

Chapter 1

Procurement at a Crossroads

The meeting invite arrives on a Thursday afternoon.

It is short, polite, and slightly dangerous.

“Can Procurement join the supplier review next week? We need your input before we move forward.”

At first glance, nothing is wrong. In fact, it looks like progress. Procurement has been invited. The stakeholder has remembered the function. Someone has created space in the calendar before the decision is formally final. There is a supplier review, a business need, and careful language around “input” and “move forward.”

It would be easy to read the invitation as evidence that Procurement has a seat at the table.

Then the attachments arrive.

There is a supplier slide deck. There is a comparison table, although it only compares two options and one of them has clearly been included to make the preferred option look reasonable. There is a draft implementation timeline. There is a note from the business owner saying, “We are under pressure to get this live before Q3.” There is also a comment from Finance asking whether any savings can be captured this year.

By the time Procurement opens the material, the work has already begun to narrow.

The supplier has shaped the conversation. The stakeholder has shaped the urgency. Finance has shaped the value question. The

timeline has shaped what is possible. The internal team has shaped what it is willing to reconsider.

Nobody has said the decision is made. Formally, it is not. There are still steps. There is still governance. There is still a meeting.

But the space for influence has already become smaller.

The polite invitation

In the meeting, the stakeholder begins with the right sentence.

“We want Procurement involved early.”

It is said with sincerity. Nobody is trying to insult the function. Nobody is trying to exclude anyone. This is not the old cartoon version of Procurement being called in only to beat up a supplier at the end. The stakeholder is more professional than that. The business is more mature than that. The process is more careful than that.

Then the next sentence changes the room.

“We’ve done quite a bit of work already, so we mainly need help making sure the commercials are right.”

The procurement manager nods.

It is a familiar sentence. It is not hostile. It is not unreasonable. The business has a deadline. The team has been solving a problem. The supplier has been responsive. People have invested time. Momentum has formed. Nobody wants to go backwards.

So, Procurement begins where it has been invited to begin.

Questions are asked about pricing, term length, payment terms, renewal clauses, service levels and benchmarking. The procurement manager does good work. Better than good work.

The supplier proposal is challenged. A few assumptions are exposed. Some commercial improvements are identified. Contract risk is tightened. The business case becomes cleaner.

Everyone leaves the meeting feeling that Procurement added value.

Later that afternoon, the procurement manager sits alone with the updated notes. There is a saving. There is a cleaner contract. There is a stronger negotiation position than the business had before the meeting. On the surface, this is exactly the kind of contribution Procurement is supposed to make. Right!

Still, something does not feel quite right.

The result is good.

It is also smaller than it should have been.

Because the largest opportunity was not hidden in the price or the contract. It was hidden in the moment before the business decided what it needed, which supplier felt safe, what timeline had to be protected, which requirements were non-negotiable, and what outcome would count as success.

By the time Procurement entered, those choices were no longer open questions. They had become background conditions.

Procurement could optimise within them.

It could not easily reshape them.

This is where modern Procurement finds itself more often than it admits. Not ignored. Not incompetent. Not irrelevant. Just late enough for the most important value to have already started disappearing.

The pattern nobody schedules

This pattern rarely announces itself as exclusion.

It appears as timing. It appears as urgency. It appears as “we just need a quick view.” It appears as “the business has already aligned.” It appears as “we cannot reopen everything now.” It appears as “we want Procurement involved, but we need to keep momentum.”

It appears as a stakeholder who is friendly, respectful and already halfway gone.

Procurement does not always lose influence through conflict.

Sometimes it loses influence through politeness.

The business invites Procurement in, but only after the range of acceptable answers has narrowed. Procurement responds professionally because that is what good functions do. It improves what can still be improved. It captures what can still be captured. It reduces risk where risk can still be reduced. It reports the result.

Then the organisation concludes that Procurement is valuable.

But it also concludes, quietly, that Procurement belongs at that stage. By repeatedly accepting the late-stage role, Procurement can unintentionally reinforce the belief that this is where it is most useful.

This is the uncomfortable reality of the current moment.

Procurement has become more capable than ever. It has better tools, better data, better processes, better category knowledge, better negotiation training, better dashboards, better supplier segmentation, better contract systems and better language around value.

And yet, inside many organisations, the same frustration keeps returning.

Procurement is involved, but often not early enough.

Procurement is respected, but not always listened to when it matters. Procurement delivers savings, but does not always change the decisions that create or destroy value. Procurement is

asked to support, validate, negotiate, document, formalise and report, but not always invited into the early conversations where the real direction is set.

That is the crossroads.

Not whether Procurement can do more.

Whether Procurement can get access to the places where doing more still matters.

When capability arrives too late

The real problem is not that Procurement lacks capability.

In many organisations, the capability is there. The people are competent. The processes are mature enough. The tools may not be perfect, but the function is rarely starting from nothing. Procurement knows how to source, negotiate, analyse spend, manage suppliers, reduce risk and improve contracts.

The problem is that capability only matters when it reaches the decision early enough.

A brilliant negotiation after the specification is locked has limited room to move. Strong supplier insight after the preferred supplier has already been socially selected becomes interesting, but not decisive. Commercial analysis after stakeholders have emotionally committed to a direction becomes evidence to be managed, not guidance to be welcomed.

This is not a small distinction.

It changes the work.

The organisations Procurement serves have changed. Decisions move faster. Stakeholders have more access to supplier information. Technology providers sell directly into functions. Budget owners expect autonomy. Business leaders want speed, resilience, innovation, sustainability, cost control and flexibility at the same time.

Suppliers influence stakeholders long before a formal procurement process begins. Internal teams shape preferences through pilots, demos, references, relationships and urgency.

By the time something becomes a procurement event, it may already be a business decision wearing a procurement costume.

Access is where value begins

The next level of performance will not come mainly from doing traditional procurement work with more polish. It will come from changing the conditions under which Procurement gains access early enough to do the work that matters.

Earlier involvement is not a calendar preference. It is an economic condition.

This does not mean Procurement abandons savings. Savings remain important. Cost discipline remains important. Commercial challenge remains important.

The point is that a saving captured late is still useful, but a decision shaped early may be worth far more.

The stakeholder who involves Procurement before selecting a supplier creates room for competition, alternatives, specification challenge, demand shaping, risk discussion, commercial creativity and budget clarity. The stakeholder who waits until the supplier is preferred creates a narrower conversation.

Procurement may still improve the outcome. But it is working inside walls built by earlier choices. This is why access is not a soft topic.

“Access is where value begins”

Access to the early business problem. Access to the stakeholder’s real concern. Access to the supplier conversation before preference hardens. Access to demand before it becomes a specification. Access to the budget logic before savings become a threat. Access to upcoming initiatives before they become urgent projects.

Without that access, Procurement can be capable and still constrained.

With that access, the same capability becomes more powerful.

The crossroads

Procurement at the crossroads is not choosing between old and new as if one can be thrown away and the other installed over a weekend. It is choosing whether to remain primarily a function that improves decisions after they become visible, or to become a function that earns access while decisions are still forming.

One path keeps Procurement useful.

The other makes Procurement consequential.

The difference begins long before the negotiation. It begins in the first moment a stakeholder decides whether Procurement will help them think or only help them finish.

That requires a different kind of attention.

It requires noticing when Procurement is invited but not influential. When stakeholders are friendly but guarded. When a supplier is being discussed as if alternatives exist, while everyone's language already protects one direction. When a request for "support" is really a request to make an existing decision safer. When the business says it wants Procurement early, but only after it has removed the uncertainty Procurement would have needed to explore.

These are early decision points.

Procurement's future role is shaped at early decision points, where stakeholders judge from Procurement's behaviour whether it will help them think or only help them finish. So, the question is not whether Procurement is busy. It is not whether Procurement is professional. It is not whether Procurement can negotiate, source, analyse, manage suppliers or report savings.

The question is sharper than that.

Where, in your organisation, is Procurement being invited after the real decision has already started to harden?

And what would have to change for Procurement to be welcomed before that moment passes?

Summary of Chapter 1

Procurement's challenge has changed

- Procurement's main challenge is no longer simply capability, tools, process or professionalism. In many organisations, those already exist.
- The real issue is whether Procurement gains access early enough to influence decisions before value, savings and direction are already shaped.
- Procurement may improve pricing, reduce risk and deliver savings, yet still operate inside limits created before it entered the conversation.

Access is where value begins

- Earlier involvement is not a soft ambition. It determines whether Procurement can shape value before it disappears. Without access, Procurement can be highly capable and still constrained. With access, the same capability becomes more powerful and more consequential.
- Stakeholders often see risk before opportunity. Procurement may see a supplier review or renewal as a value opportunity, while stakeholders may see the same situation as a risk to speed, continuity, budget, delivery or control. The same situation can therefore look open to Procurement and already narrowed to the stakeholder.

The crossroads

- Procurement's future role is decided in small moments: when a stakeholder chooses whether Procurement will help them think or only help them finish.
- The key question is where Procurement is being invited after the real decision has already started to harden, and what must change for it to be welcomed before that moment passes.

Continue reading

Next-Level Procurement is published on 15 October 2026.

Find the book and the Free Diagnostic at:



next-levelprocurement.com