



Undoubtedly, boardroom representation is one of the strongest indicators of any function's esteem in an organization. Procurement *has* come a long way from the days when a move into the department was, in effect, a relegation to the backwoods of organizational existence. But even as recently as the early 1990s, procurement was still seen as a back-office function immersed in traditional tactical purchasing activities. The more strategic supply management approaches adopted by organizations with leading purchasing practices have helped bolster procurement's image and get the function closer to the top table. This is a welcome development, not just for mature purchasing practitioners (especially those who for years have felt like their job is akin to banging their head against a wall eight hours a day, five days a week), but also for the development of the profession as a whole.

Purchasing is not yet widely perceived as a premier league profession; certainly not when compared to, say, marketing, law, investment banking or entrepreneurship. But continued efforts by leading companies to exploit the power of effective purchasing have given procurement a more important role in the corporate theatre. The recent economic slump has been an added boost as organizations of all sorts have sought to protect profit margins. Suddenly the spotlight is on procurement and it is shining brightly. Will our performance truly delight the audience?

It won't be a case of "time will tell." Rather, only those procurement functions that find their mojo by enhancing effectiveness will indeed delight their stakeholders.

The increased popularity of procurement in many quarters is a good stimulus to attract new talent and help develop the profession further. They say nothing succeeds like success. The more opportunities the procurement function has to succeed, and the bigger its successes, the more bright, young talents it will attract. This is an often overlooked fact in the debates on growing procurement talent. We must remember that in the talent war for new career entrants procurement is competing with functions like human resources (HR), finance and marketing. These are functions that are, arguably, significantly more established and more highly regarded in many organizations. Other functional areas that are relatively new to the corporate landscape, such as corporate communications, are also competitors in the talent war, especially as they are often perceived to be more sexy.

Making purchasing an appealing career path is part of enhancing functional effectiveness and sustaining the collective procurement mojo. No matter how good the bench-strength and competency of your procurement function is today, it is inevitable that at some point some of your best people will leave. Hence, it is vital to nurture a pipeline of emerging talent, just like many top-flight soccer clubs do through their youth academies. And just as any gifted young soccer player has a choice of youth academies to join, so too does any talented young professional, undergraduate or school-leaver have a choice of professional paths to embark on.

Some purchasing people might disagree with my assessment of the function's standing in most organizations today. My own procurement team at one erstwhile employer didn't quite get my drift initially. So I encouraged them to do a simple test: to stand at our reception or one of the elevators with a clipboard and carry out a random survey of at least 25 passersby, at any time, on any day of the week, asking each person the following questions:

1. Do you know where the HR department is at this company? What do they do there; what are they responsible for?
2. Ask the same questions, but for Finance
3. And for Marketing
4. Then, ask the same questions for procurement.

Rightly or wrongly, perception can sometimes be more important than reality, especially in large organizations. Trying to argue procurement's case in a mire of organizational misconceptions is like complaining about your opponent who turned up to the gunfight with his pistol while you turned up with a knife. Raising the profile of our newly-created procurement function at that former employer was one of our key priorities. We never did do the survey – we didn't need to; I was eventually able to get the team to understand the importance of our profile, and they got it.

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