

A Learning Journey to *Seeing Excellence*

Richard Pennington



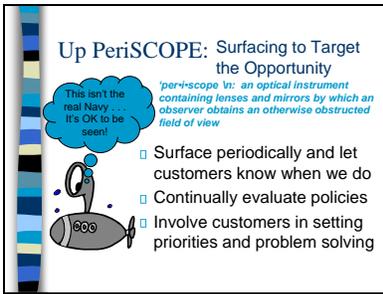
This is the story of a learning journey: how *Seeing Excellence: Learning from Great Procurement Teams* evolved from the early days in the newly-formed Colorado Division of Finance and Procurement. I learned that, “Teams are the lifeblood of organizations. Procurement is part of their circulatory system.” I also learned how great this profession is.



In the Summer of 2002, I was newly appointed as division director of the Division of Finance and Procurement, consisting of State Purchasing, State Controller, State Buildings & Real Estate Programs, and the Central Collections Unit (that collects debts owed to the state). We created a division mission and vision statement, along with guiding principles. Don't let your clients think that this is your guiding principle!



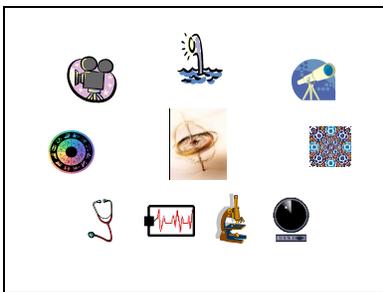
That Summer, our new division started talking about what our four offices had in common. We all had statewide financial oversight responsibilities and operational missions. Some of us needed to work on relationships with client agencies. We created a quality management system called SCOPE. Defined as an instrument for viewing, the various scopes became our visual metaphors for the disciplines teams need for continuous improvement.



This is an artifact of the SCOPE days, a slide used during presentations. The periscope is one of the most important. Procurement offices are like submarines. They cruise below the surface and need to surface once in a while (to visit customers). The periscope was the visual metaphor for customer-centricity and using questions to find opportunities to improve.



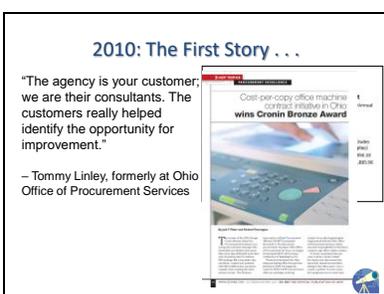
In 2004, the Department of Personnel and Administration featured an article about SCOPE in the state newspaper. They invited state employees to contact department leaders with ideas for improvement in technology support, human resources, procurement, accounts and controls, and other programs managed by the Department. The radarscope was our web-based method of informing customers what we were working on: the priorities, status, and our “Missions Accomplished.”



Scope is defined as “an instrument for viewing.” SCOPES became the visual metaphors for the elements of continuous improvement and 10 essential team disciplines.



The scopes also are placeholders for the various skills and contributions teams need from teammates. The seven scopes on the right were the original scopes used by the Division of Finance and Procurement (2002-2005). The three scopes on the left were added later as visual metaphors for risk and change management, learning, and lateral leadership. What do you bring to a team in terms of strengths? More importantly, what do you need help with?



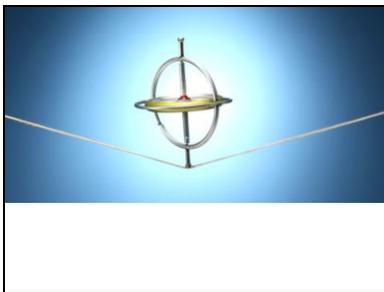
Chip Heath and Dan Heath wrote about the power of stories in *Made to Stick*. Their ideas are featured in chapter 9 of *Seeing Excellence*. In August 2010, I was contacted by NIGP asking if I'd be interested in writing an article for *Government Procurement* magazine. I was attending the annual conference of the National Association of State Procurement Officials and had just seen an award presentation by Thomas Linley, then with the Ohio Office of Procurement Services. I told NIGP I wanted to co-write his story about saving money on office machines. It is told in the 2010 [October/November edition](#). Thomas's project is an example of "internal consultancy," a concept used by McCue and Pitzer in the NIGP foundational text, *Fundamentals of Leadership and Management in Public Procurement: The Strategic Role of the Procurement Professional*. Jack Pitzer was my co-author on the story.



By then my story-spotting had started in earnest. The State of Oregon provided the most. In 2007, Oregon encountered unprecedented flooding. The story of Marscy Stone and the Oregon Disaster Preparedness Work Group is told in chapter 1 of *Seeing Excellence*. After the flooding, there was a feeling among procurement professionals that they could do better in disaster response. Marscy and the team asked, "How can we do better in emergency response?"



The team went through typical Tuchman phases in a team's lifecycle: forming, storming, norming, and performing. Their initial enthusiasm threatened to get them off track until they used a "parking lot" approach to up-channel ideas not in procurement's area. They talked about team commitment, shared meeting leadership, and put the purpose-statement on the agenda. This project was awarded a Cronin Award for Procurement Excellence by the National Association of State Procurement Officials.



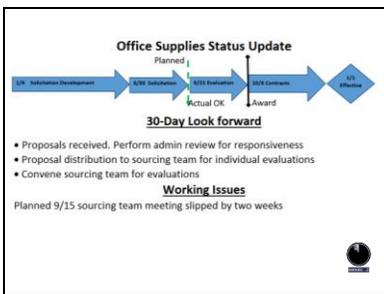
Keeping purpose in mind cemented itself as the central principle: for team formation, project management, measurement, decision-making, learning, leadership, you name it! The gyroscope became my visual metaphor for purpose and the need to keep at continuous improvement. Like a gyroscope that precesses as its spinning slows, teams that don't continually focus on "purpose" lose their orientation. So do larger organizations.

What was a procurement experience that worked well?
 What from that experience can we learn about the procurement system today?
 What would the procurement system be like if it were perfect?

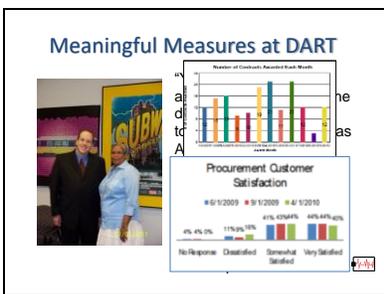
Apart from purpose, the second thread that is highlighted in chapter 2 and weaves its way throughout *Seeing Excellence* is the importance of using effective questions. This story was about the use of Appreciative Inquiry by the City of Longmont, Colorado, to improve procurement. The secret: use appreciative questions rather than always framing inquiry as problems. What was a good experience in the past? How does that inform the present? What would perfection look like in the future?



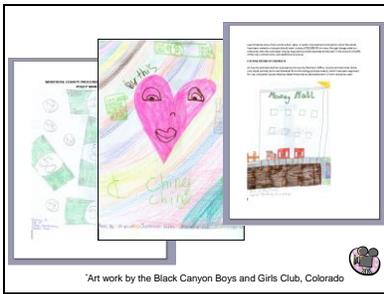
Effective project management is critical to successful teams. NASPO ValuePoint, the nonprofit that supports the states' cooperative procurement program uses sourcing teams that operate in a challenging, virtual environment. The story of the ValuePoint process improvement team was told in the [December/January 2017 edition of Government Procurement magazine](#). Lead states follow their own laws and practices, but they deal with unfamiliar policies and practices of the cooperative and other states.



Formal communication plans may not be needed in all procurements, but meeting stakeholder information needs are essential. And stakeholders include management and supervisors. The NASPO ValuePoint process improvement team developed this model project status update as a simple, one-page way to help answer the question, “What information is needed by my management?”



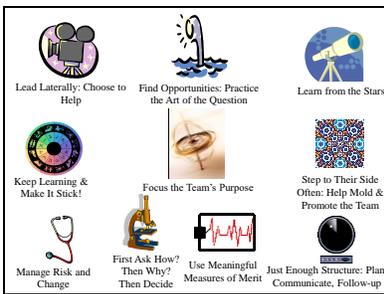
Measurement at its core is intended to assist in decision-making. Chapter 6 of *Seeing Excellence* dives into measurement in some detail, including this story. My first exposure to a procurement office’s use of balanced scorecard, Dallas Area Rapid Transit (DART) incorporated customer satisfaction into the procurement department's performance dashboard. The initiative was led by Connie Arrington, a contract analyst in the department, and Jason Edds, the department’s procurement information systems analyst. The Procurement Department Dashboard contained both workload and effectiveness measures and was used to brief DART senior management. “You have to be honest about the data,” and “share the results,” taught Jason and Connie.



The *Art in Procurement Manual* story from chapter 10 of *Seeing Excellence: Learning from Great Procurement Teams* ([and expanded on LinkedIn Pulse](#)) illustrates the power of art in an unusual context: kids competing in a Request for Posters project to have their artwork included in the county procurement manual. During the Fall of 2009, Montrose County was developing a new manual. Sue Wheater, the county’s Procurement & Contract Administrator, wanted people to read it. “I thought using art work would make it more fun.” County commissioners sought it out!



The Sound Transit story is the last story in the book. It served as a final reminder about the opportunity for creativity. The story about the mouse pad showed the power of “scripting the critical moves” or “choice architecture,” using a change to the environment to nudge behavior in the right direction. April Alexander used the mouse pad to solve a nagging problem: agency employees weren’t remembering the procurement limits for small purchases.



As it turned out, the 10 chapters in *Seeing Excellence* lined up with the scope metaphors that had been created in the Colorado Division of Finance and Procurement a decade before.

Lead Laterally: Choose to Help

- Help the Team Keep Purpose in Mind
- Use Questions Effectively to Help the Team Learn
 - Use Just Enough Structure to Help Organize Thinking and Action
- Help Promote Collaboration and Feedback by Stepping to Their Side Often
- Help the Team Engage by Committing Your Time and Attention

These five lateral leadership principles were largely derived from Roger Fisher and Alan Sharp, *Lateral Leadership: Getting Things Done When You Are Not the Boss* (1998, 2009). At the end of the book, a chapter asks, “What if You Are the Boss?” The authors’ conclusion: lateral leadership principles still apply even if you have power and the authority to be an ultimate decision-maker.

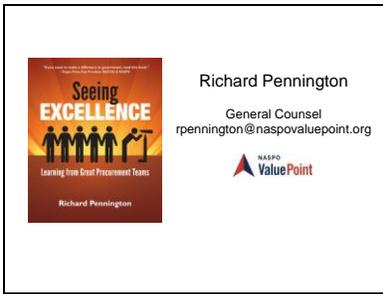
How can I help?

For a teammate wanting to contribute, this is the central question. Asking this question is lateral leadership.

Find the Gap

“Find the Gap!”:

1. Find a colleague who will go to a customer’s office with you.
2. Make an appointment and go there; don’t just call.
3. When there, ask this question, “What’s one thing we can do or stop doing to help you succeed?” [guaranteed the discussion won’t stop there . . .]
4. On the way back to the office, talk about the gap—the one between where the customer thinks you should be and where you are.
5. Talk to your supervisor about the gap, maybe put it on a staff meeting agenda.
6. Take one step to start closing the gap.



I hoped you enjoyed our journey. When I finished the book, I was awestruck at how much these teams and professionals cared, their dedication and resourcefulness. Join me in applauding these professionals.

This is a terrific profession with boundless opportunities to learn and contribute to making government better. —Richard Pennington