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Comptroller General
of the United States

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Decision

Matter of: Applied Research Associates, Inc.

File: B-424731; B-424731.2

Date: October 28, 2026

James Eric Whytsell, Esq., Susan W. Ebner, Esq., Christina J. Hansen, Esq., Simone T. Stover, Esq., Rory Gallagher, Esq., and Harshita Kalidindi, Esq., Stinson LLP, for the protester.
Paul F. Khoury, Esq., and W. Benjamin Phillips, III, Esq., Wiley Rein LLP, for Leidos, Inc., the intervenor.
Judith L. Richardson, Esq., Department of Defense, for the agency.
Michael P. Grogan, Esq., and Evan D. Wesser, Esq., Office of the General Counsel, GAO, participated in the preparation of the decision.

DIGEST

Protest alleging flaws in the agency's evaluation of proposals and best-value tradeoff decision is denied where the agency's evaluation judgements and tradeoff decision were reasonable and consistent with the terms of the solicitation.

DECISION

Applied Research Associates, Inc. (ARA), of Albuquerque, New Mexico, protests the issuance a task order to Leidos, Inc., of Reston, Virginia, under task order request for proposals (TORFP) No. HDTRA1-25-R-0015, issued by the Department of Defense, Defense Threat Reduction Agency (DTRA), for engineering analysis, modeling, testing, and software development services. The protester challenges the agency's evaluation of proposals and best-value tradeoff.

We deny the protest.

BACKGROUND

The agency issued the solicitation on March 4, 2025, pursuant to the procedures of Federal Acquisition Regulation (FAR) subpart 16.5, to firms holding contracts under DTRA's Combating Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs), Mission Pool 3, Targeting, Information Operations, and Irregular Warfare indefinite-delivery, indefinite-quantity (IDIQ) contract. Agency Report (AR), Tab 5, TORFP at 1; Contracting Officer's

Statement (COS) at 1-2.[1] The solicitation contemplated the issuance of a single task order, on a cost-plus-fixed-fee basis, with a 1-year base period of performance and four 1-year option periods, with a maximum performance period of 66 months. COS at 1. The solicitation sought counter WMD target assessment technologies, where the awardee would develop methodologies, models and tools for finding, characterizing, assessing and defeating underground facilities, hard and deeply buried targets (HDBT) and foreign WMD, and also support combatant commands and the intelligence community in their WMD and HDBT defeat operations through utilization of the developed technologies. AR, Tab 5.ii, Statement of Work (SOW) at 1-4.

The solicitation provided for award on a best-value tradeoff basis considering the following factors, listed in descending order of importance: (A) technical approach; (B) management approach; (C) past performance; and (D) most probable cost. TORFP at 73. The TORFP also stated that "[a]ll evaluation factors other than cost or price, when combined, are significantly more important than cost or price[,]" but "cost will be carefully considered in the selection decision." *Id*. The technical and management factors would be assigned one of five color and adjectival ratings, with the following possible combinations: blue/outstanding; purple/good; green/acceptable; yellow/marginal; or red/unacceptable. *Id*. at 75-76. Past performance would be assigned one of three possible ratings: acceptable; neutral; or unacceptable. *Id*. at 76. Cost would be evaluated for realism, reasonableness, and completeness. *Id*.

The agency received proposals from ARA and Leidos by the established due date. Following multiple rounds of interchanges with the offerors, the agency issued a task order to Leidos on July 31, 2026. The following is a summary of the agency's final ratings for ARA and Leidos:

	ARA	Leidos
Technical Approach	Blue/Outstanding	Purple/Good
Management Approach	Blue/Outstanding	Purple/Good
Past Performance	Acceptable	Acceptable
Most Probable Cost	$348,732,095	$331,864,900

AR, Tab 19, Best Value Decision Memorandum (BVDM) at 8.

In making its selection decision, the agency explained that although ARA received higher adjectival ratings than Leidos for the technical and management approach factors, ARA's unique strengths under those factors "do not provide sufficient benefit to the Government that would justify paying ARA's higher evaluated cost." *Id*. at 10. Following a debriefing, ARA filed this protest.[2]

[1] All citations to the record are to the corresponding PDF page numbers.

[2] Based on the approximately $331 million value of the task order, this protest is within our jurisdiction to hear protests related to the issuance of orders under multiple-award

(continued...)

DISCUSSION

ARA marshals several challenges to the agency's award decision, focusing primarily on elements relating to the agency's evaluation of Leidos's cost proposal, as well as DTRA's best-value decision. For the reasons that follow, we find no basis to sustain the protest.[3]

Evaluation of Leidos's Proposal

(...continued)
IDIQ contracts that were awarded under the authority of title 10 of the United States Code. 10 U.S.C. § 3406(f)(1)(B).

[3] ARA raises other collateral allegations, and although our decision does not specifically address every argument presented, we have considered each argument and find that none provides a basis on which to sustain the protest. For example, ARA contends the agency's consideration of the offerors' past performance was unreasonable and contrary to the terms of the solicitation. Comments and Supp. Protest at 21-30; Supp. Comments at 13-18. In this regard, the protester argues DTRA did not look beyond the adjectival ratings assigned--failing to give due credit to ARA's alleged superior performance record--where ARA had two more references than Leidos, both of which were relevant and exceptional in terms of performance quality.

An agency's evaluation of past performance, which includes its consideration of the relevance, scope, and significance of a vendor's performance history, is a matter of discretion which we will not disturb unless the assessment is unreasonable or inconsistent with the solicitation criteria. *RELYANT Global, LLC*, B-413741, Nov. 21, 2016, at 4. The evaluation of past performance, by its very nature, is subjective and a vendor's disagreement with an agency's evaluation judgments does not demonstrate that those judgments are unreasonable. *Chloeta Fire, LLC*, B-416448, July 17, 2018, at 5.

The TORFP only allowed three possible ratings: acceptable; unacceptable; or neutral. TORFP at 76. While both offerors received a rating of "acceptable", in its tradeoff analysis, DTRA specifically identified that "ARA provided two more relevant/exceptional references than Leidos." AR, Tab 19, BVDM at 10. However, the agency explained that where both offerors were "performing exceptionally" as incumbents, "the volume of past performance references provided by ARA does not provide a qualitative advantage or a lower risk profile over Leidos[,]" and therefore their past performance was "essentially equivalent." *Id*. We find reasonable the agency's evaluation conclusion that, despite ARA's more numerous references, both offerors' performance records--where both are performing successfully on the incumbent requirements--provide an equivalent expectation of successful performance.

The solicitation provided level of effort (LOE) estimates--in terms of full-time equivalents (FTEs)--for each contract line item number (CLIN). TORFP at 67. The TORFP explained the agency "makes no assurances that the projected estimates will be completely accurate" and also that the "CLIN pricing assumptions are provided for informational purposes only." TORFP at 67. As relevant to this protest, the TORFP included research and development (R&D) and operation and maintenance (O&M) CLINs for both the standard performance period (for the base year and each option year), as well as for a surge option (also for the base and each option year). *Id*. DTRA explained that the purpose of the surge options was to increase the ceiling of the type of work otherwise being performed (*i.e*., R&D or O&M), and would represent an "increase in effort to [the] existing workstream." AR, Tab 5.v., Draft TORFP Questions and Answers (Q&A), at cell E27. For their cost proposals, offerors were instructed to provide a complete labor breakout for each CLIN, showing the proposed quantity of labor hours, direct labor rates, and total labor cost by labor category. TORFP at 13.

Central to ARA's protest is the agency's cost evaluation of Leidos's proposal. As noted above, the agency would evaluate an offeror's costs to determine if they were realistic. TORFP at 76. While DTRA determined that ARA's costs were realistic and did not warrant any adjustment, the agency did have concerns with Leidos's costs, specifically, its offered FTEs for the surge CLINs.

Following the submission of its initial proposal, the agency's initial evaluation identified several concerns with Leidos's approach. The agency assigned a weakness, under the technical factor, for the firm's reliance on novel technical solutions, to include Shredder, CEDAR, TRFCTA, and HyperCube.[4] DTRA explained these tools "are government-funded technologies that are still in the early stages of development (proof-of-concept or prototype) and have not achieved initial operating capability (not fully developed or deployed)." AR, Tab 10, Leidos Initial Evaluation at 2. The agency concluded that "it is not feasible to utilize these technologies within 18 months of contract award as it will take more time to fully develop them[,]" and that their inclusion in Leidos's technical approach "presents a moderate risk to the program in that the proposed efficiencies from the use of these technologies may not be realized, leading to delays and/or decreased production." *Id*.

The use of these technologies also impacted the agency's view of Leidos's cost proposal. For example, Leidos proposed [DELETED] hours per FTE, which the agency

[4] As to these proposed tools, Leidos's proposal explains: Shredder is a generative artificial intelligence (AI) tool; CEDAR (or Computing Environment for Data Analytics Research) is a product for optimization and uncertainty quantification studies; TRFCTA (or Target Immersive Mission Planning Rapid Functional Characterization Tools and Automation) is a customized AI tool developed for DTRA; and HyperCube is a repository of building standards, manufacturer information, part numbers, and other pertinent information that provides content to a sparsely populated matrix. *See generally*, AR, Tab 8A, Leidos Technical Proposal.

identified as “slightly below the government’s recommendation of 1,920 hours, leading to a [DELETED] [percent] reduction in labor hours[,] which is acceptable if successful implementation of innovative AI technologies is met to offset the decrease.” *Id*. at 4. However, DTRA cautioned that the proposed FTE reductions over the life of the contract rely on achieving efficiencies through novel technologies, but because those will not likely be readily available for the first 18 months of performance, it “is not feasible to reduce FTEs as it will take time to fully develop and use the efficiencies proposed as well as the fact the government funding is not guaranteed for the development of these technologies.” *Id*. at 4-5.

The agency raised these concerns during the initial interchange period and Leidos modified its proposal, stating it was taking “deliberate steps to eliminate dependencies between technology availability and mission execution to remove production and schedule risk.” AR, Tab 14ii, Leidos Interchange Response at 7. The firm further explained that its novel technical solutions were intended to be “accelerators, not dependencies.” *Id*. at 35. Leidos stated to maintain production and schedule, it would “use experienced technical and scientific personnel; in-place, proven approaches; and existing [commercial off-the-shelf] COTS and [government off-the-shelf] GOTS tools while continuing to introduce new mature COTS tools into the process.” *Id*. DTRA was satisfied with Leidos’s explanation, and removed the weakness it had assigned under the technical factor. AR, Tab 18B, Leidos Final Technical Approach Worksheet, at row 9.

The agency conducted a second round of interchanges with Leidos, seeking information regarding the firm’s staffing for the R&D surge CLINs, where Leidos proposed [DELETED] percent of the agency’s LOE estimate. AR, Tab 15A, Second Leidos Interchange Notice at 1. While DTRA acknowledged that Leidos stated its estimate was based on historical program data and allowed for flexibility based on needs and timing, the agency considered the firm’s explanation insufficient and sought further rationale for its proposed staffing levels. *Id*. Leidos responded by explaining it derived a staffing rate based on historical performance on the predecessor contract, and that because “the Government has not established a fixed staffing level or workload volume, we apply our scalable staffing approach[.]” AR, Tab 16B, Leidos Second Interchange Response at 4. The firm went on to state:

> This approach ensures the Government pays only for the labor required to achieve performance outcomes, while preserving the flexibility to surge or adjust staffing as requirements evolve. It also reduces risk during lower-demand periods and ensures resources are available when workload increases. Leidos has the ability to scale beyond this as needed for mission requirements in coordination with DTRA.

Id.

In its final evaluation, DTRA upwardly adjusted Leidos’s total FTEs for the R&D surge CLINs, to align Leidos’s LOE with the agency’s anticipated need for increased R&D

surge hours across the life of the contract, as identified in the independent government cost estimate (IGCE). AR, Tab 18A, Leidos Final Evaluation at 5-6 (increasing Leidos's proposed FTEs for R&D surge CLINs (which ranged from 11.4 FTEs to 13 FTEs) to the IGCE's estimated 28.6 FTEs). This resulted in an approximate $18M increase for Leidos's most probable cost. *Id*. Concerning the O&M surge CLINs, the agency determined that while Leidos's proposed FTEs (which ranged between [DELETED] and [DELETED] FTEs) varied from the government's estimate (10.5 FTEs), such variance was "acceptable", and was "manageable and technically justified rather than a risk to mission execution." *Id*. at 6. DTRA noted that "Leidos is providing [subject matter experts] SMEs to transfer information from source documents into 3D model schema and final product templates using operating system tools in lieu of TRFCTA[,]" but that "TRFCTA is still proposed
as an efficiency accelerator rather than a dependency." *Id*. The agency found Leidos's proposed "FTEs for the surge O&M CLINs to be acceptable" and concluded that it did not warrant a cost adjustment. *Id*.

Challenge to Agency's Technical Evaluation

With this as a backdrop, we turn to ARA's specific protest allegations. First, ARA challenges DTRA's evaluation of Leidos's technical proposal, arguing the agency unreasonably concluded that Leidos had, through its interchange response, resolved an assigned weakness, concerning the proposed use of novel technologies. Comments and Supp. Protest at 16-21; Supp. Comments at 18-23. The protester alleges that Leidos made no substantive changes to its technical proposal during those interchanges, and the agency, in turn, ignored the risk attendant with the firm's approach. In response, the agency argues it reasonably considered the weakness resolved where Leidos made substantive changes in response to DTRA's concerns. Supp. Memorandum of Law (MOL) at 2-4.

As noted above, this task order competition was conducted pursuant to FAR subpart 16.5. The evaluation of proposals in a task order competition, including the determination of the relative merits of proposals, is primarily a matter within the contracting agency's discretion, because the agency is responsible for defining its needs and the best method of accommodating them. *Engility Corp.*, B-413120.3 *et al.*, Feb. 14, 2017, at 15; *URS Fed. Servs., Inc.*, B-413333, Oct. 11, 2016, at 6. Our Office will review evaluation challenges in task order procurements to ensure that the competition was conducted in accordance with the solicitation and applicable procurement laws and regulations. *Engility Corp.*, *supra* at 15-16. An agency is not required to document "determinations of adequacy" or explain in the evaluation record why it did not assess a strength, weakness, or deficiency for a particular item. *Booz Allen Hamilton, Inc.*, B-417418 *et al.*, July 3, 2019, at 17. A protester's disagreement with the agency's judgment, without more, is not sufficient to establish that an agency acted unreasonably. *Engility Corp.*, *supra* at 16.

As explained above, DTRA initially assigned Leidos's proposal a weakness under the technical approach factor for its use of technologies "that are still in the early stages of

development (proof-of-concept or prototype) and have not achieved initial operating capability (not fully developed or deployed)." AR, Tab 10, Leidos Initial Evaluation at 2. The agency noted that "it is not feasible to utilize these technologies within 18 months of contract award as it will take more time to fully develop them[,]" which "presents a moderate risk to the program in that the proposed efficiencies from the use of these technologies may not be realized, leading to delays and/or decreased production."[5] *Id*.

Here, the record supports the reasonableness of the agency's determination that Leidos's modifications addressed DTRA's concerns. Indeed, in response to the assigned weakness, Leidos explained that it would use "experienced technical and scientific personnel; in-place, proven approaches; and existing COTS and GOTS tools" to maintain production and schedule, and would "invest[] funds to support concurrent buildout of the technologies" Leidos proposed. AR, Tab 14ii, Leidos Interchange Response at 35. Moreover, Leidos directly addressed the agency's central concern--namely, the risk tied to the fact that it was not feasible to utilize these technologies within 18 months of contract award--by stating that it was no longer proposing that these technologies would allow for the expected efficiencies within the first 18 months. *See id*. at 7 ("We removed the previously proposed staff reductions at the 18-month mark."). Instead, Leidos explained it "intended these technologies as accelerators, not dependencies." *Id*. ARA suggests removal of the weakness was unwarranted, where Leidos has not demonstrated when, or even if, these technologies will be implemented. *See* Supp. Comments at 20 ("Even if one assumes that everything will go according to plan, and the technologies will be available for Leidos' use at some time during the period of performance, there is no guarantee regarding when they will become available or whether they will allow Leidos to achieve the promised efficiencies.). However, we find reasonable the agency's conclusion that Leidos's amended approach (*i.e.*, using existing and proven approaches, while also working toward maturing these technologies for future use), addressed DTRA's concerns regarding the risk efficiencies will not be realized within 18 months of award. The protester's disagreement with the agency's evaluation judgement does not provide a basis to sustain the protest. *Engility Corp.*, *supra* at 16.

Challenges to Agency's Cost Evaluation

ARA also challenges the agency's cost evaluation. When an agency evaluates a proposal for the award of a cost-reimbursement contract or task order, the offeror's proposed costs are not dispositive because, regardless of the costs proposed, the government is bound to pay the contractor its actual and allowable costs. FAR 15.404-1(d), 16.505(b)(3); *AECOM Mgmt. Servs., Inc.*, B-418467 *et al.*, May 15, 2020, at 4. Consequently, the agency must perform a cost realism analysis to determine the extent to which the offeror's proposed costs are realistic for the work to

[5] The agency, in its initial cost evaluation, also identified Leidos's use of these technologies to achieve efficiencies as potentially problematic. AR, Tab 10, Leidos Initial Evaluation at 4.

be performed. FAR 15.404-1(d)(1); *see also Noridian Admin. Servs., LLC*, B-401068.13, Jan. 16, 2013, at 4-5. An agency is not required to conduct an in-depth cost analysis, or to verify each and every item in assessing cost realism; rather, the evaluation requires the exercise of informed judgment by the contracting agency. *See Cascade Gen., Inc.*, B-283872, Jan. 18, 2000, at 8; *see also* FAR 15.404-1(c). Our review of an agency's cost realism evaluation is limited to determining whether the cost analysis is reasonable; a protester's disagreement with the agency's judgment, without more, does not provide a basis to sustain the protest. *Imagine One Tech. & Mgmt., Ltd.*, B-412860.4, B-412860.5, Dec. 9, 2016, at 14-16.

The protester raises several allegations regarding the agency's cost evaluation, none of which provides a basis to sustain the protest. First, ARA contends the agency's cost realism analysis was unreasonable, where DTRA's adjustments to Leidos's costs were insufficient and did not lead to a realistic price. In this regard, the protester argues DTRA failed to consider the risk associated with Leidos's staffing approach, as modified through its exchanges with the agency, and that in accepting the awardee's staffing approach, "the Agency allowed Leidos to lowball its [LOE] estimates without consequence." Comments and Supp. Protest at 36; *see also* Supp. Comments at 3-8.

As noted above, the agency identified that Leidos proposed approximately [DELETED] percent of the solicitation's FTE LOE estimate, with the firm's rationale being that this rate was "more in line with historical program data". AR, Tab 8C, Leidos Cost Narrative at 24. Leidos asserted this approach would provide DTRA with "flexibility based on the need and the timeframe." *Id*. Through the second round of interchanges, Leidos explained how it arrived at its [DELETED] percent rate (based on seven years of contract support), and explained it could meet the agency's surge requirements through the application of its "scalable staffing approach" identified in its management approach proposal. AR, Tab 16B, Leidos Second Interchange Response at 4. Leidos further provided it had "the ability to scale beyond this as needed for mission requirements[.]" *Id*. The agency, with an understanding of Leidos's staffing approach (as driven by its management approach), upwardly adjusted the number of proposed FTEs to better meet the agency's anticipated staffing needs for these CLINs. AR, Tab 18A, Leidos Final Evaluation at 6.

The agency did not have concerns with Leidos's O&M surge staffing, where the slight difference in the proposed FTEs as compared to the agency's estimate was acceptable and "manageable and technically justified rather than a risk to mission execution." *Id*. DTRA specifically identified Leidos's provision of "[DELETED] in lieu of TRFCTA[,]" but where "TRFCTA is still proposed as an efficiency accelerator rather than a dependency." *Id*.

Here, the record demonstrates that DTRA reasonably evaluated Leidos's staffing approach as outlined in its cost proposal. As an initial matter, the protester objects DTRA's acceptance of Leidos's deviations from the LOE estimates provided for in the TORFP for the surge CLINs, whereas ARA proposed staffing in line with those estimates. *See* Comments and Supp. Protest at 38-39 ("[T]he Agency has failed to

adequately explain how it accepted Leidos' explanation and allowed it to propose to perform with significantly fewer personnel and hours than ARA[.]"); *see also* Supp. Comments at 5-9. However, the agency and the intervenor correctly note that the LOE estimates for the CLINs were just that--estimates. Offerors could, through their unique technical approaches, and with appropriate explanation, deviate from the estimates provided. *See* AR, Tab 5v, Draft TORFP Question and Answer, at row 11 (confirming that "offerors are not required to bid the FTEs, or estimated values listed"); TORFP at 76 (explaining that DTRA's cost realism evaluation would require the agency to evaluate elements of the proposed cost estimates to determine if they are "consistent with the unique methods of performance and materials described in the contractor's technical proposal").

ARA's argument that DTRA's cost adjustment for Leidos's R&D surge CLINs were insufficient finds no support in the record. Indeed, not finding issue with Leidos's technical or management approach, DTRA reasonably concluded that it would likely require more FTEs for those specific surge CLINS, and upwardly adjusted Leidos's costs to meet the agency's estimate. We find such action reasonable, and indeed, the very purpose of a cost realism evaluation--to determine the extent to which the offeror's proposed costs are realistic for the work to be performed. *See* FAR 15.404-1(d)(1). Moreover, to the extent the protester contends the agency failed to reasonably consider the adjustments Leidos made to its proposal through exchanges, we disagree. The record demonstrates the agency was aware of Leidos's staffing strategy, its ability to meet the agency's surge requirements, and the modifications of its proposal made during interchanges. *See* AR, Tab 18A, Leidos Final Evaluation at 6 (referencing Leidos's interchange response); AR, Tab 46, Declaration from Evaluation Team Lead at 1-2 (referencing the same).

Similarly, we find unpersuasive ARA's contention that the agency failed to consider the attendant risk with Leidos's proposal, or whether Leidos lacked an understanding of the solicitation's requirements. *See* Supp. Comments at 8-10. Indeed, the record evidences the opposite--the agency found that under both the technical and management approach factors, Leidos's proposal "indicates a thorough approach and understanding of the requirements, and risk of unsuccessful performance is low[.]" AR, Tab 18A, Leidos Final Evaluation at 1, 2; *see also* AR, Tab 46, Declaration from Evaluation Team Lead at 2 (explaining why Leidos's technical and management approaches led the agency to conclude that the firm's staffing below the government's estimate did not warrant a finding of increased technical risk). As to the R&D surge CLINs, the agency noted Leidos's "ability to scale beyond what was proposed as needed for mission requirements" and found Leidos's labor mix for these CLINs "appropriate". AR, Tab 18A, Leidos Final Evaluation at 6. Additionally, any potential performance risk of understaffing the contract was effectively mitigated by DTRA's upward adjustment of Leidos's costs for the R&D surge CLINs. Regarding the O&M surge CLINs, while Leidos proposed fewer FTEs than the agency's estimate, DTRA specifically explained that the deviation was "manageable and technically justified rather than a risk to mission execution[,]" where Leidos was providing "[DELETED] tools in lieu of TRFCTA[,]" and where "TRFCTA is still proposed as an efficiency accelerator rather

than a dependency." *Id*. Accordingly, we find no basis to sustain the protester's cost evaluation challenges.[6] *Imagine One Tech. & Mgmt., Ltd.*, *supra* at 16 (a protester's disagreement with the agency's judgment, without more, does not provide a basis to sustain the protest).

Best-Value Decision

ARA also challenges the agency's best-value determination. Where, as here, a solicitation provides for issuance of a task order on a best-value tradeoff basis, it is the function of the source selection authority to perform a price/technical tradeoff. *Alliant Enter. JV, LLC*, B-410352.5, B-410352.6, July 1, 2015, at 13. An agency has broad discretion in making a tradeoff between price and nonprice factors, and the extent to which one may be sacrificed for the other is governed only by the tests of rationality and consistency with the solicitation's stated evaluation criteria. *Id*. at 14. There is no need for extensive documentation of every consideration factored into a tradeoff decision. FAR 16.505(b)(7*)*; *Lockheed Martin Integrated Sys., Inc.,* B-408134.3, B-408134.5, July 3, 2013, at 10. Rather, the documentation need only be sufficient to establish that the agency was aware of the relative merits and costs of the competing quotations and that the source selection was reasonably based. *Id.* A protester's disagreement with the agency's determination, without more, does not establish that the evaluation or source selection was unreasonable. *Engility Corp.*, B-413120.3 *et al.*, Feb. 14, 2017, at 16.

In the tradeoff, the agency considered the unique strengths of the offerors' respective proposals under the technical and management approach factors, their performance records, and their most probable costs. AR, Tab 19, BVDM at 9-10. In making its selection decision, the selection official found that while ARA received higher adjectival ratings under both the technical and management approach factors, the firm's unique strengths did not warrant the associated price premium. *Id*. While ARA argues the agency's tradeoff was unreasonable for several reasons, we find no basis to sustain the protest, and address three representative examples.

First, ARA contends the agency improperly equated strengths between the two proposals, where DTRA concluded that ARA's strength for "their robust [configuration

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[6] The protester argues had it known the agency would have accepted deviations from the government's LOE estimate (as was the case in Leidos's proposal), ARA would have proposed fewer FTEs; as ARA bid closer to the agency's estimate for the surge CLINs, it was entitled to a downward cost adjustment. Comments and Supp. Protest at 43-46; Supp. Comments at 10-13. However, as described above, we find no basis to conclude the agency deviated from the solicitation's cost evaluation criteria, or somehow treated offerors unequally. Indeed, how ARA staffs its proposal is entirely a function of its business judgment--the protester is not entitled to a cost adjustment merely because another offeror proposed a viable alternative predicated upon a leaner staffing solution.

control board] CCB process" and Leidos's strength for "specialized technical expertise" were "functionally comparable." *Id.*; *see* Comments and Supp. Protest at 49-52. However, as the evaluation team lead explains, the "strengths were determined to be functionally comparable because a CCB demands personnel with a certain set of personnel skills and procedures, and Leidos had proposed a complement of personnel with commensurate/similar skills and procedural acumen." AR, Tab 46, Declaration from Evaluation Team Lead at 1. We find this explanation reasonable and consistent with the underlying evaluation record.

Second, ARA asserts the agency unreasonably equated ARA's ratings of "outstanding" with Leidos's ratings of "good" under the technical and management factors. Supp. Comments at 25-27. However, the underlying record does not support this contention. Indeed, the agency specifically recognized that ARA's adjectival ratings were higher than Leidos's rating. *See* AR, Tab 19, BVDM at 10 ("ARA's ratings of ["outstanding"] on Technical and Management Approaches are higher than Leidos' ratings of ["good"] on both Technical and Management Approach[.]"). The fact that the selection authority looked beyond the adjectival ratings to the underlying merit of each of the proposals does not mean the official equalized different ratings. Our prior decisions provide that there is nothing improper about an agency's decision to look behind ratings given proposals by evaluators in an attempt to ascertain the true relative strengths and weaknesses of proposals. *See Midland Supply, Inc.*, B-298720.3, May 14, 2007, at 4. Moreover, adjectival ratings and point scores are but guides to, and not substitutes for, intelligent decision making. *Shumaker Trucking & Excavating Contractors, Inc.*, B-290732, Sept. 25, 2002, at 8. Thus, we do not agree with ARA that DTRA improperly equated two different proposal ratings.

Third, ARA alleges the best value tradeoff decision attributes an underserved strength to Leidos's proposal regarding its use of digital twins, thus rendering the tradeoff unreasonable. Comments and Supp. Protest at 56; Supp. Comments at 24-25. In its initial technical evaluation, the agency assigned Leidos a weakness for is proposed use of digital twins, which "demonstrates a misunderstanding of the task's constraints." AR, Tab 10, Leidos Initial Evaluation at 2. Leidos resolved this weakness, in the eyes of DTRA, "by rebranding digital twins as [multi-resolution models] 'MRMs' and clarifying that the goal is to make the MRM as true to reality as possible while appropriately bounding uncertainties." AR, Tab 18B, Leidos Final Technical Approach Worksheet, at row 10. Nonetheless, the tradeoff seemed to improperly credit Leidos's proposal for its use of digital twins: "Leidos demonstrated a comprehensive understanding of future-state requirements through Digital Twin Stage 2 which optimize production and scenarios." AR, Tab 19, BVDM at 9. ARA argues the mere removal of a weakness through interchanges cannot reasonably be considered a strength in the tradeoff decision.

Here, we conclude the tradeoff's reference to digital twins was not a prejudicial error. Earlier in the best value decision, where the agency identified each offeror's unique technical strengths, DTRA properly identified one of Leidos's strengths as "Leidos' [DELETED] (Figure 1.1-13) which identifies ways to optimize production and scenarios

and demonstrates a comprehensive understanding of current and potential future-state requirements (Phase 4), lowering the risk of unsuccessful performance[.]" AR, Tab 19, BVDM at 3. However, in the tradeoff, this strength is again described, but with the inclusion of a reference to digital twin stage 2. *Id*. at 9. It appears this was in error. Indeed, as explained by the evaluation team lead, the tradeoff's reference to "digital twin" was a mistake; the reference should have been to "multi-resolution model" or MRM. AR, Tab 46, Declaration from Evaluation Team Lead at 1. We find such an explanation reasonable and consistent with the underlying record. Accordingly, we cannot conclude that this assigned strength (for a comprehensive understanding of future-state requirements), which also appears in the agency's underlying evaluation and elsewhere in the tradeoff decision, can reasonably be considered improperly assigned.

The protest is denied.

Edda Emmanuelli Perez
General Counsel