

BOOK REVIEW

Government Procurement Management (Special Edition), by Stanley N. Sherman (Wordcrafters Publications: Germantown, Maryland, 1999, softbound, ISBN 0-941448-04-5 260 pages, \$70.00).

In this most recent edition of Government Procurement Management, Stanley Sherman, Professor Emeritus of The George Washington University updates his ongoing study of public procurement in the United States (Special Edition, 1999). The book consists of 18 chapters and four appendices. The strategic look at public procurement differentiates this book from others that discuss public procurement and contracting. While other texts explain statutory and regulatory “speak” and rely heavily on analysis of case law, this book takes a practitioner’s approach regarding the unique aspects of public procurement. The text provides an excellent introduction to the competing and conflicting goals of the federal procurement system, leaving the reader to hypothesize about various improvements that might be made. Those interested in a historical view of federal level procurement will find Appendix 1 most valuable. Readers should note that the book looks at public procurement at the federal level; however, many of the concepts apply to public procurement at all levels.

The title of the book may be misleading to those who equate the term “contract management” with post award activities. To the contrary, this text analyzes the entire acquisition process, i.e., from identification of a need through the challenges of managing a contract. Primary emphasis, however, is given to the pre-award process including planning, funding, methods of sourcing, and socio-economic issues. (Note: The author devotes a separate work, Government Procurement Management: Post Award [Wordcrafters Publications, Germantown, MD 1999] exclusively to post award activities).

Many chapters intertwine concepts and share common threads, which may confuse the reader who desires to read a chapter and move onward to a new topic. However, this approach serves as a reminder to the reader that procurement topics do not exist in a vacuum and must be considered in consonance with one another. For example, introductory chapters address workforce issues and initiatives, e.g., qualities that should be considered in hiring procurement agents. This topic is revisited in chapters that discuss leadership and management in public procurement.

The book, however, incompletely discusses outsourcing, which is an important topic. Recent emphasis and interest in outsourcing provide more topics for inclusion in the next edition of this work. Other areas that warrant more discussion are commerciality and the use of automated procurement systems.

At the onset, the author quickly acquaints the reader with the concept of the Materials Management Function (MMF), positing that procurement is a critical part of the MMF. He defines MMF as the continuum of need analysis through the operational use of the system and graphically demonstrates that this function is iterative in nature. Thus, the author concludes that the contribution that procurement makes to the MMF is also ongoing since procurement also takes place on a continuum that supports various stages of the MMF. For example, at the onset, needs analysis may require contracting services. In the latter stages of MMF, contracting services may also be required for services such as development, prototyping and manufacturing.

The book discusses well the impact of various reform movements regarding federal procurement. The author characterizes procurement as an interface function that links input and output. It is a discipline that must adhere to a plethora of statutes and regulations and also rely on the business acumen of its government agents. Sherman brings this discussion full circle by noting that reform movements of late have reduced reliance on rigid rules and challenged the procurement workforce to develop and practice good business skills in an environment that emphasizes balanced competition and cooperation.

The author analyzes historical trends that have reshaped and redefined federal level public procurement including a discussion of the statutory and regulatory changes of the mid 1990s that have significantly altered the procurement landscape. Sherman discusses the challenges associated with the organizational design of public procurement organizations and the dynamics of change that have affected not only process but also the overall framework within which procurement takes place. The text does not critique current policies and procedures; rather it provides the reader with “food for thought.” The author clearly advocates the project management approach as a means toward developing solid acquisition strategies and achieving program goals and objectives. He suggests the Defense Department model of project management as one worth examining.

A strength of this book is the comparative analysis between commercial procurement and public procurement. What becomes clear is the degree to which public procurement bears the burden of compliance with many social and economic programs, public funding constraints and statutory ethical considerations, which are matters not relevant (with minor exceptions) to commercial procurement. Another interesting feature is the author’s use of secondary statistical data to substantiate a shift in the expenditure of public funds from the procurement of supplies to that of services.

Training and development of the procurement workforce is of particular interest including turnover of personnel, retention, and training. The reader will likely conclude that when funding resources decline, the training of the procurement workforce also declines. The negative effects of this chain reaction are apparent.

The planning and funding chapter provides a useful list of suggested planning factors. The book devotes two well-written chapters on sealed bidding and competitive negotiations. The text identifies and compares well various contract types, not only categorizing and describing formal contracting arrangements, but also providing a thoughtful discussion of the critical importance of selecting the right contract type. Another strength is the examination of the formulation of public procurement policy at the federal level.

Readers should be cautioned that this text relies extensively on an examination of public procurement through the lens of the Department of Defense, which is no surprise to the informed practitioner since this department has traditionally played a vital role in the shaping and redefinition of federal level procurement processes, roles, and responsibilities. The author includes excerpts from Defense and NASA regulations and policy directives. Readers must recognize that such discussions offer an examination of a model and do not portend to explain the inner workings of all public procurement operations.

The text makes a solid contribution to existing literature on the procurement discipline, challenging the reader to critically think about procurement issues and recognize the potential effects that managerial decisions have on the success of the programs they support.

One recurring theme subtly weaves itself through this text: the constantly changing operating environment within which public procurement exists. That being said, no text on public procurement can hope to address all current practices and initiatives at the time of publication. While prior editions contained an index, bibliography and list of acronyms, this special edition does not. Hopefully, the next edition will bring back these added features. Occasional typographical errors should not cause the reader any concern. The text will leave readers with a deep appreciation for the complicated public procurement framework within which procurement decisions are made.

The text is strongly recommended for those interested in understanding the environment, challenges and complexities associated with federal level procurement. Since many concepts and practices transcend the boundaries of the federal level, strong application of concepts will apply to public procurement at all levels.

Reviewed by:
Elisabeth Wright
School of Business and Public Management
The George Washington University
Washington D.C. 20052