

Procurement and sales: **a love story**

Why the department that fights hardest for a discount may be the best ally a salesperson ever has

I'll admit it: for most of my career in sales. I've had mixed feelings about procurement. No matter how strong my solution was, I assumed they would negotiate hard and put pressure on the price. They push on terms and conditions, too.

For a salesperson chasing a number, that can feel like hitting a wall just before the finish line. It's a bit like having your flight delayed at the start of a vacation, frustrating and hard to appreciate in the moment.

But somewhere along the way, my frustration turned into something closer to respect—and, dare I say, affection. Because the same wall that slows me down on the way in becomes my fortress once I'm through it. The day I become a verified, approved supplier in the purchasing system, the relationship changes. Reorders and future business become easier, while every competitor who wants my seat now has to climb the exact wall I just climbed. Procurement, it turns out, builds the moat around my own castle.

So, this is, in its own strange way, a love story.

These are my thoughts on procurement and on how it has changed over the years. Like anyone who has fallen for someone, I've grown curious. As a salesperson, I genuinely want to understand procurement better, what drives it, how success is measured, and where the profession is heading. Along the way, I've read some genuinely interesting reports and came across a few facts that changed how I see the people on the other side of the table. Let me share them with you.

Two sides of the same coin

Sales and procurement can look like opponents, but we're really two halves of the same engine. Salespeople generate revenue, we bring the money in. Procurement protects and grows what stays. They ensure the company gets the products and services it needs while improving profitability through smarter buying. One side fills the top line; the other protects the bottom line. You need both for the machine to run.

Procurement is a profit centre, not a cost centre

Here's what I've come to appreciate: a great purchasing manager can move the needle on profitability in ways that are genuinely hard for sales to match, euro for euro.

The maths runs in procurement's favor. According to the Chartered Institute of Procurement and Supply, organizations can spend more than two-thirds of their revenue with suppliers. That means even a small reduction in purchasing costs can flow almost directly to the bottom line.

And the best teams are exceptionally good at delivering those savings. Research from The Hackett Group shows that world-class procurement organizations generate roughly twice the savings of their typical peers while operating at about 21% lower cost. Other studies have linked advanced procurement capability to EBITDA margins that are up to five percentage points higher than average, all without winning a single new customer.

A salesperson celebrates a big new deal, receiving prizes as top sales performer of the year at a great kickoff event from the hand of the CEO.

A procurement manager quietly delivers the same profit impact by trimming a few percent off a category of spend, no new logo required. That is not the enemy. That is a colleague doing a hard job exceptionally well.

The real magic is in the terms (and the invoice)

Price gets the attention, but the part I've learned to admire most is what procurement does with terms and conditions, especially around the invoice and when it gets paid.

This is where cashflow lives. The metric finance teams watch is Days Payable Outstanding (DPO), the average number of days a company takes to pay its suppliers. A higher DPO means the business holds onto its cash longer, which directly improves working capital and liquidity, and it also serves as a proxy for a buyer's bargaining power.

The effect is real and measurable. In one documented case, a manufacturer with €50 million in cost of goods extended its payment terms from 58 to 75 days and freed up roughly €2.3 million in additional working capital without damaging a single supplier relationship.

Read that again.

By changing *when* the bill is paid, not what is bought, procurement unlocked millions in cash. That is financial engineering of a quiet, elegant kind. As a salesperson, I may resist those longer terms in the moment, but I can't pretend I don't understand why a good procurement team fights for them.

Every love story has its hard parts

I won't pretend it's all roses. That €2.3 million the manufacturer freed up must come from somewhere and often it's the supplier's cashflow, which means its mine. The longer they wait to pay, the longer I wait to get paid. I've sat on the wrong end of a reverse auction that turned a solution I was proud of into a line item priced like a commodity, and I've watched price pressure pushed so hard that good suppliers simply walked away. So, when I say I admire procurement, I'm not pretending every negotiation feels like love in the moment. Some of them sting.

But the procurement people I respect most know exactly where the line sits. They understand that a supplier squeezed past breaking point isn't a win, it's a risk to their own supply. And love, after all, goes both ways.

A great procurement partner gives something back: a clear and fair process, an honest forecast I can plan around, payment that lands on the agreed date, a longer contract once I've earned it, a willingness to be a reference when I've delivered.

When that exchange is balanced, both sides win. When it isn't, the relationship doesn't last—and the best buyers know that as well as I do.

The job has changed — and so should our respect for it

The procurement I once trained to “get past” is disappearing. The function has moved from back-office cost-cutting to genuine value creation: managing risk, securing supply, driving innovation with suppliers, and protecting the business when markets turn rough.

It has climbed the org chart, too. BCG's recent research notes that the path from Chief Procurement Officer to CEO has never been shorter.

For those of us in sales, the lesson is simple: the person across the table is increasingly a strategic operator with a seat near the top of the company. Treating them as an obstacle isn't just unkind, it's a bad strategy.

How I sell to the people I admire

So how do I square loving procurement with still needing to win? A few things I try to hold onto:

- Lead with total value, not just price. The best procurement teams have already shifted from unit price to total cost of ownership. Meet them there.
- Make the terms part of the conversation, not a surprise. If payment terms matter to their cashflow, bring options instead of resistance.
- Earn verified-supplier status and treat it as a partnership. The barrier that's annoying to get through is the very same barrier that keeps my competitors out.
- Respect the craft. A purchasing manager who improves margin and cashflow is doing for the bottom line exactly what I'm trying to do for the top.

It was a love story all along

That's also why I'm extra excited about the research Mercuri International is running right now, going even deeper into procurement, how it's changing, what it's measured on, and what it all means for the way we sell. The more I look, the more convinced I am that the old "sales versus procurement" rivalry is out of date. It was never really a fight. It was a love story we hadn't recognized yet.

*So tell us –
what is your
relationship with
procurement?*

*Do you see them
as the wall, or the
moat? Share your
story with us.*

Grow your people
Grow your business