



EMPOWERING

the Chief Acquisition Officer

By Ronald Falcone



Chief Acquisition Officers (CAOs) need more than just a “**seat at the table;**” they need an equal voice with regards to menu selections and choices.



How relevant is the chief acquisition officer (CAO)? The role of the CAO in federal acquisition is not only unappreciated, but has also not fully implemented.

The misperception of the CAO's role is exacerbated by the fact that many members comprising the federal Chief Acquisition Officers Council (CAOC) are not explicitly designated as CAOs and some are even designated as chief financial officers (CFOs). Government leaders must recognize that the acquisition and finance functions are not only separate and distinct but are also complementary and equally important as each provides strategic value to the agency's mission.

Governance of these two functions requires separate roles and responsibilities. A separate governance structure would promote the concept of checks and balances—otherwise the likelihood of conflicts of interest would increase, thereby eroding public trust even further. Separate governance by the CAO and CFO is consistent with the Obama administration's three tenets required for a level of openness in government: i.e., the government should be transparent, participatory, and collaborative.¹

The window of opportunity is now for the Barack Obama administration to raise CAOs' role to greater prominence. It is imperative that this administration leads the change necessary for elevating the CAO position to an organizational peer with its CFO and CxO counterparts. Doing so would increase

the CAO's effectiveness and clout in leading transformational change not only within the acquisition function but also throughout the respective agency.

In March 2009, the president issued a memorandum on government contracting to all heads of executive departments and agencies. The memo called for various federal management councils to develop governmentwide guidance to assist agencies in determining if existing contracts are wasteful, inefficient, or not aligned with the agency's needs.²

However, in addition to not mentioning a role for the CAO, the administration did not call upon the CAOC to support such an important initiative. Intentional or not, this oversight reflects the continual misunderstanding of acquisition's role as being less relevant and merely a secondary function rather than a primary and prominent function, especially when compared to the role of finance and the CFO. With the recent focus on the need for more collaboration, transparency, and full and open competition, as well as the greater use of fixed-price contracts, acquisition professionals question why the current administration has not emphasized or reinforced the significant importance of the CAO's role. At a minimum it would increase "name recognition" of the CAO, but more importantly it would bring the CAO to the table with an equal voice.

Who is the CAO?

The answer to this question depends on who is asked. If one were to ask a group of business professionals what the acronym “CFO” or “CIO” stands for, most of them would answer “chief financial officer” and “chief information officer” respectively. If one then asked the same group of business professionals what the acronym “CAO” stands for, the answers might vary³:

- An accounting professional might answer “chief accounting officer,”
- An information technology professional might answer “chief analytics officer,”
- An education professional might answer “chief academic officer,” and
- An acquisition professional might answer “chief administrative officer” or hopefully most might answer correctly with “chief acquisition officer.”

Many assume that the CAO is defined in the *Federal Acquisition Regulation (FAR)*. The assumption is correct; however, the *FAR* does not define the *chief acquisition officer*, but rather the *contract administration office*. FAR 42.301 defines *CAO* as follows:

When a contract is assigned for administration under Subpart 42.2, the contract administration office (CAO) shall perform contract administration functions in accordance with 48 CFR Chapter 1, the contract terms, and, unless otherwise agreed to in an interagency agreement (see 42.002), the applicable regulations of the servicing agency.⁴

As federal acquisition professionals, we have to ask the following question: Why hasn't the “chief acquisition officer” been formally defined and recognized in the *Federal Acquisition Regulation*?

Congress' Vision of the CAO

The CAO position was created by congress with the enactment of the Service Acquisition Reform Act of 2003 (SARA). As a brief review, Section 201 of SARA specified:

CAOs must play a more prominent role in governmentwide acquisition initiatives.

The chief acquisition officer would have acquisition as the official's primary duty and advise and assist the agency head and other senior officials to ensure that the agency mission is achieved through the management of the agency's acquisition activities.⁵

According to the SARA, the CAO would be required to:

- Monitor the agency's acquisition activities;
- Evaluate these acquisition activities based on applicable performance measurements;
- Increase the use of full and open competition;
- Make acquisition decisions consistent with applicable laws;
- Establish clear lines of authority, accountability, and responsibility for acquisition decision-making; and
- Develop and maintain an acquisition career management program.

A recent survey conducted by the National Academy of Public Administration stated: “The CAO is expected to collaborate with agency senior leadership, especially the agency senior procurement executive.”⁶ The survey revealed that many CAOs emphasized the need to develop a “strong, effective collaboration between program staff and contracting staff to achieve the best results for the agency.”⁷ The survey also revealed a consensus that collaboration with other “chiefs,” especially the CFO and CIO, to discuss common issues was extremely important and the best way to achieve this

was to guarantee a seat at the table with senior agency decision-makers. However, CAOs need more than “a seat at the table.” If CAOs are to be genuinely relevant, they need equal standing with their CFO and CxO counterparts. The only way to realize equal status is through an organizational restructuring that moves the CAO/CFO relationship from vertical to horizontal.

CAOC

Section 202 of SARA authorized the Office of Federal Procurement Policy (OFPP) to establish the CAOC to monitor and improve the federal acquisition system.

The Council will, among other things, develop recommendations for [the Office of Management and Budget] on acquisition policies and requirements; assist the administrator in the identification, development, and coordination of multiagency and other innovative acquisition initiatives; promote effective business practices to ensure timely delivery of best value products and services to the government; and work with the Office of Personnel Management to assess and address hiring, training, and professional development needs related to acquisition.⁸

It is interesting to note the number of titled CAOs that are currently listed as the principal designees comprising the federal CAOC membership.⁹ **FIGURE 1** on page 20 indicates that for the most part, CAOs do not have predominant roles in the departments and major agencies. Also, many acquisition professionals question whether the role of the CAO is merely titular and not being taken seriously enough within most federal agencies.

Federal Chief Acquisition Council Members	
Departments	Title
Agriculture	Assistant Secretary for Administration and Chief Acquisition Officer
Air Force	Assistant Secretary of the Air Force
Army	Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Army (Procurement)
Commerce	Chief Acquisition Officer and Assistant Secretary for Administration
Defense	Director, Defense Procurement & Acquisition Policy
Education	Chief Financial Officer
Energy	Chief Acquisition Officer
Health & Human Services	Assistant Secretary for Financial Resources
Homeland Security	Chief Procurement Officer
Housing & Urban Development	Deputy Secretary
Interior	Deputy Assistant Secretary for Performance & Management
Justice	Assistant Attorney General for Administration
Labor	Director, Business Operations Center
Navy	Executive Director, Acquisition & Logistics Management
Transportation	Assistant Secretary for Administration
Treasury	Assistant Secretary for Management
State	Assistant Secretary for Administration and Chief Acquisition Officer
Veterans Affairs	Executive Director (Acquisition, Logistics & Construction)
Major Agencies	
Environmental Protection Agency	Chief Acquisition Officer
General Services Administration	Associate Administrator for the Office of Governmentwide Policy, Chief Acquisition Officer
National Aeronautics and Space Administration	Assistant Administrator for Procurement

FIGURE 1.

Some have argued for the establishment of an official CxO council to discuss cross-functional issues that have governmentwide impact, and such a council would also help to break down the stove pipes.¹⁰ This recommendation makes sense; however, it will not be as effective as it could be unless CAOs are not only given an equal seat at the table but also paralleled authority with their CxO counterparts.

Assessing the Acquisition Function

OFPP recognized the importance of aligning the acquisition function with the agency's mission and its placement in the depart-

ment's or agency's hierarchy. In an Office of Management and Budget (OMB) Memo issued May 2008 by OFPP titled "Conducting Acquisition Assessments under OMB A-123," agency acquisition officials should consider the following questions:¹¹

- Where is the acquisition function currently placed in the agency/component?
- Does management view the acquisition function as a business partner in supporting mission needs?
- Does management view the acquisition function as a strategic asset in

support of the core mission and business processes?

- Do management and staff view the acquisition function as a business partner rather than a support function?
- Do disconnects exist between where the acquisition function is placed in the organization's hierarchy and its actual role in achieving the component's mission or supporting its operations?

The Government Accountability Office (GAO) also weighed in on the acquisition function in the report "Framework for Assessing the Acquisition Function at Federal Agencies."¹²



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The report identified four cornerstones required for an effective acquisition function:

- 1 | Organizational alignment and leadership,
- 2 | Policies and processes,
- 3 | Human capital, and
- 4 | Knowledge and information management

The first cornerstone in particular defines two elements: 1) aligning the acquisition function with the agency's mission, which requires acquisition to operate strategically and be appropriately placed in the organizational hierarchy in order to succeed; and 2) commitment from senior executives, which requires steadfast ethical leadership, effective communications, and continuous improvement in order to achieve success.¹³

The CAO is the appropriate catalyst and change agent for not only leading the transformation of acquisition as a strategic asset but also being recognized as a mission-critical business partner. The most effective CAOs have a broad mindset that not only understands the importance of compliance but also the risk/reward tradeoffs to affect optimal business outcomes against the backdrop of their two most important customers: the program/mission and the taxpayer.

Career Employee or Political Appointee?

There is debate as to whether the CAO should be a career employee or political appointee. In many agencies, the CAO is a political appointee, as is their CFO counterpart. Dr. Allan Burman, adjunct professor at George Mason University, in conjunction with the IBM Center for the Business of Government, recently led an initiative along with a group of acquisition professionals to outline a framework for the Obama administration titled "Six Practical Steps to Improve Contracting." One of the working group's recommendations advocates that a career civil servant with acquisition acumen should be "appointed" as a deputy CAO.¹⁴ Also, Rob-

ert Burton, former deputy administrator of OFPP, echoed that sentiment by stating that "the Obama administration needs to appoint full-time CAOs."¹⁵

Also, a recent GAO report found that "Many of the CAOs also have other responsibilities, such as chief financial officer or assistant secretary for administration or management, and may not have management of acquisition as their primary duty, as required by SARA."¹⁶ SARA confines the CAO to non-career employee status. The SARA legislation states that any reference to *senior procurement executive* (SPE) found elsewhere in government documents should be replaced with *CAO*. In theory, this sounds good, but in reality, the effectiveness of the SPE/CAO is diminished for several reasons, two of which include:

- The SPE does not have the authority, responsibility, and accountability for the management, oversight, and goals for the program office; and
- The SPE is not perceived as a peer to the CFO and in many cases is a line manager subordinate to the CFO.

Raj Sharma, president and co-chair, Board of Directors at the Federal Acquisition Innovation & Reform (FAIR) Institute, states "The role of the CAO has never been fully articulated nor understood. Additionally, the position lacks any real power as those within the acquisition community (e.g., program managers) often report to other parts of the organization."¹⁷

GAO has never explicitly recommended that the CAO be a political appointee; however, it did acknowledge that an agency's senior acquisition official must have enough power and influence to drive the change necessary to affect its underlying organizational structure and processes. Some in Congress believe that only political appointees have sufficient clout to get the attention of senior-level decision-makers.¹⁸ The current administration has an opportunity to provide impetus to SARA by requiring agencies to formally elevate the CAO within their organizational structure.

The Acquisition Function and Finance Function—Separate and Distinct Roles

While the concept of the CAO in federal acquisition is relatively new, the CFO was instituted in 1990 with the Chief Acquisition Officer's Act. This may partially explain why the acquisition function tends to be overshadowed by the finance function due to the longstanding placement of the acquisition function within the agency's finance function.¹⁹ As a result, the CAO's role is diminished by becoming subservient to the CFO.

CAOs must play a more prominent role in governmentwide acquisition initiatives. However, in many cases, the CAO is just an extra role for the CFO or other senior staff members. In fact, the Department of Education's (ED) CAOC representative is the deputy CFO. ED is not alone. In many agencies, even though the acquisition management function is headed by the SPE, it is still subordinate to the financial management function and the CFO.

Another example of conflicting roles is demonstrated by the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), Office of the Assistant Secretary for Financial Resources (ASFR). Their mission is "to provide advice and guidance to the secretary on all aspects of budget, financial management, grants, and acquisition management." The ASFR grants the CFO full departmentwide authority, which also encompasses the role of the CAO. This example illustrates the inappropriate sharing of conflicting roles, especially placing the CAO role ancillary to the CFO role.²⁰

Many valid reasons exist for the acquisition function and the finance function being separate and distinct. These same reasons apply for why the CAO and CFO roles need to be separate and distinct as well as positioned at an organizational peer level, otherwise the potential for conflicts of interest greatly increase. **FIGURE 2** on page 24 describes how both acquisition and finance functions distinctly process appropriated funds and illustrates the interaction of acquisition and finance and why it's necessary to have separation of duties

at an organizational level as a means of checks and balances.

The importance of peer relationship is amplified even further in this age of openness and accountability, especially when dealing with the taxpayers' money. Agencies that do not actively implement a CxO-level peer relationship within their organizational hierarchy will eventually become the antithesis of transparency and accountability.

The CAO as an Organizational Peer

Agencies are beginning to recognize the importance of elevating the CAO and the acquisition function to an organizational peer with the CFO and the finance function. At a recent House Committee on Veterans Affairs on the Structuring of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs of the 21st Century, Secretary Shinseki of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) introduced a proposal to authorize VA to establish an assistant secretary for acquisition, logistics, and

construction. He believed that this would elevate the acquisition function within VA. As Secretary Shinseki stated:

We have been able to move forward on many of these initiatives, even without an acquisition office headed by an assistant secretary. But these are piecemeal moves of opportunity. Going forward our programs need coherence, intellectual rigor, and decisiveness. This overdue change will help cement and accelerate all these efforts, past and future. The [SARA] requires the appointment of a non-career employee as a chief acquisition officer (CAO). The GAO has identified as a weakness situations where the CAO has other duties not related to acquisitions. VA remedied this by establishing an Office of Acquisition, Logistics, and Construction in October 2008. But we do not have a senior-level assistant secretary to lead that office, and I believe that is critical.²¹

The VA “gets it”—they recognize the need to elevate the acquisition function to a peer level with the CFO and also the need to take

the next step to formalize the CAO function and further advance the department's governmentwide leadership in acquisition management. VA's leadership is best exemplified by the department's Center for Acquisition Innovation (CAI) and component, the VA Acquisition Academy (VAAA). The VAAA's mission is to infuse creative and innovative business advisors into the acquisition workforce.²²

GAO's report “Framework for Assessing the Acquisition Functions at Federal Agencies” emphasizes the appropriate placement of the acquisition “with stakeholders having clearly defined roles and responsibilities.”²³ One of the red flags that GAO cautions awareness of is the case where “There is no chief acquisition officer, or the officer has other significant responsibilities and may not have management of acquisition as his or her primary responsibility.”²⁴

GAO further opined that strengthening the interaction of the relationships across the various functional departments (including acquisition management and financial man-

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Acquisition

The program office is given budget authority, which allows an agency to incur financial obligations requiring cash disbursements of appropriated funds.

The program office submits its fiscal year budget to congress that reflects its program needs and receives appropriated funds identified by purpose and objective.

The contracting office exercises legal control over appropriated funds.

The program office secures funds for a specific requirement.

The contracting office obligates appropriated funds in the acquisition/contracts management system through a legal reservation of funds.

The contracting office is subject to the Anti-Deficiency Act, which makes it a violation of law to incur obligations in excess of an appropriation or apportionment or in advance of an appropriation.

Finance

OMB apportions appropriated funds to the agency finance office.

The finance office exercises administrative control over appropriated funds.

The finance office allocates apportioned funds to program offices that have budget authority.

The finance office commits the appropriated funds in the financial management system through an administrative reservation of funds.

The finance office disburses payments from the U.S. Treasury to contractors according to the contractual terms and conditions.

The finance office is subject to the Anti-Deficiency Act, which makes it a violation of law to make expenditures in excess of an appropriation or apportionment or in advance of an appropriation.



FIGURE 2. THE SEPARATE AND DISTINCT ROLES OF ACQUISITION MANAGEMENT AND FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT

agement) is determined by executive leadership. VA has been able to succeed in bringing the acquisition function to the forefront and on equal footing with the finance function. The department's success is primarily the result of senior acquisition leadership knowing the importance of establishing an effective working relationship over time with senior finance leadership. Many federal agencies would do well to emulate VA's approach.

Acquisition Management Systems vs. Financial Management Systems

While the acquisition profession considers the role of acquisition management as a value-added support service with a strategic focus on mission results, others, including their financial management counterparts, think otherwise. In many instances, acquisition management is incorrectly perceived as simply a transactional function relegated to clerical staff

and "paper pushers." Another aspect of this misperception pertains to the distinct purposes of financial management systems and acquisition management systems. The former focuses on general ledger accounting and the latter focuses on procurement and contracts management. While there are overlaps with regards to budgeting/funding, invoicing/payments, and receiving/asset management, each system has distinct and specific roles.

Many non-acquisition professionals argue that acquisition management systems are merely feeder systems or subsystems of the financial management system. In many cases, the governance of the acquisition management system is under the purview of the CFO and/or CIO. However, the lack of an organizational peer relationship devalues the acquisition management system and the acquisition process, thereby short-changing the agency's mission.

Acquisition management and financial management are two equally important disciplines and one is no more important than the other. The financial management system is the system of record that manages all transactions resulting from financial events (e.g., commitment of appropriated funds, recording of obligated funds, and processing of contractor payments). The acquisition management system is the system of record that manages all transactions resulting from procurement and contracting events (e.g., legal obligation of appropriated funds, receipt/inspection/acceptance of deliveries, contractor performance, approving invoices). With the increased scrutiny on the effective use of taxpayer funds, it is paramount that each system has separate and distinct roles as a means of checks and balances. Such a fundamental approach aligns with OFPP and GAO guidance directing CAOs to establish effective and internal controls and to "ensure assessments of agency acquisi-



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tion activities are integrated with agencies' existing internal control processes and practices and support, as appropriate, annual assurance statements required by [OMB Circular A-123]."²⁵

Acquisition management systems are inaccurately viewed as a feeder system and incorrectly regarded as a non-strategic "back office" function instead of a strategic function, along with its financial management counterpart. In some agencies where the CAO role is either nonexistent and/or subordinate to the CFO, there is a tendency to inappropriately regard the acquisition management system as a secondary, non-core system. The end result is that the acquisition system is inappropriately bundled with the core financial management system.

Peter Tuttle, CPCM, senior acquisition manager at Distributed Solutions, Inc., advocates that:

Just as a chief financial officer oversees and leads the upgrade and modernization of core financial systems, there needs to be an equal and enduring chief acquisition officer to oversee and lead the acquisition system upgrade and modernization because the acquisition business processes and system requirements are not the same as core financial processes and system requirements.²⁶

Conclusion

In summary, the significant importance of the CAO's role in federal acquisition should not be understated. The administration currently has a golden opportunity to raise the importance and awareness of the CAO's role in federal acquisition and to align with previous congressional direction invoked by SARA. The misconception of the CAO's role is propagated by the fact that many agency representatives on the federal CAOC are not explicitly designated as "CAOs" and some are even designated as "CFOs."

All federal agency stakeholders must recognize that the acquisition function and the finance function are separate and equally important. Both provide strategic value to the agency's mission. Governance requires separate roles and responsibilities. Separate governance of the CAO and CFO roles would promote the concept of checks and balances; otherwise the likelihood of conflicts of interest would increase, thereby eroding public trust even further. VA has met the challenge of elevating the CAO to an organizational peer with its CFO and CxO counterparts. Failure of other agencies to follow suit will diminish the CAO's effectiveness and clout in leading transformational change not only within the acquisition function but throughout the agency. CAOs need more than a seat at the table; they need an equal voice with regards to menu selections and choices (i.e., equal decision-making roles). **CM**

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ENDNOTES

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