



# Training the newly elected

## advice for the procurement professional

**A**NOTHER ELECTION... AND, another group of newbie politicians to “paper train,” to use an analogy.

Those who are called to public service often bring with them intelligence, conviction and a drive to promote fairness and efficiency for their constituents, but the heady aroma of power can often overtake the best of intentions. Then these political public servants become like puppies run amok, violating procurement policy and having all sorts of ‘accidents’ that circumvent

the very process put in place to ensure fairness and efficiency. Adding insult to injury, you and your colleagues may have the less than fun task of cleaning up the mess.

You might wish that you could rub their noses in every screw up, but that is unlikely to happen; besides, there is a more humane way. The newly elected appreciate straight, to-the-point information because in politics this is often the last thing they get. And it can be hard to get them to focus with so much new

stuff to learn. Whacking someone’s nose until you get their attention (difficult not to mention illegal!) and then explaining in loud, short sentences everything you want them to know would probably not work well; politicians are not puppies and would surely take exception. Perhaps you could include a copy of this article in your briefing report and the hard work will be done. Below is a letter addressed to new politicians; it is a synopsis of what we believe every newly elected politician should know.

Dear [Mayor, Councillor, Premier, MP, MPP, Board Member] (select one):

The media seems keen on exposing problems and issues related to procurement in this organization. Now that a new [council, government, board] (select one) has been elected, we understand you want to help keep any problems from appearing on the front page. As Procurement Director, I believe I can assist you in providing some notes for your welcome briefing of new politicians.

Here are my thoughts about strategic issues that new [councillors, ministers, members] (select one) might want to consider before getting involved in any specific procurement activity, or when dealing with a lobbyist:

**Like it or not, you can’t do what you want ...**

Politics does not reign supreme in all domains of public administration. Bypassing ‘fair and open competition’ to do whatever is the most expedient or politically flattering at the moment is not ‘OK.’ It is unethical, contrary to public policy and frequently illegal. Public policy dictates that procurement should be fair, open and transparent and the Supreme Court of Canada is the final determiner of the rules, not a politician no matter whether federal, provincial or local.

**Acting on behalf of lobbyists will get you in trouble ...**

There is often great pressure both from within the administration and from outside to bypass established procurement processes or to favour one particular vendor. Lobbying is a fact of life, as is wanting to reward or assist your constituents, especially large employers or supporters. You will be approached to discuss ongoing procurements. However, if

you attempt to influence the selection of a particular vendor, you will be violating both public policy and the direction provided by the Supreme Court of Canada. You will put your organization at risk of litigation and yourself at risk of being on the 11:00 p.m. news –unfavourably.


**Procurement people have special skills to help us do it right ...**

There is an established body of knowledge associated with procurement including standards, models and best practices for all aspects of public procurement. And this organization has professional procurement staff that do know what to do. Many procurement professionals are credentialed through two major professional bodies that have chapters in Canada, as well as several other professional bodies that deal with public procurement and supply chain management in Canada. Trained public procurement professionals can help you through the procurement process in a fair, transparent and accountable manner.

**Leave procurement to procurement professionals...**

Justice Bellamy held two years of hearings related to the Toronto MFP Leasing scandal in which a \$43 million lease ended up costing \$86 million. Her report provides more than 100 recommendations dealing with procurement issues. Number 130 should be framed and displayed in every politician’s office: Councillors should separate themselves from the procurement process. They should have no involvement whatsoever in specific procurements. They have the strongest ethical obligation to refrain from seeking to be involved in any way.

While our analogy is a bit of tongue in cheek, the above letter makes valuable points. Once you brief your new politicians, please be patient as training takes time. It may also take a few more surreptitious attempts of ‘anonymously’ dropping off reminder copies of this article with sections ‘anonymously’ highlighted.

Good luck; have fun, and keep smiling... and just about the time you get this new bunch trained, there’ll be another election and you’ll have to do it again! 

Access Michael Asner’s publication, *An Elected Officials Guide to Public Procurement in Canada*, at: <http://www.rfpmentor.com/cmspdfs/freeguidecanada.pdf>

Michael Asner is a consultant specializing in public procurement. He is a frequent speaker about procurement issues throughout North America. He was one of the original columnist in this magazine contributing ‘In my opinion’ for five years. (michael@rfpmentor.com)

Sharon Sheppard is a freelance writer and editor and has collaborated with Michael for many years. She also provides research services on policy issues including public procurement. (sasbenj@telus.net)