



# Adetoun Ayo-Adeola

Preferred pronouns: **she/her**

Title: **Finance Procurement Manager**  
**City of Phoenix, AZ**

Years in procurement: **15+**



## What procurement-related transformation are you most proud of?

It's so exciting being a part of the evolution in how the City of Phoenix does procurement. The push for continuous improvement got started with our former Chief Procurement Officer/Assistant Director TJ Martin, and continues under the current leadership of Chief Procurement Officer/Assistant Director Adriana Phillips. [Editor note: both PEN members!]

Specifically, I'm very proud of the work our team is doing to hold vendors accountable for how they spend taxpayer dollars. Since 2021, we have been making a concerted effort to evaluate vendor performance, and to work collaboratively with vendors in doing so. At first, vendors were

surprised we were checking up on them that frequently! But now that vendors know there are checks and balances, they are stepping up more. It has led to more collaboration between vendors and the City of Phoenix, and agencies are getting better value from their procurements. We've seen a mindset shift: there's more of a recognition that we're all working together for the common good.

After all, the vendors drive on city roads and so do I! It really demystifies the entire process if you can make it feel personal; otherwise, procurement can feel really disconnected and rigid. When people see the results of procurement as something that affects day-to-day life, it makes a difference.

## Tell us more about how this new contract management process works.

First, we categorized our contracts and put them in three different buckets: low-, middle-, and high-risk. Public safety contracts, public-facing contracts, high-dollar contracts with direct resident impact: those we considered high-risk. Things like office supplies were low-risk. You can't put the same effort into monitoring and managing every contract!

We set up quarterly evaluations for high-risk contracts, and annual evaluations for low-risk contracts. Everyone on the procurement team agreed on what each process should look like, and we adopted standard operating procedures. We evaluate vendor performance on a scale: excellent, good, satisfactory, not satisfactory, or terrible; and we include details on why the specific rating was given.

These evaluation meetings make it possible to discuss performance with vendors more frequently than we used to. Due to staff turnover in the vendor community, it is hard sometimes for them to keep track of the contract language requirements. So they are encouraged to

update their representative information and the evaluations act as pointers/redirection tools for them to stay on course.

It's a positive and collaborative discussion, not a punitive one: it's more "this is where you are, and this is where you could be." When we initiated the new performance evaluation process, we had one vendor email us: "I'm not okay with 'good' or 'satisfactory'! I want to be rated 'excellent'; I want to know what I have to do to make that change." That's the kind of dialogue we want to have.

And it is dialogue, not just one-directional: we make sure the vendors sign the evaluations, so they know how we're evaluating them, and if they feel it is unfair, they can have a meeting with us to discuss. A lot of people see contract management as strictly about compliance, but when you start to think about it as customer service on both ends — for the vendors and for the City — that's when you can see things transform.

## How have you leveraged PEN to support this initiative?

I reached out to PEN member Jim Campion, the Purchasing Manager of the Town of Gilbert, AZ to learn more about how Gilbert is doing vendor performance evaluations after seeing his

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presentation during a PEN virtual training. We had an hour-long meeting, and he went through the whole process. It was very helpful. In the end, our system didn't use the same technology platforms as Gilbert's system, but we definitely learned from their experience, and it felt comforting to know a neighboring jurisdiction was also focused on improving vendor performance.

### **Can you share any lessons learned with other procurement professionals interested evaluating vendor performance?**

One feature I want to highlight is that we've taken our relationships out of the realm of back-and-forth email and have tried to hold our meetings in person. We've found that if there's a conflict between a vendor and the City, if we keep emailing each other, it's more likely things will get combative. But at an in-person or even virtual meeting, we're able to resolve most issues. We had one contract the City wanted to terminate for poor performance. But we brought all the stakeholders together in one room. We asked them, "Is there something you need from us to be able to do better? How can we provide it?" And we had a discussion. The process worked: it's one of our easiest contracts to manage now.

I mean, sometimes it really is very simple: we had a vendor once who had delivery issues — but then it turned out they'd never been given the gate access code to the delivery location. But even when the issues are more complex, it's about finding a middle ground. The vendor needs to keep their business running; the City has a duty to the taxpayers to be prudent with finances. Each party needs to understand the aim of the other. It's a lot easier when there's common ground.

The other piece of advice I'd offer is: use the tools you have. You don't have to get fancy software! Excel, Teams, PowerBI — that's enough to get started. You can design a simple vendor evaluation form and share it with your team and your vendors. So often we are looking for ways to automate our processes, but as helpful as that is, the key thing is simply to keep the lines of communication open, and you can use the tools you have to accomplish that.

### **Let's shift gears a bit. Why did you begin working in procurement?**

I worked as an oil and gas lawyer in Nigeria for fifteen years, during which time I collaborated closely with the Nigerian railway and Nigerian Customs as part of a public/private partnership on the establishment of a dry port in the northern part of Nigeria. In my role as an attorney, I handled very diverse types of transactions, and over time, I noticed that it was all too prevalent for contracts to be very lopsided, for one side to end up much happier than the other at the end of a negotiation. I noticed how this didn't produce success. So, I got involved in contract negotiations, and I tried to make it so that both sides were happier. Doing that, I became the preferred attorney for doing transactions, because there was value to both sides. Eventually, that work led to a career in procurement.

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

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### skills do you consider essential to be successful in the public procurement field?

Well, procurement is a dynamic industry; things continue to change. If you don’t like change, then you won’t like procurement! But if you’re adaptable and like continuous improvement, growth, and striving to live up to best practices, then procurement might be a good fit for you.

The other quality that is essential is being ethical. The word “public” changes the meaning of the word “procurement.” It’s not just buying things; the word “public” carries with it additional responsibility because you’re handling taxpayer money. Ethics boils down to responsibility: you’re handling something that isn’t yours, and your actions can lead to either difficulties or successes for the public. It’s always essential to keep the public impact in mind. And that goes for vendors too! Both sides need to be custodians of the public interest. We are all working towards the same goal.

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

I love traveling! I’ve been to several countries in the Middle East and Europe, and I was in Lima, Peru for a contracting training; I don’t speak any Spanish, but I still made friends. My husband and I have three kids, and we love traveling together, too; I love making memories with them. I’d visit a country each month if I could!



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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