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Clued in for Successful Post-award Execution: A Case Study in Simulation Learning

BY KIMBERLEY LANGSTON

Significant effort is put into the pre-award phases of a procurement process. On the government side, months or even years are spent defining and refining requirements, engaging with industry, and painstakingly selecting a winning contractor. On the industry side, similar investments in time and money are made to understand the government's requirements and create solutions that provide value and are differentiated enough to win.

During these pre-award phases, there are compliance checks, multiple review cycles, and so much rigor that one would think every government award ends up crystal clear to all parties involved. However, that is far from today's reality, especially when the team of people who worked the pre-award phases are not the same team of people who work the post-award execution.

It can seem more like gazing into an opaque sphere than a crystal ball. Discrepancies, undocumented assumptions, inadequate level of detail, information held by some stakeholders but not all, and mismatched expectations are examples of circumstances that make successful post-award execution so challenging. To make matters worse, walking into a messy situation as the new responsible party can make you want to shout, "What did I walk into?!"

But shouting only helps for a moment and you realize that, in order to do your job, you'll need a clear mind and a strategy to assess the situation and determine a path forward. You can't do that alone because government contracting is a team effort with a myriad of stakeholders involved. The NCMA NEXUS conference brought this entire myriad of stakeholders together to collaborate and learn from each other. Presenters Kimberly Jones, Trinity Hanson, Joseph Endresss, SPC; Lauren Bloomquist; Brendan Sutch, CFCM; and Ami Adams from CGI Federal and Dolores Kuchina-Musina, Ph.D., PPCM, CFCM, CF APMP, NCMA Fellow from Rexota Solutions, LLC focused their efforts at NEXUS on hosting a two-hour workshop to explore the skills and communication methods necessary for a professional new to the team to achieve a clear mind and path forward for successful post-award execution.

How the Game Was Played

The team created a post-award simulation based upon the classic murder mystery board game, *Clue*. Our "Get Clued In" workshop brought the board game to life, where the players were able to speak directly to characters inspired by the *Clue* board game suspects.

While there was no murder to solve, there was plenty of mayhem in the contractual documents and game artifacts. Workshop participants were assigned in teams to seek out clues that could be used to improve a simulated contractual arrangement. Each team of players acted as an agreement officer, taking over a prototype Other Transaction Authority (OTA) agreement already in progress. The OTA agreement used in the game was between a fictitious Department of Defense agency called the Center for Learning and Upskilling Excellence (DoD CLUE) and a non-traditional federal contractor named Train U Up to provide an educational software prototype branded as *EduJester*.

The game's characters included Trinity Scarlett, the contractor; Joe Greene, the program manager; Brendan Mustard, the infrastructure contractor; Dolores White, the former Agreements Officer; Amy Plum, financial analyst; and Lauren Peacock, policy and legal.

Like the rooms represented on *Clue*'s gameboard, each character

was stationed at a different table. Throughout the session, each team rotated to every table where they were allowed to inspect some artifacts and interview the character. Teams were asked to document three major areas: assess the current state of execution, identify any risks, and draft a list of recommended contractual changes to include in a modification. Each team visited every character for the same amount of time and the order in which they visited them was randomized and therefore different for every team.

Who Won? Everyone!

After teams had interviewed every character, they were given time to collect their clues and document their assessment, risks and recommendations. During the debrief, there was unanimous agreement amongst all teams about the current state of agreement execution. Teams identified consistent risks, and all had similar recommendations for contractual changes that were needed.

However, there was a lot of discussion around the order in which the teams visited each character. As teams gathered more clues throughout the simulation, they began to gain a clearer picture of the agreement and its current state of execution. The more clues they gathered, the more questions they had. The more questions they had, the more they wanted to revisit previous characters, armed with the new information. The first few characters that each team visited were critical in clarifying key issues that needed to be addressed. Teams that were able to visit certain characters early on had a much

"Trinity Scarlett," (wearing pink feather boa on left side of table) of the fictitious contractor Train U Up, was one of the characters in the "Get Clued In" workshop.

clearer picture and therefore, a distinct advantage. Despite that advantage, the teams all coalesced with a similar assessment, risks, and recommended changes, arriving at the same endpoint. The workshop participants all agreed that this echoed the often-messy fact-finding that takes place in the real world. Every team's desire to reinterview characters also highlighted the importance of circular and ongoing communication among all stakeholders involved in the contracting process.

Throughout the workshop, participants were confronted with different personalities, various agendas, and the absence of key information. They had to work together as a team and figure out how to build rapport with each of the characters, which was not always made easy for them, again replicating real life. Participants

gained practical experience working with what they were given, figuring out what they needed, and finding the best way to bridge that gap.

What everyone learned is that it takes curiosity, good human relations, creative thinking, and persistence to gain the knowledge necessary to fill in the blanks, so to speak, and understand how to make the mysterious agreement work.

We won't give you the specific agreement details here because the team will be running the game again at the NCMA World Congress in July 2024. We hope you'll join us in Seattle to "Get Clued In." **CM**

Kimberley Langston is VP Product Strategy at CGI Federal. She has supported the federal contracting community for 25 years and has a passion for solving complex problems with innovative approaches and is known for bringing an element of fun into everything she does.

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