



3. Institutionalizing Accountability for Speed in Government

By C. Morgan Kinghorn, Jr.

Introduction

How do incoming leaders institutionalize getting things done quickly, while still ensuring accountability? The path from a political campaign promise to delivering a citizen service is a long journey. The environment that new leaders are entering is likely to be very different than anywhere else they have worked. That is why it is important to have a broad understanding of why it will be difficult, but not impossible, to get it done and get it done quickly.

Understanding the Challenge of Managing in Government

What makes the leadership journey in the public sector especially challenging is the fact that those responsible for the implementation of programs are civil servants who by law must not be involved directly in the political theatre that often surrounds elections and legislative battles. For the most part, legislation is written by congressional staffers who have never managed much, let alone a complex program.

In addition, each of the three branches of government can—and often does—weigh in on the program's purpose, legality, or even the method of implementation, sometimes after the start of that implementation. Finally, of course, our federal system increasingly relies on thousands of state, local, and other entities to bring services directly to citizens. So getting it done is quite different in the public sector where there are a multitude of interests and power players, often with conflicting and multiple objectives. This complex world creates uncertainty and danger for you and it has the tendency to produce very risk-averse leaders and bureaucrats. That is the environment that political appointees are dropped into, and while it is a challenging one, there are strategies to be an effective innovator and leader within it.

So in this environment that often seems designed for complexity and risk of failure, how do you make government programs work? For example, how do you get health care reform done amid a nightmare of contentious political debate, resulting in over 2,000 pages of statutory detail which few have read? How do you get financial or credit reform done when that same political confusion exists and the political environment is very contentious? While these are only two examples of new statutes awaiting full implementation, there are thousands of other programs already operating that were also designed in the heat of political debates, emergencies, or citizen outrage over some unforeseen event. More often, the question for a political appointee or a career leader is simply how to improve a current program to make it more effective. The truth is that our government is complex and at its core, not designed to be fast, much less terribly efficient.

So how do you make it faster, and along the way, more effective and efficient? The good news is that while the environmental and structural complexities are there, they are nothing new. Many government operations are highly successful, even when constrained by our dysfunctional environment. Even with our system's complexities, there have been many successes, some as

obvious as the moon landing or the eradication of fatal diseases. And at the more micro-level, many ongoing operational programs, such as the bureaucracies established to improve the environment or collect taxes, are wonders of administrative success, given the pulls and pushes of our system.

As noted earlier, it is important to remember that for the most part civil servants don't write legislation, they just do their best to make sense of it. The civil servants in many government organizations have historically been able to overcome many of the built-in inhibitors that would confound most people managing a private business. It may not always be pretty, terribly efficient, or even highly effective, but the job gets done. There are many examples of successfully getting it done at all levels of government. Leaders of these civil servants should seek information and advice on how to operate in this complex and unique system.

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Constraints Confronting Government

It is important to understand the broad landscape and two major constraints now facing the federal government.

Constraint One: Uncertainty surrounding the budget process. In recent years, we have seen the collapse of the federal budget process and its impact at the macro and micro levels, both government-wide (Congress and the President), and at the agency operating level. There is a value in governmental core processes (the budget being one of them) that provide a foundation for decision-making. For decades, the budget process provided a firm foundation—albeit a disagreeable and time-consuming one—for managing resources. General and sometimes very specific priorities were established and the resources available to accomplish those objectives were reasonably set at least for a year, if not longer. Achieving an approved budget would reference all of the difficult elements of the federal system mentioned above, but once passed, the budget provided a foundation for moving forward. The detail within the budget, formulated within the agencies themselves and worked out in a sometimes contentious manner with the President's staff, made it clear (or at least clearer than now) what the priorities were going to be.

At the micro level or operating program level, if the budget process within an agency was well developed, many problems were fixed either in formulation stage (prior to enactment) or certainly in the development of an operating plan prior to the start of the fiscal year. This budgetary framework gave an agency a clear foundation for moving forward. At the national level, the discipline that once enforced balanced budgets no longer exists so that there is no pressure to make tough choices between programs. There is now little or no effort in the budget process—given the lack of enacted budgets—to truly establish priorities; and the constant movement created by endless continuing resolutions further delays decision-making. All of this confusion minimizes the ability of budgetary leadership within an agency to enforce discipline regarding choices. In effect, 20 years of management agenda have more or less been negated by the current necessity to manage month to month, even sometimes week to week, and from

continuing resolution to continuing resolution. And on top of all this have loomed fiscal issues that bring increasing confusion because of the chaos that results from uncertainty and its fall-out. So without such a building block creating a broad decision-making structure, you are going to have to create your own mechanisms to manage decision-making on budget and program priorities.

Constraint Two: Ambiguous federal legislation. A second constraint that makes government less nimble is the fact that major new legislation has not been reviewed by the executive board to the degree that it used to be. There is little back-and-forth on significant issues outside of the more limited number of congressional staffers and interest groups that are now allowed into the drafting room. Bipartisanship at this stage rarely exists. Perhaps more important, the agency staff who end up implementing new legislation often have no input into the specifics. This has resulted in legislation that is often contradictory and fraught with unintended consequences.

In the long-ago past, new national programs were created by individuals who had been involved in operating complex missions, and the long-standing bureaucrats were just that: bureaucrats who knew how to implement legislation and programs that had some chance of working. Time was spent on examining not only the intent of the legislation but the feasibility of effective implementation. So for those lucky enough to become leaders of a relatively new program, they will need to find ways to quickly understand the unintended consequences and fix them directly.

Key Steps in Succeeding in Government

These constraints, and others, can be roadblocks to getting things done. So how can you be successful in this federal operating environment? Not everyone is successful; some leaders leave town quietly to go back home. Some leave town having accomplished only a fraction of their agenda. The best leave town wanting to return and knowing their staff would like them to return. I have worked with political and career leadership who have left town in all of these ways. Obviously, it is the last way that one wants to emulate!

To move quickly, leaders need to create a path through the roadblocks. I would like to share three steps that I believe enable leaders to be successful in this environment, and indeed to want to return some day and, perhaps more important, be able to do so. I have managed programs within highly political organizations, as well as those that are apolitical. In addition I have operated in organizations that are highly visible, as well as those that remain more or less under the day-to-day radar.

The key to success for a leader is to create an effective operating environment that establishes a clear framework of objectives, of responsibility and accountability. However, this environment must also reference the kind of operating environment you have—very public or more under the radar; highly politicized outside and inside or not. Many of the constraints will be beyond a leader's abilities to directly fix, but will directly affect your operating environment. So the key to success or at least a chance at it is to create a set of effective processes that can soften the disruptions of the macro politics on your agency's operating environment. It's the details, actually, that can help.

Step One: Use analytics to make choices. The first step is to create analytical processes for making choices that reflect the operating environment of the organization, as well as the broader world around it. Undoubtedly the administration will have a new or revised management agenda that will define the broader administrative and program objectives. Embrace that and use it to accomplish your own mission responsibilities. However, leaders still need to create an operating

environment within their agency with its own initiatives, feeding off the broader directions of the Administration, but focused on your own operating world. To start framing an effective operating environment, leaders must find out how much they really know about their organization's culture and its stakeholder environment. Leaders must ask who the external players are that can make or break their chances of success. Leader must also find out who the innovative leaders are within that organization. If leaders don't know these factors they need to learn them quickly, if possible even before starting job.

Step Two: Know your allies. Leaders should get to know those who will be around them, and talk to as many people as possible about the place. Leaders should learn from discussions which employees have open minds and have a good sense of themselves and of the broader operating environment. They should begin to formulate whom to have around at the beginning of the journey. Where possible, they should talk to employees down the food chain as well. And whether they come from within the organization or from a previous work life, leaders should determine who it is they want right around them, people close to them that they enjoy working with, talking to, debating ideas and solutions. To the extent possible, when they actually begin their job, leaders should continue to build understanding of how successful people in the organization get things done quickly and effectively. In order to accomplish an agenda, leaders will need to:

- Understand the operating environment
- Know who the “get it done people” are
- Understand what issues or actions can get you painted in a negative light

Step Three: Adopt operating principles that reflect your agenda. The third step in creating an effective operating environment is to establish some operating principles that fit the leader's

Managerial Cost Accounting (MCA)

The greatest potential to improve program operations in the public sector is the serious implementation of managerial cost accounting, a type of analytics.

There are lots of names people use for managerial cost accounting with many variants, ABC, ABM, etc. In the 1990s while at the IRS, I led the government-wide effort to create Managerial Cost Accounting Standard No. 4. I believed managerial cost accounting needed to be broad-based, focused on management information and not accounting, and flexible enough to fit any organization in the federal government. That standard, still in place today, and I believe still with the potential to be as effective as our working group thought it would be, provides you with an existing, regulatory framework to create an operating environment that has at its core continual process improvement, and that can now rely on the greatly improved financial data and systems developed over the last 20 years.

The reason I believe MCA is so useful is that it enables program managers to understand, sometimes for the first time, how their programs operate because it requires a detailed examination of the business processes. As you build an MCA program, I strongly believe you need to have several attributes that help you and your team understand the effectiveness of each program and key process. Full costs is obviously one; the others are timeliness, the value to the customer of each process, and if you are really living dangerously, the inherent risk of that process. With a single MCA “system” all programs can be analyzed as their full costs, how long it takes to deliver that particular product or service to the citizen, the value your own people believe each process has for the citizen, and the degree of risk to the organization or the product or service of each process. Furthermore, if implemented correctly, the information from the analysis gives you a road map to improve your program's efficiency and effectiveness, including elements of time, quality, risk, and cost.

agenda. An overall concept to remember is: focus, focus, focus. There is a relatively short time to accomplish objectives. So whatever are a leader's operating or strategic objectives, while their impact can influence operations for years, the time to implement them will be very short, on average a couple of years, possibly a little longer, and possibly even less.

While these principles may not be used (but they could be given the state of government management today), leaders need to develop a simple set to provide a focus, a rallying cry for staff as well as the broader organization. There have been many diversionary tactics thrown up by people who didn't want to know the full costs, or have a single source of data, or liked the free goods; the existence of a set of operating principles helps to hold everyone's feet to the fire. Leaders should figure out principles and use them to drive initiatives.

Step Four: Construct processes that will hard-wire your initiatives into the organization. The final step in building an effective operating system is to construct processes that will hard-wire initiatives into the organization, although not in a way that prevents future flexibility. The hard-wiring is important as well because the continuation of objectives will not necessarily rely only on the continued presence of those who were most supportive. Constructing a process that will enable administrative as well as mission improvements will take time. But it is worth the effort to create such a foundation because some significant success can be quick.

Conclusion

These four steps—and my long tenure in public service—lead me to conclude with several thoughts on how to get things done quickly, but accountably, without being slowed by bureaucracy and other obstacles. I offer the following advice for leaders.

- People watch what you do when times are tough: so watch what you do in the tough times, particularly how you deal with people. Build up reserves of support throughout the organization.
- Trust but verify with your new teams. 100 percent of federal employees want to do well; somewhat fewer, however, are *able* to do well. Some don't adapt well to changes in leadership or programs they helped create, for example. Work with the ones that are able; you will know who they are. As one of my mentors told me, have someone around whom you like but who is willing to argue and challenge you.
- Give a high degree of attention to managing risks in your programs. Day-to-day risks and long-term risks need to be kept in view. But don't do it in a way that creates an organization with people, including yourself, who are risk-averse. Have some folks around you who understand the concept of risk management and will keep an eye on it for you. You need to keep an eye on it as well.
- Find the often-rare traits that would define an innovative bureaucrat—someone that organization admires, who has been successful in any definition of the word, but who is willing to change. Find those people and embrace them and work with them; use them to help you achieve your objectives.

In closing, the journey new leaders embark upon will be an exciting one, filled with incredible people. I hope the suggestions above will make it successful, both for the relatively short run of a leader's appointment and the longer life of their organization.

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