

Procurement – spotting the figs through the leaves

Newsletter #10

17/08/21



10 days ago, Family Frost had a week's holiday in Portugal.

We were all in need of a break.

It was super-relaxing.

And having spent too much time at home, we gained our perspective back.

By a stroke of serendipity, I also discovered a whole new angle on how to approach my work in procurement.

When I go on hols I take my running shoes to explore the local area.

But there's a problem with running in Portugal - the village dogs are lethal! They're of the 'ankle-biting' variety. They appear from under gates and jump over fences and join together into a marauding pack – I had to see off a savage group last summer.

So, I took the safer option and ran around the garden of our rental villa.

I tend to run in the early morning before the heat of the day.

I created a circuit: down through an olive grove, past a stone wall covered in bright pink bougainvillea, along a scented walkway of lavender, over some gravel, up a flight of steps and to complete the circuit, under a fig tree.

Great – a fig tree! My wife (Tessa) loves figs, so I thought she'd be happy.

But I couldn't see any figs on the tree.

I guessed it must be a little early in the season.

Before supper she went for a walk around the garden and came back with a big bowl of lovely figs.

"Where did you get those from?" I asked a little surprised.

She pointed to the tree I'd run under some 20 times earlier in the day.

I couldn't believe it! When I went to inspect the tree, sure enough it was dripping in fruit.

How could I have missed it?

The reasons were simple – the early morning sun meant the tree was in shadow and I was so focused on the routine of my circuit that I simply couldn't see the green fruit through the big green leaves.

This got me thinking...

The optimisation of a routine or process usually delivers efficiency gains.

We tend to like a degree of rigour and routine too.

Regularity brings comfort.

But routine can result in us missing huge amounts of value.

The next day I decided to run round the garden-circuit in the opposite direction.

Not only did I see all the figs but I noticed so much more besides – a breath-taking view over the neighbour's orange grove, a BBQ I'd ran past without even noticing and the gravel section transpired to be a place to play boules (this become our evening activity).

On my return to Procurement Adventurer HQ I decided to test my hypothesis. I picked half a dozen things I'm working on:

I walked backwards through several processes.

Where before, I'd looked from above, I looked up from below.

If usually I called Sarah and Claire, I spoke with John, Eli and Paul.

Typical questions were replaced by a-typical questions.

I switched left for right and right for left.

As for speed, I exchanged fast for slow and slow for fast.

Once barren fig trees started revealing fruit. Of course, the fruit had always been there. I just couldn't see it.

The opposite of a routine can of course feel somewhat uncomfortable.

I'm certainly not recommending you change everything – 'stop, start, continue, upgrade' is not a bad approach.

But I do recommend that you look at the fig tree from all angles, at different times of day, in different lights and with different speeds.

You should find some valuable fruit you couldn't see before.

Try it.

Simon

Frost, Procurement Adventurer