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How Epideictic Rhetoric Influences Source Evaluation Boards in Oral Presentations

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Abstract

Oral presentations have officially been part of the FAR since 1994. Initial critics questioned their auditability, but Federal procurement shops employed rigorously controlled physical environments to provide contractors with equal footing. As the process matured, oral presentations have been a popularized method of source selection and allow a federal buyer to streamline the acquisition process.

Post-Covid, the methods to host oral presentations have moved from in-person to a virtual stage. Now more than ever, contractors are able to fabricate ethos by diligently scripting every word to maintain more substantial control over their intended messaging. This paper examines if favor is subconsciously given to presentations that use rhetorical methods - namely elements of epideictic rhetoric.

This paper will use a qualitative research approach based on relevant Federal and Academic texts and personal experiences as an oral presentations coach. It will examine the history of oral presentations and provide an overview of the principles of epideictic rhetoric. It will connect these elements to communication/retention sciences to show rhetorical favorability. The goal is to provide the Government with tools and recommendations to account for style bias and ensure the right contractors are chosen for mission-critical contracts.

Introduction

Within the Government Contracting Bid & Proposal process, there is an entire marketplace of sales methodologies to better inform the incredibly prescriptive world of proposal responses. Best practice requires a Government Contractor to be intimately familiar with their target customer and use that knowledge to put together a narrative that both a) fits the genre requirements (i.e., compliance) and b) *persuades* a Federal Agency to award them contracted work over a set period of performance. Historically, the method for the Government to acquire said products and services has been through submitted proposals – typically written documentation covering elements such as Technical, Management, Past Performance, and Staffing/Key Personnel (to name only a few). However, with increased pressures for procurement flexibility, innovation, and reform, another style of Government/Industry communication has gained steady traction. Oral Presentations as a Source Evaluation Methodology have become widely utilized through the DoD and Civilian markets.

According to the Army Federal Acquisition Regulation Supplement (AFARS), “Oral presentations are ideal for gathering information related to how qualified the offeror is to perform the work, how well the offeror understands the work, and how the offeror will approach the work.” This is a common theme throughout DoD procurement shops. Another example is the *Air Force Materiel Command (AFMC) Guiding Principles for Fair Opportunity Selection under Federal Acquisition Regulation (FAR) 16.505(b)(1)*, which states, “Under appropriate circumstances, Oral Presentations (OPs) can be an effective method to improve the Government’s evaluation of Offerors’ proposed approaches and may reduce acquisition cycle



time. OPs as a substitute for portions of a proposal can be effective in streamlining the selection process, and may occur at any time in the acquisition process.”

The same document references the pros and cons of utilizing Oral Presentations:

- Pro: “Presentations are best from Offerors’ actual team members instead of professional proposal writers.”
- Con: “Evaluators must be careful about ‘form over substance’. A flashy Offeror presentation (e.g., a great presenter) may mask weak proposal content.”

In a similar vein, the video Evaluating Oral Proposals in Major Government Procurements program, an Innovations in American Government Awards finalist, presented before the National Selection Committee in 1996 is a look back in time to when Oral Presentations were in their infancy. FAA representatives took to the podium to explain the benefits seen in their procurement shop and why oral presentations were credited with increased contracting efficiency. The FAA representative states, “...because proposal writing had gotten to be a real art in the government and those companies that already knew how to do it tended to have an edge. When you turn it more into a job interview as opposed to a proposal writing activity, you’re looking more at the qualifications of the people who will actually perform the work; their ability to turn out paper in accordance with regulations loses some of its significance” (sic).

However, in an almost deafening echo from yesteryears, a member of the receiving panel asked a question that exemplifies the AFMC “con” to using oral presentations as listed above: “It would seem to me that just as you have skilled proposal writers you can have skilled oral presenters. ...have you run into any problems that are related to that – that people say things better than they perform well or the reverse?” (sic).

And therein lies the rub, so to speak. In an effort to identify qualified contractors through rigorous demonstration free from outside impact, the DoD contracting community finds itself against the same issues as with the written proposal process: the influence of consulting, technology, and the effect of style. The heart of any application process is to persuade, and in a hyper-saturated market like Government Contracting, industry uses all the weapons in their armory to stand out in the crowd, including ancient persuasive principles such as epideictic rhetoric. This paper will explore the evolution of Federal oral presentations and how Contracting Officers may arm themselves against giving subconscious favor to presentations that serve style over substance.

Background

In 1994, the FAR was amended in response to two major acquisition reform acts – the Federal Acquisition Streamlining Act (FASA) and the Federal Acquisition Reform Act (FARA). The rewrite included an addition to FAR Part 15 – a source selection methodology called **oral presentations**. According to the Federal Acquisition Regulation Part 15.102(a), “Oral presentations by offerors as requested by the Government may substitute for, or augment, written information. Use of oral presentations as a substitute for portions of a proposal can be effective in streamlining the source selection process. Oral presentations may occur at any time in the acquisition process, and are subject to the same restrictions as written information, regarding timing (see 15.208) and content (see 15.306).”

Since their addition to the FAR, oral presentations can appear as a requirement to bid on a contract in a variety of forms:

- **Written Proposal + Oral Presentation:** Perhaps the most common example, many Agencies will leverage oral presentations as part of a phased acquisition process. This



means a standard written narrative will serve as a down select method, thereby limiting the number of offerors who present to the Government.

- **Prepared Slides in lieu of Written Proposal:** In some instances, Agencies forgo a written proposal submission and instead will ask for the oral presentation slides as the proposal response. The offeror will then present the pre-submitted slide deck.
- **Problem Solving/Challenge Exercise:** If a Government Contractor finds itself pursuing an opportunity through a particularly innovative Agency, then they may need to prepare for a Challenge scenario. The Government will provide a scenario to the presenting group during their allotted time. The offeror's group will have time to work together and develop their presentation response live in front of the Government. They will then have additional time to present. Offerors are evaluated on both of these components.
- **Team Q&A and/or Project/Program Manager (PM) Q&A:** In rare cases, Oral Presentations are limited to a Question/Answer function by either the whole presenting team or just the PM proposed for the contract. More commonly, a Q&A session occurs after the team presents.

Anecdotally, there are several reasons why the Federal Government would implement oral presentations as part of their acquisition strategy. They can be used to evaluate your expertise; test group chemistry; measure leadership ability; put you in a pressure cooker environment (to see how you react under stress); and *to determine if they want you as coworkers*.

This concept of personal preference is often overlooked, especially since contract acquisition practices have added safeguards to the process to turn complicated subjective concepts into areas of scorable objectivity. However, establishing ethos is a foundational heuristic within rhetorical study, and an individual's character and how they hold themselves have direct impact on whether we have confidence in their ability to perform a job.

Oral presentations provide a unique opportunity to directly link key personnel and the awarding agency. As stated previously, for years the primary method of bid communication between Industry and Government was strictly in written form. Although there is a time for dialogue between prospect and customer in the Pre-RFP (Request for Proposal) phase, the person selling is rarely the person doing the work on the contract. Likewise, written narrative proposals are often developed by Proposal Managers and Technical Writers, who, once the bid is "won," have nothing to do with contract execution. Oral presentations provide an avenue for Federal Contracting shops to evaluate prospective contractors not only on their qualifications as a company, but also for an individual's personality, likeability, and knowledgeability based on how they present. Oral presentations are an opportunity for the Government to get a sense of whether these individuals match agency culture – just as much as they are able to evaluate technical expertise. This rhetorical underpinning becomes a subversive part of how the Government evaluates a presentation based on their "Confidence Rating" (more on this later).

According to Acquisition.gov, "Oral presentations may be beneficial in a variety of acquisitions. They are most useful when the requirements are clear and complete and are stated in performance or functional terms. Oral presentations are ideal for gathering information related to how qualified the offeror is to perform the work, how well the offeror understands the work, and how the offeror will approach the work." This vague description does not encapsulate how much impact the degree of presentation quality will have on showcasing "how well" an individual may understand a subject area. This level of potential bias has yet to be academically explored, and though oral presentations are praised as an innovative procurement method, there are some criticisms that warrant more detailed review.



In *Oral Presentations in Negotiated Procurements: Panacea or Pandora's Box*, Sean Michael Patrick Hannaway (2000) provides a detailed look at oral presentations as a groundbreaking phenomenon in the new millennium. Although the musings were mostly positive, when the concept was first formalized into the FAR, some naysayers took issue with the addition and "...contended that the practice would (1) create confusion as to the content of the resultant contract and (2) result in a lack of any record on which an unsuccessful offeror could base its protest. As one commenter put it, the change seemed intentionally aimed at 'not leaving an audit trail'" (p. 463). Additionally, "...critics consistently voiced the concern that emphasis on more efficient source selection methods would come at the expense of small business concerns" (p. 466).

Hannaway's essay also points out the overarching themes that "...technical proposals are prepared by 'professional essay writers' and that they frequently misrepresent the offeror's actual understanding of the work required in a procurement" (p. 473), and although oral presentations have the capacity to mitigate these concerns, there is still the underpinning issue that "...the inclusion of subjective criteria such as past performance may act as an invitation to make a sales pitch and 'dazzle the Government with top-notch speakers'" (p. 470).

Current Day Landscape

Over the course of the 24 years after that article was published, the Government has imposed standards and instructions to mitigate these concerns. Pre-Covid, it became standard practice to videotape the in-person presentations, and the physical requirements were rigorous to ensure fairness. In a post-Covid world, oral presentations were moved into a virtual environment, drastically changing the needs for how industry would respond to these requirements. There are a great many benefits to virtual oral presentations for the Government – it is easy to record a virtual conference for audit purposes, it requires no additional training, and automated systems minimize the threshold for user error.

No longer do individuals need to pay for travel, and administrative burden is removed from the Government by going the route of MS Teams/Zoom. NIH Information Technology Acquisition and Assessment Center (NITAAC)'s Acquisition page echoes these sentiments and states, "Oral presentations not only benefit the federal government but can also streamline administrative burden for responders."

In fact, even pre-Covid, leveraging oral presentations has been lauded as innovative, and in FY17 the GSA's Procurement Innovation Lab Annual Report has use cases on how oral presentation acquisition methodologies saved the Government time and money:

- Expedited \$58M award in 42 days for cloud migration (Procurement Innovation Lab Annual Report, FY 2017, p. 15).
- Increased government's understanding and confidence levels of each offeror's approach for agency enterprise Automated Biometric Identification System (Procurement Innovation Lab Annual Report, FY 2017, p. 16).
- Saved time and increased the technical evaluators' understanding of offerors' capabilities and key personnel for USCIS' agile development and maintenance. (Procurement Innovation Lab Annual Report, FY 2017, p. 18).
- \$63M award in 109 days using innovative acquisition techniques, including oral presentations with scenario-based and on-the-spot questions for TSA agile services (Procurement Innovation Lab Annual Report, FY 2017, p. 20).

As recently as 2022, there are Government-created articles aimed at Federal Program offices to describe the value of implementing oral presentations. An assisted acquisition



contracting officer at NITACC produced the following table to exemplify reasons for replacing written proposals with oral presentations:

Instead of the written approach which includes...	Consider the oral response...
farming out parts and pieces to subject matter experts and then laboring to create one voice	the team who will be performing the proposed work will be preparing together and rehearsing their unified approach
company standardized formats with aesthetic graphics and charts	the actual subject matter experts telling you what they assessed from your requirements and how they would solve your problem. This is often backed up on slide decks or websites with visuals of projects they've completed to verify what they are saying
a (seeming) regurgitation of the government's requirement, leading to a compliant check list in narrative form and a price	is a tailored oral walk through that clearly demonstrates the value the government can expect to receive. These solutions are also illustrated with compelling and relevant evidence

Note: Table reprinted from NITACC [Oral Presentation](#)

As seen in the table, Federal procurement workers have less-than-positive feelings towards written proposal responses, and the sell to use oral presentations leans heavily on innately rhetorical principles such as teamwork, visuals, and compelling evidence. An intangible concept like *teamwork* is indicative of how the way in which an offeror presents will impact their evaluation and how there is more to an oral presentation than just the information – the *optics* add strength.

Now that Government Contracting is operating in a post-Covid environment, there are additional considerations that make this topic even more critical to examine. In the pre-Covid world, operating under the assumptions of the 1994 FAR amendment, oral presentations were held in person. In those times, it was a rare feat to memorize highly technical presentations, especially in the context of Federal procurement where the outcome of said presentation can make or break a company's bottom line. The difference now is that the move to online presentations allows contractors to diligently script their every word and easily read transcriptions to a virtual audience. Additionally, virtual oral presentations allow for easier ability to virtually caucus between teammates (text/Slack/Teams). The level of presentation authenticity has severely diminished, and the quality of language has increased. Oral presentations are an effective and popularized way to evaluate an offeror's abilities, but what if those abilities are skewed? What I argue today is that the shift to virtual oral presentations increases the need for offerors to employ principles of **epideictic rhetoric** to effectively present in a meaningful, impactful manner to win federal contracts, and that Federal buyers must understand these methods and mitigate potential hindrances that come from them.

Epideictic Rhetoric

Rhetoric is commonly referred to as the “art of persuasion,” the origins of which can be traced back to Ancient Greece. The composition and definitions of the practice have changed over the years, and various scholars have added their own assessment and spin to what is fundamentally a practice on how to influence others, primarily through the art of speech. Aristotle, one of the primary fathers of rhetoric, alleged there were three divisions of oratory – political, forensic, and the ceremonial oratory of display, also known as epideictic rhetoric. For



the purposes of this paper, it's important to know that epideictic rhetoric is thought of as the least substantial type of speech, as it focuses on the present state (instead of past or future) and often uses methods of praise and blame to make a point. For this article, I use the academic concept of epideictic rhetoric as a lens to provide insight for Government Officials to understand how long-taught persuasive practices may be impacting the appropriate allocation of taxpayer dollars away from the most deserving contractors. For all intents and purposes, this is an analysis of the dangers of procurement methodologies based on style over substance.

"The Public Value of Epideictic Rhetoric" is a 1996 article written by C. M. Sheard and is the principle modern day text about epideictic rhetoric. Thought of as "mere showpieces," it was Aristotle who "...limited epideictic to the praise or censure of a person or thing (tangible or intangible) and described it primarily as ceremonial speech whose audience serves as spectator rather than judge (as in deliberative and forensic oratory) and whose temporal focus is the present" (p. 768). On the surface, it seems epideictic rhetoric, often found in settings such as eulogies, offers little value, especially when compared to the other two branches (deliberative and judicial). Sheard goes on to explain, "Epideictic discourse fell into disfavor in antiquity as it evolved into a highly figurative, even fictive, mode of discourse that seemed primarily to advertise its speaker's skill" (p. 767).

Of Aristotle's three branches of rhetoric, epideictic has had an alarmingly poor reputation, being conveyed as empty spells cast on passive audiences. A word often used when discussing epideictic speech is poetry (or poetic). Many authors over the years feel that epideictic rhetoric is more concerned with poetic style than with actual substance. In *The Platonic Functions of Epideictic Rhetoric*, Bernard K. Duffy (1983) writes, "...the language of epideictic is prone to be least referential and most poetic because the facts themselves are not really at issue. Rather, the affirmation of ethical standards of judgment and behavior serves as the creative use of language While the forensic and deliberative orator are essentially bound to the facts at hand, the epideictic orator need be less concerned with material realities than with the abstract propositions he aims to affirm" (pp. 90–91). The substantiation for such claims tends to revolve around a lack of civic value due to audience members being seen as passive observers. Some believe there is no consequence garnered from epideictic rhetoric, as the speaker has no explicitly persuasive goal.

Sheard counters, explaining that epideictic rhetoric "...leads to a vision that the audience is not only invited to share but exhorted to help actualize" (p. 780). Epideictic rhetoric is not purely consumed by an audience without inspiring output – simply pretty words for the sake of showing off – because there are always underlying motives behind speech.

Sheard, Perelman, and Olbrechts-Tyteca focus on the innate civic function and how epideictic rhetoric can put thoughts into action – namely how poetic language can move you to perform. In *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation*, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca explain, "Epideictic oratory has significance and importance for argumentation because it strengthens the disposition towards action by increasing adherence to the values it lauds" (p. 50). Who amongst us are not moved by passion, and even today, credibility of leaders may be achieved through poised public speech.

So what does epideictic rhetoric have to do with oral presentations to the Federal Government? Epideictic rhetoric, according to Aristotle, deals with orations that cover praise or blame and are firmly situated in the present. One of its many critiques is that epideictic oration does not invite audience participation. While some might assess that oral presentations lean more towards Aristotle's deliberative rhetoric, the messaging behind these Federal solutions is never up for debate – they are declamatory and impassioned proclamations—a forum to praise the offeror's capabilities without garnering immediate response from the Government. In fact,



the “pitch” component of oral presentations is notably not meant to constitute discussions, and solicitations will often instruct offerors not to speak with the source evaluation board except to ask logistical questions. This is because the concept of “discussions” has contractual subtext in procurement. Discussions occur when a contractor reaches the competitive range and the Government allows the bidder to respond to weakness, deficiencies, and clarification. Discussions in procurement means an offeror may amend their bid, which is why Contracting officials need to be so careful when entering oral presentations for fear the wrong thing gets said.

As an example, a component of instructions pulled from a 2023 National Science Foundation (NSF) solicitation states, “Oral presentations do not constitute discussions... Oral presentations are distinct from the Government’s reserved right to conduct exchanges.” From a legal precedent perspective, according to law firm *Crowell* (previously Crowell & Moring), “GAO ruled that an offeror’s oral presentation and the ensuing question and answer session did not become ‘discussions’ that would trigger other offerors’ rights to revise their proposals, upholding a huge military health services contract award in Sierra Military Health Services (Dec. 5, 2003). Tackling a difficult issue with a fact-bound decision, GAO held that an offeror’s presentation and the Q&A session constitute ‘discussions’ only if agency personnel gave that offeror a chance to revise its proposal in, for example, the answers to the evaluators’ questions.” The purpose of oral presentations is thereby to persuade without conversation, with the offeror acting as storyteller and the Government as an active listener.

Storytelling

Epideictic rhetoric is an unfamiliar concept unless you happen to be a writing, rhetoric, or communications scholar. A more familiar and digestible example of epideictic rhetoric is the concept of storytelling. Within the realm of Federal proposal development, there are common tropes about how to develop written narrative. A cliché amongst Industry is to make text compliant and *compelling*. The compelling notion harkens to the idea of using the rhetorical heuristics of logos (logics), ethos (credibility), and pathos (emotions) to *tell a story* about their solution ... and there’s a scientific reason for that. In *Advertising as Epideictic Rhetoric and Its Implications for Ethical Communication* by Cem Zeytinoglu, the author aptly states that, “...storytelling is epideictic through the metaphors of coherence and fidelity” (p. 35).

According to an article in *The Scientific American*, personal stories make up 65% of our conversations. Further, storytelling reveals a bias for how individuals respond to a call to action. Psychologist Melanie C. Green published a study in 2004 entitled *Transportation into Narrative Worlds: The Role of Prior Knowledge and Perceived Realism*. Green’s research examines the effects of narratives or stories on individuals’ beliefs. Her work focuses on how an audience is heavily influenced by stories that connect to our experiences, and being swept away in a compelling story may impact a listener’s real-world beliefs. Psychologists have examined the genre of psychological realism, which focuses on humanistic motive, to explain how stories with recognizable and believable emotions most often “transport” a listener to a figurative other world – the feeling of being immersed in a story.

According to *The Science of Effective Presentations* by Prezi, “Stories are two times more persuasive than raw data...” and “...storytelling is one of the best ways to persuade people to take action” (p. 6). In this presentation, Prezi cites a study by Deborah A. Small entitled “Sympathy and Callousness: The Impact of Deliberative Thought on Donations to Identifiable and Statistical Victims.” This study examines how when it comes to charitable giving, “people often become entranced by specific, identifiable, victims” (p. 143) as opposed to causes that lean on statistics. Small provides the following examples: “In 1987, one child, ‘Baby Jessica,’ received over \$700,000 in donations from the public, when she fell in a well near her



home in Texas. Similarly, the plight of a wounded Iraqi boy, Ali Abbas, captivated the news media in Europe during the Iraq conflict and £275,000 was quickly raised for his medical care. More than \$48,000 was contributed to save a dog stranded on a ship adrift on the Pacific Ocean near Hawaii” (p. 143). As the Prezi article explains, “People tend to have stronger emotional reactions to vivid information—stories with details that make them come to life—than sterile information—facts, figures, and charts” (p. 7). The Prezi article provides further context: “Stories engage our entire brain. Researchers have discovered that our brains react very differently to stories versus straight information. Numerous studies have found that when presented with metaphors and descriptive words or phrases—things like ‘perfume’ and ‘she had a velvety voice’—trigger the sensory cortex in our brains, which is responsible for perceiving things like smell and touch. That is, the way that our brain handles reading and hearing about sensory experiences is identical to the way it handles actually experiencing them. On the other hand, when presented with non-descriptive information—for example, ‘The marketing team reached all of its revenue goals in Q1,’—the only parts of our brain that are activated are the ones responsible for understanding language. Instead of experiencing the content with which we are being presented, we are simply processing it. Stories are such powerful engagement tools because they engage the whole brain. Vivid imagery brings your content to life—quite literally—in the minds of your audience. Next time you want to hold the attention of a room, tell a story” (p. 15).

Walter Fisher’s idea of Narrative as Human Communication further connects storytelling to epideictic rhetoric. According to Zeytinoglu, “Fisher’s narrative paradigm has two important connections to epideictic discourse. First, storytelling is itself intrinsically ceremonial. In stories humans create a dramatic realism in which the heroes and villains of a society (in their perfect or exaggerated forms) act in certain situations where ethical decisions are made, and social norms and values are reflected in order to demonstrate the desired way of life and character of disposition for the people. Secondly, stories are not documentary and factual in the perfect sense. In fact, they are fictional in form, by which the maker of the story also demonstrates the ability to use language in an attractive and a beautiful way” (p. 35).

Zeytinoglu further suggests that for Aristotle, “...epideictic discourse is the occasion where wisdom merges with style the most. It can be argued that this merger between wisdom and eloquence shows itself mostly in Aristotle’s inartistic pistis of éthos where the rhetor has to demonstrate a good moral character through his speech” (p. 17). In Federal contracting, one could contend that credibility in oral presentations is gleaned, at least in part, from eloquence of speech.

Impact on Government Acquisition

As put in the decision to GAO protest [Leidos Innovation Corporation, B-415514; B-415514.2; B-415514.3, January 18, 2018](#), “...the responsibility for providing a thorough, **persuasive** response to agency questions as part of an oral presentation falls on the offeror.” Whether or not the FAR or individual solicitations explicitly refer to style, it can be inferred that when offerors present the pitched, non-dialogue component of an oral presentation, then rhetorical appeals are instinctively leveraged given the epideictic nature of the presentations and the evaluator’s penchant for stories.

This presumption can be directly connected to how the Federal Government leverages *confidence ratings* when evaluating oral presentations. FAR Subpart 8.4, Part 13, Subpart 15.3, and 16.505 all cover regulations for the Government to use confidence ratings when evaluating Federal bids. Confidence ratings are considered more innovative than the previously used adjectival ratings (colors coordinated with the terms outstanding, good, acceptable, marginal, unsatisfactory). Per the DHS PIL Bootcamp Workbook, “Confidence ratings provide evaluators



the ability to look more holistically at the strong points and weak points of an offer. Confidence ratings, supported by rationale, are often more helpful to a selecting official.”

“Confidence” does not have a hard and fast definition in the acquisition world, but one might infer it equates to a feeling of trust built on an evaluator’s interpretation of an offeror’s capabilities and benefits resulting in the lowest risk solution. The term is ambiguous and rhetorically driven, for what is trust if not a presenter’s ethos through established credibility, authority, and even likeability? To further exemplify the vagueness of evaluation criteria related to confidence ratings, I’ve pulled snippets from real solicitations from the last 5 years and italicized sentences that are rhetorically charged:

- **Program Executive Office Defense Healthcare Management Systems Workforce 3.0 (WF3) Challenge Scenarios:** “The Government will also evaluate the quality of the solution and solution presentation in a manner that breaks down the fundamental issues being addressed, maximizes understanding of risks and benefits, and successfully *persuades* Government stakeholders on the viability of the plan.”
- “The extent to which the Offeror facilitates a productive yet collaborative team environment to maximize the capabilities of the full team in developing a responsive solution. Collaborative cultures where innovative ideas are scrutinized for their merit rather than by the source of the idea would be of benefit to the Government. The Government will also evaluate the extent to which the Offeror is capable of identifying and mobilizing the best available talent aligned to the challenge including the ability to rapidly brief and onboard subject matter experts in disparate domains. Approaches that *highlight a positive interaction between contractor team members*, provide meaningful contribution from every team member involved, and augment the conversation using subject matter expertise and additional resources. Approaches where a single member or party dominates the facilitation, ideation, and presentation of the solution without inclusive participation amongst other participants and where ideas are valued based on source, rather than value, may present a performance risk.”
- **Department of Homeland Security (DHS), Management Directorate (MD), Federal Protective Service (FPS) Personnel Security Support Services Contract:** “Confidence ratings will be supported by a narrative inclusive of the *noteworthy observations* that assesses the Government’s level of confidence that the offering contractor will successfully perform all requirements.
- **VA Enterprise Data Infrastructure Services EDNS:** The written proposal and oral presentation will each be evaluated to determine the extent to which the proposed approach is workable and the end results achievable. The written proposal and oral presentation will each be evaluated to determine the *level of confidence provided the Government* with respect to the Offeror’s methods and approach in successfully meeting and/or exceeding the requirements in a timely manner.
- **UNITED STATES SECURITIES AND EXCHANGE COMMISSION (SEC) for SEC Enterprise-wide Database Administration (DBA) and Support Services:** “The SEC will evaluate the written responses, oral presentations, and price submissions to select the best-value Offeror. The Offeror that provides the *greatest overall benefit* in their response to the requirement will be selected for the task order award. The approach is based on comparative evaluation and not a tradeoff. Following receipt of responses (including oral presentations) to this TO RFP, the SEC will first check an offeror’s response for conformity with the solicitation. A proposal is acceptable if it conforms to all material requirements of the RFP, otherwise, it is deemed unacceptable. Only acceptable responses will be evaluated. Subsequently, the SEC will perform a



comparative analysis (comparing response to the requirements of the SOW and comparing offerors to each other) to select the contractor that is best qualified to fulfill the requirements, based on the Offeror’s responses to the factors outlined in this TO RFP.”

Recommendations

In my research examining oral presentation solicitation references, there is only one instance where I have read an explicit mention of style, as seen in the **Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) CMS Cloud Information Technology Operations and Maintenance (ITOPS) solicitation**: “The Government is interested in the informational content of the respondent’s answers rather than the particular style or technique used in delivering them.”

This clause acknowledges that the way in which an offeror presents is separate from the material they cover. By including such language, the contracting shop attempts to formally remove the evaluation bias given towards presenters who employ elements of the more stylistic branch of epideictic rhetoric. It begs questions of how rhetorical prowess may impact how a Source Evaluation Board scores presentations, since rational human beings are scientifically swayed by stories.

Based on the science and history of demonstrative oratory, it can be determined that the use of poetic language and storytelling is more persuasive than objective facts, and contractors who leverage such presentation mechanisms are subconsciously held in higher favor since people have a stronger emotional response to vivid information. This means the Government evaluators and their Contractors need to be more attuned to the role rhetoric plays in oral presentations.

Although there will always be bias, especially when leveraging a confidence rating style of evaluation, when the mission is on the line, it is incumbent on the Government to include contractual safeguards from this pre-Aristotelian magic. Key recommendations for the Government to consider are as follows:

Suggestion	Rationale
Leverage a challenge scenario style of oral presentation wherever possible.	Challenge scenarios are the pinnacle type of oral presentations to avoid overly prepared rhetorically charged presentations. By limiting preparation time, you get an authentic look at the individual and how they interact with other members of their team. Hannaway’s 2000 article recommends, “The use of sample tasks, pop quizzes, and questions directly related to the contract requirements has the greatest potential to improve the quality of source selections decisions” (p. 509).
Require only key personnel to be oral presenters. Remove the option to add additional presenters or the request for executive leadership.	There is often an allowance for executive management to attend an oral presentation. This typically occurs in the form of a small business CEO participating in orals to showcase their corporate commitment. Executive leaders who have no impact on project/program operations should not join the presentations since they are well-versed in selling their personal organization.
Where possible, get back to having oral presentations in person.	The fastest way to ensure prospective contractors are knowledgeable in the subject matter is to move oral



	presentations back in person. Without the ability to have a script in front of them and access to reference material, you can better see the natural proclivities of the contract key personnel.
Focus energy on developing more meaningful questions for Q&A and have questions specifically tailored for each of the key personnel positions.	If the Government continues to use pre-scripted oral presentations, then there should be more emphasis on the question and answer portion of the oral presentation period. This provides more opportunity for authentic, ad-libbed material and ensures all members of the team have a unique point of view.
Add caveats to the solicitation to limit the importance of style.	The Government should consider adding clauses like the one referenced from CMS in their evaluation criteria: “The Government is interested in the informational content of the respondent’s answers rather than the particular style or technique used in delivering them.”

The federal government’s ability to succeed in its mission and ensure our national security hinges on its ability to effectively and efficiently engage with industry and gain access to critical technologies and innovation. By acknowledging the impact of scholarly concepts such as epideictic rhetoric, we provide a long-studied subject as a lens to view our constantly evolving Federal procurement institution to improve processes and evaluation procedures.

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