



## ELIAS VAINCHENKER

**COMMAND/ORGANIZATION:** Joint Program Executive Office for Armaments and Ammunition, Directorate of Integration

**TITLE:** Project officer

**YEARS OF SERVICE IN WORKFORCE:**  
24

**DAWIA CERTIFICATIONS:** Advanced in program management, Practitioner in engineering and technical management

**EDUCATION:** Bachelor of Engineering in mechanical engineering, Stevens Institute of Technology

**AWARDS:** Commander's Award for Civilian Service (2012); Commanding General FORSCOM Award for Excellence (2008); Commanding General's Award for Excellence (2006)

# SHIFT WITH THE WIND

With over two decades of Army civilian service, Elias Vainchenker said there is “no right answer” to the advice he could give fellow junior engineers for success in the Army Acquisition Workforce. “We typically transition engineers or other math and science careers to project management due to the sheer quantity of such co-located personnel. The primary discriminator of whether someone from a career field based on calculations and precision will be successful in project management is on whether they can shift their mindset to developing decisions with lack of all the information,” he said. “Those that pause or hesitate until enough information is collected will have their project paths decided for them based on time,” he said, when their alternate options might no longer be viable.

“I advise those entering this field to inflect on their course of actions in only so far as the schedule allows and to make decisions to move forward and to take the risks they are uncomfortable making with the data they currently have,” he said.

As the project officer for the Joint Program Executive Office for Armaments and Ammunition (JPEO A&A) under the Directorate of Integration, Vainchenker is responsible for finding solutions to supply chain issues, so our warfighters have the ammunitions they need when they need them.

“In a project management role, we have a daily responsibility to make hard decisions that are worth millions of dollars to the DOD,” he said. “Whether it be a production project that requires a decision to direct a contractor to stop production due to test anomalies and conduct a root-cause investigation—which may still result in inconclusive data—to developing programs that require continuous and consistent communication of progress. ... It is a unique authority entrusted to us in project management by the U.S. Army.”

Vainchenker began his career at JPEO A&A in what he said was a “less complex product portfolio” in pyrotechnic munitions—used for illumination, signaling simulation of battle sounds and effects—transitioning from the U.S. Army Combat Capabilities Development Command in system engineering. He was fortunate to have a mentor to guide him through “a new way of thinking” and introduce him to planning, programming, budgeting and execution, and contracting.

“I was fortunate to have contractors with sufficient expertise and historical product knowledge to be afforded the bandwidth to focus on learning product improvement programs, urgent materiel releases and other approaches to developing capabilities for the user,” he said. “As a result, in my first couple of years, I had worked with a broad team to field escalation of force capabilities to Operation Iraqi Freedom [OIF]/Operation Enduring Freedom [OEF].”

During OIF/OEF, Vainchenker said his experiences included anything from conducting fast-paced safety tests to demonstrate the risk of shooting pen flares at windshields of approaching vehicles (in order to waive them away from checkpoints), to collaborating

with Public Health Command on health hazard assessments and the environmental community on product improvements.

“These smaller-scale efforts became the building blocks for future career experiences of fielding products in the more complex processes of type classifications, final type qualifications and full materiel releases, allowing me to provide the U.S. Army pen flares, infrared tracer small caliber ammunition, sniper ammunition and new Navy 127 mm artillery munitions,” Vainchenker said.

In September 2022, he transitioned to the assured munitions lead, responsible for assessing strategic supply chain risks for JPEO A&A’s portfolio of munitions, leveraging the expertise of each program office managing specific products to roll up the strategic aspect of risks.

“Being part of an evolution of the DOD vision of production risk management is a great experience allowing me to leave a lasting impact of how it functions in the future,” he said, as data is continuously evolving and tools to capture and communicate risks across the portfolio are still being developed.

The most valuable position Vainchenker said he held in the Army Acquisition Workforce was first line supervisor at the product level. “This is the most challenging and rewarding level of supervision,” he said, as it involved being pulled in two different directions due to the need to develop others and remain the backup expert to each team member.

“Essential to each new member of the team being successful is providing enough guidance so they understand the project, while also giving them an opportunity to fall and learn. Providing each member enough room to chart out their project path and,

therefore, giving them the space to create new solutions is essential to their investment in the project,” he said. “Allowing enough space that they can make mistakes to learn from is essential. It simply needs to be a fall onto a net, not a fall onto the ground—some pain but no permanent injuries.”

“The most important lesson I learned is to manage the emotion projected in my recommendations,” he said. “Always find a means to separate yourself from the decision so that logic remains the basis of any dialogue and so debate can continue to influence the outcome. Once a discussion becomes positional, someone will lose and the community as a whole gains less.”

Resilience is also key. “In your career, it will be essential to remain unphased and

driven in the face of multiple obstacles and redirections in your project. Your original plans and vision will be impacted by resources, schedules, shift in U.S. Army or user priorities, leadership visions, contractor motivations or a multitude of other factors,” he said. “To understand your project path is not a road traveled linear by car but, rather, a boat set on a course across a shifting sea.” According to Vainchenker, each compromise and adjustment is part of the process to create a community solution. “Being a champion for your project is not related to your vision, but rather a general capability that you represent on behalf of your user, ensuring a usable product remains in the hands of Soldiers. Therefore, you must give it your all each day you come into work regardless of how far you are from the path you originally envisioned.”

Outside the office, Vainchenker continues to give his all mastering a new sport. “Currently, my focus is learning kiteboarding and has become a significant part of my lexicon,” he said, also comparing kiteboarding to project management. “It is always moving regardless of if you are ready or not ... there is no time for perfection. The kite itself is slow to initially accept a change in direction, but after consistent input it will divert and speed up in the new direction beyond your expectation.” In project management, Vainchenker said that consistent input and communication of the desired direction is the only way to create a shift.

“Both the sport and career field require 10 years to hone the skills enough to be able to understand well enough to identify the mechanics and performance of others in the same field from a distance—allowing you to offer advice for them to refine their performance.”

—**HOLLY DECARLO-WHITE**



### MOVING WATERS

Vainchenker kiteboards primarily in Cabarete, Dominican Republic, because of consistent onshore winds. He has also kiteboarded in Kenya and Mexico, with more places to be added in the future. Like project management, he said, the sport and the career field require 10 years to hone the skills. (Photo courtesy of Elias Vainchenker)