

**Julia McIlroy: 0:06**

Hi everyone and welcome to NASPO's Pulse, the podcast that focuses on current topics in public procurement. I'm your host, Julia McIlroy. Today's guest is Gene Burk. Gene is the Director of Procurement Programs and Services from the state of Connecticut. We'll be discussing continuous improvement to better serve. Hi, Gene, welcome to Pulse.

**Gene Burk: 0:29**

Oh, good morning and thank you for inviting me today.

**Julia McIlroy: 0:32**

I'm glad you're here, Gene. To start, I'd love to hear about your background and what led you to public procurement.

**Gene Burk: 0:39**

Well, my background may be a little more unusual than some. I know a lot of people find their way to procurement not as an initial career choice, but in my case, my background is in the theater. I have a bachelor's, master's and PhD in theater and I'm also a licensed attorney in the state of Connecticut. So I have those two backgrounds and until I started working at the state of Connecticut, so I have those two backgrounds and until I started working at the state of Connecticut, all of my career had been in the private sector. So I have experience working in global hospitality. I'm a legacy Sheraton person for those who know their hotel brands and I started in Hawaii there and then moved to the corporate headquarters in White Plains, New York, and that's how I initially lived in Connecticut. I've also worked at Stanford University higher education and at a company now called Gen, originally called Symantec and then called Norton LifeLock. So if people are familiar with some of those consumer protection and cybersecurity products, I've worked there as well.

**Gene Burk: 1:50**

I mentioned that I had lived previously in Connecticut and in most families, when the kids grow up, the kids move out of the house. In our case, when the kids grew up, the parents moved out of the house. That was to take the job at Stanford. And then, during the pandemic, our first grandchild was born and we were looking for opportunities to move back from the West Coast to the East Coast and this opportunity at the state of Connecticut came up and I thought you know, I really wanted to be part of public service and this seemed like the perfect opportunity to do so, and that's how it's turned out to be. I couldn't be happier doing what I'm doing today.

**Julia McIlroy: 2:35**

Gene, what an incredible and diverse background you have. So tell me so. Phd in theater arts. Is it performing? Is it directing? Is it costumes?

**Gene Burk: 2:48**

Mine, dual, my background. Those degrees were in directing. I also had my equity card as a stage manager and also in more academic critical studies as well, so I could bend your ear for hours talking about 20th century American dramatists and playwriting given the time, and critical theory, things like that.

**Julia McIlroy: 3:12**

I'm actually working on a play, so we'll have to have an offline conversation at some point.

**Gene Burk: 3:18**

Happy to have a Benadramaturg and new play. Development has been something I've been part of in the past as well.

**Julia McIlroy: 3:24**

How interesting. And were you ever a practicing attorney?

**Gene Burk: 3:28**

I think we all practice all the time. We keep trying to get it right. I had a very, very short stint where I was trying to do things in practice. This was during the Great Recession in the 2008-2009 period, and most of my initial clients were people like me who'd been laid off from where we had worked. And one of the two things I learned about that most people, when you're dealing with them, say hey, I used to work with you, with the company. I had no idea you had to do all of you had to think about all of these things when it came to contracting, which was really revelatory. And then the other part was I didn't want to do that, because so much of being in private practice has to do with marketing yourself to others and it's less about the actual practice of law.

**Gene Burk: 4:23**

I like being in an organizational setting, whether it's a company or the state, where you can practice as part of what you do. And in my case, it's not so much the practice of law, it's applying law to what you're doing, because everything that we're doing is in service to others, which is where the theater background comes in, because you're never doing it just for yourself. You're always doing what you do for an audience. So it's always. Theater is always outward facing, and that's where I see public service is that way as well, it's all outward facing, whereas the public service is that way as well. It's all outward facing.

**Julia McIlroy: 5:04**

That's a great point. I hadn't thought about theater in that way, but you're actually in the service of others. You're doing a performance to benefit others, so that's a great point. So, gene, public procurement isn't just about contracts, right? It's about outcomes. So how do you ensure your improvements are truly making life better for the citizens of Connecticut? I?

**Gene Burk: 5:30**

think that the most important thing to do is ensure that you have a very inclusive approach to that contracting process, that you are including all of the necessary stakeholders in the process from the outset, so that you can in fact be outcome-based, the whole focus of contracting. It's not a goal in and of itself and it's not about some of those abstruse terms that people want to spend a lot of time arguing the fine points of. It's about outcomes. What are we trying to achieve? And when you know what you were trying to achieve, then you work backward from that to say, okay, how do we get there? What are the questions you know from a solicitation standpoint? What are the questions we need to ask to ensure that a selected contractor can deliver what we need for this outcome?

**Gene Burk: 6:27**

You start from there and then you try to eliminate the barriers from identifying that need to filling that need as much as possible, because contracting is a tool. It's just a tool. It's not an end in itself. It's like a script. The script when it sits on a page it's something nice to be read, but it's intended to be performed, it's in service of others, and so that contract, if it's going to live, it, needs to have the input of all the stakeholders involved, who understand what those outcomes are, and procurement people. While they really need to be curious about understanding what these outcomes are, we do need to rely on the subject matter experts and really listen to them to say what are the outcomes we're trying to achieve, and then how do we get there.

**Julia McIlroy: 7:20**

I used to say to my staff at the University of Idaho what problem are we trying to solve? I think you're saying the same thing, and then you can figure out which tool you need to solve that problem. Always, again, in the service of others, Absolutely so, Gene. What mechanisms like end user surveys have influenced how your procurement team improves over time?

**Gene Burk: 7:45**

I think surveys are a good tool. We have implemented Procured to get voice of customer about supplier performance and that's as a tool to begin that process. But it's a good tool for that purpose. But I think there's a lot more to it than that. I think there's a lot more that happens upfront. I mentioned that.

**Gene Burk:** 8:14

I think one of the most critical traits that someone in procurement needs to have is they need to be curious, they need to ask a lot of questions, because answers typically will present themselves more clearly if you ask the right questions. And part of those questions are getting out, getting out in the field, sometimes literally in fields. I remember doing food procurement and working with groups of chefs who had never been to farms before, and so if the outcome was to serve better meals to people, then get those chefs out into the field, see how the food was grown so they understood the process. And the more we all understood the process, the better we could they could be about specifying what they wanted. We could be better at buying it for them, which resulted in better meals for guests Again, outcome oriented.

**Gene Burk:** 9:11

So get out of the field. Do supplier visits, do job site visits, do the things that let you understand what is it that's actually needed? Because then you can see the results of what you've done what's working, what's not working. Ask a lot of questions, get it in the field, see how things are actually being consumed, being used, being served.

**Julia McIlroy:** 9:36

To my mind, one of the best parts of public procurement is getting to work with end users and the individuals who you're procuring for. In other words, if you're working with DOT, understanding what their processes are, what their needs are like, going out to say a bridge that's being constructed, as you mentioned, going out to the farm and seeing that entire supply chain all the way from the farm to the table. That's the part of procurement, besides serving others, that I find really interesting and fulfilling Absolutely.

**Gene Burk:** 10:11

And it's endless, because the world is constantly changing, there are new ways to do things and there are always more things to learn, and that's one of the reasons I think procurement is a fascinating field to something else, but it has been a really, really fascinating journey to learn so much about how things work, and I have a great deal of respect for so many people and all the different jobs that are done to make sure products and services move from point A to point B. It's fascinating, endlessly fascinating.

**Julia McIlroy:** 10:57

When you were with Sheraton, did you have an opportunity? Were you involved in the supply chain process there at all?

**Gene Burk:** 11:04

In the supply chain. There are sometimes misnomers. Supply chain often refers to direct procurement, as opposed to most of what we're doing in service industries as well as government, which is essentially the service industry, which is mostly indirect procurement. But you still have supply chain elements to it and yes, I have.

**Gene Burk:** 11:23

Whether that was some people may remember the wholesale introduction of pillow top mattresses in the hotel industry. Well, that started with the Heavenly Bed from Weston and I was part of that process. So, the supply chain there, understanding how the mattress industry works, not just on a national basis but on a global basis, and understanding how you move products from one place to another, how you have to incorporate different fire codes, how you have to you know the, the and all of the downstream effects okay, does that change how the sheets that you buy and other other parts of the bedding? There were just a lot, of, a lot of other elements to it. So, yes, I have from food, from food supply related things, um, through products like that and thinking through how you do global supply and distribution of products. Yes, I've been involved in a number of those kinds of projects.

**Julia McIlroy:** 12:25

Interesting. So can you share an example where procurement improvements led to faster, fairer or more equitable service delivery?

**Gene Burk:** 12:35

The most recent example and I think it's worked out really, really well for us in the state of Connecticut has to do with establishing an MSP program for contingent healthcare workers. Msp Master Service Provider If people are familiar with that as a program, you contract with one entity who then engages all sorts of staffing agencies to be able to fill your needs. Well, previously in the state of Connecticut, what we've had, what I inherited, we had a series of what looked like a good solution. We had a series of eight contracts with individual staffing agencies. Well, what that meant for our client agencies is they were dialing for dollars. If they needed an RN for a particular location, they would just go down the list and they would call do you have one available for this time? And if that's not available, I pick up the phone and I call another one. I pick up trying to call another one um, and it was a very, very manual process with an msp provider. They've got a single point of

contact that msp can leverage instead of and then we now know this um instead of leveraging this, instead of leveraging seven or eight service providers, the one that's selected is now I think their roster is something like 18 or 20 different service providers. So for our end users they're able to single point of contact. They make one inquiry. It becomes the role of the MSP to locate what they need. So it's become a lot faster. It means the positions are getting filled a lot faster.

**Gene Burk:** 14:19

It's administratively easier for all of our end users and we've created a lot more opportunities for small businesses in the state. And one of the things we did with that to really emphasize that at the outset we brought together all of the end-using agencies and we also brought all the prospective bidders for the MSP and we also invited all of the certified small businesses in the state who provided those services and we had an open house to bring them all together so that we could broker introductions for them. Because a lot of this is outcome based Get people together. We know what the outcomes are. How do we get the players together. And I was really really pleased with how that one turned out, because I think it's been a win for the agencies and for the patients and clients that they serve, because staffing levels are better now. It's for those who have to provide those services. It's more administratively efficient. We've created more opportunities for more staffing agencies in the state, so everybody wins in a situation like that.

**Julia McIlroy:** 15:34

That open house sounds invaluable, as you said, for all parties an opportunity for small businesses to understand the agency needs and then for the agencies to get FaceTime with small businesses that they wouldn't have otherwise. So great idea, and it sounds like it was really successful.

**Gene Burk:** 15:56

It does and we're planning to use it. It hadn't been done before here, but I'm planning to use it as a model for a lot of other contracts of that sort.

**Julia McIlroy:** 16:08

I think it's great. Do you also do like coffee and cookies, or is it just?

**Gene Burk:** 16:15

Of course, if you have a social event like that my hospitality background you always have to have some foods and beverages there because, again, it's you want to be hospitable. You're trying to make it. Our goal is to be a partner of choice. It's one of the catchphrases that we

use, and I mean it more than a catchphrase. We use it when I do presentations internally. I use it with meetings with groups of suppliers or individually with suppliers. Our goal is to be a partner of choice.

**Gene Burk:** 16:51

Sometimes you have to use us, but that doesn't mean you want to use us, so we really want to. You know, if you're in the supplier community, you don't have to sell to the state we want you to. So help us. Help us understand how we can make it more attractive for you to do so. Some of that is letting you know about the opportunities. Sometimes that's about removing barriers. Letting you know about the opportunities. Sometimes that's about removing barriers. Sometimes it's about explaining why doing business with the public sector is different than doing business with the private sector, and I feel pretty confident being able to talk about that, having spent most of my career in the private sector. I have a pretty good, although it's all been on the buy side. I think I have a pretty good understanding of what some of those differences are, so being able to articulate them and trying to then explain the value proposition why it's worth it to do business with a public entity as opposed to their private clients.

**Julia McIlroy:** 17:47

It's a great point that suppliers have choices as well. Yes, sometimes they have to sell as well. Yes, sometimes they have to sell. But you don't want a relationship where they're not my favorite client. Sure, I'll sell to them, but when you get into a pinch I'm not really going to help. I'm not saying all suppliers would do that, but some. You want to be an organization that they want to do business with and that you can rely on suppliers because you have a greater relationship.

**Gene Burk:** 18:15

And part of that is structural and part of that is just how you treat people. I mean, when I started in business in the hospitality industry, it was in Hawaii and one of the things about Hawaii the tourism industry is very, very big, but the island itself, oahu because I worked in Waikiki there are a million people there, but everybody lives in a fairly concentrated area. So all those suppliers that you're dealing with you were going to see them at the school, at a church, at the beach, at Alamoana Shopping Center. You were going to see them and I always wanted to be in a position where, even if you didn't get business from us at a particular time, you didn't feel bad about it and that we could still be civil and friendly with one another.

**Gene Burk:** 19:06

And you work in a state like Connecticut, second smallest state in the country. You are, although it's hard to get from one place to the other because there are no right angles in most of the roads. It's a very small state and so you are going to run into people, so comport yourself in a manner that's respectful of everyone else, because you don't know when you're going to run into somebody else, and I'd like to feel like, anytime I do that, we could respond civ to one another, so it doesn't take that much more to be nice.

**Julia McIlroy:** 19:40

So I'm a California girl that lived in Idaho in a small college town for many, many years and I made it very clear to my kids they were, they were raised there that essentially be nice to everyone, because you should be nice to everyone, but also be nice to everyone because that person that you honk at might be your high school teacher. So mind your P's and Q's, and the same thing, the same philosophy for dealing with suppliers, especially in a small state or a small area. So, gene, how do you measure whether procurement change is benefiting the people of Connecticut?

**Gene Burk:** 20:17

The short answer to that question is ask. Don't assume that just because you've executed a contract that your work is done and it's really, really important to get out and ask, talk to your stakeholders, Just like we were talking about understand what those outcomes are supposed to be by asking and getting out in the field. You need to do the same thing. It's a continuous process. Is it working? Because process improvement and change nobody likes change. Most people don't like change, in particular, in the public sector. It can be hard, but that continuous improvement mindset we want to do better, that we always want to do better how can we do better? The only way you can do that, not just thinking about it on your own you need to get out. You need to be a lot more outward focused. We do that. We have a lot of different tools that we use to do that. We've really tried to organize our teams, that we have a team.

**Gene Burk:** 21:28

It's the business access team and we've really we've built that team up over the last couple of years and their mission is to really get the message out about our interest in being a partner of choice, getting small businesses certified, working on contractor pre-qualifications. But also, a member of that team is assigned to every solicitation to help identify who might all the potential suppliers be, who we think ought to bid on this solicitation, and getting out to meet with them, to communicate with them, to say we want you to be involved, we want you to be involved. We do regular forms with municipal organizations, which is always a two-way street. We want to tell you what we're doing on



your behalf. But every one of those kind of efforts involves feedback. Hey, I always allow at least a third of the time for their feedback and their questions and comments, because that's how we can get better. We can tell you what we're planning to do.

**Gene Burk:** 22:42

What do you think, what concerns, what questions do you have? So, internally, I do a quarterly procurement forum where we do the same thing. Hey, these are the improvement processes that we're going to be rolling out or we just rolled out. What are your questions? What are your concerns? I do the same with the finance group. So all the CFOs of all the agencies meet with them. Same thing. This is what we're rolling out. How's it working for you? And again, we want to be a partner of choice. We know you have to work with us, but we'd like you to see us as a resource, as a partner, because our job is to help you serve others.

**Gene Burk:** 23:26

So if we're not doing that if we're not effectively helping you serve others, then we're not doing our job.

**Julia McIlroy:** 23:33

Gene, I love that philosophy of simply ask. Starting there, that sounds great. It sounds like it's really benefited the state. So, gene, what advice would you give to procurement teams trying to shift from an internal focus to a citizen-first mindset?

**Gene Burk:** 23:51

What advice would I give? I think that it's really important to put yourself in the shoes of a customer or a client or a beneficiary of the work that you're doing and think about it from their perspective. Why are we doing what we're doing? Who is this for? What is the outcome? Think it through. A contract is more than here's a list of terms and here's a product list or a service list and here's a price list. What does that mean? Think through it, apply it in real life. What does that mean? How does that affect somebody? And recognize that the longer we take to execute something, the longer certain services aren't being delivered to someone. So again, think through who is this going to affect and what's important to them, and focus on those things.

**Gene Burk:** 24:48

I think that thinking through from a process perspective, what are you doing that's getting in the way, that's not supporting delivering these tools for others to use. A contract is just a tool and if we've made it hard to use the tool or we're denying people the tool because it's

taking us too long to get there, then again that's not being a partner of choice and that's not work in service of others. We should be an enabler of those services, not an impediment to those services. And so you know. Look to see how you know. How are your tools designed? Are they designed to be user-friendly? Do we make solicitations incomprehensible to potential suppliers? How do we streamline that process so we can get them to be more interested?

**Gene Burk:** 25:34

What sort of intake do we require from agencies requesting goods and services? Are we doing in a way that actually facilitates the execution of an agreement? Are we asking things unnecessarily? How do we do that? And finally, I would say, just being mindful of why we're doing what we're doing. Just be mindful, ask questions. Why, why are we doing this? Be curious, ask a lot of questions. Seek first to understand before trying to be understood. You know, yes, there are things that we have, statutes that we have to conform to. There are certain things, rules that we have to abide by, fiduciary responsibilities that we need to exercise, but those are all in service of others. So, rather than making sure people understand what those are, let's try to understand their needs first, and then we'll figure out how to meet those requirements that we have. But it's all about why we're here and what we're doing. It's a mindset shift. It's not about the contracts. It's about the outcomes that those contracts are designed to achieve, and start there.

**Julia McIlroy:** 26:48

So it sounds. The best is yet to come right.

**Gene Burk:** 26:51

I always think that Optimism is part of my DNA and I think that that's really, really an important way to look at things. I couldn't be more excited about where we are today in terms of the tools we have to be able to create outcomes. We're now at an inflection point where, in the past, the tools we had if you think about tools moving from typewriters to laptops to cloud-based solutions, typewriters to laptops to cloud-based solutions Now we now have tools moving now into the AI era, where we used to have a handsaw and then we went to power tools and we were able to do more things and we could do them fast and we could do them a little more precise. Now we're moving into the laser world, where we can do incredibly detailed work, where we can do a lot more work and be a lot more accurate and a lot faster. We can do a lot more things.

**Gene Burk:** 27:54

Each time we do that, it's a more powerful tool, which means it can also potentially be more dangerous. So you have to be more careful about how you use those tools. But, looking at the positive side of it, these are tools that enable us to do more. So I always think the most memorable things are yet to come, because we have the tools and the capabilities to do them, and that's what keeps me continuously excited about what I do. We have new tools, there's always new opportunities, and how do we apply new tools to these new opportunities?

**Julia McIlroy:** 28:29

Gene, thanks again for joining me today. I very much appreciate it.

**Gene Burk:** 28:33

Oh, absolutely. Thank you for inviting me. I appreciate this opportunity and I'm really grateful for all the work that NASPO does and a great, great organization. Happy to be part of it and love this series. So thank you so much.

**Julia McIlroy:** 28:50

And to our friends in public procurement, remember we work in the sunshine. Bye for now.