THE CATEGORY TRAP

A spotlight on the career challenge for category managers and how to navigate around it

I spend my days talking to procurement professionals about their career. We discuss the usual stuff - salary expectations, current situation and what they want for their next opportunity and for category managers, here is where the problem begins.

Category management has grown as a concept over the 10 years that I have recruited into the world of procurement. These positions are challenging, well paid (mostly), often responsible for significant spend and they require a talented procurement professional to undertake. Typically, candidates will be experienced procurement professionals who are non-people managers but are self-starters, autonomous and able to both execute complex procurement processes and have the character to take stakeholders with them.

The problem doesn’t lie within the role itself but it is what the role prepares the candidate for.

“What does the next step look like for you?” I ask the Category Manager. “I am looking for a management role, Leighton,” they often reply.

In this scenario the problem is the classic ‘catch 22’ – the ambition is to progress into a leadership position but they don’t have the required leadership experience to get to that next level.

This situation occurs across industry, however it is more acute for procurement category managers in particular, as the concept of category management encourages a flat organisational structure. Furthermore, category managers have progressed to a relatively senior level without necessarily having had exposure to people management and the nature of their role is to manage niche spend areas, encouraging a deep specialism, but as a consequence inhibits an understanding of other categories.

This sounds an impossible situation but if you’re a progressive category manager then there are steps you can take in order to move on in your career.

Demonstrate intent
As a category manager it is easy to focus on the day job - your role is challenging, with targets based on delivery. You are judged on your output versus your peers. However, ‘getting your head down’ to focus on the task in hand is not going to give you the personal development you require, nor will it demonstrate that you’re ready to progress.

Whether as part of your formal appraisal or a more informal approach, ask your boss for the opportunity to get involved in leadership tasks. Volunteer as a mentor or coach junior members of the team. Ask to be part of recruitment processes and be proactive in taking responsibility for leadership tasks. More importantly, don’t go looking for an increase in salary to compensate for the increased workload (clearly don’t turn it down if it is offered) - this is for your personal development and could pay in the long run.

Apply for internal manager vacancies that arise
If a management position opens up, then make your Procurement Director understand your leadership qualities in a formal interview process. These opportunities will arise infrequently, but if they do, then there is no better opportunity to show your capability as a contender for management. If you don’t get the role, your ambition will be recognised and the resulting feedback will provide a clear identification of your development needs.
Expand your category knowledge

“There’s no one better than me at understanding recruitment spend,” you tell the interviewer. “Then tell me how to develop an overall procurement strategy for an organisation in which 80% doesn’t fall into your niche,” the quick thinking interviewer replies.

Without a broader demonstration of being able to manage other category areas, it will become much harder to convince an interviewer that you’re able to manage wider categories, let alone an entire company’s spend. If your desire is to lead, then it is important to have broader category experience.

External options

Ultimately, if the structure is flat and you have no chance of getting the ‘Head of’ position, then engage with your local recruitment expert and explore the external market place. Explain your motivators and ask them to present only vacancies that will provide career development potential. Only go forward to positions that provide stepping stones or management development. Find a consultant that you can trust and develop that relationship.

A great next step would be a position with one or two direct reports, giving you the management experience that you need without the responsibility of managing a large team or function. Be confident in saying no to a recruiter when you don’t feel the company or the role is right for you. Make the strategic career decisions, which aren’t always about maximising short term earning potential, but give you the development that benefits you in the long run.

Challenge to the profession

As the category management population increases, the situation is likely to get worse, so there is a challenge to procurement leaders and the wider profession. There needs to be recognition that there are an increasing number of category managers that are unprepared for leadership and frustrated with their inability to get to the next level.

In a competitive market place, the last thing companies should be doing is losing talent or having a demotivated work force. Leadership is not suitable for everyone, but without considering these professionals for management roles or providing them with the people management responsibility that they desire, their potential could become unrecognised and inspirational procurement champions could be lost to the world of interim contracting.

Ambitious buyers early in their career need to see that there is a logical path to a senior management role and a category management population stuck in their niche shows a blockage more than anything else. This message is not one that will reflect well on the profession as a whole particularly with an ever more aware graduate population who are considering their career options.

In summary, companies need to provide a pathway for those who want the opportunity to gain leadership or management experience or at least be considered for it. If they don’t, then savvy businesses will recognise that there is a talent pool of overlooked, frustrated category managers and your high performing ‘dependable’ team member will be snapped up to become someone else’s leader of the future.