



PEN Member Spotlight

Zak Kelley

Preferred Pronouns: he/him/his

Current Title: Special Advisor for Procurement Innovation & Strategy

Jurisdiction: Metropolitan Government of Nashville & Davidson County, TN

Years in Procurement: 4

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What advice would you give to people interested in joining the procurement industry?

Do it. Seriously. If you get the opportunity, take the leap and go for it. Procurement is such an exciting field and not enough people realize that. It touches everything. We buy the chemicals used to treat drinking water, we develop the contracts that get your roads paved and our sidewalks built. Whenever there's an emergency or a natural disaster, procurement is at the table helping first responders identify contractors for engineering, debris removal, medical support—you name it. It's never boring and you can see, in real terms, the impact of your work. And you don't need a background in finance or supply chain management to be successful in this



field. I came from the world of politics, public policy, communications. All of those skills have been directly transferable and, truthfully, an asset as our team works to continually professionalize our operation.

What does procurement excellence mean to you?

Procurement excellence is about leveraging the purchasing process to deliver better results for the communities we serve. In our organization, we manage over \$1 billion dollars in spend annually. That's a huge amount of money and where we spend it, how we spend it, and with whom we spend it matters. An excellent procurement process is one that is transparent, competitive, equitable, and results driven. In everything we do, that should be our focus.

Why did you start working in procurement?

I started working in procurement because I needed a job...simple as that. I was serving as one of the legislative liaisons for Mayor Megan Barry when she unexpectedly resigned. Michelle Lane, who I had worked with when she was Chief Diversity Officer in the Barry administration, came to see me one day as I was packing up my courthouse office. She had just been appointed Purchasing Agent/Chief Procurement Officer and asked me to come work for her in the Division of Purchases. I kind of laughed and told her I didn't know anything about procurement except that it was wonky and bureaucratic and took a really long time to get things done. She told me that was precisely the point. She didn't need people who already knew procurement; she could teach anyone the technical aspects of purchasing. What she needed were people who could get things done, who could communicate value, and engage in logical extensions of thought. She really wanted to elevate procurement from a purely technical function to a strategic, value adding partner. From there we spent a few weeks building this new, kind of nebulous role of Special Advisor for Procurement Innovation & Strategy. It's still a fairly wide and unwieldy brief, but I've enjoyed it and am really glad I got the opportunity to take this role and make it my own.

What procurement-related transformation or change have you been involved in that you are most proud of?

Without question it's the implementation of Nashville's Equal Business Opportunity Program. This is our procurement equity initiative that sets race and gender conscious subcontracting goals on Metro projects. It's one of the few race and gender conscious purchasing programs in the United States. In just four years, this program has taken Nashville's spend with Black, brown, and women owned businesses from around \$29 million annually to just over \$400 million annually—and that

number is still going up. This isn't my doing by any means; it's the work of people like Michelle Lane, Christopher Wood, Jerval Watson, and the team at our Business Assistance Office. I'm just happy to have played a small, supporting role on this program that is creating generational wealth for so many Black, brown, and women owned businesses in Nashville. It's a game changer.

What is one skill that you consider essential to be successful in the public procurement field?

Critical thinking. Public procurement is an ever evolving field. Governments have, necessarily, always relied on partnerships with the private sector to provide a wide range of services. That's still true today. What's different is the way we engage and manage these partnerships. In the past, departments gave procurement the solution they wanted and procurement went out to find the

provider. Done. Now procurement focuses less on these pre-conceived solutions and spends more time working with departments to identify desired outcomes. What's the problem the department wants to address? How will they know they were successful? Who are their natural partners? Who else is doing this well? Are there other agencies that have the same problem? We need more procurement professionals who are less worried about processes and procedures and more focused on how we can deliver the best

results for the public. That requires more than technical expertise; it requires critical thinking, logical extensions of thought, and a willingness to challenge the status quo.

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What outside interests do you pursue when you're not working on procurement projects?

One of the best things about being in the public sector is the work life balance. When I'm not in the office you'll find me reading, hosting parties, traveling, rowing, cheering on the Vols (Tennessee college sports), taking my corgis (Phoebe & Oliver) to the park, and binge watching RuPaul's Drag Race with my partner, Trevor.

The **Procurement Excellence Network** is an initiative of the Government Performance Lab designed to help public sector leaders use government procurement as a tool to improve resident outcomes and advance equity. The **Government Performance Lab**, housed at the Taubman Center for State and Local Government at the Harvard Kennedy School, conducts research on how governments can improve the results they achieve for their citizens. An important part of this research model involves providing hands-on technical assistance to state and local governments. Through this involvement, we gain insights into the barriers that governments face and the solutions that can overcome these barriers. By engaging current students and recent graduates in this effort, we are able to provide experiential learning as well.

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