



Fewer conferences and more political courage

by Michael Asner

Over the last 10 years, I've given workshops on procurement topics to government people across Canada. As a result, I've had hundreds of conversations and discussions with procurement executives, buyers and program managers from the federal, provincial and local governments, from universities, libraries, school boards, and health regions about procurement issues and problems.

Procurement people from Nunavut to Vancouver to PEI have shared their concerns with me – one of the major concerns being the perceived lack of support for the procurement function within their agencies. As well, procurement people are sometimes pressured by their bosses and political masters to sanction improper actions. I've been told that many procurement people have heard the line "I know you don't like the way we awarded this contract, but just sign it!" And there are only so many times that you can object before *you* become the problem.

It appears to me that senior executives and in particular, elected officials, need to be more aware of the procurement function and the issues procurement professionals deal with on a daily basis. We know the rules. We know the law. And we know about public policy. It is past time that the procurement process is given the respect it deserves.

Few senior managers and elected politicians understand what procurement people do – and what value they can add to the process – often thinking that that they impede progress by insisting that procedures be followed. They fail to understand that procurement is governed not by a local political agenda but by public policy and the courts. There are rules that must be followed in every jurisdiction. And finally, these same managers and elected officials fail to recognize that procurement is practiced as a profession and its members have a strong code of conduct.

I have also worked with private firms to help them understand how to sell to governments. My workshops provided me the opportunity to

discuss key concerns with a wide variety of private sector firms – printing companies, engineers, systems integrators, recycling firms, accounting firms. These firms, from all over North America, have a common set of concerns:

- Vendors generally don't understand and are often intimidated by the procurement process.
- Vendors are concerned that, although a government is announcing a competition for a contract, the winner has already been decided. They distrust the process.
- Vendors believe government hides information or, at least, makes it difficult to obtain. The proposal writing process is very expensive and when you lose, it is difficult to find out the specific reason why you lost.

It is obvious to me that both sides of the procurement continuum could benefit by becoming more familiar with the fundamentals that govern the process – ethics and laws, professional standards of procurement personnel, the formalized process for tendering, evaluation and award of contracts and the necessity of fair, open competition to ensure the best value for dollar spent, as well as the impact that technology will continue to have. Some simple changes could do a lot to raise the profile of procurement:

- Adopting accurate job descriptions which reflect procurement's important role rather than burying the most important tasks in "and other duties as may be assigned;"
- Recognizing "fair and open competition" as a value of the organization by including it in each executive's job description;
- Educating senior executives and politicians about the laws and rulings of the courts, which define the procurement function; and
- Identifying all the value-added tasks that procurement performs.

In many public agencies procurement reform is driven by external forces – reports of scandals, outraged citizens, the public reports of auditors and sometimes by calling in the police.

In my opinion, our professional procurement associations, such as the Purchasing Management Association of Canada, the National Institute of Government Purchasers and others, could exercise significant influence in getting our public institutions to both recognize the importance of the procurement function and drive procurement reform from the inside. They would serve their members better by being stronger and more visible advocates of both the profession and "fair and open" competition. Senior management and their political bosses need to empower the procurement function. Advocacy is an important, underfunded, and seemingly neglected function of our associations. *MA*

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