

**Kevin Minor:** 0:04

Greetings and welcome to the NASPO Pulse the podcast. We are monitoring issues in state procurement. I'm your host, Kevin Miner, and I've recently returned from my trip to beautiful San Diego, California, for NASPO's 75th anniversary annual conference. And, folks, let me tell you what an event. There was dancing, there was laughing, reuniting of old friends and forging of new relationships, but, most of all, cutting-edge sessions and keynote speakers sharing their expertise and knowledge over today's procurement topics. And we, Josh and I, were lucky enough to get in on one of those conversations. We present to you the second live podcast recording at a NASPO annual conference. Hold your applause. Hold your applause. I know you're excited.

**Kevin Minor:** 0:59

We got to talk with none other than Valerie Bollinger, Chief Procurement Officer for the state of Idaho, who is presenting over a session entitled Innovative Solicitation Methods, and we thought what better way to discuss that than with an interview? We talked with Valerie about what innovation means and why it's important, the biggest hurdles for procurement office when trying to innovate, creating a culture of innovation and more. Email us with your questions and your comments. Podcast at [naspo.org](http://naspo.org). And, if you haven't already, make sure you subscribe to us on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, Google or wherever you get your podcasts. Catch up on the latest in procurement literature at [pulsenaspo.org](http://pulsenaspo.org) written by your very own NASPO staff. Let's take the pulse, Introduce yourself and tell us just a little bit about yourself and why we should be listening to you today, before we get started.

**Valerie Bollinger:** 1:53

Sure, we're starting out with a difficult question. Why should you listen to me?

**Kevin Minor:** 1:59

And you don't have very long to convince them, fair enough.

**Valerie Bollinger:** 2:02

So, as Kevin said, I'm the CPO for the state of Idaho. I've been in state procurement for a little bit over eight years Well, with the state for a little over eight years, two years before that with the University of Idaho. Like many people, tripped and fell into procurement. I was an attorney for a couple of years before that, so I'm a recovering attorney, I like to say. And yeah, I've been participating with NASPO for about the last six or seven years and absolutely love it, and I am very excited to talk about innovative solicitation methods.

**Kevin Minor:** 2:39

Sounds like you've got a lot of good experience with NASPO and at the state.

**Josh Descoteaux:** 2:44

So, valerie, you've been hearing a lot about this word that begins with I, innovation, innovative. Now, what does that mean to you and how does that and why is that important and how does that relate to what we're going to talk about today with solicitation methods?

**Valerie Bollinger:** 2:59

So, Josh, there's a quote that I. It's been attributed to several people, so I won't actually say who said it, because I don't want to get it wrong, but I say it all the time in my office. The definition of insanity is doing the same thing and expecting a different outcome. And so, for me, innovation is all about finding new solutions to problems, old problems, new problems. It's about not doing the same thing over and over again, not doing an RFP the same way over and over and expecting a different outcome. If we're not getting the outcome we want, we got to find a new way to do it right, Not just cross our fingers and say I hope it works this time right, let's find a way to make it better.

**Valerie Bollinger:** 3:42

So I'm really passionate about that. I don't believe in change for the sake of change, right. I don't believe in just oh, we've got to find something to do. I think it's really important to know what problem you're trying to solve and then come up with ways that you think you can solve that problem. And that's what I mean. That's what keeps us moving forward and makes us responsive to our stakeholders and their needs.

**Kevin Minor:** 4:06

Sure, I love making up work for the sake of making up work.

**Valerie Bollinger:** 4:10

I mean, we all have so much time on our hands, Right yeah?

**Kevin Minor:** 4:13

exactly yeah. So, Valerie, can you tell us what are some of the biggest hurdles for the procurement office when you're trying to innovate?

**Valerie Bollinger:** 4:22

Yeah, I think there are two words that answer that question. But for the sake of your podcast, I'll expand a little bit.

**Kevin Minor:** 4:29

Thank you very much. I appreciate that.

**Valerie Bollinger:** 4:30

Fear and time. So I think there's a lot of fear about trying something new, particularly in procurement, and I think it can be at the staff level, the leadership level, internal, external, conscious, subconscious, I think. For staff, they often are afraid to bring up an idea because they don't want to sound dumb, they don't want to get ridiculed, they're afraid they're going to mess something up. For leadership, if they're, especially if they're in an appointed position, right. If something goes catastrophically wrong because we try something new, position right. If something goes catastrophically wrong because we try something new, um, I, you know they may their job may be on the line and that, and even if it's not my job on the line, I certainly don't want to be the reason my boss gets fired. Um, I don't know, maybe sometimes, I hope, my staff maybe you do, I don't know.

**Kevin Minor:** 5:18

Let's not go there. Yeah, yeah, um, this is being recorded.

**Valerie Bollinger:** 5:23

Um, but I think so. I think there's a lot of fear, particularly with procurement right, Fear with a solicitation, fear that if you change a process, that's going to open you up to a challenge, a protest, a lawsuit, a whatever right. Our attorneys are always kind of afraid that if we do something different then they're not going to be prepared to defend it and they're not going to or they're not going to be able to defend it. So I think there's a lot of fear on on those sorts of things. Um and time, I you know. Hopefully, one of the goals of innovation is ultimately efficiency, right, but it takes an upfront investment of time to come up with a new way to do something, to vet it, to communicate about it, to train on it. So I think a lot, especially right now.

**Valerie Bollinger:** 6:12

I know I've said to several people this week we have a ton of extra money right from the feds, from the state. We have a ton of extra money which equals a lot of extra workload and we're working at 50% capacity of our core positions in our office right now. So the idea of taking time away from what is already just an insane workload to do innovation feels, um, just feels crazy to people. I think so, um, and it takes a lot of energy to try something new. So I think those are the two biggest hurdles and it's really, really important. My experience is innovation doesn't usually happen by accident. I mean, sometimes the idea comes up sort of randomly, spontaneously. But it's really

important to work at having a culture that fosters innovation, because if you don't, a lot of times you may even not even realize that you're stifling innovation just in the culture in your office?

**Kevin Minor:** 7:11

Sure, yeah, and you know you don't hear a lot. Oh, we have a bunch of extra money and you would. Sometimes you might think that that just automatically means innovation, but that's not necessarily true, is it?

**Valerie Bollinger:** 7:21

No, definitely not.

**Kevin Minor:** 7:24

So how do you create a culture of innovation?

**Valerie Bollinger:** 7:28

Yeah, I think creating that culture is about sort of creating a safe space and time. We're going to go back to that time thing. Go back to that time thing. But, you know, having kind of a set of ground rules for the team where they feel like they can bring up an idea, they can ask a question, they can make a suggestion and know that they're not going to get ridiculed, that there's going to be some opportunity to discuss.

**Valerie Bollinger:** 7:58

I tell my team all the time like like warning, I'm thinking out loud right now it's dangerous. And by the time I finished I may go back to the beginning and say just kidding, because you know it takes time to brainstorm and talk through those things and kind of work through the possibilities. Um, and I want the rest of the team to feel comfortable doing that as well, um, and and having time saying here's the problem we're trying to solve, go think about it and let's come back. And at our next staff meeting I want to hear if there's any ideas or if you want to just talk to me about it. You know, schedule a time and we'll we'll talk about it. So I think making sure people know that ideas are welcome and that they're allowed to ask questions, they're allowed to make suggestions and that we're going to follow through Right, which doesn't mean that every idea that comes up we're going to do.

**Kevin Minor:** 8:47

Sure.

**Valerie Bollinger:** 8:47

Definitely don't. We don't have enough time for that and some things are a little too risky. But I think for someone who does come up with innovative ideas to feel like they it, it never goes forward, it never goes anywhere. You're just going to stop eventually, right? You're just going to say it's not worth my time to bring up that idea because we never do it. So that's one area where I think I I have to be really careful to not get so caught up in all of the other craziness that I forget to spend time nurturing those ideas so that people continue to bring them forward.

**Kevin Minor:** 9:22

And I think you're at risk of losing buy-in too. People won't want to work with you.

**Valerie Bollinger:** 9:29

Exactly, and they'll go to another agency where their innovation is fostered. Those are the people I want on my team, so I've got to make sure that I'm nurturing that.

**Josh Descoteaux:** 9:39

And, like a lot of other people that were just kind of stumbling into procurement, for me it hit home because I stumbled into it and I was like, wow, these are my people. I am so risk adverse and I don't want to go out on the ledge to suggest something, and everybody seemed to agree with that. We're very risk adverse by nature and so

what you're talking about in terms of, like, innovating going out and it is a risk almost, because what if something happens? What if you say something you think is a good idea and then it doesn't necessarily have the desired outcome? So one of my questions in terms of the best practices in procurement we promote not saying no to agencies and finding a way to think of solutions with regular procurements that we're doing Can we apply this practice of innovation within the procurement office?

**Valerie Bollinger:** 10:23

Yeah. So I love this question, Josh, because I think it's an opportunity to really kind of get to a bigger idea. So in our office, that's been a really big focus for the last couple of years. Been a really big focus for the last couple of years is um an emphasis on being strategic partners with our stakeholders, our agencies um being problem solvers, right. So when they come to us with a problem um, and maybe it is a hey, how can we procure this thing that we need in six weeks, when it normally takes us six months? I love that question. Yeah, that's my favorite Um.

**Valerie Bollinger:** 11:05

But but you know, when they come to us with a problem um, not just saying no, we can't do that, let's talk about how can we get to where you need to be, how can we find a solution? Um, and I think, as leaders in our office, it's really important that we model that same concept within the office. So if every time they come to us with a question or an idea, we immediately say no, no, we can't do that, then it's really hard to then turn around and expect them to go back to our agency stakeholders and not do the same thing, right? So internally we want to do exactly the thing that we want them to turn around and do with the agencies, which is say huh, well, let's think about it right, let's analyze, let's talk about what problem we're trying to solve, let's brainstorm different possible paths we could take and let's figure out how to get there. Let's find a solution.

**Valerie Bollinger:** 11:57

So, yeah, I think it's totally applicable internally and really important to foster that culture where they feel comfortable and they're encouraged to come forward and say this might be crazy, but what do you think about this idea? And feel like they can do that and then turn around and do the same thing with the agency. When the agency says would it be possible to do an RFP where we don't ask for a cost proposal? Well, I don't know. Let's talk about it, let's figure it out. And why are you asking the question? So that we can understand what problem we're trying to solve.

**Kevin Minor:** 12:34

It's almost like a Pavlovian response, right, you know you hear the bell and you say no, and you don't even know that. You said it until afterwards. Yeah exactly.

**Valerie Bollinger:** 12:45

I mean, that can be the way that it is right, Is that, especially when we're so busy?

**Kevin Minor:** 12:49

Muscle memory.

**Valerie Bollinger:** 12:50

Someone says can we skip the cost proposal? No Right, it's like come straight out oh, how'd that happen? It's like we sort of joke in our office about you know, the easy button, it's the nope button.

**Kevin Minor:** 13:07

Can we do?

**Valerie Bollinger:** 13:08

this Nope, can we do this? Nope, nope. Those are on sale, actually, but we don't want that to be. We've got to

break ourselves of that habit, right, and at least take the time to really think about it and analyze it, and and and. Sometimes the answer is going to be no. We're not always going to do every idea that someone comes up with, but if they at least feel like it's been heard and discussed and considered, then the next time they have an idea, hopefully they're going to bring it up again and eventually there is going to be an idea that's a great idea that we're like yes, that's the one, we're going to do it, let's do it.

**Josh Descoteaux:** 13:35

And when we think of innovation in the procurement process, what's the most important aspect of a successful implementation?

**Valerie Bollinger:** 13:42

Yeah. So I think um communication is hugely important. I people feel really like that fear, that that fear factor is only going to increase if people feel like they don't actually understand what we're doing or why. I think the why behind the innovation is really important, Right. I think the why behind the innovation is really important, right, so that they they that the team is invested. There's that buy-in of why are we doing this, Like, why don't we just do it the way we've always done it? Well, this is, you know, this is the reason I think one thing that's really important is choosing a good pilot project.

**Valerie Bollinger:** 14:26

So I would say, if you have a project that is really huge, really complex, politically sensitive, very visible, is that the best project to choose to try out a new solicitation method? Probably not. That's probably a recipe for disaster.

**Valerie Bollinger:** 14:43

Very risk adverse, right Because the whole thing is if it's an innovative idea, if it's the first time you're doing it, you don't know if it's going to work right, and so maybe don't choose the thing that, if it really goes splat, it's going to be splatted on the front page of the newspaper. Right? Choose something that is meaningful so that you really can sort of take it out for a good test drive as far as methodology, but something that if it doesn't work out, it's not gonna be catastrophic. And pick a project with a willing partner who understands, hey, there's some extra risk here because we're trying something new. And they say, okay, we're willing to try. We wanna try that with you. And they say, okay, we're willing to try. We're you know, we want to try that with you. And then, if it's successful, you can engage them to help sell that to other agencies who are a little skeptical about your newfangled idea. Right? Instead of me telling people, hey, I had this great idea, another agency can say we did this thing with the division of purchasing, it was hugely successful. Let us tell you about it. And that carries a lot more weight coming from another agency than it does coming from us, at least in Idaho, um. So I think that is really good and then once you kind of get through that pilot, if it's successful training right.

**Valerie Bollinger:** 16:03

People hate to feel like they don't know how to do their job, and that's when we've implemented new things in our office. That's the thing that's been. Hardest is if people who are used to feeling like an expert all of a sudden feel like they don't know how to do their job. That is very disconcerting and um it. It's hard to get people excited to keep trying new things when they all of a sudden feel like it's their first day of the job. On the job again.

**Josh Descoteaux:** 16:27

That is not a good feeling and one of the things that came to mind, too, when I'm thinking about if I have an idea, or as I encounter a challenge in my past procurement that I've done, and I think the double-edged sword and I'd be interested to see what you have to say about this a double-edged sword of like even suggesting something, is. I don't want to make any more work for either myself or other people. How do I even come up with an idea that's going to really toe that line and actually make it innovative and an outcome that we all want?

**Valerie Bollinger:** 16:55

Yeah. So we always joke in our office that the reward for being really good at your job is more work. Right, right we probably all have.

**Kevin Minor:** 17:07

Yes, Congratulations. You're really good at your job.

**Valerie Bollinger:** 17:08

You now have more responsibilities more projects to do because you're great at your job, and I think it's the same idea, right Part of you sort of like I have an idea, but I don't want to be the one who has to do it. I don't want to raise my hand because I don't want to. I don't want the extra work.

**Kevin Minor:** 17:31

So what we try to do is is talk about those ideas and not necessarily assume that the person who had the idea has to be the one to do that pilot or try to roll it out. Oh, so you let somebody else? Yeah, exactly.

**Valerie Bollinger:** 17:35

Interesting. So we might say, hey, this is a great idea. Does somebody want to take the first, take the leap on this? Does somebody want to be the guinea pig on this project? And it might be that person who brought up the idea, but it doesn't have to be. And that way the team is supporting each other in a way that and it also means if it isn't successful, it's not all on that person right? It's a shared responsibility of the team to try to make it work and if it doesn't work, to go back and say, all right, what didn't work, what can we do differently?

**Josh Descoteaux:** 18:05

That's where that culture comes in huge because everybody is comfortable. Everybody knows that everybody's pulling in the same direction to be able to make that happen.

**Kevin Minor:** 18:12

Yeah, exactly yeah. I think part of the reward, too, right, is implementation of the idea. So if it's something that you came up with and you were brave enough to you know, poke your head up in a staff meeting and to suggest and then to see that kind of come to fruition, right? I mean, has that? Do you have any experience with that?

**Valerie Bollinger:** 18:30

yeah, I mean, part of what we try to make sure we do is recognize those things, even when they're small, right, and I think that's one thing that people get sort of sucked into this trap of thinking that innovation has to be some huge thing, right?

**Valerie Bollinger:** 18:42

So in the keynote yesterday, uh, the whole concept of the sensor on the thing tells them it's going bad, and then four minutes later it's been shipped right, which hurt my brain, but that's a different story. Um, but I think that is this huge innovative thing, right, innovation doesn't have to be huge. It can be a small thing, it iterative, um, it can be one little change, and so it doesn't always have to be a huge time investment, right, which is important for people to think about. Um, but when somebody does come up with an idea and we try it and it works, we make sure that we're celebrating that with the team, um, so that again, it reinforces the idea that, like, hey, bring, bring ideas forward, because we recognize that, we celebrate it and it really helps the team to feel like they've accomplished something when they've implemented a new, you know a new method, a new process, whatever it is, and I think I feel like the word innovation is synonymous now with big giant.

**Kevin Minor:** 19:47

Huge has to be big, bright lights, and that's not necessarily true, right.

**Valerie Bollinger:** 19:51

Yeah, I mean, sometimes it can start really small and I think for us over the last probably four or five years, we started small, just making small changes in our RFP process. Years we started small, just making small changes in our rfp process. Um, as far as we had issues with getting to the end of the process and then vendors expecting to negotiate terms that we couldn't negotiate because of the way, because of the process we'd used, and we you know I mean definition of insanity we kept doing it and telling vendors over and over again ask questions, ask questions, ask questions during the q a. Well, they didn't do it and we got to the end. We had this problem and we had a massive like messaging problem because those vendors and their lobbyists were telling everyone who would listen well, they can never negotiate our terms and conditions.

**Valerie Bollinger:** 20:37

Right, the state never accepts different T's and C's. Well, that's actually not true. It never was true. It was a process issue. So we we introduced a new way of having vendors request modifications to the T's and C's. It was a small change. We've tweaked it along the way, but it doesn't always have to be a massive thing. And then we've also implemented completely new solicitation methods right Invitation to negotiate and and a new RFI process. If you happen to be in our cronin this morning, sure.

**Josh Descoteaux:** 21:11

Well, last question, final thought what's your advice to the audience about what we talked about?

**Kevin Minor:** 21:16

What's some parting wisdom for the fine folks.

**Valerie Bollinger:** 21:19

You know, I think it's to not this may sound counterintuitive, but to not push too hard for innovation. I think, um, challenging people to think about how to solve problems is great, um, but also letting it kind of happen naturally. I think sometimes there's this push where there's almost like this pressure Like I have to come up with this, you know, huge, harebrained idea. Well, no, like just sort of let it happen naturally. As people talk about issues, challenges they're having, and brainstorming together on how they can solve those problems, um, that's where we've had the best, um, I would say, leaps forward and innovative ideas, and is all of us just kind of sitting around collaborating, brainstorming, um, just sort of throwing out random things, and sometimes it's not one idea, one person's idea, sometimes it's a little bit from here and a little bit from there, and all of a sudden we're like, hey, we think we have something here, this is exciting, and then people get excited because they're involved in that process.

**Kevin Minor:** 22:19

Great, cool, excellent. Let's give it up for our guest, very special guest, valerie Bollinger. For our guest, very special guest, valerie Bollinger. This episode of the NASPO Pulse is brought to you by NASPO's Repository of State Practices, or ROSPI. Accessing and comparing state procurement laws can be time-consuming and far from easy. That's why NASPO's research and innovation team has built the solution. The ROSPI is NASPO's member-only database of state procurement statutes, regulations and policies. You can quickly access state procurement information, ranging from bid protest procedures to bidder responsibility guidance. It even provides easy access to state procurement manuals and statewide contract database. To access, go to the NASPO network and click on the resources tab.