

—THE—  
**PROCUREMENT**  
**BLUEPRINT**

MASTERING THE **PROCUREMENT FUNCTION**, AND **SECURING A SEAT** AT THE TABLE

Harold Nwariaku

The Procurement Blueprint

Mastering the Procurement Function, and Securing a Seat at the Table

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Edited by George Verongos

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## Preface

The typical procurement employee is a renowned firefighter.

Inundated with requests from different departments for different items and services, depending on the spend category we manage, we buy everything: from writing pens and pet food all the way to space shuttles, combat missiles, and major construction project services.

We can be many things – general purpose problem solvers to experts in specific spend areas.

We manage costs and production/service efficiency for different organisations. This means ours are usually the first phone numbers that are dialled when something external is required; time of day not being a limiting factor.

The print on popular t-shirts sold on e-commerce websites, ‘Procurement manager – only because Full Time Multitasking Ninja is not an actual job title’, describes the life of a professional in our field.

With or without the requisite experience, many of us are thrown into this very complex job responsibility and expected to deliver; ‘After all, is it not to buy stuff?’ That’s what they think.

Many leaders insist, and rightly so, that ALL spend within their budgets passes through the procurement department, except, of course, salaries and allowances, thus effectively placing the responsibility for billions of naira on the laps of people with varying degrees of experience. These CEOs do not always reckon with the reality that we need to have the skills to deliver the bang for their buck, as we are typically the only outlet for spend within the organisations we operate in.

Like jugglers, we attempt to keep everything in the air; right price, right source, right place, right quantity/quality, all at the right time. This role is usually played by magicians, yet the feedback is swift and unrelenting when any one of these balls falls out of our grasp.

Most importantly, we manage people: department heads, user teams, internal and external audit representatives, vendor relationships, government agencies and regulatory bodies, our colleagues, managers, and different stakeholder groups.

What kind of training prepares us for this kind of responsibility?

As an essential function in any organisation, procurement is primarily responsible for strategic and tactical sourcing, acquiring, and managing the goods and services required for the organisation’s operations.

Despite its importance, procurement professionals at different levels often struggle to secure the recognition and rewards for the contributions they make to the organisation’s success.

This book, *The Procurement Blueprint: Mastering the Procurement Function and Securing a Seat at the Table*, aims to change that.

Drawing on my extensive experience as a procurement professional, I have developed a framework that procurement managers can use to master the procurement function and secure a seat at the table. My philosophy for success is based on what I now refer to as the 3Ps – People, Processes, Performance.

**People** – Nothing works without the people. So, between recruiting the right people and ensuring they have the necessary tools and development to deliver on the job, procurement managers should focus on building growth

and leading mindsets in themselves and the teams they work with. Managers should provide needed development to “right-fit” the people for the tasks they are meant to deliver. This may include restructuring and team development.

**Processes** – If we regularly review the current processes in our organisations and reapply best-in-class processes from world-class organisations such as CIPS and ASCM, we will have established governance practices that stand the tests of rigorous audits because they are built with compensating controls and self-test mechanisms which provide assurance to management.

**Performance** – With the right team and efficient processes, performance is merely an outcome. Managing a diverse database of suppliers is key to achieving this. Being aware of and using digital tools and platforms that efficiently analyse data and automate repetitive tasks allows us more time to focus on decision-making and service delivery.

This procurement blueprint framework is designed to provide procurement managers with a roadmap for success. It covers all the essential aspects of procurement, from strategic planning to stakeholder management, and provides practical guidance on how to excel in each area. By following this framework, procurement managers can build the skills, competencies, and relationships necessary to deliver value to their organisations and drive their organisations’ success.



FRAMEWORK FOR MASTERING PROCUREMENT	
PEOPLE	Navigating Procurement Politics Career Lessons and Milestones Starting a Career in Procurement Procurement Fundamentals Mastery: Key Concepts and Techniques Perception Management: Building a Positive Reputation Developing Successful Relationships Recruitment and Growth Strategies Right-Fitting: Choosing the Best Candidates Focus Areas for Heads of Procurement Nurturing Your Procurement Team
PROCESSES	Procurement Policies and SOP Elements: Creating Guidelines for Best Practices Sourcing Strategy Development Industry Analysis SWOT Analysis Competitive Analysis Supplier Analysis Portfolio Analysis Risk Management/Mitigation Competitive Bidding: Maximising Value for Your Organisation Successful Negotiations Understanding the True Costs of Procurement Effective Contract Management: Ensuring Compliance and Performance
PERFORMANCE	Supplier Performance Management Supplier Performance Management Measures Measuring Procurement Performance Future Supply Chain Technology tools that drive Performance:

If you manage procurement people at any level, this book is for you. However, it is also suitable for other professionals who work closely with procurement, such as finance and operations professionals. It is my hope that this book will help to elevate the procurement function and enable procurement managers to achieve the recognition and respect they deserve.

I am grateful to all the professionals who have contributed to the development of this framework over the years. I would also like to thank my colleagues and mentors who have supported and guided me throughout my career.

Finally, I would like to express my appreciation to the readers of this book, and I hope that it will be a valuable resource in your journey to mastering the procurement function and securing a seat at the table.

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Fuad Abdullah, you were the first person I confided in that I wanted a career change, and you were the first person to offer me the role.

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Javier Cajiga, I owe you a lifetime of apologies. This is not the place to explain, but you were more than kind to me.

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Babalola Oyeleye, thank you for hiring me to work with you and for the relationship we still have many years after.

My colleagues, peers, and co-participants at all the trainings and meetings we attended together, you all played a part in forming me and making me this procurement professional turned writer.

To the teams I worked with at Procter and Gamble, Guinness Nigeria, and MTN Plc, I hope you learnt something from me; I for sure learnt a lot from each one of you.

For the multiple stakeholders I had to ‘satisfy’, throughout my career, it was not always easy to agree on what was WIN: WIN, but I think we sharpened each other along the way.

To all the suppliers, vendors, and partners I had the pleasure of interacting with, thank you for all you do to support organisations and to keep the ‘lines running’. I appreciate you all.

My immediate and extended family have always stood with me, and you all are a big part of this.

To all of you who I call friends; your conversations, debates, and company is forever cherished.

To all who will read this book, if you learn something and can be inspired to be better at what you do, my purpose of writing it is fulfilled.

Daddy, you are always in my heart.

Mummy, thank you for constantly praying for me.

To my children, Chinwe, Ikechukwu, Nwabueze, and Nneoma, you make me humble, and I have tears in my eyes just thinking of you.

Olamide, you mean more than the world to me. You are my closest friend, and I am proud to call you my Pearl.



## Foreword

In every market system, there are two key players – demand (the buyers) and supply (the sellers) – which must come together for business transaction to take place. But markets are inherently imperfect in nature, due to information asymmetry which happens when demand and supply do not have the same information, with one having more or better information than the other. The result is the inability of demand and supply to tango, for an attainment of an optimal state. So, there needs to be a perturbation to cushion optimality in the system, for demand and supply to reach an equilibrium point.

Companies are the agents which make that optimality to happen as they make it possible for the frictions (of getting products or services) which demand has, and the challenges (of reaching buyers) which supply has, to be fixed. Indeed, you are more likely to visit a restaurant when hungry in a new city over knocking at people's homes, looking for someone who has food to sell. The restaurant, a company, removes the information asymmetry problem, since both parties (the hungry person and the food seller) have a converging point, instead of each party guessing who is hungry and who is selling food in the city.

A similar scenario happens when someone has money to lend with expectation to be paid a percentage interest, even as another person (unknown to the potential lender) wants to borrow a similar amount. Without a bank, both must hopelessly wait to discover each other for a transaction to take place. But with a company (a bank), in the picture, that guesswork is not necessary, as the lender can invest the money with a bank which pays the interest, just as the bank takes the same money to lend to the borrower. What has happened here is that a bank has solved an information asymmetry problem between the two people and made a transaction equilibrium to be attained. This construct applies to all industries, including insurance, aviation, and education, as companies work to fix market frictions.

Those frictions are the market needs of customers. And to overcome them, companies acquire and deploy capabilities across many dimensions to run their operations, and effectively help customers overcome their needs.

In banking, a bank must develop capabilities in risk management, credit services, and more. In agriculture, a farmer needs to have capabilities in irrigation, harvesting techniques, and more. In insurance, the insurer must model risk and price premiums appropriately. As those components of capabilities are built, companies deepen factors of production to create products and services, which are the 'forces' which when applied on customers' frictions, overcome them. Those factors of production must be efficiently managed as they are being deployed to produce the products. And that efficiency requirement cuts across the tripod of people, processes, and tools. No business can thrive without the people, processes and tools being entwined within the production system.

Making that harmonisation activates supply chain since companies need tools (raw materials, equipment, etc) for the people to use on the processes developed within the production system. Supply chain is catalytic because commerce itself is a composite of supply chains since no company or organisation can do it all alone. You have some tools, and you need some from others, even as you are shipping the ones you created or developed to another company which needs them. As that happens, there are purchases and supplies. Indeed, there is a procurement management regime, to organise the tools the people and the processes need, to run and operate the production system.

Procurement management is a fundamental management construct in business because it manages the 'buy' activities for a firm – and that means spending its resources for the tools required for production. And since

winning in markets involves effectively utilising resources, it does imply that an effective procurement strategy is supreme for companies which want to become category-kings in their markets. When companies get procurement right, they build competitive advantage over peers and competitors.

Indeed, in our knowledge-evolving world, just as technology continues to facilitate the process of socio-economic developments, enabling new ways of exchanging information, and transacting businesses, efficiently and cheaply, effective procurement system under a broad smart supply chain management, is changing the dynamic natures of all major industries, and has provided better means of using the human and institutional capabilities of nations in both the public and private sectors, radically altering the ordinances of trade and commerce, at regional and international levels. When you buy smart, you win, as a government, company, or a citizen!

And that buying smart looks at the spaces of price, source, time, place, quantity, and quality. In this book, '*THE PROCUREMENT BLUEPRINT: Mastering the Procurement Function, and Securing a Seat at the Table*', Harold Nwariaku explains the mechanics of a winning procurement playbook, for organisations of all sizes, geographies, structures, and growth levels. It also reveals the procurement function, and how professionals can acquire and develop capabilities, to become *masters* of one of the most important domains of market systems.

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## Introduction

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*Experts write.*

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This is the fundamental principle that has inspired this book. When you successfully conquer the ‘imposter syndrome’ and do something you’ve always doubted you could do, you mostly find out that it wasn’t so hard after all.

Amidst the plethora of material written about procurement and how the function should be set up and managed, I have decided to contribute my experience and knowledge to the pool. It may not move the needle in the larger scheme of things, but it will make a difference to people who find themselves stuck with a huge responsibility for company spend and don’t know where to begin.

This is not an academic treatise; however, references are included for copyright attribution. The contents of this material do not contain a lot of procurement jargon or complex terms and principles; indeed, I can refer you to countless articles and materials that propose and prove those theories and how they work. I have simply documented my career journey and experiences and the lessons I gleaned working in this industry.

Our profession is such that academics do all the writing, and those with field experience never have time to document their stories. It is my hope that sharing my account with some opinions sprinkled here and there will make interesting reading for those who will take the time.

The dynamic nature of the global business landscape, and the seismic changes the pandemic has introduced to the way we do procurement, have already ensured that some of what you will read will be outdated by the time you hold this in your hands or listen to the audiobook. Therefore, narrating my account gives some context to the doctrines I try to expound here. It then becomes easy for managers in similar situations to explore the options available to them and make decisions that maximise the benefits to their teams.

Do bear in mind that we are often caught between two categories of critical stakeholders – our user departments (internal organisation) and our suppliers (the external organisation). We are sometimes pulled in different directions to the extent that our allegiance is questioned. Many procurement people have heard the dreaded question, ‘Are you working for the suppliers or for us?’ We usually hear this question when we find ourselves trying to take a stand when, in our assessment, the suppliers are being treated unfairly.

The maturity required to deal with such situations only comes with experience. I try to explain how applying the principles of stakeholder management removes the element of bias and gives you some room to operate without having your motives challenged at every turn.

As you will find throughout this book, I suggest that our job is primarily relationship management. When we have developed our skills such that we are comfortable with our abilities and competence at work, what we really spend a lot of our time doing is managing the expectations of the different entities who depend on us for optimal service. Satisfying these interested parties across the spectrum becomes the yardstick by which we are measured.

In the end, no one will tell our story if we don't tell it ourselves, so here goes my attempt at doing so, and I hope it inspires someone to tell theirs.

With that said, let me welcome you to *The Procurement Blueprint: Mastering the Procurement Function and Securing a Seat at the Table*.

The book begins with a discussion of the importance of securing a seat at the table and navigating procurement politics. I share lessons learned from my early career and the turning point that led me to pursue procurement as a profession. I then cover procurement fundamentals, including key concepts and techniques, before delving into my career roles as a corporate procurement manager and senior procurement manager.

Perception management and building a positive procurement reputation are essential for procurement professionals, and I provide some guidance on how to do this effectively. Adapting to changes in procurement, including the evolution of procurement skills and developing successful relationships with stakeholders, is also covered.

I explore different procurement organisation structures and recruitment strategies for building and developing a strong procurement team. Procurement policies and standard operating processes (SOPs) are crucial for successful procurement operations, and I suggest guidelines for creating effective policies and processes.

Crafting a sourcing strategy and conducting competitive bidding are critical components of procurement, and I provide a detailed explanation of each. Total life cycle costs, writing a recommendation for approval, and effective contract management is also covered in depth.

Supplier performance management and the importance of embracing future supply chain technology are discussed. I conclude with my reflections and thoughts on the future and our relevance as a profession.



## **First Things First**

This moment was always going to come.

Writing a book about managing the procurement function is like documenting my career story, and though I did think about doing this, I never calculated that it would come about this way.

I was asked to deliver a lecture as a member of the Tekedia Institute faculty, and though it took me a while to put my thoughts together, I finally did. A week after I sent in my lecture notes, I had to show evidence of why I considered myself an authority in this field (part of the requirements for another application), and I realised that it was time. This is in addition to requests from several people who have asked me to document my unique style of managing procurement.

It is interesting to note that the subject 'management' is universal. Indeed, there are many more qualified subject matter experts on either subject. Within the context of managing procurement, however, we are faced with a dilemma:

Many of the people who have managed procurement functions do not retire from such jobs to write books. A good number of them set up consulting agencies, like me, and carry on the work of providing top-quality services to the private and public sectors. We are so passionate about our work that we almost never want to leave it entirely.

Much of the material in our industry is written by people in academia, and rightly so. These people have scanned almost every reputable source of knowledge across the globe and distilled that complex world of information into clear and concise thoughts for our benefit.

Managing procurement is not something you master through reading; it is something you get better at through practice. By the time you're in a position where the responsibility for spend management and people development sits with you, you usually do not have time to read. You're so immersed in work that you do not have time for much else.

Lastly, a lot of the material available in the knowledge space teaches you procurement – its principles and strategies. There's not a lot of content that provides guidance on how to efficiently manage the people within the procurement department or function.

My experience is unique in the following aspects:

I stumbled upon the profession. My background was in business development and project management, and my foray into procurement was because of circumstances or fate if you will.

I have had to build procurement organisations almost from scratch twice, and I won an award for doing this in one of the world's greatest companies at people development.

I received some of the best training in procurement while leading a team made up of 90% new hires.

I have worked with different organisations and with different procurement teams.

I exceeded results with a relatively new team in a tough business year when few others in the company met their objectives.

I know how to deliver results with a procurement team; I know what works and what doesn't.

People write books for different reasons, and I must confess that I never saw myself as an author until a few years ago. I have always had a notebook where I put down my thoughts on everything that comes to my mind worth noting. Some of my journals are mere pieces of paper, many of which I retain in my possession: and when I do read them, I am amused or impressed by the content, mainly with how my thought process has evolved through the years and how my views on different subjects have either changed, evolved, or remained the same.

Managing people and getting the best out of them has always intrigued me, especially when I realised that so many people do not get it right.

Are procurement people unique in the way they should be managed?

I think that every individual will respond to the management style that optimises their knowledge and skills, thus guaranteeing the required performance. Procurement functions are tasked with specific requirements and expectations, and an understanding of how to bring out the best in the team is critical to success.

As I discuss these principles, I will share personal stories that affected my success or failure with the teams I've worked with. These stories are obviously one-sided, and I apologise in advance for any perceived misrepresentations or my inability to reflect the other side's experience. To protect identities, I will leave names out, but I will be as fair as possible. It is my hope that these stories will help to illustrate the challenges of managing teams in this function and provide a few lessons for people tasked with such a responsibility. I will try to highlight each lesson or insight to draw attention to it.

## Securing a Seat at the Table: Navigating Procurement Politics

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*'If they don't promote you, promote yourself'.*

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This was a popular saying amongst young professionals when we started building our careers in the late 90s. At the time, the commercial banking industry was developing, and their employees would switch jobs quite frequently as they chased bigger titles and larger salaries. That was because it was easier to be promoted through sitting for interviews at another bank than to slowly ascend the hierarchy in one company. This is obviously in opposition to the school of thought in favour of digging roots and flourishing in one place; however, there are many excellent examples of such individuals. Now, I'm not taking a stand for either one or the other, as people will ultimately do whatever works for them; I am instead suggesting that colleagues in the procurement profession consider the idea as a possible path to breaking the barrier into senior management.

The phrase 'a seat at the table' refers to the idea of having a place of influence or decision-making power within an organisation. In the context of procurement leaders occupying C-suite positions, it means that procurement professionals have a role in the leadership and decision-making processes of the organisation. This could involve participating in strategic planning and decision-making discussions, contributing to the development of company policies and procedures, and representing the organisation in negotiations and discussions with external parties.

Having a seat at the table means that procurement professionals are not just tasked with executing decisions made by others but are actively involved in the creation and shaping of those decisions. It demonstrates that procurement is viewed as a valuable and important function within the organisation and that the expertise and insights of procurement professionals are valued and sought after.

For many years, I have heard this phrase used as an aspiration for procurement professionals. The way it is used suggests that we are not yet as recognised for our contributions to company success, and this may be the case in certain organisations. My view is this:

If all we do is sit at our desks and issue RFQs and manage negotiations, we are merely doing clerical/administrative work.

A buyer is a professional who is skilled and experienced at using the following tools to deliver value for his/her organisation.

Supplier Analysis: Use the 10 Cs to gather information and understand supplier capability.

Economic Analysis: Give context to transactions that take account of financial metrics and consider trends that may impact buying decisions.

Industry Analysis: Able to use insight gained from the industry to go beyond obvious costs to make recommendations cognizant of hidden costs as well.

Competitive Bidding: Apply the rules of competitive bidding to accurately request and analyse vendor submissions.

Contract Management: Manage supplier relationships effectively during and after business awards.

Policy Application: Have a good grasp of policies that act as the guardrails for every procurement action.

Just as doctors, engineers, and accountants learn the fundamentals of their profession to practice effectively, we also need to masterfully apply the principles that give our work the credibility it demands.

Doctors, for instance, spend seven to eight years on average learning about the human body and how diseases and illnesses can be treated. After receiving their license, they keep studying to stay updated and relevant within the medical profession. When you visit a doctor, they first take your vitals (temperature and blood pressure in relation to your weight, height, and other physical observations). These data are then fed into your medical history to understand changes and significant deviations from the norm. All of this is usually done before the doctor meets with you.

When you then discuss your ailment or symptoms, further questions are asked, and additional physical examinations are conducted. You may need a blood test, X-rays, or an MRI, so the doctor can diagnose a condition before prescribing appropriate treatment, which may or may not include medicine.

Lawyers do not create strategies to represent clients until they have understood ALL the facts of a case and determined that their client has a chance of winning. They listen to and document every single detail, knowing that big cases sometimes swing on small technicalities. They study past cases and bring all their experience to bear when marshalling a plan for defence or prosecution.

Auto mechanics will run multiple tests and try to simulate the fault code encountered by the vehicle owner before they begin to propose possible solutions or make up a list of replacement parts to be purchased by the client.

I can go on, but I think you get the point. We will only earn the respect that professionals deserve when we pay the price to master the craft and use established methodologies to arrive at the solutions we offer to our customers.

Now that we have attained the desired level and proven our worth, we must deal with the level of maturity in the organisations we work for. It goes without saying that the companies we work for do not always understand the value we bring. The typical path of a procurement career should lead to a chief procurement officer (CPO), who sits on the executive committee and plays a strategic role in how the organisation is run. Many organisations limit the role to a head of procurement (HOP) status, and this can be quite frustrating for many of us because the HOP title seems to limit us from achieving C-suite status.

The way out of this is to change the game. You can choose to stay at the HOP level and moan about how much more you can contribute if given the opportunity, or you can create another path for yourself. My suggestion and I've seen this work, is that you move into a more 'recognised' role in another department like operations, marketing, or finance. You might fit into any of these fields or others with relative ease, depending on your skill set.

Finance or operations would seem like more natural choices because we are already commercial experts in the categories we manage, and engaging multiple stakeholders is already a core requirement for our success. Add a few high-level certifications, and we should make the transition to a chief commercial officer/head of finance or chief operations officer position within a few years. Some have moved from marketing roles to become CEOs.

Tim Cook – the CEO of Apple, was the director of fulfilment at IBM (fulfilment/distribution is part of the logistics function), became chief operating officer (COO) at Intelligent Electronics, then vice president of corporate materials at Compaq before Steve Jobs hired him.

Apple has become a reference for excellence in supply chain and procurement practice. They seem to have developed seamless end-to-end distribution and logistics processes for their product launches and materials sourcing. In addition, the chief procurement role is one of the few that report directly to the CEO.

Alan George ‘A.G’. Lafley – two-time chief executive officer of Procter and Gamble (P&G) and former executive chairman, is lauded as one of the most successful CEOs in history. He served in the US Navy as a supply officer in Japan during the Vietnam War.

David S. Taylor – Mr Taylor has built his career in the P&G product supply organisation as production manager for several P&G plants including the manufacturing facility at Mehoopany, Pennsylvania. ‘This experience gave him hands-on understanding of manufacturing, logistics, engineering, and supply chain operations. He transitioned to marketing, where he led major brands in baby care, hair care, family care, and home care until he became chairman and CEO in 2015.

P&G is one of the best examples I can cite for a company that recognises the critical role of procurement because I worked there, and I am witness to their success at integrating the supply chain into their overall operations. I attribute this to the operations background of two of their most successful CEOs.

Other examples of supply chain leaders who moved on to CEO roles are Mary Barra of General Motors, Brian Krzanich of Intel, Fabian Garcia of Perrigo, Beth Ford (Land O’Lakes), Pier Luigi Sigismondi (Unilever), Sonia Syngal (Gap) and Gerry Smith at Lenovo. (O’Marah, 2021)


At this level, you are part of the strategic decision-making team. This is where you can begin to use that influence to elevate procurement and the larger supply chain to its rightful place. Your knowledge of the profession and your experience in navigating corporate politics will serve you well, and you will have literally fulfilled the dream of giving procurement ‘a seat at the table’.

## The Journey Begins: Lessons and Milestones

I started out my career as an internal auditor in a manufacturing company, where my team laid the foundation for the first-ever audit of a mid-size group of companies in south-eastern Nigeria. The CEO of this organisation hired a very experienced consultant from a top university to do the induction and provide training on conducting audits within a group. I recall that he was very knowledgeable and patient during the sessions.

I worked with a small team of very dedicated people and a manager who understood the importance of giving employees room to be their best selves; by that, I mean that he had the opposite style to micro-managing people. I did not stay in this company for very long, but it was not because of him. In fact, I almost lost an opportunity to move to a Fortune 500 company because I wanted to stay and reward my boss for being kind to me.

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 *It is important to manage people with empathy; many managers don't know how many employees leave the organisation or stay because of their actions.*

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My career really kicked off with my next job, where I spent nine years growing up and finding out who I was. My first assignment was in the far north of Nigeria, and this was when I learnt how to 'sell'. My job title was key account manager (KAM), customer business development department. It involved developing different categories of retail outlets – A, B, C stores and kiosks, to become growth partners of our company. I learnt to use the PSF (persuasive selling format) and achieve DPSM (distribution, pricing, shelving, and merchandising) while covering 70–80% of customers within my region. I would spend daytime hours working with the distributor sales team and evenings making sales calls to decision-makers (store owners).

Doing this consistently for four years with long monthly road trips for meetings formed me in ways I cannot fully express. For example, communicating to non-English-speaking customers; persevering with difficult 'gatekeepers'; sending weekly sales/inventory reports; monthly performance review meetings; competing with my colleagues across other regions in the north for who was the best KAM; learning to write 'recommendations' that could make or mar your career; being ready to 'sell' myself at every opportunity; and understanding that the answer to the question 'how are you?' is not 'I'm fine', but an elevator pitch of how well the business is doing in your territory.

Wow! Those days, 'men' were formed in the field: we learnt to manage our own businesses while working with distributors. At one point, I was responsible for five states in north-western Nigeria. Driving across that vast region helped me think straight and learn to drive carefully.

I will never forget what those years taught me and how those experiences prepared me for what I did throughout the rest of my career.

Sometime in 2001-2002, there was violent unrest in parts of the North. I was caught up in the middle of all three of these incidents, and the trauma became unbearable. I'm my father's first son, you see, and that means that it fell to me to look after my siblings. It would have been very unpleasant if anything had happened to me, so I submitted a request to be transferred out of the North. This was a difficult request to grant at the time because the

company ran a very lean organisation, and there were no vacancies in my department; however, a key resource who was managing a national project resigned, and there was an urgent need to fill that role.

In my four years up North, I had developed a flair for IT and using computers (this was in the late 90s). Add that skill to my experience in sales, and you had the perfect example of ‘when opportunity meets preparation’.

The role required someone with sales experience and a flair for IT. I interviewed for the role and was offered the job the same day. This was an internal transfer, so all I needed to do was travel back up north to get my things, and I was set to begin a new life.

As national project manager, I took over and deployed a field sales automation initiative across distributors in Nigeria. MARS – mobile automated retail selling as it was called – involved long hotel stays and the daily grind of working with sales teams at various distributor locations to drive productivity and discipline. I received top project management training, and I worked with Microsoft Access on Windows 95, Palmtops (PDAs), and mobile printers. This was at the start of the GSM (global system for mobile communication) revolution in Nigeria, and network coverage infrastructure was just being developed. It was an exciting project because it was innovative, and it attracted a lot of attention from senior business leaders.

This was my introduction to sitting in meetings (once every quarter or during field trips by visiting leaders), making presentations and discussing the impact of a major project on business growth. I had to send in weekly project reports, sometimes containing the same information – either that the project was going well, that I was having software or hardware configuration issues, or that we were waiting for shipment of devices for a few weeks at one time.


Now that I think about it, this was my first interaction with procurement because my team back at the head office needed to place orders for Palmtops and mobile printers, and each time they routed the request through the procurement or purchasing department. I remember my frustration with the delays and not getting regular updates.

The customers (distributors) paid for the handheld devices, and I made commitments to them for project deployment. According to the project plan, sales team training and data capture would happen within a month. The rest of the period would be spent working with the van sales representatives in the field, fixing any hardware issues and reporting progress. This didn’t always go as planned, as we sometimes had to wait weeks for the hardware to be delivered. Our customers were frustrated, and the project was delayed by a few weeks at a time. When I took on responsibility for procurement a few years later, I remembered this and tried to manage the expectations of my stakeholders.

Not one for following rigid routines, I was bored by the weekly project reporting requirements and missed them a few times. This project was about to be deployed in several countries simultaneously, and Nigeria was a pilot test for Sub-Saharan Africa. Senior business leaders, including a then vice president, were interested in its progress and insisted on receiving the updates. However, they rarely acknowledged my emails or gave any feedback, so I assumed they were not reading them or they just didn’t care about one small project in the deserts of North Nigeria.

In a project review with a senior IT manager from South Africa, he seemed to notice my reluctance to send the reports, and his words still ring in my ears today; ‘I know you think that no one reads those reports but keep sending them’.

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 *Keep sending updates about your work; there are discussions going on that you are not a part of.*

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I did not know this at the time, but they were having discussions with one another, and celebrating the fact that someone was making the project work in Nigeria despite the infrastructure challenges of a poor telecommunications network, lack of constant electricity, etc. They were impressed and saw the Nigeria project as a model deployment: If MARS could work there, it would work anywhere.

During my MARS implementation with a distributor in Lagos, Nigeria, I worked out of the head office and had constant interactions with the local leadership. This was great exposure for me, even though it also revealed my inexperience. I didn't mind being vulnerable, as it was all a learning experience for me. Anyway, during one of those interactions, a senior finance manager questioned the viability of the project and wondered why distributors were being asked to pay for devices when they were not getting any benefits. I did not have enough information to respond, so the debate was taken on by my superiors. They agreed to conduct a financial assessment of the project to determine if it should be continued or scrapped, using financial data from distributors' locations where I had executed the project. Imagine my apprehension at this development. What if the data showed that the project didn't have any financial benefits?

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 *Never show resistance to audits or interrogation of your work. Don't fret over stuff you can't control.*

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I had no control over this audit, and as damning as the outcome may have been, I had done my work to the standards required. So I simply went about my business and trusted in the quality of my work. Note that the project had many qualitative benefits, which were acknowledged, but the finance team needed to have comfort in justifying the costs (the numbers must make sense with them). Anyway, the analysis went ahead, and the outcome was something I am forever proud of.

Using a 'control' distributor of similar size (without MARS) and another distributor where I had fully implemented the project, the finance team stripped off the impact of all other growth initiatives (sampling, brand promotions, price incentives, etc.) and compared their financials.

To my delight, the data showed that the MARS project implementation had increased van sales by +20% and distributor revenue by 14% nationally.

The credibility, visibility, and traction this created for the project are difficult to estimate; I'll just say that this earned me a promotion and boosted my career significantly.

Shortly after this, I was asked to manage the IT department at the manufacturing site. The company was transitioning to a supply network operations model, which was quite exciting for someone who wanted to pursue



a career in IT. However, this person was not me, and after a year of managing SQL databases and delivering user experience, I requested a different kind of challenge.