for an AO. First and foremost, make sure you don't trust the way the system is set up. Be confident that you're the smartest player around, and there's no way the PEO-PEM relationship could possibly work. This will keep expectations low. Also, don't trust your counterpart individually. This way you are sure to limit your vulnerability for the other guy's mistakes. You get an added benefit of simplifying your life since lack of trust is contagious. You'll never have to worry about his thinking of you! The real pro makes sure he frequently and publicly "bad-mouths" the system and his counterpart so everyone knows where he stands. It's especially effective if you can convince your boss "they can't be trusted." That way you can stymie action almost every time.

II. Interpersonal Skills

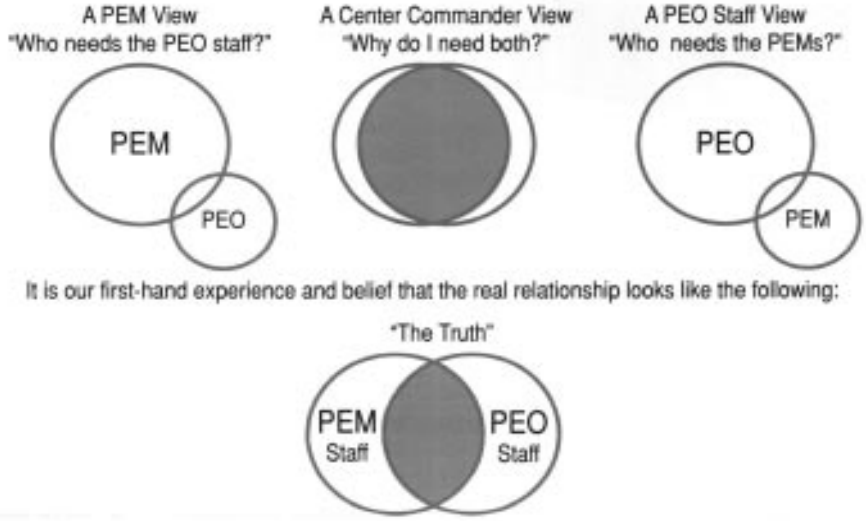
— Sure-Fire Way to Problems #3: *TAKE THINGS PERSONALLY.* Even in the fast-paced world of Pentagon AOs, make sure you're not very understanding, and that you interpret every oversight, statement or action as aimed at making you look bad or limiting your promotion opportunity. For extra-added effect, pick at the scabs from the occasional "broken glass" in order to undermine any trust you might have (see Sure-Fire Problem #2)

— Sure-Fire Way to Problems #4: *LIMIT PERSONAL INTERACTION.* It's easier to fail if you avoid any contact with "the enemy." Faxes work great for this. Limit phone calls to your counterpart, and prefer to leave messages, making "them" call you. An occasional walk to the other guy's office is bad judgment, so is carpooling, and going to lunch together. These heinous actions are only exceeded by socializing with your opposite number off duty. Treat personal interaction as you would fraternization — be discreet.

— Sure-Fire Way to Problems #5: *BE HUMORLESS.* Humor can make the Pentagon tolerable, if not enjoyable, so avoid it like the plague. A serious countenance will ensure you are taken seriously. If you must show emotion, it is *much better to get* angry.

— Sure-Fire Way to Problems #6. *BE UNRELIABLE.* Reliability is associated with predictability and, like

FIGURE 1.PEM / PEO Relationships



5. Be humorless
6. Be unreliable

a fighter pilot, "jinking" makes you a much tougher target to hit. Therefore, when you say you'll do something, try not to do it. Bust suspenses, don't return phone calls, and constantly revisit closed issues. Best of all, deny you ever made the commitments in the first place (reference Sure-Fire Problem #2).

III. Professional Courtesy

— Sure-Fire Way to Problems #7: *"HOG" INFO.* It is very effective to take a parochial view of who needs what information. Assume you can infallibly predict who will need what information and husband it accordingly. Never, ever send information that might help your counterpart look good if you can help it. For extra style, when the other person asks for information you don't think he needs, tell him you've never seen it! Religiously avoid the practice of sending courtesy copies. Practice good OPSEC/COMSEC.

— Sure-Fire Way to Problems #8: *ENSURE SHORT NOTICE.* Alas, some exercise will inevitably force you to interact to obtain coordination — a meeting, a document or a boss. Train yourself to think of your counterpart only at the last minute (after 5:30 p.m. is best). Then fax a curt note saying "need your comments" within a half-hour of the suspense. The real pro will backdate the note to make it look like you gave more time than in reality. Give yourself extra points when you tell your boss "I gave it to them yesterday and they have not responded."

— Sure-Fire Way to Problems #9: *DON'T BACKFILL.* On those occasions when you attend meetings or listen in on conference calls, try not to slip up and tell the other person about it. Backfilling creates expectations of trust and teamwork, and could provide that bit of information to give "the competition" an advantage in the battle over who's in charge of the program and, ultimately, who gets promoted. Remember, this is war!

7. Hog info
8. Ensure short notice

— Sure-Fire Way to Problems #10: *QUIBBLE.* A good technique on the road to disaster is to be excruciatingly literal. For example, when your opposite number says, "I thought you said you didn't have that information!," responses like "You asked for information, not this document," are very effective. Practice phrases like, "The meeting? What meeting? Oh, the OSD meeting. Why didn't you say that?," for maximum effect. Deny ever being told of meetings or suspenses if you forgot or were overwhelmed by another action. This way you can further foster the feelings in your organization that the "other side" always ignores you.

Conclusion

While we attempted to use humor and a bit of the absurd to make a point, unfortunately, these descriptions are closer to the mark than we would like. Too many critical partnerships inside the Pentagon are poisoned by some of these sure-fire ways to problems. With a little discipline, common sense and courtesy, AOs can, and must, avoid these pitfalls.

We hope this trip through a fictitious PEO-PEM action officer partnership does not ring too true for you, and may serve as a helpful reminder on improving any team or partnership. We believe it is not only possible to have a good PEO staff-PEM relationship, but that the mission requires it.

9. Don't backfill
10. Quibble