

26 When AI is On the Menu

40 Multimodal AI Streamlines Contract Management Processes

46 Bureaucrat-topia

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Done persistently and rigorously, this process can prompt you to take measures to learn more.



Lifelong Learning: Cultivated Curiosity and Self-Interrogation



BY VERNON J. EDWARDS

Much is being said these days about the importance of lifelong (continuous) learning in the contracting profession. That's a good thing, but what does it mean, and how should one go about it?

It involves reading, of course, and it should involve orderly discussion

among colleagues. But, above all, it involves cultivated curiosity and critical inquiry. Curiosity and inquiry about what? Professionally speaking, and in general terms, about (1) concepts, (2) principles, (3) rules, (4) processes, (5) procedures, and (6) techniques.

The fundamental method of lifelong learning is self-interrogation.

Self-interrogation is the process of asking *yourself* – and being honest with yourself – what you know about something that has drawn your attention.

Done persistently and rigorously, this process can reveal to you the boundaries of your knowledge and the depth of your ignorance

about professional matters. It can also prompt you to take measures to learn more. The driving force of self-interrogation is cultivated curiosity.

What is “cultivated curiosity?” It is a conscious, intentional, and persistent drive to inquire, especially about things that seem familiar at first glance. Prompted by cultivated curiosity, an inquiring mind asks itself, “What do I really know about that?” An inquiring professional mind looks things up, finds things out, and seeks to know more about professional concepts, principles, rules, processes, procedures, and techniques.

One example is asking a question such as, “What is the difference between a process and a procedure?” Cultivated curiosity takes nothing for granted. It prompts a mind to ask itself, “What is that?” “What does that mean?” “How does that work?” “What is different?” “What is the same?” “What do I know about that?”

How does self-interrogation work? It is not a matter of running to a colleague with a “quick question.” Here is an example: Suppose that you have been assigned to a government source selection team or a contractor proposal development team, and it has been suggested that you read Federal Acquisition Regulation (FAR) Subpart 15.3, Source Selection, to prepare.

You have heard of source selection, scanned the FAR coverage, discussed it with colleagues, and think you know something about it. So now you sit down to read attentively and critically.

Consider this paragraph from FAR 15.305, *Proposal evaluation*:

“(a) Proposal evaluation is an assessment of the proposal and the offeror’s ability to perform the prospective contract successfully. An agency shall evaluate competitive proposals and then assess their relative qualities solely on the factors and subfactors specified in the solicitation. Evaluations may be conducted using any rating method or combination of methods, including color or adjectival ratings, numerical weights, and ordinal rankings. The relative strengths, deficiencies, significant weaknesses, and risks supporting proposal evaluation shall be documented in the contract file.”

Every word in those sentences is familiar to you. You have encountered each of them before in some context. Word for word, most of us would not think twice about them. But, really, what do we *know*? What could we explain to others? Let’s ask ourselves some questions.

We may know what the word “proposal” means in an ordinary dictionary, or perhaps as defined in FAR 2.101, *Definitions of Words and Terms* (a response to a request for proposals), but what is a proposal in the context of government contracting? What is the *concept* of a proposal as that term is used in government offices? Is it one thing or many things?

When two contracting professionals refer to “proposals” in conversation, are they referring to the same kind of content? Are they thinking consciously about content at all? What would proposal consultants, marketers, lawyers, and government



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evaluators say about proposals? Is a proposal a marketing tool? A sales pitch? Is it an *offer*?

FAR 2.101 defines *offer* as “a response to a solicitation that, if accepted, would bind the offeror to perform the resultant contract.” What kind of a response would that be? How is *offer* defined in “Black’s Law Dictionary, 15th Edition,” and in the “Restatement of the Law, Second, § 24, *Offer Defined*?”

Are offer and proposal synonymous, one and the same, or is an offer just one part of a proposal or vice versa? If so, which part is which? How do we recognize them? How do we distinguish them, if need be?

Conceptually, what kind of process is “evaluation?” What does someone do when evaluating (e-valu[e]-ates) something? Are there any general principles of evaluation that apply to all evaluations? Are there standard procedures? If not, then how does one plan an evaluation? How should one think and what must one do when evaluating something?

FAR 15.305(a) says, “Proposal evaluation is an assessment,” but it then says, “evaluate *and then* assess relative qualities based on factors.” (Emphasis added.) Is there a difference between evaluating and assessing? Are evaluation and assessment the same process or are they separate steps of some more all-encompassing process?

The FAR councils used two words, so the words must mean different things. Right? So, what does someone actually do when *evaluating* something? And what does someone do when *assessing* something? Are there general principles of evaluation

and assessment? Do special principles apply in government contracting?

FAR 15.305(a) says to evaluate and assess proposals based on *evaluation factors*. Conceptually, what kind of thing is a *factor*? Are dictionary definitions contextually useful for understanding that word as used in the FAR? What do all evaluation factors have in common that makes them evaluation factors? What is the relationship between evaluation factors and value, and what is the nature of that relationship? How does it work?

What is *value* in the context of government contracting? That word that appears in 290 places in the FAR, which defines *best value*, but not value itself. What type of property is value? How do we describe the value we want? And if we are seeking “best value,” how do we measure value for purposes of comparison? What type(s) of measurement do we make, and what type(s) of scale(s) do we use?

What is *risk*? The word appears in 254 places in the FAR (not counting the FAR supplements), but the FAR does not define it. The *Defense FAR Supplement* defines it in six different ways. Is there a definition specifically applicable to source selection? How does the International Society for Risk Analysis define it in its *Glossary*?¹ How did Frank Knight define it in his classic text, “Risk, Uncertainty, and Profit,” a book widely available and read?²

FAR 15.305(a) says that evaluations may be conducted using any *rating method* or combination of methods. What is a rating? Why rate proposals? What purpose does it serve? What is its function in proposal evaluation? What does someone do when they

rate a proposal? What methods are available and used? Is it always helpful, or sometimes a needless complication?

FAR 15.305(a) prompts many questions in an inquiring mind. If you consider yourself a seasoned professional, and if a novice were to put those questions to you, how would you answer them? Could you provide an answer that would be coherent to a novice and consistent with sound practice? Would your answer describe only what you read in the FAR or repeat what you were told during on-the-job training and gathered from standard practice, or could you provide information from other sources and be able to explain in depth? Would you have a stock of reference material that you could provide or refer them to, such as books and journal articles about evaluation and decision-making?

It is often the case that supervisors of novices tell them to read the regulations in their spare time. That’s good advice, but the regulations are not textbooks. They are compilations of rules – must, shall, must not, shall not, may, may not, etc. They generally do not provide explanations or detailed instructions. A person must learn concepts, principles, processes, procedures, and techniques from other sources. Do you know where to look for them? Do you have access to them?

Most novices are “taught” through on-the-job training and occasional classroom instruction. However, those methods usually involve duplicating observed behavior and rote learning. They typically do not lead to deep comprehension, which is essential to

innovation and improvement. Deep comprehension comes when we self-interrogate and then ponder what we have been told, observed, read, and experienced. And pondering involves asking lots of questions and critically evaluating lots of answers.

We learn through cultivated curiosity and critical inquiry. Thus, self-interrogation is the key to professional mastery. Lifelong learning is observing, reading, thinking, asking yourself questions, and theorizing every day of one's professional life.

In many ways, learning is easier these days because the internet provides access to a lot of information and publications. For instance, many of us take the concept of evaluation for granted. Of course we know what

it is! But, in fact, there has been a lot of inquiry into the nature and processes of evaluation. See this from Scriven, *The Logic of Evaluation* (2007):

“Evaluation has an extremely extensive territory, since it includes the substantial portion of everyday discourse devoted to proposing, attacking, and defending evaluative claims about food products, football teams, human behavior, global warming, and almost everything else. The domain of professional evaluation is still very extensive: we here distinguish seven standard sub-divisions of it, and four other specialized domains which are less commonly categorized or recognized as part of evaluation's domain, although substantially devoted to it.”³

And this, from Shusterman, *The Logic of Evaluation* (1980):

“Evaluative judgements are typically supported by reasons. The second aspect of evaluative logic concerns the logical role of those reasons. Do they function as evidence or principles logically supporting an evaluative conclusion, or are they merely some means of persuading the reader to adopt the critic's judgment?”⁴

And this, from an essay by Deming, *The Logic of Evaluation*:

“Any adjective that is to be used in evaluation requires an operational definition, which can be stated only in statistical terms. Unemployed, improved, good, acceptable, safe, round, reliable, accurate, dangerous, polluted, flammable, on-time

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performance (as of an airline or train) have no meaning except in terms of a stated statistical degree of uniformity and reproducibility of a test method or criterion.”⁵

If evaluation is part of your work, what do you not want to know about it? And there is a lot to know, more than was dreamt of by the authors of the FAR.⁶

In his great novel, “Cancer Ward” (1968), Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, the Russian writer and recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature, has one of his characters utter a warning that has long haunted me: “You can’t know everything in the world. Whatever happens, you’ll die a fool.” True enough, sad to say. So little time, so much to know.

But at the core of every professional life, there should be the haunting expectation that there is more to know and a lifelong drive to learn it so we can do more and do it better. We must never tire of interrogating *ourselves*, being honest with *ourselves* about what we really know, inquiring about what seems familiar, and seeking answers to a never-ending stream of thoughtful, carefully crafted, incisive questions. Not “quick” questions directed at colleagues, but tough questions, directed at *ourselves*.⁷ **CM**

Vernon J. Edwards is a former Air Force and Department of Energy contracting official. He founded the FAR Bootcamp[®] and is a regular contributing author to *The Nash & Cibinic Report*, published by Thomson Reuters.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Society for Risk Analysis Glossary (August 2018), Society for Risk Analysis, <https://www.sra.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/SRA-Glossary-FINAL.pdf>.
- 2 Knight, F. *Risk, Uncertainty and Profit* (1921), Available online at <https://www.econlib.org/library/Columns/y2018/Emmetriskuncertaintyprofit.html>. Another classic.
- 3 Scriven, M., “The Logic of Evaluation,” University of Windsor, OSSA Conference Archive, <https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1390&context=ossaarchive>.
- 4 Shusterman, R., “The Logic of Evaluation,” *The Philosophical Quarterly* (Oct. 1980), 321-341.
- 5 Deming, W. Edwards, “The Logic of Evaluation” (1975), <https://deming.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/The-Logic-of-Evaluation-1975.pdf>.
- 6 The author recently found an excellent out-of-print reference, *Handbook of Evaluation Research*, University Edition, (1975), chock full of interesting articles, available used at Amazon.com.
- 7 The author wrote this while spending a month in Paris, France, inspired by a city in which there seems to be a bookstore, or two, in every business block, many streets named after authors, and many statues of philosophers.

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