



MASTER A NEVER-ENDING DIALOGUE WITH YOUR CUSTOMER TO GUARANTEE A WINNING RE-COMPETE

How to overcome the pitfalls of being the incumbent in government contracting

Excerpt from the forthcoming book, Winning Conversations: Mastering the Art of Business Development by Bill Scheesele

Regardless of current belief, becoming the Contractor of choice doesn't happen overnight. Winning the business takes time and necessitates the strategic alignment of your company's resources with your customer's requirements needed to fulfill their mission. If alignment is the key to winning the business, then mastering an uninterrupted, never-ending dialogue with your customer is the means to winning the contract again as the incumbent. *But how so?*

Dialogue is a true exchange and requires genuine "hearing" of your customer's message. Furthermore, it's a conversation that doesn't end when you get the business. The secret to a winning re-compete is continuing the dialogue and working hard to maintain the alignment-relationship you struggled so hard to develop in the first place.

Unfortunately, being the incumbent is wrought with challenges.

First, an incumbent is saddled with the disadvantage of overconfidence: the ego trip of believing you know what your customer wants and needs. After all, you won the contract. That success can lead to a misplaced sense of satisfaction and overconfidence that you're in the driver's seat as the incumbent. Feedback on your work is good. You're meeting contract goals and maybe even winning awards. But, in dissecting a losing re-compete, incumbent teams often realize their comfort level was dangerous, ultimately becoming a trap that equated to complacency. They wrongly assumed since everything was fine at one time, it would be fine in the future.

That's 180 degrees from reality.

The second challenge is that the incumbent program manager and team have the responsibility of serving in not just one, but two roles. Along with satisfying the customer and fulfilling requirements, they are also Business Development Farmers. In this Farmer role, they are charged to ferret out every new objective, technology or direction that may ultimately affect the contract requirements in a re-compete. They need to be in continuous dialogue with all customer personnel, making sure to identify and engage any and all individuals, including new personnel, who may influence the program going forward. If the program manager and his/her team are not executing the Business Development Farming role consistently and well, as the incumbent, they could miss something of major significance and suffer negative consequences in the re-compete process. Failing to hear what appears in retrospect to be clear signals by the customer and failing to address changing customer needs are specific signs of complacency.

A client recently revealed his organization's position on Business Development Farming. In his company, Farming is a priority competency for all program managers. It's even part of the job description. They make sure their Business Development Farmers are capable of executing a formal Business Development process and understand how and why to ask customers the "hard" questions. Why? He shared that if they don't do Farming well, they won't keep the contract.

If you overcome your listening biases ... NOT hearing just what you want to hear but digging for more information ... ***you may find the work you did yesterday for your customer is not the work they need tomorrow.***

Third, as the incumbent, there's also a cost disadvantage to consider in a re-compete, especially if a specified subject matter expertise is required for the program. Here, dialogue is again a most important means to an end. Getting to the core of the "hard" cost considerations allows an incumbent to align their proposal with the customer's expectation ... being the skinniest they can be to do the job the right way. A bloated proposal won't match up with lean requirements. This may become particularly critical with the new administration's likelihood of more procurement oversight with a focus on cost cutting and eliminating budget waste, as signaled by the intended appointment of an administration Chief Performance Officer.

Maintaining the discourse sends a consistent message reminder to the customer that you, as the

incumbent, are ever diligent, dedicated and focused on meeting their needs. And that's a "win-win."

Last, but not least, solid discovery and discourse can keep contractors out of programs with "loose" contracts that "tighten" after being awarded. Sweating blood to make a contract work, with resources that are stretched to the limit, results in tremendous overhead. This is a losing proposition for both sides.

In the end, a strong, skilled and never-ending dialogue backed by strong performance is what solidifies the contractor of choice relationship. Especially during times of change, a continuous dialogue with the customer can insulate an incumbent from surprises in the re-compete process.

The best surprise in re-competes is no surprise.

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