DHS Procurement Lab: Innovating Acquisition by Failing Safely

A high-tech prototype backpack demonstrates how agencies can address fear of failure and enhance innovation efforts with cultural support.

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Establishing a cultural environment in which employees are less afraid to fail is key to government acquiring more innovative technologies, according to government individuals focused on innovative procurement and acquisition practices.

At the Department of Homeland Security, teams are proving this idea works through its Procurement Innovation Lab.

After an agency survey revealed contracting employees' innovation efforts were

stifled due to fear and cultural resistance, DHS created the lab to experiment with novel planning and acquisition practices, said PIL's Testing and Re-engineering Lead Trevor Wagner on a panel at the Feb. 12 Acquisition Excellence 2019 Conference in Washington, D.C. The lab uses a continuous feedback cycle to test new ideas, share lessons learned and promote best practices, Wagner explained.

Acquisition Innovation: The Backpack Example

One case study, for instance, used this feedback cycle to demonstrate an improved acquisition process, Wagner explained. Partnering with the innovation lab, DHS's Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction (CWMD) Office was able to save time and money through a rapid prototyping process of a high-tech backpack, shortening what would have been a multi-contract award process into a single-contract acquisition plan.

Starting with the question of, "How can we do design, prototype and full production all under the same contract?" the lab decided to get creative, Wagner said. And it started by adapting an all-in-one contractual base period, which included vital feedback from government and vendor users.

Through government option periods, DHS purchased small quantities of prototype backpacks from non-traditional industry vendors during an established low-rate initial production and testing period, Wagner said. With the continuous user feedback cycle, vendor teams were able to make quick adjustments to prototype designs, enabling DHS to purchase larger quantities once improvements were made. This evaluation technique resulted in vendors presenting better products more quickly, with the agency receiving innovations more efficiently.

According to Wagner, by implementing continuous testing and sharing user feedback, the problem then changed from, "How can we acquire new ideas?" to, "Who should we knock out first?"

Key Points in Creating a Fail-Safe Strategy

In addition to providing a safe space for people to successfully innovate, it is important to identify that people fail — and when it happens, to allow people to fail safely.

"You can't do fear and innovation at the same time," said panelist Michael McFarland, director of acquisition business systems and assistant secretary for financial resources for the Department of Health and Human Services.

When it comes to innovation, it's best to allow people to fail fast within short sprints, McFarland noted. But conducting retrospective "discovery sprints" to understand problems and successes is also beneficial, said U.S. Digital Services' Digital Service Acquisition Strategist Florence Kasule, who also spoke on the panel.

"[It's] going out and doing a post-mortem, [asking] what happened, what are the needs, and what are the recommendations to move forward?" said Kasule.

Making sure that everyone's voice is heard, Kasule added, and respecting perspectives within different disciplines also helps to create a fail-safe environment.

Other ideas, panelists suggested, include empowering employees through high-level executive support, hiring right-minded individuals who are resilient in the face of failure, finding permissive customers who are willing to take the time to bring efficiencies, and sharing ideas and achievements that help connect products or processes to the overall mission.

Most importantly, innovators and agencies must be willing and able to "keep trying," McFarland noted, and successfully address any underlying fears that are holding them back.

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