Improving Agency Decision-Making: Practical Steps for Better Procurement Outcomes

Why Procurement Decisions Deserve More Attention

Working with government agencies taught me something early: the quality of the final contract depends far more on the decisions made before the RFP ever goes out than on anything that happens after. Yet most teams spend their energy on the tail end of the process, scrambling to evaluate bids and defend their selections. The front end, where the real shaping happens, often gets squeezed into a few hurried meetings.

Over the years I have watched good procurement teams and struggling ones side by side. The difference almost always comes down to how they handle the early judgment calls. Who gets invited to the table. What questions they ask. How they weigh competing priorities. That is where the foundation for strong agency decision-making gets laid, and it is also where things can go quietly wrong.

The Hidden Cost of Rushed Criteria

One of the most common traps I see is teams jumping straight to evaluation criteria without first asking what problem they are really trying to solve. A state transportation department once called me in after a major IT procurement fell apart. The vendor they selected had scored highest on their weighted matrix, but the system never worked in the field. When I looked at their criteria, every point was about technical specs and cost. Nothing measured how the solution would perform under real road conditions or how easy it would be for field crews to learn.

That experience stuck with me. It showed how agency decision-making can look perfectly rational on paper yet still produce a bad outcome. The issue was not that anyone made a careless choice. It was that the frame they used to make the choice was incomplete. They optimized for what they could measure easily instead of what actually mattered.

Since then I have made it a habit to push teams to spend more time on the problem definition phase. Before anyone writes a single criterion, I ask them to write down three things: the core need the procurement serves, the biggest risk if the solution fails, and what success would look like six months after deployment. Those three questions alone can reshape the entire approach.

Building a Decision Framework That Works

Good agency decision-making does not happen by accident. It requires a deliberate structure that accounts for human bias, incomplete information, and competing stakeholder interests. Over the years I have landed on a few principles that consistently improve outcomes.

Start with the Why, Not the What

Too many procurement documents begin with a list of requirements. That puts everyone in a reactive mindset from the start. Instead, I encourage teams to open with a clear statement of the problem and the desired outcome. This shifts the conversation from checking boxes to solving problems. It also makes it easier to evaluate trade-offs later, because you have a north star to guide you.

Bring the Right Voices into the Room

A common failure point is leaving out the people who will actually use what is being procured. I once worked with a city that bought an expensive fleet management system without ever asking the mechanics who would maintain the trucks. The system looked great in demos but required data entry steps that slowed down the repair shop. Within a year, the mechanics were working around it, and the city had wasted hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Getting end users into the decision process early does not mean letting them drive. It means listening enough to understand what will work in practice. Their lived experience often reveals constraints and needs that no requirements document ever captures.

Weight Criteria Before You See the Bids

This one sounds obvious, but I have seen it violated more times than I can count. Teams decide on weights for evaluation criteria after they have already seen the proposals. That opens the door to unconscious bias, where criteria get adjusted to favor a preferred vendor. Setting weights beforehand locks in the priorities while everyone is still objective. It also forces the team to have hard conversations about what matters most before they know who benefits.

How Documentation Quality Affects Outcomes

One area that consistently gets underestimated is the quality of the procurement documentation itself. Vague language, inconsistent formatting, and buried requirements all lead to confusion during evaluation. And confusion is the enemy of sound agency decision-making.

I once reviewed a solicitation where the same technical requirement appeared in three different sections with slightly different wording. Vendors interpreted it three different ways. The evaluation team spent weeks arguing about which interpretation was correct. By the end, no

one trusted the process, and the agency ended up with a protest that delayed the project by months.

Clear, consistent documentation does more than just reduce confusion. It creates a shared reference point that keeps the evaluation team aligned. When every evaluator is working from the same clear criteria, the scoring becomes more reliable and the final decision holds up better under scrutiny. That is especially important in competitive procurements where losing vendors are looking for reasons to challenge the outcome.

Tools like SpendLogic can help here by standardizing the documentation process and reducing the chance of these inconsistencies. But the real value comes from the discipline of writing clearly in the first place. No tool can fix bad thinking, but a good tool can reinforce good habits.

Handling Trade-Offs Without Breaking the Process

Every procurement involves trade-offs. Cost versus quality. Speed versus thoroughness. Innovation versus proven reliability. The teams that handle these trade-offs well do not try to eliminate them. They make them explicit and build them into the decision framework.

One approach I have seen work is creating a simple trade-off matrix before the evaluation starts. List the key tensions you expect, then decide in advance how you will resolve them. For example, you might decide that a 10 percent cost premium is acceptable for a solution that scores 20 percent higher on reliability. Having that conversation ahead of time prevents the team from making inconsistent choices later, when pressure is high and time is short.

This kind of preparation also makes the final decision easier to defend. When you can point to a pre-agreed trade-off rule and show how you applied it, the reasoning behind the choice becomes transparent. That transparency builds trust with vendors and stakeholders alike.

Learning from What Went Wrong

No procurement process is perfect, and every team will make mistakes. The important thing is to capture those lessons and use them to improve the next cycle. I have seen too many agencies repeat the same errors because they never took time to debrief after a project closed.

A simple post-project review can be incredibly valuable. Gather the evaluation team, review what worked and what did not, and document the findings. Look specifically at the points in the process where agency decision-making went off track. Was it a lack of clear criteria? A bias toward a particular vendor? A failure to communicate with stakeholders? Each of these root causes points to a concrete fix you can apply next time.

Over time, these reviews build institutional knowledge that makes the whole team smarter. The best procurement shops I have worked with treat every project as a learning opportunity. They do not dwell on failures, but they do study them.

Making the Process Sustainable

Good agency decision-making requires effort. It takes time to define problems, gather input, set criteria, and document everything clearly. In a busy procurement shop, there is always pressure to cut corners and move faster. But the shortcuts almost always cost more in the long run, through protests, rework, or solutions that do not deliver.

Building a sustainable process means finding ways to make the right thing the easy thing. That can mean using templates and tools to reduce the friction of good documentation. It can mean creating checklists that force the team to pause and think before moving forward. It can mean setting aside time for debriefs and treating them as non-negotiable.

The agencies that do this well do not have perfect processes. They have processes that are good enough, consistently applied, and continuously improved. And that consistency is what produces better outcomes, project after project.

At the end of the day, procurement is about making choices that serve the public good. Every step you take to strengthen how those choices are made pays dividends far beyond the individual contract. It builds a culture of thoughtful, deliberate agency decision-making that serves everyone better.