

# Procurement leadership in practice

**M**OST ARTICLES AND BOOKS ABOUT leadership are written from the perspective of successful leaders, or those who either teach people how to be successful leaders and write about traits of successful leaders. “A real leader faces the music, even when he doesn’t like the tune.” (Anon); “The most important quality in a leader is that of being acknowledged as such.” (Andre Maurois); and “Management is doing things right; leadership is doing the right things.” (Peter Drucker). The list of essential attributes – the way leaders think, feel and act – is endless. In fact, there are so many things that can be said about leadership, and leadership relates to so many things, that writing about leadership is a bit like writing about ‘life’ – it’s a big, amorphous topic.

It can sometimes be more useful to think about what leadership elements look like in a practical context rather than about what or who leaders are and how they got to be that way. I once worked with one of the world’s largest management

outsourcing and consulting companies where the governing belief was that everyone in the organization, at all levels of the organization, was a leader, either developing and emerging, or *de facto*. Most of us fell into the former category, and those in the latter understood that, apart from generating the revenues that made everything else possible, their primary job was to nurture the environment that made becoming a leader achievable. Positional leadership – “I’m the boss so I call the shots” – had its place, but for the most part, leadership was defined as a set of qualities that can be taught and measured within the context in which those qualities were expressed, at all levels of the organization. As I think of it, leadership is not about producing great or charismatic personalities, but about deliberately growing people’s potential in ways that can provide concrete answers to the questions: are we achieving the targeted results? Are we retaining our people? Are we serving our clients well?

at every level, to enhance the value that is potentially available in the marketplace for the benefit of the organization.

Although it is common to hear that people are leading organizations, that is of course inaccurate, since only people can be led. Because only people can do the things that need to be accomplished, people are the heart and soul of every organization. As such, leaders owe a duty to people, which can take many forms.

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“Management is doing things right; leadership is doing the right things.”

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One way of leading is to capture the full complexity of the situation facing the group and articulating it in a clear and compelling way, not overly optimistically, not overly pessimistically. Simply capturing what is going on and presenting a grounded perspective gives a sense of common understanding of the purpose and goals to be accomplished. In a way, it is that grounded perspective that provides the sense of order upon which it becomes possible to aspire to excellence. A stable and predictable environment is one that accommodates change more easily, that allows for richer and more rewarding human relationships, and that makes people feel hopeful they can better participate in achieving their full potential.

Closely related to the above is the idea of accepting and encouraging different ideas, different perspectives within the organization. It is by sharing ideas with leaders who listen and hear that people give the best of themselves, by feeling valued, by sensing that their contribution is meaningful and special. There is the story of U.S. General Colin Powell who took a walk every afternoon around the military grounds, using the same path, to signal he was available to anyone who wanted to speak with him, and welcoming diverse ideas. Leaders, according to Powell, show concern for the efforts and challenges faced by underlings – even as they push for higher standards.

Given the fast-changing procurement environment in Canada, encouraging a diverse range of views becomes an opportunity – an opportunity to capture and re-define the job description of the modern procurement officer. The purchasing role of the past may have been focused primarily on administrative tasks, away from the more high-profile areas of program delivery. But there is now a need to transform the role into an important corporate management function, one which is both strategic and transactional, and contributes significant value to the organization. The opportunity to recast the role may be sharpest in Ontario where the provincial Ministry of Finance just released the initial edition of its *Supply Chain* Guideline, which is raising the bar on the way procurement is conducted in the province. Leadership means grasping the opportunity and participating in the process to influence the shape of things to come in procurement.

Indeed, different things are expected of individuals at different places in every organization. What are some leadership features that can apply to, say, the director of Procurement and Logistics in a hospital, a municipality or any other type of organization? Below, in no particular order, are some ideas about how we can think of our role as procurement professionals in our respective organizations. Many more ideas could be added.

#### Leaders' obligations

Like everyone else in the organization, leaders owe a duty to the organization – a duty to contribute to the financial and/or public policy success of the organization and to do what is necessary to ensure the future success of the organization. In procurement, this may mean nurturing relationships with suppliers and potential suppliers since they are an important source of the value to the organization – it is the leader's job,

### Leaders provide momentum

If capturing the full complexity of the situation facing the group and articulating a clear and compelling direction is the role of leaders, so is creating a sense of momentum. Without momentum, there is the risk that all work will stall at contemplation.

Momentum is not a mere abstraction – it is a sense within a group that what they do together is interrelated and is progressing towards an objective that has been defined by the leader. It is a shared sense of purpose, which greatly surpasses the separate objectives of each individual within the group.

In an organization's procurement group, momentum may be built around the group's strategic objectives for the year, which need to be clear, measurable and well communicated. Only leaders can create the conditions necessary to gain momentum, and maintain it on a consistent basis.

Change – welcome or unwelcome – creates opportunities for building momentum. The recent e-Health Ontario debacle

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"Leadership means grasping the opportunity and participating in the process...."

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in the province creates an opportunity for reform that can be harnessed, not just by those living under the spotlight, but by procurement professionals across the entire public sector. Similarly, the release of the province's new *Supply Chain Guideline* also becomes an opportunity to build momentum around the many new requirements that are being proposed to be implemented.

### Leaders are accountable for being effective

As is noted in the quote from Peter Drucker earlier in this article, there is a difference between efficiency, which is to do things well, and effectiveness, which is to do the right things. Leaders must do the right things, but not all by themselves. The director of Procurement and Logistics may be accountable ultimately for the work of the group, but by recognizing the diverse talents of her team members, he/she can get the job done by reaching out and enabling others to reach their full potential for the benefit of the group, and the organization. The objective is to harness the talent that is available, not by focusing first on positions, but by recognizing individual interests and strengths, wherever they may be in the group.

In the end, leadership may be more a weaving of relationships than anything else – a weaving with a sense of direction and momentum, which is clearly communicated, and focused on achieving measurable results. 

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# Canadian Public Procurement Council Forum 2009

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Photo: Anne Phillips


**E**ARLY IN NOVEMBER, MEMBERS OF the Canadian Public Procurement Council met in Victoria for their annual forum. The pre-forum workshops drew a select number of delegates and the concurrent sessions and plenary sessions held over the next three days were met with enthusiasm. Delegates peppered many presenters with questions and during the lively breakout sessions, shared their own experiences, challenges and solutions with each other. One such session was on the challenges of rolling out the federal infrastructure funds as quickly as was being demanded. Changes in signing authority, process and staffing were all required in varying degrees and everyone had different ideas and solutions. Relationships between governments at all levels needed tuning up so that everyone could take advantage of the economic stimulus.

At a special early morning event, the winners of the Leadership in Public Procurement Award and Leadership in Green Procurement were presented their awards by Summit magazine and the leadership award sponsor, BMO Financial Group. The winning submissions were described in greater detail at one of the morning sessions where delegates queried

the presenters on aspects of their submissions. BMO also had an opportunity to inform delegates of advances in their card services for the public sector.

As always, networking among the delegates is one of the strengths of the forum. One delegate told me that she had a challenge before her and did not know where to begin, but she met a delegate that had already been down that road and, not only would he share his documentation, he would personally help her work out her approach... now that is value for money from a conference! Some of the forum presentations are available at <http://cppcforumccmp.ca/program.php>.

Victoria's mild weather and the location of the conference centre location in the heart of downtown did much to allow delegates to interact socially as well. The banquet evening in the Crystal Garden was a great success with Sutcliffe, a Beatles tribute band, encouraging several delegates to linger over coffee and to dance.

Delegates are now anticipating next year's conference, which will be held in Ottawa in early October. Plans are already underway for a full and captivating program that will capitalize on the venue being our nation's capital. Stay tuned. 

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