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Tangherlini: Tighter budgets mean bigger role for GSA

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Acting GSA Administrator Dan Tangherlini says he is confident the agency can demonstrate to its customers that its contracts and programs can save them money. (Mike Morones / Staff)

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Dan Tangherlini wants more of your business — a lot more.

Installed by the White House a year ago as acting administrator of the General Services Administration to fix the scandal-rocked agency, Tangherlini ushered in a flurry of reforms to dial back conference spending, employee bonuses and accountability lapses at GSA.

Now, his focus is fixed on overhauling the way federal agencies buy goods and services. His aim is to redirect considerably more federal procurement spending through GSA contracts.

“Frankly, the system we have now, the way we structure ourselves now, the way we invest in certain things now, is not sustainable,” Tangherlini said in an hour-long interview with Federal Times editors and reporters. He said agencies will need to find ways to cut costs as much as possible without sacrificing their missions.

Last year, only about 12 percent of federal procurement spending that could have gone to GSA actually did, according to the agency. Tangherlini said his hope is that, within 10 years, the agency can get that figure closer to 90 percent.

While this may seem like a stretch, he is heading in the right direction: GSA has improved its market share of federal contract spending to 15 percent today and has a goal to hit 17 percent by the end of this fiscal year, he said. Those figures do not count spending that goes to products and services that GSA does not offer on its contracts, such as weapon systems or other military-unique items.

“We’ve really been after this for, I would say, the last six months,” Tangherlini said, adding that some employees “are a little afraid that

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if it's all about market share, then we may not be pushing the best price or the best value."

But he said he assumes that market share will increase only if customer agencies believe they are getting the best price and value from GSA.

"I'll tell you there is some organizational skepticism about that [within GSA] — that maybe people will buy our argument that it's faster and so they'll go with faster rather than cheaper," he said.

Tangherlini said he has been meeting with leaders of other agencies to sell them on the virtues of using GSA, and a big one is the time savings. He said using a GSA schedule to purchase products or services takes about half the time of independently procuring the same thing.

"That's why we're going and looking at this cost issue and saying [to customer agencies], 'Look, we think we can save you time, which equates to money and then price.' ... I think if we keep running that play, you're going to see us pushing up our market share," he said.

Tom Sharpe, Federal Acquisition Service commissioner at GSA, said in a separate interview that he is approaching every agency with a plan tailored to help it save money by using GSA programs and schedules.

A big goal is to persuade his biggest customer — the Defense Department — to rely more on GSA.

DoD spends about 5.6 percent of its eligible procurement budget through GSA programs, whereas civilian agencies spend about 27 percent, Sharpe said.

Agencies should use GSA services much more for office supplies and professional services instead of duplicating those contracts independently, he said. There are about 1,600 different schedules and contracts for professional services alone, he said.

"There is incredible duplication across government," Sharpe said.

Tangherlini said a big key to GSA's future growth is its ambitious multibillion-dollar professional services contract, OASIS, which will be awarded in the fall.

"I think it's very important," he said.

"OASIS is a way of responding to customer concerns and complaints and saying, 'Look, there's got to be a faster, more comprehensive way to deliver multi-part service-oriented results for agencies,'" he said.

Tangherlini has been talking with other agencies about every aspect of their businesses, from office supplies and software to fleet management and hybrid vehicles. "Let agencies focus on what they do best by doing what we do best as good as we possibly can," he said.

He said a program that will allow agencies to lease new hybrid vehicles at the same cost as conventional vehicles demonstrates that GSA can offer agencies a good deal on new cars.

GSA is able to lower its lease rate for the hybrids because of better-than-usual sales of its used vehicles. That allows the agency to offset the higher cost of acquiring the hybrids. The Interior Department has signed up for 300 cars. Tangherlini said he would like GSA to manage and lease more cars to agencies — up to double the current 200,000. If GSA managed 400,000 cars, it would save agencies a combined \$250 million in costs.

GSA has been gathering data on agency purchases, vendor prices and more in order to find where it can save customers money and where its services are needed most.

Tangherlini said GSA also wants to transform federal offices by knocking down walls, shrinking oversized offices and creating a more collaborative environment — all while using far less office space. Agencies can reduce not only lease costs but also administrative and technology costs by using fewer copiers and less paper.

GSA is moving thousands of employees into recently renovated space at its Washington headquarters and offering more telework services. Most of the time, only 40 percent of headquarters employees are at their desks, which offers an opportunity to save money, Tangherlini said.

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