



Procurement Career Mentor Clinic – ‘Skills for Moving Up’

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One of the many challenges Procurement & Supply Chain people struggle with is mastering how to grow their careers successfully. So this article is the first of a number of planned ‘clinics’ from Sigi Osagie and Peter Smith to help supply management

and procurement folk by addressing specific questions we’ve been asked on the broad themes of career and performance.

(Readers are encouraged to send questions to [psmith\(at\)spendmatters.com](mailto:psmith@spendmatters.com) or to Sigi Osagie at www.sigiosagie.com. We will pick out the most relevant ones and address them in further articles.)

Thomas D. Asks:

I’ve got many years’ experience working in Procurement roles in different companies, and I consider myself to be a good Procurement Manager. But I still haven’t been able to step up to a senior or executive-level role as I would like. What do you see as the most important skill I need to make that move up?

This is a question many people ponder but never really take action to address. Sometimes people don’t feel confident enough to ask; or they may have no one – a mentor, coach, shaman or whatever – to explore the question with and get the developmental help they need. Or, worse still, some people just bumble along without any thought given to their career growth and direction.

I presume that you’re currently in a middle level role. This clarification is important, as the skills needed in middle management can be quite different from those required to step up to an executive role.

I hope your “many years’ experience” means several years spent in different roles building a broad knowledge base and multiple perspectives. This distinction is also important – you should always **grow your**

experience from different stints of work, rather than doing the same thing time and again. Some people have “10 years’ experience,” for example, but it’s actually 1 year’s experience times 10. This is not growth.

Being “good” may not be adequate to make the step up. Good often means average or the same as most people. What you want is not to be “good” but to **be outstanding** – you’ll find it easier to make the step up compared to many others who are good or average.

There isn’t really one “most important skill” required to move up to a senior role, other than your **personal effectiveness**. This is the single trait or competence that affects everything else.

For example, your personal effectiveness shows in your ability to think clearly about your intents: you must **be clear on your career goal(s)**. Do you want to step up into an Operations, Supply Chain or General Management senior leadership role, for example, or to become a CPO?

Each of these (and other executive roles) may require different routes. You may need to get some exposure to other functional areas beyond Procurement. You could do this in any number of ways, for example: getting a secondment to another area; learning from colleagues in other functions; making a deliberate job change, and so on. Consider any such job move as a stepping stone towards your ultimate career goal.

Broadening your experience base will give you **a more rounded understanding of business** and the wider organisation, and a better grasp of the implications of each function’s actions on other functional areas, which will help develop your **strategic thinking and awareness**. This is always advantageous in executive roles, even if you remain in Procurement.

I’ve deliberately drawn on your own words to give you some pointers. So I hope you can see that your ability to step up to a senior role starts with **your own perspectives** – how you see yourself and your worldview.

And I believe you should focus your development efforts less on technical skills and more on what it takes to step up, and stay up: **‘soft’ skills**. It’s not your technical expertise that will propel you upwards. Your technical competencies are simply ‘Qualifiers’ – they qualify you to play in the Procurement / Supply Chain sandpit, like thousands of others. But it’s your soft skills that’ll differentiate you, help you excel and win in your career – they are your ‘Order Winners.’

People with poor soft skills typically have stunted careers. The higher up you climb, the more vital your **soft skills** become. And you’re more likely to grow wings and fly if you **get yourself a mentor or coach** to help you sharpen those abilities.

Some critical soft skills to hone include:

- **Self-leadership**. You must be adept at **managing yourself** – how you think, what you focus on, how you act, and so on.
- **People management**. In a **line management** role you must **be effective at getting the best out of your people**. Aligning people effectively is also important to get results through others who don’t report to you.

- **Results-orientation.** Focus on delivering results; that's what you're paid for. If you work for a lousy boss who hasn't given you SMART objectives, set yourself some. Then deliver.
- **Persuasive communication and influence.** Sharpen your abilities to win people over. This isn't just about using hard facts and technical lingo; get savvy at 'connecting' with folks emotionally and empathetic listening.
- **Interpersonal relationships.** Immerse yourself in appropriate networks of people who will have positive impacts on your growth. Always remember The Golden Rule, and help others when you can. Manage your 'personal brand' sensibly – learn how to build rapport, communicate your achievements and aspirations, and market yourself -- in the right way, to the right audience and with the right message.
- **Self-belief.** Above all else, believe in yourself. You have what it takes to achieve what you want. Don't let anyone tell you differently; not even yourself.

