

WINNING GOVERNMENT CONTRACTS REQUIRES OPENING THE LINES OF COMMUNICATION

A frequent topic in discussions regarding federal acquisition is communication between the government and industry – the vendor community wants more of it, but government employees remain reluctant to participate. Let’s examine the dynamics...

All federal agencies have mission needs which are supported by, and often performed by, vendors under contracts with those agencies. Successful performance under these contracts requires vendor understanding of the agency mission, vision and challenges. The government needs to understand vendor capability, experience, solution set, and approach to make the best source selection decision. It would seem these interests provide balance in the communication exchange. Both parties have important reasons to communicate in the procurement process, and the benefits are obvious. Better understanding of the requirement leads to better proposals and solutions, and in turn, better understanding of the capabilities and proposals enables a better source selection decision and better chance of mission success.

So, if communication appears to be beneficial and critical to both parties, why is it so elusive?

First, the government, under the [Federal Acquisition Regulation \(FAR\)](#), conducts procurements and controls the entire process. It also must abide by regulations, policy, and cautionary warnings from attorneys when presented with an opportunity to communicate with the vendor community. Despite enabling messages such as the series of [MythBusters memoranda](#) from the Office of [Federal Procurement Policy \(OFPP\)](#) and messages from Chief Procurement Officers, most government employees find it much safer to restrict communication, to preserve the “integrity” of the process. Many in the procurement community still believe if a vendor wants something (anything) it must be detrimental to the interests of the government.

Industry is certainly driving the demand for information from the government. Vendors have a compelling motivation – they are competing to win contracts! They desperately need information to make initial bid/no bid decisions for new

work, and they need even deeper data to submit the best possible proposal. On the other hand, vendors can be reluctant to share their proprietary information in settings that may not adequately protect such data. They would happily share pertinent information with the government, but not with competitors!

These factors in the procurement space leave a void of necessary information to meet mission requirements. The federal acquisition environment has forced the parties to be wary of each other to prevent procurement integrity violations, conflicts of interest, and inadvertent disclosure of proprietary or business sensitive information.

Breaking Down Barriers to Communication

There is no quick solution here, but obstacles to communication are beginning to ease in many agencies. As procurement officials have experienced the benefits of increased communication, they have begun to encourage their specialists and program offices to break down barriers. They are asking them to engage with industry to enhance communication that will ultimately lead to added value for the American people.

That said, agency leadership can provide the framework for increased communication, but meaningful change must occur at the working level. Program managers and contracting officers must include communication with industry in their planning and execution of requirements to lead to better outcomes in support of their agency's mission. A critical part in helping vendors understand the mission is being open to answering questions and clarifying requirements early in the bid process.

Industry must approach opportunities for communication with the sincere goal of learning about the agency's mission in order to best apply their capabilities in support of that mission. Despite the construct of federal acquisition, the best results come from carefully managed partnerships between the government and industry. In some cases, it can be advantageous to engage a [consultant with government experience](#) – someone who can provide insights on opening the lines of communication. Knowing where potential sticking points might lie and averting them could even speed the process of building trusting and successful relationships.