

Kevin Minor: 0:04

Greetings Pulse Takers and welcome to part three of my three-part interview with NASPO's Chief Learning Officer, Diane Lancaster. We're finishing up our conversation from part two, so if you haven't stop, go back and listen to part one and part two. So if you haven't stop, go back and listen to part one and part two. That's episodes 16 and 17. Before you reach the conclusion, it is worth it. Let me tell you. Diane tells us how she got into public service, some of the history of the public procurement profession, her roles and responsibilities at NASPO, and we finish our conversation on the importance of public procurement in higher education. If you haven't already, make sure you subscribe to us on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, Google, and make sure to check out the NASPO blog, pulsenaspo.org. Let's take the pulse. Why is it so important to teach public procurement and why is it so important to have public procurement be offered at a collegiate level?

Dianne Lancaster: 1:13

That's an excellent question. A lot of people have asked me that. They say, hey, training is fine, let's make great training programs, and I'm all for that. Training certification, totally all for that College level coursework and I'm not saying I mean there's good quality, bad quality, but college level coursework is about the why. Training is how do you do it? What are the rules? How do I process this? How do I set this up? What do I do if there's a problem? Collegiate work is why. Why are we doing this? What does fair and open competition mean? Why is it even required? What do we care about it? What difference does it make that we have supplier relationships? What is all that about? And college level courses teach you yes, they teach a lot of. You know the how. I mean they talk about data analysis and building spreadsheets and whatnot.

Dianne Lancaster: 2:20

But the fundamental part is thinking. The idea is that you give the student what we call constructs. You give them ways, systems, checklists. You give them ways to think about problems, to think about the way the world works, to think about how business works. Why do we approach negotiations a certain way? Could we do it better? Well, you've got to know the basics. It gets back to that. You've got to know the foundations, and foundations are not necessarily easily seen. You know, if you didn't study history or read an article, you wouldn't necessarily know that procurement has its roots in thousands of years of history that, fundamentally, are still the same. You have to rise to that systemic level. You have to think about okay, there's a system here, there's a marketplace here. Well, what does that mean to me at my desk? Now, to me, that's part and parcel of being a professional, Kevin. You have to be a professional. You have to think that way.

Dianne Lancaster: 3:33

Now, professional credentialing is critical. The UPCC program, which offers the certified public buyer and officer certifications, is important and you don't have to have a college degree to qualify for one, but you do have to have experience and you do have to show enough education and training to show that you're serious about being a professional, and college coursework is part of that. You don't even have to do a four-year degree to sample. Good, college coursework is part of that and you don't have to. You don't even have to do a four-year degree to sample college. Good college coursework, um, you can take, like we have here at the community college. You can take classes without, you know, going into huge debt. You can take classes. You can audit, you can. You can take classes that are offered by a university for not for credit and you can take for credit classes.

Dianne Lancaster: 4:27

There are so many ways that you can gain some college level discussion and it's partly that. It's that getting out of the how do I do it at the desk, in compliance with my state rules and regulations, to okay, let's talk about methodologies. Let's talk about why do we use requests for proposals and what is the goal of a request for proposal. If you understand these things, then you can go back to the foundation and you're going to build it differently. If you look at a request for proposal as truly a way of determining the qualifications and the best value proposition out there, you're going to look at building that proposal differently than if you just look at it as an exercise. I got to get through this. Hopefully nobody protests and somehow we get to contract without everything

blowing up in my face, because I got 15 other projects that I've got to get to as well.

Kevin Minor: 5:31

Right.

Dianne Lancaster: 5:32

So that's why I have a strong belief, as you know, in education and personally have continued to invest in my own. Personally have continued to invest in my own. Every time you get and this goes back to personal happiness at some point you have to kind of decide what are you going to be, what are you going to settle on and then invest in and build? And a specialty public procurement is a specialty. A specialty can be very rewarding. You know I'm in high demand, mainly because I know something about a specialty area that not a lot of people know about. You know nothing wrong with being a generalist, but at some point you got to be a good something.

Kevin Minor: 6:18

What is it Hone in Laser in? Yeah, you got to hone in.

Dianne Lancaster: 6:21

If you're going to be a good anything, be the best. You read this all the time. I mean, there's nothing new here. I'm just telling you from my time, where I'm looking back over a 35-year career if you don't decide to invest and be the best you can be, you're going to be bored, you're going to be unsatisfied. Sure, and there is a lot of truth in the old notion that if you do something you love, the money will come, you'll, you'll make enough to put bread on the table. Uh, nothing will will replace the, the satisfaction of of going to bed peacefully and happy because you did your best at work, and then getting up and having some energy for facing the day and and taking action. Uh, to move the dial or to move whatever it is that you're, you're trying to do how has procurement changed since you were a cpo?

Dianne Lancaster: 7:21

well, uh, as I was kind of talking earlier, procurement in the last 20 years, you know, I mean, I've got three or five years of experience, leadership positions uh, procurement has changed dramatically the methods, the processes, and yet there are things that are still the same. Uh, you, you still have to record agreements. The the fundamentals of contracting, the agreement between two persons or two parties, are still there. But what are you doing? What are you accomplishing? Things like traffic signals, you know. Traffic signals would seem pretty simple, you know. You got lights yellow, green, red, you know and they plug them up there, they hang them over the intersections and somebody flips them on and and they work, don't they? Well, today they are considered technology. Yeah, traffic signals require servers, they require programming, they require tremendous knowledge yeah in traffic flow traffic online network

Dianne Lancaster: 8:41

oh, I mean, it's a very complicated. So what is a seemingly simple commodity? Now you add technology a school building. When I worked for the school district, they built 10 new schools. At the time and this was in the early 90s and they had a big bond measure and they built 10 new schools. It was great. Today, a school is simply technology, wrapped in concrete or brick. Technology has changed everything and it has changed the way we communicate. It's made us go paperless or crave want to go paperless. I think the pandemic has forced a lot of that back where it didn't finally exist, so we've gone paperless.

Dianne Lancaster: 9:28

Technology is now embedded in nearly everything you do absolutely um, and, and then there is the movement from the technical movement, from an invitation to bid, which is always the okay. You pick the low bid from the responsive and responsible bidder right and and you make a contract, and that price had better be firm, and and you go forward. Uh, now a request for proposals, and, and it's all about subjective values yeah hopefully objective

ways of measuring and trying to figure out.

Dianne Lancaster: 10:10

How do we pick the best proposer, how do we pick the best company to bring value to the situation, whatever it may be Right, if it's traffic signals, what kind of company do you want doing your traffic signals? And so, as a procurement officer, as a purchasing agent because that word agent, I think we don't use enough your job is to translate, your job is to help that agency talk about what is it, what's behind the surface, what is the need, how does this thing have to work? And get them to tell you, you know, get that agency group to talk about traffic signals. Well, how are they supposed to work and how does this all come together and what's the connectivity to other systems?

Kevin Minor: 11:02

Right.

Dianne Lancaster: 11:04

So you have to think bigger. I think systems thinking in many levels Sure Critical. You've got to look at totality, you've got to look at the context and and you've got to be a people person enough to pull that out of your agency customer, because as a purchasing or procurement officer you don't know these things.

Kevin Minor: 11:27

Yeah. You know, I don't know how how can you, how can you, how could?

Dianne Lancaster: 11:31

you know how traffic signals are supposed to, how they that works. So you have to pull the story out and that I'll tell you. That is some of the most challenging work I've ever had was trying to get agency people to tell me the story, tell me what it is, what's the situation? Cause sometimes they don't know, they and and or they have an idea that they think they should do and to say, okay, let's get to the, let's get to the essence of that, let's figure out. I know you've talked to some people, you have a sense of what brands you might like, but it's a story.

Dianne Lancaster: 12:12

Yeah, and in public government you can't. It's hard to just call out a brand you know you're always looking for. How do we make this an even playing field? How do we encourage competition at the same time field? How do we encourage competition at the same time? We're looking for best value. You know you don't want to overpay and you certainly want to overreceive. You want to get tough value for your dollar. It's no different than in your personal life, really Same kind of thing. So. But you've got to engage the agency and I think it's. I think it's more difficult. I remember the first training session that I attended or even helped with on specification writing was how to specify, how to spec a peanut butter sandwich.

Kevin Minor: 13:00

Is that what they? Is that what they train you on?

Dianne Lancaster: 13:02

buy a peanut butter sandwich, and that was the first training class. Well, that was 35 years ago. Today, again, it's about how's it supposed to work, what's it supposed to do, and and how, and and. Can we rely on the supplier? Can we count on you? Are you going to be around? We need longer relationships. So when we talk about how things have changed, we've talked about it's much more strategic and that call to become less tactical and more strategic. That's been out there now for decades and we keep saying it because strategy keeps evolving. And today we're talking about tremendous interrelated systems. You're talking about a school, for example, that has technology and everything and it's all connected Traffic management, public safety, you know, a police car today? The technology is phenomenal. The average person has no, no idea how much car admits its own wi-fi?

Dianne Lancaster: 14:12

oh yeah, oh yeah, yeah. And and the cars are equipped with so much technology. Um, it's a technology center, every single car and every yeah you got to deal with that.

Dianne Lancaster: 14:23

Now the younger generation, they say oh well, the younger, they're all wired in, plugged in. Sorry, no, they're not. They are plugged into applications, they know how to work with applications. But again, to step back and see the big picture. What is the big picture? Well, it's not a peanut butter sandwich anymore. The big picture? Well, it's not a peanut butter sandwich anymore. Now it's it's, you know, managing critical intersections, yes, where, if you don't have the traffic signal technology working, there are going to be car crashes and people are going to get hurt. Yeah, um, it's totally. I mean, stakes are higher. Uh, the need for expertise is higher've got to be credible with those agency customers. You've got to be credible with suppliers, and you know, you've got to be an agent. You have to work back and forth until you get it right. And we're talking big money, big money, oh yeah, more and more.

Dianne Lancaster: 15:24

Oh, the average employment. We're talking like unemployment claims. Right now there are a lot of states that are scrambling to upgrade their unemployment systems. You could be looking at 50, 100, 150, 200 million dollars, just on average, for one system. So it's tremendous money, tremendous stakes, tremendous risk. What?

Kevin Minor: 15:46

would you like to see happen for the future of public procurement? Give me a 10, 20 years.

Dianne Lancaster: 15:54

Well, I think public procurement is one of those areas of work that's always going to be there.

Kevin Minor: 16:01

Of course.

Dianne Lancaster: 16:02

Government has to have people to go out to the marketplace, interact with the business world and bring back the goods and services that government operations need. That's not going to change. It hasn't changed in thousands of years. They have found cuneiform tablets in the Babylon. You know the ancient days where they had government workers who were ordering tablets, things, purchase orders, basically written on clay tablets that have survived for thousands of years. So we have to have again. We have to have some context to go. Procurement's not going away. The foundation, the fundamental function, is not going away. It's how we go about it, how do we do it. And the marketplace, the public procurement officer, works in a very special marketplace. It is not the wall Street, it is a different marketplace.

Dianne Lancaster: 16:59

And the marketplace will continue to have business people, it will continue to have government agencies with missions, and the procurement officer has got to put the right combinations together to meet the government needs. How are they going to do it? That's what's going to change. I think we're seeing a little of this right now because we've had to truly shift from the office environment now to the internet environment. We're talking right now by internet means. So we're going to have to continue to advance our technology and our skills at using technology to bring people together, and I think there are probably tools that we can't even think about yet that will enable us to bring people together, because, at the end of the day, you still have to have people come together to talk about what it is that they're going to do.

Dianne Lancaster: 17:56

What are you buying? Who's bringing it? You know how are we going to get this work done and you still have to

have that. These foundation pieces are not going to change. But one of the biggest skills that every procurement person has got to have is the ability to communicate. And that means and you have got to advance that. If you're, if you go on a Zoom call and you're shy and you don't want to show your face, get over it. Just get over it, because you know I'm I don't particularly like seeing myself on camera, but you've got to get over it. You can't just be a black screen. You've got to open up your face, open up your home, wherever you are, and you have to be willing to say this is it. I'm not in the office anymore, but this is it. I'm here, let's talk, let's get some work done together.

Kevin Minor: 18:57

Yes, well, that kind of. You kind of already answered the last question I was going to ask you and I do. I do have one other question for you. You know, I don't know. I think it's okay to say I don't know if a lot of our listeners know, but you are retiring at the end of the year. From.

Dianne Lancaster: 19:16

NASPA only.

Kevin Minor: 19:17

From NASPA only, yeah, not from learning and not from being a part of, and I'm sure I won't. I hope that that's not the end of you. What do you plan to do in retirement? What are you looking forward to?

Dianne Lancaster: 19:37

I think that you know certainly the professional work when you again it gets back to relationship. When you've been doing this and you've invested in it, as I have, you have professional contacts, professional friends like yourself, that of course. I'll stay in touch. I've applied for, been accepted now as an honorary member of NASPO.

Kevin Minor: 19:52

Congratulations so.

Dianne Lancaster: 19:54

I'll proceed down that path. I'm looking forward to teaching, to having more time to teach, particularly locally. I've been challenged by technology so many times and now I teach online comfortably, and so I'll keep doing that. And, of course, you know, know, we talk about family and friends, but you don't realize, uh, until you know, I've been working basically two, three jobs, probably most of my life, to have time to, to uh, invest in those relationships. You know, and, and you know, professional career, there should be a work-life balance. From my generation, many of us, we probably didn't pay as much attention as we should have to that, and so the late nights, the weekends, working long hours and all that takes its toll. So, yeah, so you know I want to do what I want to do, which is, you know, that's pretty much it.

Kevin Minor: 20:56

Right Hang back with your dogs.

Dianne Lancaster: 20:59

Yeah, yeah.

Kevin Minor: 21:01

I got my three dogs Out in the beautiful Oregon country.

Dianne Lancaster: 21:03

Yeah, out in the beautiful Oregon country, I certainly am not going to sit on the porch because I'm too interested in what's going on and too, you know, I get excited about the connections as we've talked, and so, no, I don't. I think, in terms of NASPO work, we have to start thinking about the next edition of our flagship publication, the NASPO

Procurement Guide. You know there's all kinds of things. You know you can find so many things to do if you're willing to step up.

Kevin Minor: 21:39

I never expect you to sit on the porch, but I think it's funny that here we are asking you about retirement and you want to talk about the next edition of the procurement handbook. So I think that says everything that we need to know about you. Diane Lancaster, it was an honor to speak with you today. Thank you so much for joining me.

Dianne Lancaster: 22:00

Thank you, Kevin. It's been an honor to talk with you as well. I appreciate the opportunity and I look forward to I hope folks hearing this podcast and being emboldened, babe, sample some more, get into the blogs, get into the podcast, take the trainings, enjoy.

Kevin Minor: 22:26

And thus concludes our three-part interview with NASPO's CLO, Diane Lancaster. Truly an amazing and accomplished professional, Diane. We're so happy to know you. It's been a career well served so far, and I know that it is far from over, and that's really all I can say. She, I, I thought did such a good job. I just really don't want to mess it up by adding any kind of dialogue on the back end, so I won't other than to say thank you for listening. We really hope you've got something out of these three interviews. There was a lot that we covered. The season finale of the NASPO Pulse podcast will air November 17th and feature our 2020 NASPO president and the chief procurement officer for the District of Columbia, George Shutter. You are not going to want to miss this one. Pulse takers, email me podcast at naspoorg with questions and comments. We'd love to hear from you. I'm Kevin Miner. Until next time.