

Getting What You Pay For

Ten of the 40-plus pounds of flight equipment I wore for missions in Vietnam went to multiple emergency communication radios...cellular phone-sized transceivers each weighing slightly in excess of three pounds. Why carry so many? Because experience showed that despite our best preflight efforts, less than one in three stood up to the violence of ejection. Because of defective parts or poor workmanship we were saddled with a deficient piece of gear that was our lifeline in the event of ejection.

The lengths to which we went to make up for such deficiencies may seem ludicrous, but I still feel the anger well up even as I write this. It's not the vision of some suede-shoed, low-cost bidder skinny-dipping in the Bahamas (at our expense) that bothers me, it's the realization that a well-entrenched Pentagon procurement specialist had not seen fit to make sure we got the right equipment. Beyond its abominable aspects, the blithe acceptance of mediocrity in public procurement activities is a violation of a public trust. No one doubts that such behavior needs to be exposed and rooted out, yet not only do we frequently tolerate it institutionally, we continue to reward it with commendations based on such specious claims as "saving the taxpayers' money," even when the savings involve the purchase of inferior equipment that may endanger the operator or the public. While the issue of culpability may be more to our liking, it makes little difference whether the basis for inferiority is poor specification, fraud, malice, or low-bid mandates. I'd like to believe, for instance, that no one involved in the radio situation knowingly cut corners so that the problem lay in ignorance of what subjection to 500 knot slipstream and 16-g deceleration would do to my emergency communications equipment. But how much better off were we for being placed in jeopardy by amateurs rather than crafty villains? In Vietnam, because I was young, green, and far removed from the decision loop, I grumbled a bit and let it go. But when the whole specter of questionable procurement practices came up again--such as in the Los Angeles school bus-skewering disaster--my old frustrations came roaring out of hiding.

It's Time For a Reality Check

Far be it from me to suggest that a sharp pencil isn't important to an MSW manager--it's vital to any reputable vendor's long-term interests as well--but a major part of the process is knowing what's really involved in the deal...top to bottom. Few would consider assigning an unqualified person (or one whose skills are unknown) to a critical task, any more than we would knowingly use inferior or unproved materials in a construction project. But can we say the same about the equipment we put into service? Experience suggests that we're more apt to be driven by non-performance related factors in our selection of equipment than in other areas under our control, but does this make sense? Not when it comes to accomplishing tasks that are of general importance. Not when it comes to impacting matters of public health; and certainly not that affect safety in any way shape or form. As the Los Angeles situation points out indelibly, where public health and safety are at stake, there's no room for uncertainty in the reliability of components and systems, and equally as much, their vendors. We all know there are no shortcuts, and most of us are acquainted with someone who has fallen prey to the lure of "bargains" such as that "made in Albania" wrench that led to busted knuckles, the bargain pair of designer shoes that snapped a heel on the way to an interview, or even the "nobody can match this deal" curbside collection bin that spun off wheels faster than you could order the replacement parts. Most of us have been bitten by the "too good to be true" bug. The search for the *magic answer* is universal--it's part of the human condition--and that's just the point. We have to make sure that we don't institutionalize the reward by focusing so tightly on cost that we lose sight of the larger, more important matters.

The Magic of Numbers and Names

Very few purchasing decisions in any business are driven by revolutions in technology. Instead, the emergence of a better trash compactor is more apt to reflect perseverance than inspiration. Nor, for the most part is there anything proprietary or mysterious in the means by which some vendors are able to achieve and pass on legitimate savings. Absent disdain for profit, instructions from another world, a total lock on the technology, or the clandestine development of "Secret Ingredient-X," pricing is a function of overhead burden, production volume, cost-effectiveness and efficiency in product design and materials utilization, and delivery of a reliable and durable unit or system requiring minimal after-sale support. Explanations to the otherwise should make you want to check your wallet before proceeding.

A military axiom holds that all ordnance rules are written in blood, and to some extent the same is true in any industry. We tend to think of such rules as being the province of standards and enforcement organization such as ASHTO and OSHA, but the repositories for and practitioners of the retained knowledge are the manufacturers and operators to whom the rules and standards apply. While, there's no such thing as an iron-clad guarantee against failure--nothing's that perfect--a good long track record and a lot of satisfied customers is the best insurance I can think of for limiting the number of surprises in store for you. As far as I'm concerned, if there's anything better than experience, it's more experience.