

## No Need for Anarchy

Paul Emanuelli's article "Anarchy in the Evaluation Room" <http://procurementoffice.com/anarchy-in-the-evaluation-room/> used recent cases to highlight issues with RFP evaluations. The issues included these, among others:

1. subjective evaluation criteria
2. murky and inconsistent processes for combining individual scores into the final group consensus score
3. lack of documentation about how the evaluation committee determines its scores

To address issue 2 and contribute to solving issue 3, Emanuelli recommends his enhanced consensus scoring process. In that process, final scores are simply the average of individual evaluators' scores unless the individual scores fall outside a certain tolerance of variation. When that happens, and only when that happens, the evaluation committee discusses the criteria in question to reach consensus on them, presumably to bring their individual scores into the range of acceptable variation where they can be averaged.

But one should ask why individual evaluator scores would differ at all when judging a proposal using the same criteria definitions. Clearly, the reason is because the evaluation criteria are subjective at least to some degree, the very thing the evaluation process strives to avoid: issue 1 above. And it is that subjectivity that leads to the other issues Emanuelli describes.

If the criteria were starkly objective, then the individual evaluators would all come up with the same evaluation score and there would be no difference among individual scores and group consensus scores. This would give the following advantages compared to the subjective process that Emanuelli is trying to patch:

- Prospective respondents could calculate their own scores before submitting proposals to determine if they were well-suited to the project. This would avoid ill-suited respondents wasting their time to produce poor proposals that would waste the evaluation committee's time in evaluating and rejecting them.
- The evaluation committee's job would be quick and easy. The process for determining the final score, and documentation of that process, would be much simpler.
- The justification for each score would be clear to any independent reviewer after the fact.
- Debriefing respondents after contract award would be simple and non-confrontational because of the process's inherent objectivity for explaining scoring rationale. Because of this, it can take place proactively to relieve the respondent of the dilemma of about deciding whether to ask for feedback.

The immediate objection to this idea is that real evaluation criteria cannot be made starkly objective.

We used to believe that too until we actually thought about it and tried to do better. We developed a six-part evaluation structure that creates objective evaluation criteria to give the advantages above. We tested and refined it with a wide range of government RFPs over a 10-year period.

Yes, some criteria cannot be evaluated objectively. That simply means they are poor criteria: attempts to measure things by asking the wrong questions. The trick is to find the right criteria that lend themselves to objective evaluation.

RFPs use evaluation criteria to minimize risk, the risk of selecting an inexperienced unknowledgeable contractor perhaps, or ending up with an unsuitable product or service. When faced with an unevaluable criterion, the approach we have found best is to examine the underlying risk we are trying to minimize and look for other ways of evaluating it.

Take the example of minimizing the risk of selecting an inexperienced contractor. RFPs often include criteria to measure the following, all of which are difficult to map objectively to scores:

- the contractor's qualifications and maybe the qualifications of the contractor's key people (but which qualifications and how many?)
- knowledge of project management (but the general principles are available from any project management textbook or online)
- suitability of a project plan (but there may be many approaches to solving the same problem and what if the proposed method is unconventional and new to the evaluation team?)

An objective approach would be to recognize that an experienced contractor is one who has done the same sort of work successfully before, the more the better. With good definitions of "same sort of work" and "successfully," the evaluation could be based simply on the number previous suitable projects completed, supported by a minimum of confirmatory detail: a number. Is it one? Is it ten? This is much more objective.

Yes, there is more to it than this admittedly simple example presents. Creating objective criteria can be difficult at first but it gets easier with practice. However, the payoff of using the six-part evaluation structure up front is significantly reduced risk, greatly increased transparency, and much higher efficiency for the owner downstream along with a higher level of satisfaction for respondents overall.

Emanuelli's enhanced consensus scoring method might be the best available when working with a flawed (subjective) evaluation design. However, designing the whole process to be objective right from the start makes everything a lot simpler and less risky.

*Contact TimmiT to find out more about using the six-part structure for objective evaluations in your procurements.*