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From Cost Center to Competitive Weapon

Reimagining Procurement

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What 30 procurement leaders said procurement is for, where it falls short, and what they would do about it.

At DPW New York, on June 3, 2026, Beroe and Kearney gathered 30 CPOs and procurement leaders together to debate the here and now vs the future of procurement, and how to address the gap. The room got stuck into some old-school worksheets – a light respite from a conference full of AI – and here's what you told us.

Chapter 1

The mission statement

The brief: Imagine you're setting up procurement as a function from scratch. No legacy. No tech shackles. AI is embedded throughout the organization. Picture how it would look – and what you'd be trying to achieve. The mission should be one you'd be proud to put in front of your CEO.

Read the verbs

The quickest way to see what the room thinks procurement is for is to look at "the verbs", in the phrases they were written in. Sheet after sheet wanted to accelerate, to drive speed, to make faster and smarter decisions, to predict, decide and execute at speed, to maximize every dollar spent, to accelerate innovation. These are verbs that go out and get something. What is almost entirely missing is the language procurement has lived inside for thirty years: control, comply, reduce.

From cost center to competitive weapon

The ambition was not incremental. Nobody sketched a better-run cost center. Delegates described a function that gets ahead of the business to turn spend into competitive advantage and market leadership. Cost discipline has not disappeared from the picture, but it has been demoted from the point of the job to a baseline you are simply expected to deliver. Savings and compliance still appear, but as table stakes, while the headline ideas are all about creating advantage and moving faster than the competition.

Speed, value, and a function that thinks

The loudest signal is speed. Faster, smarter decisions, accelerating, driving speed, acting on the market before rivals do – it came up again and again, more than any other single idea. Value sat right alongside it, and innovation and competitive advantage were never far behind. Resilience and risk mitigation rounded out the picture, framed as what lets the business take on more than its competitors can. Underneath all of it ran real-time market intelligence and AI as the fuel that makes the speed possible.

Across more than one table, procurement was cast as a value accelerator and strategic advisor (or “thought partner” as one delegate phrased it). That is the relationship side of the same ambition: where speed, value, and resilience describe what procurement delivers, “thought-partner” captures how it wants to sit within the business: in the room early, shaping the decision rather than processing it.

What you said most

Ask a room of CPOs and procurement leaders what you exist for, and the answers were unanimous:

Procurement exists to

- accelerate value, innovation, and speed
- maximize the value of every dollar spent
- drive faster, smarter decisions

by

- using AI and real-time market intelligence to predict, decide, and execute at speed
- making AI the operating model, not a bolt-on
- partnering across the supplier ecosystem instead of policing it

so the business can

- move faster and lead its market
- grow margin and build resilience
- gain competitive advantage

Pulling the room’s ambition into a single line:

Procurement exists to turn every dollar of spend into speed, innovation, and competitive advantage, reading the market in real time and deciding faster than anyone else can, so the business outpaces its rivals and leads.

Chapter 2

The gap

Measure the distance

In the first discussion, the room set an ambition built on movement: procurement exists to turn every dollar of spend into speed, innovation, and competitive advantage, reading the market in real time and deciding faster than anyone else can. The obvious next question is how far today's function sits from that line.

The gap you named first, and more often than any other, was how to decide faster than anyone else, and the slowest part is the deciding itself.

The gap you named first: deciding at speed

"Decisions and Speed" was ranked the number one gap most often across the tables. The picture underneath it was consistent: manual processes, multiple layers of approval, little of it automated... One table reached for "analysis paralysis," another wrote "fail-fail-fail."

And where AI was meant to take the weight, the room flagged something it had not yet built. Risk governance for AI-enabled technology is still missing, so even the tools designed to accelerate the decision are waiting on a layer of control that does not exist. The mission promises a function that decides at speed. Today the speed stalls at exactly the point where decisions get made.

Reading a market you can't trust

If procurement's fuel is real-time market intelligence, then the quality of that fuel surely matters. Here the room was candid. Data sits in silos, is often immature or inaccurate, and is open to interpretation before anyone can act on it. One table said the only option is to "accept data is not perfect" and move.

The tools meant to fix this drew the sharpest verdict of all: not yet AI-enabled, still siloed, and not improving the data-reliability problem so much as actively causing it. You cannot read a market in real time off data you do not trust, and it is hard to pin slow decisions on the platform when the platform is part of why the data is slow (returning to that first gap again).

Still cast as the old function

Two more gaps, taken together, suggest the business still treats procurement as the function earlier discussions in the room said it had outgrown. The first is measurement. The metrics that count are still speed and savings, and the wider value the room wants to create is, by its own admission, hard to measure and therefore largely unmeasured. In Chapter 1, we saw savings had been demoted to table stakes – but this isn't reflected in today's scorecard.

The second is influence. Procurement is still seen as an order-taker, as a roadblock, with what one sheet called "tenuous influence", and a stubborn gap between its potential and perceived value. It gets pulled in late, after the rogue, last-minute decisions are already made, which is the exact opposite of the thought-partner role the mission aims for.

The capability question sits just behind both. The AI-native skills, and the storytelling that turns data into a narrative the business acts on, are not yet in place, and notably this was the front the room most wanted to move on first (but that was a question for the last discussion, so we will come back to that in Chapter 3).

The gap under the gap

Run down the list and every gap so far looks structural: approval layers, silos, tooling, metrics, a seat at the wrong table. Structural gaps are reassuring, because they look like things you can buy or build your way out of. But the room flagged a harder challenge: the gap is behavioral, not just structural.

You can automate the approvals, integrate the tools, broaden the scorecard and still not move, because the deeper constraint is the savings mindset and the habits built around it over decades. New technology dropped into old behavior does not change the behavior. The change management has to be embedded alongside the architecture, or the architecture sits unused. This is the gap most likely to be underfunded, because it is the one thing on the list that cannot be bought.

Which is why naming the gap turns out to be the easy part.

Chapter 3

The first moves

Where you chose to start

The more revealing question came last: given ninety days, where would you actually start? In order of importance, you cited talent and capability, the conversation with the business, governance and measurement, and data and visibility. What is striking is what was passed over. Tools and architecture, named in the previous chapter as one of the biggest gaps, was not among the fronts any table chose to move on first.

Start with people, not platforms

The room put talent first. Build AI-native capability, set the performance expectation, and get the tools into people's hands rather than waiting for a perfect rollout. What the room kept returning to: AI as an operating model is not a piece of software; it is talent, tech, processes, and data moving together, and the part that moves slowest is the people. You can implement a platform in a quarter (or some at least!). You cannot buy the habit of using it, which is why the opening move is a capability move and not a purchase.

Get into the conversation earlier

The second move is about where procurement stands when decisions get made. The room's view was to understand and validate the business's stakeholder and growth strategy, align the procurement portfolio behind it, and show up at the product and strategy stage rather than after the fact. This is the influence gap answered head on. If procurement is pulled in late and treated as an order-taker, the fix is not to ask for a better seat, it is to arrive earlier, with a point of view about the priorities the business has already set.

Change what gets counted

The third move goes after measurement, the place where the scorecard had fallen behind the ambition. Two things the room named: track and score AI usage and fold it into performance reviews, and broaden the metrics beyond savings and speed so the wider value procurement creates finally gets tracked. Data and visibility sit just behind this, the analysis a better-measured function can begin to trust. Measurement comes before tooling here for a reason. Change what you count, and you change what people chase.

Why start here, why now

While "decisions and speed" was the number one gap identified, no group made it the opening move. The room treated decision speed as an outcome, not a lever. You do not fix slow decisions by ordering people to decide faster. You fix them upstream, by building the capability, getting into the conversation and changing the incentives, and the speed follows. The reason for moving now was put plainly: AI as the operating model only works when talent, tech, processes, and data move together.

What proof looks like at ninety days

By day ninety, the signal that would be accepted as proof of success was not a deployed platform but a changed conversation: procurement in the room earlier, at the product and strategy stage. Alongside it, AI usage tracked and visible in performance reviews, and the business's growth priorities validated with the procurement portfolio aligned behind them. Every one of those signals is about behavior and position, not about software deployed.

Pulling it all together

The room described an ambition built on speed, then named gaps that looked structural. But asked for its first move, it did not propose a platform, but capability, relationships, and incentives. The mission was about outpacing the market.

The plan, in the end, was to make AI the operating model and not a bolt-on, so procurement stops running the old function faster and starts running a different one: anticipating rather than responding, continuous rather than episodic.

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