

## **Welcome And Today's Focus**

**Julia McIlroy 0:07**

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 Dhanraj Singh, CPO from New York. We'll be diving into a topic that's reshaping how government gets things done: procurement modernization in New York State. We'll talk about what's driving the transformation, how it's impacting people and processes, and what the future might look like when modernization really takes root. So grab your coffee. This is going to be a great conversation about change, collaboration, and what it takes to make government work better for everyone. Hi, Dhanraj. Welcome to Pulse.

**Dhanraj Singh 0:50**

Hi, Julia. Thank you very much for having me.

**Julia McIlroy 0:53**

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

## **Defining Modernization And The Mandate**

**Dhanraj Singh 1:01**

Great, great, great question, and thank you for that. And again, thank you very much for having me on your podcast. When I think about my journey into public procurement, it really began long before I ever stepped into a government office. You know, I grew up with a deep appreciation for how systems, people, and resources come together to make communities function. Over the years, working across academia, public finance, public policy, economic development, and more recently in organizational leadership, I saw a very common thread that is beneath all the action. And that is procurement is really the quiet engine behind everything that works well in a society. So when I joined New York State, that belief only strengthened much of what we're doing today in procurement modernization, as you mentioned in your opening in New York State, is really a direct reflection of our governor, Governor Kathy Hochul, and our Commissioner, Commissioner Jeanette Moy, their vision. They have set a very clear and ambitious charge to reimagine how governments can work faster, smarter, and more transparent, and how we're able to do that in a way that connects to the needs of the people that we serve. So their leadership is really the impetus of this and what created the mandate and the moment for real change that we're seeing in New York right now. When I stepped into this role as state CPO, I saw a world-class unit with professionals delivering extraordinary services and work. But I also saw an enormous

opportunity to align the systems that we have, the processes that we're using, and the workforce with the vision that the governor and Commissioner Moy laid out. So for New York State and myself leading this effort, modernization is really rooted in the broader vision of transparency, speed, innovation, and economic impact. So it's not a project, it's not a good endeavor to take on. It really is the fulfillment of that mission, that mandate, and that charge that has been laid out. And this is what really motivates me at the very personal level is getting up every day and building a procurement ecosystem that really meets the needs and expectations of the people of New York. And so, in short, this is where this is the intersection at which procurement, modernization, my own background and professional life, and the moment of modernization in New York State, where all of it meets together.

**Julia McIlroy 3:47**

That's so great. And I like that saying of the common thread that runs through all of this is serving others, right? And the role that procurement has in serving our citizenry. So, Dhanraj, we've already touched on this, but let's start at the basics. When we say procurement modernization, what does that really mean? What's changing and why now?

**Dhanraj Singh 4:13**

You know, I've spent a lot of time thinking about this very question to at the very minimum make sure that I'm very clear with the mandate that is in front of us. And let me start with the big story. Modernization for New York State isn't a project or it is not a technology. We're embarking on an effort that is really a shifting in the mindset of how procurement can really serve New Yorkers and be a catalyst for economic success and prosperity. That is at the very highest level. When we say procurement modernization, this is fundamentally what we're talking about. I mentioned earlier that Governor Kathy Hochul and Commissioner Moy have laid out a very clear vision. And if I dive into that vision a little bit without getting into the weeds, you see a couple of important aspects that we want to take on. There is a technology component, there is a talent retention and attraction component, and there is rethinking new models of operation with a very clear goal of achieving procurement and operational excellence. So the modernization, if you pull all of this together, is how do we build a 21st century best in class procurement ecosystem that really delivers for the needs of New Yorkers? Embedded inside of this is the goal of faster, data-driven, transparent, and strategically aligned procurement operation to the needs that our business and our customers have, and ultimately to the needs that New Yorkers have. Included in this approach, it is a conviction that when procurement works, it drives economic prosperity, it allows innovation that happens in the market to be diffused and the benefits reach everyday citizens, and it also powers the job creation engine. And so, again, I want to reflect on the fact that the way we see procurement is not a back-end support office, it's not an

administrative function that is done. Governor Kathy Hochul and Commissioner Moy have been very clear that the way procurement must work is to be that engine that I referred to earlier. And you you asking the question is about why now and what's changing. And so I reflected briefly on the mindset that we're trying to change. But in terms of the why and why now, look, what we have seen over the past couple of decades is a significant increase in volume, complexity, and outcome expectation from procurement operations. And when you put those together, what they have effectively done is to outgrow the capacity and capability of legacy systems. And so the moment for rethinking how we do procurement, the rate at which it operates, what drives the decision-making process, and how strategically is it aligned with the priorities of the governor and commissioner and the needs of the people, that is at the core of New York State's procurement modernization.

**Julia McIlroy 7:15**

It sounds like it's very much an excellence mindset. So it's not just change for change's sake, but really wanting to be best in class.

**Dhanraj Singh 7:27**

That is exactly correct. You know, you you summarized that beautifully. It is it is how can we rethink this? How can we cut through the noise? How can we break through a lot of silos, but really get best in class? I I love that phrase. I really do. In in in our office here on a daily basis, the phrase that we use to almost describe everything that we do and how we approach them is we want to achieve operation and procurement excellence. So completely agreeing with with the way you frame that. I love it.

**Julia McIlroy 8:00**

That's great. Did I happen to mention that I think of myself as an honorary New Yorker? I love to read the Times every morning and really have uh my finger on the pulse of New York. So it feels very familiar speaking with you.

**Dhanraj Singh 8:19**

I I did not know that. I am so happy that you shared it. And look, you know, this is that is really a New York thing, right? Um, um, we are the state that we we we love the fact that you know you you have an interest in what happens here and you you pay attention to what happened here. Um, because we we love when we get the feedback, we love the ideas, and we're never shy about the challenges that we face and and the need for us to continue to think in a very collaborative way to address the issues of our times and the challenges that we're facing, whether that be procurement or anything else. So we're very much appreciative of you being being a New Yorker.

**Julia McIlroy 9:02**

Well, great. So modernization can really shake up how teams are organized. How's the effort changing the way procurement offices across your state work together? And are you seeing new ways of collaborating and sharing expertise?

### **From Silos To Enterprise Procurement**

**Dhanraj Singh 9:18**

That is a great question, um, Julia. It it really does hit at the core of the why, just below the vision that I talked about from Governor Kathy Hochul and Commissioner Moy. You know, one of the biggest changes that we're seeing, and you might find this a little bit uh uh surprising, is not technology per se. Now, don't get me wrong, in the procurement world or in any other aspect of public life, technology is growing rapidly. That is no question. But what I'm what I'm reflecting is a little bit more inside on procurement operations. And like I said, one of the biggest changes we're seeing is isn't in the technology per se. But in the last five years, for example, when you pay close attention to what is happening in procurement shops, what you're seeing is a very high level of organizational stress and an urgent need for transformation and system enablement in the way people and teams collaborate and work to improve outcomes and impact. And that is a very fundamentally different thing than just saying we need more technology. The organizational stress you might appreciate coming out of the COVID period and immediately in the aftermath, the economic changes that are happening at the global and national level, right? Even at the local level, markets, supply chain disruptions, markets are really finding themselves. Organizations where there's a lot of legacy processes and systems found themselves with a high level of stress. And we've seen it. I've seen it to some extent even in my own office. And so the question and the conversation is about how we can transform and what systems can we put in place to really empower and enable the folks that that are doing the work on the front line, right? There's a coup, you know, as you as you think deeper into this, I can tell you, I get very excited about this, Julia. So you're gonna, you know, feel free to cut me off when you have to. But when when you look at at the organizational level, like I said, and the stresses that you're seeing, it come from a couple of places. Like I mentioned, one of them is about you know legacy systems being in place. You're also seeing pockets of silos. You're seeing the absence of shared tools, shared analytics, shared expertise. And so where you have it, great, sometimes it's siloed. The shared capability is not there. This is where the technology component comes in to expand that capability and make some of this intelligence and resources more accessible and shared. We have seen over the past couple of years, NASPO has been leading on the forefront in developing communities of practice and research and procurement, modernization and contract development training. How do you

take all of those resources that are there and infuse them at a pace that you can absorb within the office to drive the modernization forward? This again is where the effort is focusing on. When you pull all of this together, what we're looking at is moving from procurement shop a procurement office to really start to take on procurement as an enterprise function, powering using technology and powering a statewide platform that really allows you to have the kinds of impact, the kinds of speed, and the kinds of agility that that our agencies who are delivering services on the front line need. What is the result that we are hoping to achieve from the effort? We talked about this moments ago. It is intentional procurement and operational excellence, a way to harness the innovation in the market, bring it into our shop, but also to make sure that our workforce, productivity, and satisfaction, job satisfaction for the folks who are on the front line increase significantly. And I'll give you a quick side note. They will tell you, you know, coming out of high school or college or graduate school, I had procurement clearly in front of me that I want to pursue. I've never heard somebody said this. Um, you you almost always heard them describing a journey in pursuing the purpose and the mission that they have, and then stumble upon this engine, like I said, that is at the bottom of everything that works. And when you arrive at that point, you realize this is incredibly important. And it doesn't take long for somebody who has a mission-driven attitude and orientation to get glued onto that process very quickly. So I hope that answers the sort of question that you ask, and I didn't deviate, but I wanted to make sure that I provide that enterprise-level view in how we're looking at this effort to change the way we work and change the way the workforce approaches procurement. We want to shift the mindset, but make sure that shifting is accompanied with capabilities, intelligence, and capacity.

**Julia McIlroy** 14:19

Excellent point. You know, when we talk about modernization, our focus is so often on technology. But really, modernization is about people. And technology is a component of that, right? It's another tool that employees use to get their work done. So, how's New York supporting and preparing its procurement workforce for this transformation, this modernization?

### **Centering People And Change Management**

**Dhanraj Singh** 14:51

You you are absolutely correct. I don't think that could have been framed better. Almost by default, when you talk about procurement modernization, it's easy for the minds to run, you're talking about a technology. And like I mentioned, technology is a piece of this. So you're absolutely correct. And in New York State, the approach that we're using for

procurement modernization, at the heart of this transformation, is our workforce. And these are the people who show up every day to make the system and the process work. They are at the foundation of everything that we're doing, it is the centerpiece of our modernization effort. Now, what does this mean beyond the top line that I just you know shared? It means we're being very intentional about developing the skill set and talent of our people. And in almost every area that we think is critical to powering a 21st century modernized procurement process, skill set in contract administration, skill set in negotiation, in analysis, in procurement research, in data literacy, in categories under management, in our supervisory, managerial, and leadership capabilities. We are making sure that even as we think of a new operating model for the organization, we're very intentional about creating clear pathways for our workforce and our professional staff so that they can progress and they can develop and they can achieve their full potential in the profession. We're working collaboratively, again, with our partner organizations like NASPO and others to make sure that we're doing our fair share to lift the professional identity of procurement staff. We are making sure that change management, for example, as we think about modernization and all aspects of it, is not an afterthought. And change management sits at the forefront of how we approach the modernization efforts, how we communicate, how do we coach? What readiness level of support are we providing to our staff? You know, in earlier this year, procurement services, we held our first ever procurement retreat. We partner with the Center of Procurement Excellence, and we had a very successful retreat that allowed us to just take a moment and stop the day-to-day grinds and say, look, let's take a minute and look ahead what the next 15-20 years would look like. Let's look back and see where the last 20 years went, position ourselves, and then ask the question how do we meet the moment that is before us? And that really helped to cement the effort that we're undergoing right now. I will tell you also that in the summer of this year, we've spent time making sure that every person in a leadership and managerial capacity in the procurement office here in New York, we took the Clifton Strength Leadership Lab analysis. And we did that because we wanted to establish some very clear baseline assessment in understanding where our own expertise lies and to sort of challenge our own convictions and assumptions about how we lead and how we manage. And the intention was clear. Can we identify those areas where we have a significant endowment of leadership and managerial talent and where we might be lacking? So we know where we need to put efforts in the training and capacity development. You bring all of this together, what you're looking at is a perfect ecosystem where the people that are driving this process as a unit were possessed the best in-class skill set. We have the confidence to take on the procurement challenges that are in front and those that would continue to come. And together we embody the resilient community of procurement professionals that, as crises come and when they come, because believe me, they will come, be it environmental, be it

social, be it natural, when they come, procurement is ready to respond to the needs of our communities. And so I'll end on this question by saying that no matter the view or from which angle you examine our efforts to advance procurement modernization in New York, you will find that in the middle of it all is the people who are on the front lines delivering procurement services to the people of New York.

**Julia McIlroy** 19:21

It sounds like both of those efforts, doing the assessment as well as having the Center for Procurement Excellence come in and do a day-long retreat, really benefited your staff. So kudos for both of those. So let's take a minute and talk about tools. What types of new technologies are helping make procurement faster, smarter, and even more transparent? And how do these tools change the day to day work for your staff?

### **Tools That Enable, Not Replace, Judgment**

**Dhanraj Singh** 19:49

You know, I reflect on as I as I'm thinking about your question, I am reflecting on something that I said earlier, which is enablement. How do we enable? Enable, empower, and equip our procurement professionals with the tools that is needed. And so if I kind of back my way into the question and the answer that the question that you're asking, what I would point to is that we are certainly looking at technology and how we can leverage these tools to transform the workday of staff. And we're looking specifically at technologies that have the ability to automate repetitive tasks. What this allows us to do is to shift the focus from administrative to strategic. What I'm describing there in essence is something that approximates to a modern automated statewide e-procurement platform where all you can think about, all the work streams or functionalities that is involved in public procurement, whether it is sourcing, contracting, suppliers management, data and analytics, spend analysis, and so forth, that all these functionalities and capabilities sit within the technology in such a way that it enables staff to go through those repetitive tasks in a very, very timely and efficient manner, thereby freeing up their time to spend on much more of the strategic thinking that is necessary in today's procurement environment. We're looking at digital tools that, for example, reduce emailing. I talked earlier about the need and the ability to have shared analytics and shared capacity and shared intelligence. So when we find tools that allow for an environment where these tools and capacity can be in a shared manner and you're able to work and sort of break down the digital silos that may exist, you tend to speed up and you're able to harness more efficiency from every hour or every minute that you're dedicating to the task, to procurement tasks. We're looking at technology and tools that not just to empower and enable us as procurement

professionals, but our customers and our stakeholders. In August of this year or thereabout, we we released an online vendor feedback system. We partner with a firm called Procurated and we deployed an online vendor feedback system which allows our authorized users, those are folks by law who can use our contracts, to in real time provide us with feedback on their experience in using one of our contracts. Whether that be it great, whether that being not so great, we are empowering them to provide that feedback to us real time so that we can see it, we can attend to it, doesn't need to be lingering for months and the pain grows. We can address it with the urgency that it requires. And we can also get the feedback of what works. In similar fashion, we're looking at technologies and tools and improvements to our website to make sure that the way we communicate with our stakeholders are clear, on time, and easy to interface and use. Part of the expectation, the big expectation that we have, even for our efforts to deploy a full sweet e-procurement system, is to make sure the entire purchasing experience from our customers, for example, is easy. You can get to the place where it compares to that of you're making an Amazon purchase. You're able to go under contract, get your items in a marketplace, and you're able to make your purchase. We're looking at technology that allows us to advance some of the policy and social priorities that the governor has tasked us with through the procurement process. So, for example, advancing participation of minority and women-owned business firms in the procurement process and service disabled veteran-owned businesses, and to make sure that the procurement process itself is not so complex or convoluted that it discourages participation. Quite the opposite, we want to leverage technology to make sure participation becomes much more easy, fairer, and much more participatory. We, for our decision makers internally, from executive levels to mid-management, senior management, supervisory level, we want to empower them with the kinds of data analytics through dashboarding and ready available data tools and visualization to give them the intelligence that they need to make good decisions, timely decisions, impactful decisions, decisions that impact our operations, performance of contracts, cycle time. And so our approach to technology is not here is a great piece of technology. We know a lot of folks are using it, we know it's great in the market, it's the next best thing on the scene, it's novel, we'll like it, we'll take it. It's much, much more intentional and nuanced than that. It is tied specifically to an enablement that we're trying to develop. So as we think about how we're leveraging technology, I will probably summarize this in as best as I could to say it must be an enabler of good judgment, not a replacement.

**Julia McIlroy 25:33**

That's an excellent point. And I love when you said that you want to enable, empower, and equip your staff, the three E's. That's that's a great attitude. So, you know, we know that big

transformations don't happen overnight. So if we look back for just a moment, what were some of the pain points that showed you it was time for a real change in procurement?

**Dhanraj Singh 26:00**

Another great question, and I love the way you frame this. I think in your question right there, it reflects an almost immediate appreciation for the fact that you generally don't approach big modernization efforts just simply on the basis that they're good to have, right? Often when you look below the purpose and the why, you may find very much pain, be it operational pain, strategic pain, administrative pain. It is certainly the case for New York State, being one of you know the largest state in the country, and I did say larger, not the largest, with our economy that is so diverse, with our business community that is so diverse for our for New Yorkers at large, their expectations and their needs. When you look at all of it and juxtapose how does the current procurement operations meet the demands from again the economy, businesses, and our customers, what we found is a couple of things that I think you put them together, you will see a big picture of pain that emerges. One is cycle time. We have seen, especially coming out of the pandemic, cycle times and the time it takes to get a procurement in place, get a new contract in place, and agencies being able to use it. We've seen some very protracted cycle time. And what that does, it impacts our agencies from delivering the kinds of services that they need in a timely manner to New Yorkers. What we've seen is a fragment of data and systems and the absence of a unified enabling platform and technology to give you the kinds of operational efficiency that you need. We have seen when you look at the processes themselves, a lot of it remains manual, which demands a significant amount of staff time and at times overwhelming. That also, as you might imagine, brings some amount of inconsistencies in the way one process might be done in one area as opposed to the next. When you take those three things together, your cycle time, the fragmentation, and the manual nature of the work, you have a perfect storm of frustration, not just for the folks who are doing procurement, the procurement professionals, but our customers, New Yorkers, our suppliers. And that is the pain that we have recognized and made the decision in no small part, like I explained earlier, through the mandate that was handed to us by Governor Kathy Hochul, Commissioner Moy, that we need to transform the procurement process. We need to modernize the procurement process, not incrementally, not we'll fix this piece today, and maybe in five years we'll revisit. No. We're going to rip the band aid off and we're going to approach this with intentionality, but in a transformative way. We know it's a tall order, we know the work is significant, we know what it takes, but with the kinds of leadership that we have from Governor Kathy Hochul, Commissioner Moy, we have the tools and the resources that is needed to make this transformation possible and this modernization possible. And so therein lies, like I mentioned, due the pain that we have seen, and we take

that very seriously. We want to make sure that when you use the word or the term New York and doing business in New York, it must become synonymous with that's the place to do business. That's the place to do procurement.

**Julia McIlroy** 29:50

So it sounds like you were able to do it in a New York minute, right?

**Dhanraj Singh** 29:54

Yes, that is correct.

**Julia McIlroy** 29:57

There are many fantastic cities in the US, but there's only one city that can claim it's the city that never sleeps.

### **A Vision Of Success And Impact**

**Dhanraj Singh** 30:06

That is absolutely correct. We are New York, and I have said time and again when we think of procurement, the express goal here, against all of the things that I've mentioned before, is also to make sure New York is the leader in public procurement.

**Julia McIlroy** 30:24

Absolutely. So looking ahead, if we fast forward a few years, what does success look like to you? How do you hope procurement in New York State feels different once modernization really takes hold?

**Dhanraj Singh** 30:39

When I think about the future, I am really not imagining a system. When I look back, we have built plenty of those. But what I am imagining is how procurement will feel for the people who depend on it and equally on the people who are doing. Procurement must feel painless, it must feel strategic, it must feel exciting, it must be defined by faster access to goods and services and impactful and improve public outcomes. Like I mentioned moments ago, suppliers must see New York as the easiest and the fastest place to do business. It is a future in which data informs our approach to risk, compliance, performance oversight, and even innovation. I am imagining a workforce that feels so empowered, valued, and excited about their role that they play in serving New Yorkers. I am imagining a time when procurement amplifies the impact that it has on economic growth and innovation as opposed to stymieing. Ultimately, what I envision is a procurement infrastructure and ecosystem that aligns with the public good and the expressed vision of

Governor Kathy Hochul and Commissioner Moy. So when I think about the future and what success for New York State modernization looks like, that is what I see in front of, not a piece of technology.

**Julia McIlroy** 32:13

That's great. I think that most of us in public procurement are in public procurement because we care about the common good. We want to serve the citizens of our city, state, and country, right?

**Dhanraj Singh** 32:30

That is absolutely correct. I will share with you that I love the phrase that my commissioner often uses as she talks about the work ahead of us. She always phrases this as look, public service is a calling, and it truly is. Nobody, you know, wakes up one day and says, you know, they're going to decide to just try their hands at public service. No, you really it goes much more deeper than that. And so you're absolutely correct that as you think about how we approach the work that we do in procurement, it is certainly the case that it rests on that foundation of a love for public service and for serving the communities that we live in.

### **Most Memorable Procurement: Modernization**

**Julia McIlroy** 33:14

Absolutely. So lastly, would you please tell me about your most memorable or unique procurement?

**Dhanraj Singh** 33:21

This is a this is a very exciting question. I'll tell you. I, you know, people often ask me about my most memorable procurement. And the truth is, it isn't something that is behind me, it's something that is being written in real time. The most profound, interesting, and meaningful procurement of my career is the one we're shaping right now. New York State's procurement modernization. This effort isn't just another initiative or a project, it is the single largest opportunity we have to redefine what procurement means for the people of New York. It really is a chance to transform every touch point from how we engage suppliers to how agencies deliver services to how our workforce experiences their roles. Modernization is the most consequential procurement I've ever been part of because it enables all the others. It unlocks speed, transparency, innovation, and impact at a scale no single contract could ever achieve. And what really makes this moment even more meaningful to me, it is that it is rooted in Governor Kathy Hochul's and Commissioner Moy's vision. You know, they set a bold and uncompromising charge, and that is to make government work better, faster, smarter, and more transparent for the people that we serve.

That mandate is what launched this transformation, like I mentioned earlier, and it is what guides every decision we make at a very personal level to be entrusted with leading this effort alongside an extraordinary team. It is the honor of my professional life. Every day we are shaping a system that will touch millions of New Yorkers and thousands of businesses for years to come. It is a responsibility I carry with deep humility and conviction. So my most memorable procurement isn't a past award or a complex negotiation, unfortunately. It is this modernization effort, the procurement that is reshaping how every other procurement will work. And I believe that when we look back years from now, this will stand as one of the most impactful public sector transformation in New York's history. And the beauty of it is we are writing that story now.

**Julia McIlroy 35:54**

That's beautifully said. And it's exciting that you're right in the middle of it. I'll have to have you back in a few years, and then we can look in as a retrospect, and you can tell me what you learned and what went well and what you would have done differently.

**Dhanraj Singh 36:08**

The honor and privilege will certainly be mine.

**Julia McIlroy 36:12**

Dhanraj, thanks for being a guest of Pulse. I very much appreciate it.

**Dhanraj Singh 36:17**

No, thank you. Thanks to NASPO for having me and allowing us to share in our experience. Again, the hope is always that others can see what we're doing, provide feedback, learn from both what we got right and even where we got wrong. And so we we very much appreciate the opportunity to share the efforts that we're undertaking. So again, thank you for having me.

### **Closing Reflections And Next Steps**

**Julia McIlroy 36:41**

You're welcome. That's a wrap on today's episode. We've heard how New York State is taking a thoughtful, people-first approach to procurement modernization, focusing not just on new tools, but on the new ways of thinking and working together. Big thanks to Donraj Singh for sharing his insights. If you enjoyed the conversation, be sure to follow the show for more stories about innovation, leadership, and the future of public procurement. Until next time, keep asking questions, improving processes, and moving procurement forward. And remember, we work in the sunshine. Bye for now.