

## Qualifications of a COR

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As CORs gain increased responsibility for providing significant portions of command or installation support services, they are displacing traditional senior civilian and military leaders who formerly managed functions performed in-house—functions now outsourced to the private sector. For example, with the recent outsourcing of large-scale installation administrative functions in both the Army and Navy, no longer is it uncommon to find a COR responsible for administrative support functions previously handled by a colonel or GS-15 division chief at medium-sized installations, supervising over 100 government employees.

The prudent commander will exercise the same amount of care in selecting a COR for such a large project as would be taken in selecting a manager for an in-house staff. Not only are basic leadership and employee motivation skills required for the job, but the COR also must bring considerable cross-agency skills such as financial, acquisition, and programmatic management as well as knowledge and experience of contract management and administration skills to the table. Also, a finely developed sense of interpersonal communication and diplomatic acumen are required to work with Contracting Department personnel who frequently have other priorities and do not face the functional problems that CORs experience and solve on a daily basis.

What should a military leader look in selecting a COR to manage a critical part of the command's mission? Here are several ideas.

### Experience

The ideal COR will bring a wide array of experience to the table, preferably including functional expertise in the technical area being managed. In the contract environment today, the Contract Officer and the related contracting structure provide sufficient oversight on regulatory matters requiring specific knowledge of the FAR, DFARS, and legal issues of the contracting world. The COR is, and should be, the Contracting Officer's interface with the day-to-day technical work performed on the contract.

For example, the COR of a logistic function would ideally have sufficient experience with the standards of performance, the specialized vocabulary associated with the work, and the broad base of functional knowledge to successfully communicate with the contractor. Similarly, the COR of an engineering function would have the level of experience or education necessary to provide quality assurance over the desired product or service.

The experience level required in a COR should be directly proportional to the scope and complexity of the operation. Ideally, the career path of a COR should include several major components that include: experience in the functional area commensurate with the project; cross-industry experience in financial management and business administration at a level commensurate with the project; an apprenticeship under an experienced veteran of the contracting business so that the individual will have sufficient knowledge of COR functions and related problem-solving skills before assuming responsibility for a first job as a COR; and prior experience as a government contractor at the managerial level. Prior business management experience offers substantial value to a COR as it provides the potential to avoid a costly and time-consuming trial-and-error process of learning what the business world is all about.

In short, the smart commander will seek out an individual with a strong background and experience to become a COR. An experienced contract manager is more likely to meet the complex challenge of the contract environment, exercise the control mechanisms embedded in the contract operation, perform the necessary quality assurance and risk management functions, and ensure financial accountability on the part of the contractor.

No longer is it sufficient to point a finger at the contractor when something goes wrong. If anything does go awry, the COR is responsible for introducing corrective and remedial action, including terminating the contract if that becomes necessary. On the other hand, the COR merits credit when the contractor does well. After all, contract success often depends on the COR preparing effective written specifications for the contract and exercising vigilant quality assurance and oversight of the services once the contract is underway.

## **Education**

What is the appropriate education level for a COR? Education prerequisites depend upon the size and complexity of the contract and on several other factors. For a contract with substantial size and complexity, a strong case can be made that a graduate degree related to the functional area should be required. Frequently, the requirement for a graduate degree is more important on a professional services contract than for a product or manufacturing contract because of the nature of services contracts. Because a professional services contract often requires a graduate degree for the contractor manager, one should likewise be required of the COR. More importantly, a graduate degree confers an example of individual achievement that requires commitment, perseverance, and capability—all traits normally characteristic of a seasoned manager.

For a contract of lesser size and complexity, a bachelor's degree is the minimum education a commander should accept in a COR. Contract management requires mastery of many college level concepts such as business administration

principles, cost-benefit analysis, negotiating techniques, cost modeling, and understanding of the applicable law and technical regulations. Those that have not been exposed to higher education would clearly be at a disadvantage.

In addition, the well trained COR will have completed a wide-range of professional-level courses provided by the contract management community and will hold memberships in professional organizations such as the American Society of Public Administration, National Contract Management Association, or similar organizations that sponsor a Code of Ethics or professional standards as a condition of membership.

### **Intangibles**

What other qualities should the prudent commander or senior leader look for in a COR? Intangible, qualities or skills such as patience, tolerance, perseverance, a results-oriented management style, dedication to the task at hand, and motivation will help ensure effectiveness. A finely tuned sense of patience and tolerance is almost a necessity for a COR to cope with built-in delays inherent in the contracting process. Delays are not only intentionally factored into the procurement process to discourage all but the most determined from proceeding, but also unintentional delays surface frequently and often extend into lengthy delays. To complicate matters further, lengthy delays can frequently result in loss of momentum and introduction of peripheral issues that cause loss of focus and progress.

The fully equipped COR maintains a tool bag full of personal qualities to operate effectively in an intensely regulated environment filled with bureaucratic delays, and remains focused on the goal of bringing the procurement to award. Once the contractor is on the job, the results-oriented COR remains focused on the job and vigorously protects the government's interests while motivating and enabling the contractor to achieve expected levels of performance.

In some cases, a COR may work on several contracts. In these cases, the COR should have the capability to conduct project oversight for several large, complex procurement projects in various stages of the acquisition process where activities on one project could impact other projects. Obviously, the government's best interest is not served by having a poorly prepared individual assigned to a COR position, but rather the government's best interest is served by ensuring that an individual is fully equipped to handle the responsibilities.