

Fixing Acquisition: An Opportunity Lost?

By Stan Soloway and Phil Kangas

January 30, 2015

We've spent more than a decade ignoring a simple warning of the 2002 Volcker Commission: We are trying to run a 21st century government on a mid-20th century, industrial age business model. A series of surveys of acquisition professionals the Professional Services Council and Grant Thornton have conducted during the last 12 years have consistently flagged the implications of that omission for the federal acquisition workforce. [Our 2014 survey](#), released Jan. 22, shows that the government remains mired in old models. This should be disturbing to anyone who recognizes the critical role acquisition plays in the execution of the government's missions.

Consider this: In all seven surveys, respondents—who are all government personnel, many from the senior echelons of the workforce—overwhelmingly identified general business acumen, risk identification and mitigation, negotiating skills and knowledge of buying complex technology capabilities as significant gaps in the federal acquisition workforce's skills. Other, more obvious forces were also identified as inhibiting optimal performance—including the budget insanity that has made it nearly impossible for any agency to optimize operations during the last several years—but the general conclusion has been the same for almost the entire time we have been conducting this survey. Simply put, the workforce does not have the skills needed to do the job as well as everyone wants, and demands. This not a failure of the workforce, but of our collective slowness to recognize the need for major change in how we train, educate and support that workforce.

To borrow from military parlance, acquisition professionals must fight as they train and train as they fight. In this context, we continue to “train” our acquisition workforce in ways more relevant to how things were than to the “fight” they have to wage today. If we don't seize the opportunities presented by the early stages of a generational shift in the federal acquisition workforce, we will lose the battle for a stronger, more efficient and innovative government for another generation.

Young government professionals we surveyed agree. They expressed strong concern that neither their training nor their workplace encourage or enable them to exercise critical or creative thinking. Instead they are largely driven to rigid rules- and compliance-driven processes. How long do we expect the best of the best to stick around under these circumstances?

At a time when agency and administration officials, program managers and others are clamoring for innovation, our 2014 survey respondents ranked innovation next to last out of six possible objectives for any given procurement. Reducing barriers to entry into the government marketplace ranked dead last. There are, of course, many reasons for this fundamental disconnect, including budget pressures and a lack of incentive to pursue innovation, or limited awareness of how such change can have a hugely beneficial impact on budgets.

But regardless of the reasons, the fact of this finding itself is disconcerting at best and merits serious attention and action.

This brings us back to the opportunity the generational shift in the federal acquisition workforce presents. By government estimates, some 40 percent of the current workforce has less than five years of experience and another 40 percent is retirement eligible, or will be in a very short time. While some deem that a crisis, we think it is the opportunity of a lifetime to fundamentally change the culture and the way in which we deploy, train and empower the workforce. It is an opportunity to take a hard and careful look at the future and begin building for it, rather than relying on the industrial age model the Volcker Commission warned about.

It will not be easy. It will take strong and sustained leadership and a willingness to upend long-standing models of workforce education. Most of all, it will take a willingness to pay close attention to what the federal acquisition community itself is saying, and has been saying for a dozen years. We ignore them at our own peril.

Stan Soloway is president and CEO of the Professional Services Council, and Phil Kangas is a principal at Grant Thornton.

(Image via [Brian A Jackson/Shutterstock.com](#))

By Stan Soloway and Phil Kangas

January 30, 2015

<http://www.govexec.com/contracting/2015/01/fixing-acquisition-opportunity-lost/104070/>