

The Acquisition Workforce: What Agency Chief Operating Officers Need to Do

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The government needs a strong cadre managing its many contracts. It doesn't have that today.

Contracting has gotten more complex as the number of people to manage them hasn't kept up. The government spends less to manage its contracts on a percentage basis than at any point in history--not because it is more efficient, because it has no choice. Until we solve our workforce problems, we will spend billions more than necessary, suffer less effective programs, and face crises when contractors take on the government's role.

Not enough people, gaps in mid-level management, inadequate salaries, poor career ladders, training shortfalls, stove-piped operations and a "toxic" environment of mistrust and second-guessing represent some of the most glaring problems identified by a mix of government, private sector and academic leaders well versed in the field. These issues give evidence of a structural dysfunction that thwarts attempts at piece-meal solutions. For example, simply putting more money into agency training budgets, while ignoring the need for developing a successful working collaboration between program and contracting staff, will not be sufficient.

The cost of poorly run acquisitions is high. At over \$400 billion annually for contracts, even minor inefficiencies and gaps in effectiveness can result in the losses of billions of dollars.

Agency leadership must accept the critical role that acquisition plays and make strengthening it a priority.

Agency Chief Operating Officers (COO's) are best positioned to accept this challenge. They will fail to achieve their missions if they ignore the critical role that contracting plays. If competent staff and sufficient resources are not in place to allow agencies to acquire products and services effectively and efficiently, the essence of what government is meant to do is put at risk. However, if the negative effects and the risks of failure are so stunning, an obvious question is why more is not being done. To some, it is an issue of education and communications. To others it is an issue of leadership. It is both.

COO's need to take an enterprise approach that deals with the multiple disciplines involved in acquisition and not just focus on contracting officers.

The Defense Department for years has recognized the strategic importance and breadth of the acquisition role. Program and technical staff who develop requirements and not just contracting officials are included in any Department of Defense acquisition workforce assessment. Civilian agencies are beginning to embrace this approach. Recognizing acquisition in this broader context leads to a greater appreciation of the strategic

value it brings. An across-the-enterprise approach offers the best chance for tearing down those stove pipes that hinder collaboration as well as devote the necessary resources.

Chief Acquisition Officers must be prepared to demonstrate the value proposition in mission terms from investing in an effective acquisition function. This includes good performance measures. Facts, not assertions, are needed.

Effective human capital planning is a critical enabler of transformation.

Agencies need an effective strategic and human capital planning process to address the resource and staffing constraints that undermine successful acquisition management. These must be seen as investments essential to the health of the agency and its mission, not just another expenditure claim on its annual budget. This planning that will allow agencies to align staff and resources for mission accomplishment.

Key Recommendations

Agencies must put in place or enhance core processes to make the function operate as effectively as possible. These include:

- Establishing sound career ladders for acquisition professionals so that they see a solid progression,
- Providing direct hire authority to agencies so they can recruit and acquire staff in a timely fashion,
- Putting in place intern, mentoring and coaching programs to build confidence that staff can do the job,
- Designing recruiting programs to bring in mid-career leadership from outside the government,
- Offering joint program officer and contracting staff training programs to promote a collaborative working environment, and
- Establishing effective succession planning to cope with impending retirements

The time for action is now. We need to move from studying to doing.

As there is greater appreciation for the importance of the acquisition role and the need for creative and innovative staff to accomplish agency missions, there will also be a greater willingness to address procedural constraints such as burdensome hiring restrictions that make it that much more difficult to acquire the staff needed.

George Mason University and the IBM Center for the Business of Government have convened a series of discussions by thought leaders on issues for public managers. These sessions generate practical advice for critical management problems. The participants are recognized leaders in their fields and include senior government and private sector managers, academics and representatives of non-profit organizations.

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