

Welcome To NASPO Pulse

Julia McIlroy 0:05

Hi everyone, and welcome to NASPO's Pulse, the podcast that focuses on current topics in public procurement. I'm your host, Julia McIlroy. In this episode, we're sitting down with Samantha Willis, Chief Procurement Officer from the beautiful state of West Virginia, to explore what it really takes to lead procurement at the highest level of state government. From those first day surprises to the hard-earned lessons that only come with time, we'll dig into the moments that define leadership in this space. Hi, Sam. Welcome to Pulse.

Samantha Willis 0:39

Hi, Julia. I'm so happy to be here.

Sam's Path Into Procurement

Julia McIlroy 0:41

I'm so glad you're here. So, Sam, to begin, I'd love to hear about your professional background and what led you to public procurement.

Samantha Willis 0:48

Yeah, so like many of us in public procurement, uh, I kind of landed here. Uh so I did not exactly seek out procurement as my planned career. So after law school, I spent some time in the governor's office where I had the opportunity to interact with the procurement director at the time and dig into some purchasing issues in that area. And I found that the contract work was some of my favorite. Um, I had kind of known going in that I was really interested in contracts. I like to dig into the words and really do the research. Um, and I love to help people negotiate and come to solutions that serve both sides. So the contract work was my absolute favorite. And as our time in the governor's office was winding down, there was this opportunity to come over here as the chief procurement officer. And I jumped all in, uh, not honestly knowing exactly what I was getting myself into, uh, but we could get into that later. But uh, I did not know the full scope of what I was doing, if I'm being honest. But I knew that I loved digging into the contracts. I knew that I loved looking at the law and how the law and procurement creates these very clear boundaries around what you're supposed to do. And then there's some flexibility within that to get creative and come up with solutions for problems. So it's nice because you can really you can really get creative and come up with new ideas, but it kind of gives you a world to work within.

The Day One Reality Check

Julia McIlroy 2:18

It sounds like your focus is very much serving others, coming up with solutions to problems. Um, as you said, you love contract law and that's what it is, right? Finding a solution to a problem. So, as you mentioned, your career didn't begin in public procurement. So, when you first stepped into the role of CPO, what's something you wish someone had told you on day one?

Samantha Willis 2:41

I do wish on day one that I had known, you know, the full breadth of what I was going to be touching. And and this is a little bit difficult to explain, I think, to somebody who's never who's not intimately involved in procurement, but you know, having jumped into this role, I I knew it was important, I knew it was valuable, I knew it was going to serve my state really well. I had no idea when people said it's different every day. I did not realize how true that was and how broad and um impactful my role would be. And I think that if I had, I'd probably had been a little bit more scared, to be fair, to start out. Um, so maybe it was a good thing, but I I do wish that I had known and understood just the gravity of what I was stepping into at the beginning. And it didn't take very long before I understood I can make a lot of really wonderful change here.

Julia McIlroy 3:44

So, two years into your role, what lessons about procurement leadership stand out the most?

Samantha Willis 3:50

So, two years in, I think what I've learned the most about procurement leadership is you have to listen and soak up the experience of the people around you. And I say that not only as somebody coming in new, but I think for folks who have been in procurement for a while and step up into leadership, being able to listen to the people around you and hear uh their expertise, their experience, consider it, and being open-minded to different types of solutions, I think that's very important. Um, one thing that I have noticed during my time in this role is that people tend to get a little bit boxed in in what they think is possible and what they think what they think the law says or what they think the rule says. And so as a leader, being able to see and interpret the law and rule and then say, actually, we have a little bit more flexibility there than we've previously interpreted, that I think is really valuable.

Julia McIlroy 4:51

When you were in law school and thinking about your future career, which path did you think you would take? Did you think you would be in government on some level?

Samantha Willis 5:02

So I didn't exactly know what I wanted to do when I went in there. Um I really enjoyed my contract classes. So I always kind of had that in the back of my mind that that was more I was gonna be a transactional type of attorney. I I knew pretty quickly like litigation was not gonna be my was not gonna be my game. Um but I had gone into law school after spending some time working as the communications director for the uh community technical colleges. And prior to that, I had interned in undergrad for the legislature. So I kind of just kept circling back no matter what happened. I just kind of kept landing back in Charleston, back in government. So once I went to law school, I had a feeling that some sort of government work was going to be in my path. Um and I think that really inadvertently came into fruition in a lot more ways than I ever anticipated, actually.

Julia McIlroy 6:01

It must have been super exciting and interesting working in the governor's office.

Hiring For People Skills

Samantha Willis 6:07

It was. Um you get to see a whole lot of different, um, a whole lot of different opportunities, a whole lot of different people show up. Issues come up from every department, so there's a ton of variety. And, you know, truthfully, I cut my teeth as an attorney in the governor's office, which I think is a super unique experience, but it really gave me a good concept of what it looks like to be a generalist, to dip your toes into different types of law and really search for solutions to varying types of problems rather than getting um very focused on one type of issue. For me, I think I really thrive in an environment that has a lot of variety and opportunity to find different types of solutions.

Julia McIlroy 6:55

So public procurement isn't always a career people plan for, as we've discussed, right? So, how do you attract new talent to the field and what qualities do you look for when you're building a strong procurement team?

Samantha Willis 7:10

So you're absolutely right. People do not tend to jump straight to public procurement as a go-to option, and and I'm not, I'm no exception to that. Um, we are still in the works in developing a more concrete plan for attracting new talent. And actually, we've been working with NASPO's teams to uh identify some new opportunities to reach out to college students and even high school students, but as far as qualities that I look for, I think the most important thing is people skills and a willingness to learn. Um, when I interview folks for for buying positions here in our in our division, I don't look for people who necessarily

have oodles and oodles of procurement experience. That is wonderful, and I will absolutely take it. Um, but I think what I value in addition to that is an ability to learn and understand, dig into the code, um, interact with the agencies in a positive and supportive and customer service-based way. Because at the end of the day, what we do here is serve our agencies. We're here to support them, to make sure that they're following the law, to make sure that they are doing their absolute best to serve the citizens of West Virginia. And so for me, it's all about customer service and being able to communicate that message to our agencies.

How Procurement Touches Daily Life

Julia McIlroy 8:36

And there's no doubt that procurement is people-centric. As I've mentioned in the past, when I was interviewing individuals for my staff and that would work with me closely, I would say you have to like serving others because that's what procurement is all about, right? We're not buying things for ourselves, we're helping buy things for others. So you better like people if you're going to be in this position. Many people don't realize how much procurement touches everyday life. How does state procurement impact residents in West Virginia? And can you share an example of a procurement decision that helped West Virginians?

Samantha Willis 9:16

Sure. So procurement impacts the state of West Virginia in a whole lot of ways. So one of my favorite examples that I like to use is our statewide contracts, because those not only help serve our state agencies, but they help facilitate good procurement options for our local governments. So those are my favorite opportunities, especially, you know, we've got fire trucks, we've got school bus tires, you know, those kinds of things that when you think about your community and what your community needs, those are the areas where we're really helping to make sure they have the goods and services they need to keep things going. So, you know, the West Virginia Purchasing Division has 176 spending units under its authority. And so we run the gamut of everything from office supplies to construction equipment to temporary labor. You know, we really have a lot of impacts to every type of agency. You know, DEP is out there helping remediate mine, uh, remediate mine areas. Highways is working on updating their roads and bridges around here. Um, we just we really can touch every every inch of the state. Um, and so another little example that I always enjoy seeing is anytime we get bids for state parks. I just always think that's so exciting because I love to see our parks grow and thrive. So even if it's something as simple as, you know, new boilers for building over at the state parks, you know, watching them continue to grow and succeed, you know, that's us. We're helping. We're helping make that happen.

Julia McIlroy 11:00

So and it feels great, doesn't it? Especially state parks. This is a little shout out to the state of West Virginia. It's a beautiful place. To our listeners who have not visited, I highly recommend it. The capital is beautiful, Charleston. I very much enjoyed my time there. So if you haven't been to West Virginia, go visit. Oh yeah, we'd be happy to have you. So, Sam, if you had 30 seconds with the public to explain why procurement matters, what would you say?

Samantha Willis 11:32

So procurement is important because it helps our state agencies and all the public entities serve the citizens of West Virginia better. Um, we help make sure that we get the goods and services that you need as citizens of the community to be able to live and work and play here in West Virginia and to be able to give you everything that you need. The other piece of this is we help make sure that your taxpayer dollars are being used and stewarded appropriately.

Skills For Emerging Leaders

Julia McIlroy 12:06

Excellent PSA. Thank you, Sam. So switching to leadership for a moment, what leadership practices have helped you guide your team through opportunities and challenges?

Samantha Willis 12:19

Again, I will circle back to listening. I think that being open-minded and being ready to listen and hear the opinions and perspectives of my employees and my staff, that is the most important leadership practice that anyone can adopt, but certainly for me, that has made the biggest impact. You know, I came into this role with a lot of ideas and thoughts about what it would be like, but without a whole lot of background knowledge or, you know, reality, I guess, to back that up, and immediately learned from my senior staff members just the full scope of what we can do here and how impactful it is. And I can't imagine having done any of this or succeeded as much as we have without having their institutional knowledge, their understanding, and their just thoughtful love and appreciation for the state to back me up. So I think as a leader, the most important thing you can do is listen.

Julia McIlroy 13:21

I love that, Sam. Listening is so critical, especially in your situation where you had gone to law school, you worked in the governor's office, your background was not public

procurement, yet you had a staff of all of these knowledgeable individuals that could help you. So that's great that listening is a key aspect of your leadership.

Samantha Willis 13:45

I can read the code and I can read the rules all day long and get a sense of what we should be doing. But without that depth of knowledge and practical experience that my staff brings to the table, you know, it you can read about it, but it it's not very good unless until you do it.

Julia McIlroy 14:01

Um theory versus practice, right? So for emerging procurement leaders listening today, what skills should they focus on developing?

Samantha Willis 14:14

Yeah, so I gave a lot of thought to this actually when I was preparing. So I think one of the biggest things you can do is develop, even if you don't plan on going to law school, develop a basic legal understanding of the code and rule. Develop some basic legal interpretation skills. So, you know, being able to read the code and understand how different words are used in context and how to interpret them and what they mean for you practically. But again, being open-minded, being open to change, those are very tricky skills to develop for a lot of us. Um, and it's very easy to get to get stuck in this is the way we do it, because it's always worked and it's fine, you know. And so I think teaching yourself to be open to new ideas, um, be open to change and finding creative solutions, that is that is one of the most important skills that you can learn for life in general, um, but particularly in public procurement, because as my staff often tells me, you know, those who've been doing it for 20 years, every day they run into something they've never seen before. So you have to be able to pivot and be able to say, okay, this is a new, this is a new challenge. Let's approach it from a new direction. Um, and then the last thing is organization. Organization is very important. Um, it's a skill that I'm still actively working on and in all areas of my life. So I got all my planners, all my sticky notes. It's uh it is so challenging because you have so many different types of work going on in this building, um, and so many different types of procurements going out at any given time. So yeah, as much as you can do to prepare for leadership in in the area of organization and just undering understanding how to create a clear system to organize your thoughts, intake new tasks, intake new projects, and then implement that I would recommend to any young emerging leader.

The Future And A Huge Tech RFP

Julia McIlroy 16:26

Fantastic advice. Be organized, be flexible, know the law. I did not go to law school, yet for 25 years of my career, I was reading and interpreting contracts and knowing, okay, this is a clause that or a term or condition that we absolutely cannot abide by, and then entering into negotiation. Indemnification, ugh, that was always the one that we were back and forth on. But anyhow. So, Sam, what keeps you excited about the future of public procurement?

Samantha Willis 17:03

I think what keeps me most excited is just the variety. Um, there's so much happening every single day. There's so much change uh going on in the world of technology. There's never a dull moment, and and I don't know how to say it any differently than that, to be honest. Um yeah, the world is changing so quickly, and we have an opportunity to grow and change alongside it and also help keep things on the rails while we're doing so. Uh, so there is never, there will never be a shortage of challenges and new opportunities to dig into issues and learn something new. And I love to learn above anything else.

Julia McIlroy 17:48

So, Sam, lastly, please tell me about your most interesting or unique procurement.

Samantha Willis 17:55

The most interesting one we have done, and I'm gonna say the most challenging as well, is our one-stop shop permitting portal for the state. Um, that is run through my cabinet secretary's office, and it was a big undertaking of a project, and it continues to be so. We're now in, we have a vendor, we're now in in the process of developing the product and everything. Um that procurement was so unique because the product was so large and all-encompassing, and and it's technology based, which I will readily admit to everyone, I tend to defer to people smarter and and more proficient than I in all of those areas. So it was really a cool opportunity for me as a CPO to get down in the weeds and help develop the specs in in a way that I don't always get the opportunity to participate quite that hands-on. Um, and it was also a great opportunity for me to learn about what technologies are out there and how uh how we can develop these systems and programs to serve our state agencies better. So I would say that was probably the most interesting one I've done recently and very challenging, and it really pushed me and all of my colleagues, you know, to the outer edges of of what we are capable of or what we thought we were capable of, I guess, in terms of in terms of getting down and deciding what do we actually need? How do we solve this problem? Um, how do we develop an RFP that even speaks to these needs uh prior to prior to putting it out there? So it it took a lot of collaboration and and like I said, it was just a great opportunity for me to to get a little bit more in the weeds in the day-to-day than I usually usually have the opportunity to.

Julia McIlroy 19:50

So it sounds fun. It sounds like you got to be a buyer for a time, right?

Samantha Willis 19:55

I did, exactly. And uh, you know, I don't always get to do do those pieces. So it was it was awesome. Yeah.

Julia McIlroy 20:04

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

Final Thoughts And Sign Off

Samantha Willis 20:09

Thank you so much for having me, Julia.

Julia McIlroy 20:11

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