



Procurement People Capability: Casanova Didn't Master His Skills in a Training Room

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Another enlightening post from Sigi Osagie, expert on effectiveness in Procurement & Supply Chain Management and author of Procurement Mojo – Strengthening the Function and Raising Its Profile. Sigi can be contacted via www.sigiosagie.com.

I often have to elaborate to executives and managers in client businesses that their people are the most critical factor for organisational success. I sometimes get the point across by explaining that if you take the strategies, processes, systems and so on out of any business but leave the people in, the business will still find a way to function; after all, businesses and non-profit organisations existed before the invention of computers, PowerPoint and whatnot. But do the reverse – take the people out and leave the computers, strategies, et al behind – and the enterprise will come to a stop.

Of course, those enablers are also important for success; when they are fit for purpose, they enable us get the work done in a slick way. But their role is secondary to that of 'people'.

Procurement organisations seeking their mojo without adequate focus on building their 'people capability' will continue to find success both irresistibly alluring and, at the same time, impossibly unattainable.

As I explained previously, Procurement provides a service and our service delivery success is deeply dependent on the purchasing people who deliver that service day in, day out. The overriding consensus from relevant studies confirms that **Procurement capability and success relates directly to the calibre of leadership and people in the function.**

CPOs and Procurement managers must, thus, focus appropriate effort at growing their own leadership effectiveness. They must also think about the calibre of people they have in their function, and how their competencies support or negate Procurement's success.

It is important to sift through purchasing staff to identify those who are 'Procurement Ambassadors' and those who are 'Procurement Assassins.' Ambassadors 'get it,' and are engaged with the Procurement agenda.

Whereas Assassins hinder functional capability and damage Procurement's brand reputation – they might need re-calibration, development support or encouragement to find their destinies elsewhere.

Such talent assessment must be part of a competency development effort that incorporates the range of skills purchasing people need for success in their job roles.

Many Procurement skills development efforts centre on providing training, typically in technical competencies. While training is often cost-efficient for technical skills, it isn't always the most cost-effective approach, particularly for intrapersonal and interpersonal competencies, which are the key differentiators between great purchasing practitioners and the mediocre. Such 'soft' skills are about our ability to be effective and to master relationships with others, and with ourselves.

A mad scientist locked away in his laboratory working in isolation on experiments to discover the next breakthrough antibiotic, or how to manipulate the moon and the stars, probably isn't too bothered about nurturing productive relationships with others. But it's different for us in Procurement. **The very nature of the purchasing job, sitting between people in the organisation and people in supply markets, makes the requirement for *savoir faire* with 'people' and 'relationships' crucial to our success.**

Proficiency with such abilities can rarely be acquired by conventional "training" – some things are best learnt and mastered by doing. You just can't teach a young man how to woo beautiful women in a training room. He'll only really master the art from his experiences, good and bad. And if, in addition to his attempts, he gets wise counsel from Casanova, well, the sky really becomes his limit.

Casanova, himself, didn't hone his seduction abilities in a training room; neither did Mata Hari hers. They became great seducers through the experience of repeated practice – learning from each conquest and, no doubt, each failure too.

Procurement people don't need to reincarnate themselves as Giacomo Casanova or Mata Hari to sharpen their soft skills. Neither might it be sensible for Procurement leaders to expect the requisite competency growth in their people from conventional training. Procurement folk will best master such abilities through experience or practice underpinned by sound coaching or mentoring (hear what Bill Gates and Eric Schmidt, the Google Chairman, say).

The diverse personalities of the varied stakeholders Procurement people have to interact with provide ample opportunities for practice. And **coaching and mentoring is proven to be highly impactful in boosting key behavioural competencies** like effective self-leadership; empathetic listening and persuasive communication; influencing at C-level; strategic thinking; political savvy; and building trust – all essential for job success in many Procurement roles, especially at middle and senior levels.

Of course, Procurement people who really want to excel and be better than average must take responsibility for their own growth and development. But any effort by employers to help people grow their capabilities is an added bonus.

Building Procurement's people capability is an investment in the only true asset the function has. Ultimately, "best practice" processes and tools can, and will, be replicated by others. But talent can not be copied.