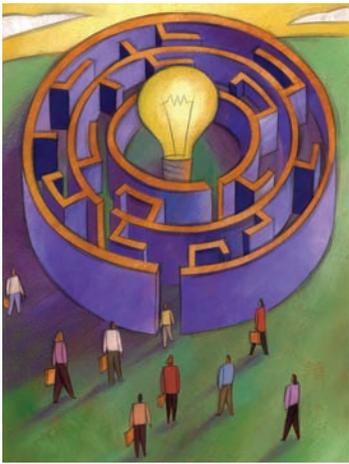


A New Generation of Change Solutions for Public Bureaucracies



Government agency managers can meet mission requirements in service to citizens while working through institutional constraints.

by Martin Goldberg and Tracy Haugen

Americans today are facing a crisis in confidence—if not in fact—in the way many of our government institutions function and perform. Skepticism abounds about the effectiveness of federal, state, and local governmental organizations in, for example, conducting war, securing our borders, providing emergency services, and educating our children in inner cities.

This crisis in confidence is not restricted to the general public in opinion polls or at the voting booths. Dedicated public servant leaders, managers, and employees—those who entered the public sector with a higher purpose to serve—also have been frustrated and often stymied by the tremendous difficulty of making the impact they came to make. Daily, they face red tape, administrative burdens, layers of oversight, attitudes of “quiet desperation” from coworkers, and other steep organizational constraints. Such problems have grown in recent years, as organizational stovepipes designed for an earlier era now interfere with the proactive collaboration and quality of interaction needed—within and across agencies—to tackle the scale of today’s problems.

However, our government institutions do tremendous good and accomplish much. An incredible reservoir of good will and drive remains among those dedicated to serve. Officials and staffs at every level perform brilliantly—some heroically—every day in countless ways. Seven hundred million pieces of mail are delivered by the U.S. Postal Service day in and

day out. After 9/11, Americans mobilized and rallied for tremendous, united efforts. That day, and for weeks beyond, firefighters, police, community volunteers, municipal leaders, and citizens across the country, in concert with our federal government, came together for unparalleled collective action. Even in the toughest circumstances, people are amazingly resilient and together find ways to perform necessary feats, sometimes with spectacular results.

How can this reservoir of human energy be tapped to produce the results needed from today's public-sector institutions on a fuller scale? How can government agency leaders and staff members best fulfill their mission requirements in service to citizens while working through institutional constraints?

This article looks at three levels of the public enterprise—agency leaders, staff members, and citizens—and explores how each can be empowered to operate effectively within the bureaucratic landscape, overcoming structural traps. A new way of thinking about effecting change in public bureaucracies is required.

Roots of New Solutions

Agency leaders and staff members often feel overwhelmed by bureaucracy as they focus on their mission. New leaders, career executives, and managers enter public institutions with high hopes for impact and change, only to have them diminished after battling entrenched regimen and norms. As a result, many of their best-laid plans go unimplemented.

Often, “structural” or other “hard-wired” organizational fixes are tried. Reporting boxes are reshuffled, new formal authorities created, policies and processes reinvented, potent information technologies applied, and new performance management metrics established. These, and other structurally oriented solutions, are frequently necessary ingredients for lasting change. Indeed, as foundational components in how an enterprise functions, they are vital. However, as practitioners of change management, when we fo-

cus on the *human* elements of new program, policy, and system adoption and use, we often see such structural efforts fall short of their intended aims. This structural overemphasis overlooks human dynamics and receives undue priority in the thinking about the problem.

Rearranging mechanics alone does not work. Such efforts at structural reform may add to the felt weight of the bureaucracy, making matters worse. While efforts at full-scale transformation may be in order, those on the front-line in agencies say, “Enough already with all the initiatives. We just want to get our jobs done!” One agency in the Department of Homeland Security said, “Just help us catch the bad guys.” They were tired of the string of improvement initiatives that by now had rung hollow and had simply blended in as part of the background noise of the organization, despite repeated efforts to get their buy-in.

In this deeper sense, what has been deemed “change management” may actually, in a welcome way, be turning into its opposite: a return to the continuity of the core mission, relying on the constant of human nature to carry the agency forward. Change management's most basic value is *helping agency leaders and staff members navigate in and through the “thicket of constraints” inherent in the bureaucracy and facilitate people's connection with each other to simply perform tasks vital to the mission.* In every organization, no matter how strong the despair with the bureaucratic state of affairs is, a waiting “coalition of the willing,” a de facto constituency—because of who they are and their inner motivations for higher service—is ready to be “unleashed” on behalf of constructive action, as has been described elsewhere.

Thus, a central aim of agency leaders committed to mission impact is to identify these early adopters inside and outside the organization, facilitate their interaction through working forums and other avenues, and then sanction and build on their activities to drive the mission agenda forward. By framing the organization as part of the environment in which players operate—and *not* the constant object of their attention, as traditional thinking about change would have it—these individuals are, in effect, “separated” from the organizational regimen that constrains their focus on mission. Thus, they are empowered to focus on critical tasks and get things done.

“Empowerment” is a term that has gone in and out of style, but in its true meaning, it is the right concept to apply here. The sections that follow outline empowerment at each of the three levels of the public enterprise—leaders, staff members, and citizens—so that the greater good

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of the mission can be realized, not consumed by the culture of bureaucracy. The scope of this article limits it to an introduction to the new concepts. They warrant further description and dialogue in light of what is at stake.

Empowering Agency Leaders

When new political appointees and senior career managers join or transfer to an agency, they often have new—and sometimes bold—ideas for advancing the organization’s mission. After all, that is why they came to serve.

Typically, they need a practical knowledge of the organizational landscape they are entering—the people, policies, procedures, processes, and programs they are inheriting and that form the context within which they will operate. In addition, these new leaders often struggle to quickly identify how the bureaucracy can provide the machinery to carry out their critical tasks or how it can stand in the way of their making progress.

Many enter with an understanding of the regulatory, legal, and other infrastructure constraints that limit and guide their actions. But they may not initially know how to navigate, work through or work around, this internal, intricate organizational terrain for maximum effect. Perhaps most important, they may not readily know the key people and constituencies in or related to the organization who are natural allies for their ideas and interests.

Without this level of people-understanding and -support, no hands will move the levers of the bureaucratic machinery. Realizing their indispensability is pivotal in advancing leaders’ agendas (see box).

Too often, however, such understanding of the people dimension is left to chance, not dealt with deeply enough, or only addressed tactically as a matter of detailed implementation planning. This leaves leaders and other senior agency managers trying to sell their major new programs somewhat blindly to those who have to execute it—to garner so-called buy-in. However, the layers of in-

stitutional regimen and resistance often prove formidable, if not forbidding. Unfortunately, many well-intended initiatives start with high hopes, only to be stalled in execution because sufficient support cannot be rallied or sustained.

For incoming leaders, the alternative to focusing on managing resistance after the fact is to work to identify the natural partners—the coalition of the willing—in the organization (and across others they must depend on for joint action), who will embrace their ideas, interests, and agenda. If this is done before, or at least in parallel to, the development of leaders’ agenda into programs, chances of successful execution improve dramatically.

If a broad mission agenda—and the need to improve an agency’s performance on core objectives—can be realized in a range of program options, why not help leaders stake out and frame those with the best chance of developing support from the beginning? That is how success builds.

Political appointees must connect early with the right career executive partners and form working alliances with other natural advocates at various organizational levels on behalf of mission-critical tasks. This is the heart of a new generation of change solutions to help empower agency leaders for effective impact. It can be done in a variety of ways.

Leadership and Organization Transition Activities

Leadership and organization transition activities support political appointees and senior career staff members in accelerating the agency’s ability to execute and deliver mission results during administrative transition by

- ◆ transition planning that takes stock of accomplishments, identifies critical transition decisions and roles, and prepares careerists and others in carrying out interim operations;

A new cabinet-level leader was intent on seeing his vision for the department translated into actionable projects with results. As a political appointee, he recognized he had limited time to do so. He worked *with* the department, focusing on initiatives and programs where the interests of the administration and the operating units intersected. Thus, rather than coming in and dictating policy prescriptions with a narrow focus on compliance, he engaged the various operating units to define projects that would carry out the department vision while meeting the specific mission needs of each unit. From the outset, he emphasized identifying and working with key personnel who understood their agencies’ missions and were widely respected for their ability to get things done. He brought people together in working sessions, including involving and communicating to those outside the department, to give these important projects proper visibility and support, sustaining them over time.

- ◆ project deployment support that translates the future vision into sets of highest-priority projects with the right owners assigned for sponsorship, organizational support, and accountability to achieve mission results, as new leaders come onboard; and
- ◆ leadership and collaboration building that strengthens appointees and career staff members' working relationships through mission-focused working sessions, fostering mutual confidence and trust.

Entrepreneurial Leaders for Mission Impact and Results

Entrepreneurial leaders for mission impact and results coach and provide other support to government executives to tap into the pent-up demand for real change that already exists in the organization by

- ◆ identifying and linking willing leaders and staff members to unite in making meaningful change happen, intra- or inter-agency, without relying on reorganizations, and
- ◆ supporting strategic and operational planning choices through analysis of where key organizational support already exists to drive successful implementation.

Empowering Agency Staff Members

At the end of the day, how well government agencies accomplish their missions depends on how effectively employees work together to achieve overarching aims. The ability of government employees to find ways to collaborate within and across organizational stovepipes to get the right information to the right people at the right time—and to make the right things happen—defines successful service. This is even more urgent today, in an era when cross-agency collaboration and joint action is es-

sential to maintaining peace and security and delivering cost-effective government services.

Just as leaders new to agencies seek to make a real impact, government employees at every level are motivated to make a difference. These employees, despite what seems like overwhelming odds, have managed year after year to find effective ways to get things done, to innovate, and to respond to pressing needs. They have done this on their own and with each other, with or without recognition or reward.

In this, government is not unique. Virtually all kinds of major enterprises encumbered by excessive bureaucratic policy and procedure have high-performing, creative people who push the limits in spite of the challenges. They are driven to do their best regardless of circumstance. However, the situation is more pronounced in our public institutions, given the entrenched bureaucratic state of affairs, inherent difficulties in making structural change work, and urgent and vital missions.

These are the employees who make up the coalition of the willing. Their work may not be readily visible, but they are making their mark. Underneath the organization's formal structure, they have found ways to connect with others and make things happen (see box). This is the de facto organization at work. Some would do more, and contribute to needed change, if only they were tapped.

Traditional methods of organizational change often ignore these informal networks of performers. By moving too quickly to reorganize or only looking at formal position authority, they ignore the rich creative processes and influence networks already in place. A new generation of change solutions can help agency leaders identify and connect with such performers and their networks on a wider scale. These solutions also empower staff members to leverage their existing working relationships in support of new agendas and critical tasks. Several new avenues of approach are available.

In another cabinet-level department, a GS-14, close to retirement, was very passionate about streamlining his bureau's acquisition process while complying with the Federal Acquisition Regulation. He jumped at the opportunity to attack this prevalent problem, which would allow him to influence acquisition practices across the department. This goal was so important to him that he stayed on past his retirement date, with failing health, in his desire to see his efforts come to fruition. As a well-recognized informal leader, his stature and influence resulted in an acceptance in the acquisition community well beyond his grade level.

Social Network Analysis

Social network analysis, using robust computer-assisted methods, identifies and maps internal people networks within and across organizations to

- ◆ capitalize on informal work and decision-making relationships already in place around a strategic initiative, major task, or other common cause;
- ◆ identify informal best practices in getting work done;
- ◆ mobilize early adopters to set the stage for change that others can later come to accept; and
- ◆ measure the degree of organizational collaboration and alignment over time.

Field Readiness Management

Field readiness management supports implementation of large-scale initiatives in complex, decentralized organizational environments and where increased integration between headquarters and field operations is newly required. These activities provide a capability to

- ◆ assess, mobilize, and report on field readiness and risks;
- ◆ clarify implementation roles and interdependent tasks for leaders and project staff members across an initiative's life cycle; and
- ◆ make needed joint decisions using an agreed-upon definition of readiness.

Education and Training Efforts

Education and training efforts prepare leaders and staff members in new ways of effecting change in public bureaucracies, including

- ◆ entrepreneurial action in public services agencies,
- ◆ effective networking practices in bureaucratic environments, and
- ◆ change management.

Empowering Citizens

Any discussion of a new generation of change solutions for government organizations must address the ultimate end-customer of agency service: citizens.

In the Web 2.0 age, the fluidity and wide access to multimedia, real-time information puts a premium on collaboration and cross-agency cooperation at every level. In this environment, government organizations must increasingly be able to utilize means of reaching and engaging citizens that differ from those of the past.

Powerful social and information technology now enables engaging citizen stakeholders and helping them respond to a variety of challenges. Coordination of multimedia outreach to citizens, communities, and commercial enterprises has taken on new importance in major initiatives, including homeland security, public health, education reform, and local citizen action. Helping appropriate agencies understand the information needs of different stakeholders at different times, and then coordinating outreach to create a more informed citizenry, has important social value. Information alerts and broadcasts range from everyday matters such as the switch to digital TV to major emergencies such as forest fires.

Information campaigns are sometimes not enough. The means are also available to directly support local communities to help them become more actively engaged and generate plans and activities in support of local or national issues. Large-scale discussion and problem-solving forums, along with information campaigns, may also be required to drive progress for some community challenges.

Strengthening first responder radio communications capabilities—at the forefront of many lessons learned post 9/11—is one such challenge. Although imperative to homeland security, changes ordered by the federal government to improve public safety communications have not always been readily accepted or implemented, given the range of players and institutional complexity involved. In one case, strategic outreach and awareness campaigns were developed to deliver information to affected individuals, businesses, and public safety agencies, leveraging professional associations to maximize reach and impact. Also, community-building techniques were employed to encourage collaboration between interdependent stakeholders within and across regions. This effort brought large numbers of stakeholders together to understand the issues and to plan and agree upon how they would support implementation of the mandated changes.

School reform, a top concern for many parents, is another challenge. The National Academy of Public Administration's Collaboration Project has identified Utah's Politicopia, a new e-democracy initiative based on a wiki platform, as a notable instance of citizen empowerment in school reform. Politicopia was used to promote citizen interaction and dialogue concerning an education reform initiative, generating more than 150 comments to clarify the issue. Two Utah representatives cited the dialogue on Politicopia as affecting their decision in the 38-to-37 vote in favor of the proposed reform. Several oth-

er states, including Rhode Island, Indiana, Montana, Connecticut, Kentucky, and Pennsylvania, are forming sites similar to Politicopia.

Participatory approaches such as these hold much promise for empowering citizens on important issues—and easing some institutional gridlock.

Community Building

Community building creates face-to-face and virtual interactive forums to bring diverse stakeholders together for debate, problem solving, and joint action on time-sensitive, critical issues. These working forums provide the platform for broad participation and agreement on

- ◆ top concerns and priorities,
- ◆ potential solutions and implications,
- ◆ roles and responsibilities, and
- ◆ key actions and next steps.

Strategic Awareness and Outreach Campaigns

Strategic awareness and outreach campaigns provide robust communications planning and tactics for major initiatives and programs and support community-building efforts. These efforts support varying constituencies—citizens, employees, other agencies, regulatory bodies, professional associations, private industry, and the media—and promote broad-based

- ◆ awareness and call-to-action plans,
- ◆ crisis management, and
- ◆ brand reputation management.

Outlook

Much is possible to help unlock the human capabilities and higher motivation to serve already resident in our public bureaucracies—and increasingly demanded by their constituencies. Although the problems faced by modern governments often require solutions with technological

interoperability, today's problems require effective *human* interoperability for any real resolution.

Such progress is not easy in the face of steep challenges or in the wake of our inherited institutional constraints. Bureaucracy, even with the best of intentions to move through it, casts a long shadow. Still, we have no alternative but to try. The good news is that much of that human capacity and willingness is waiting to be tapped by imaginative public-service leaders with the will to do so. The large-scale people mobilization that proved so effective in the immediate wake of 9/11 is a reminder of how collaboration and commitment is possible when the issue is compelling.

This new generation of change solutions can contribute to the effectiveness of our public institutions. We are committed to applying, developing, and evolving these solutions for that effect. The change solution strategies discussed in this article do not fall neatly into mutually exclusive buckets: each can be used to support leaders, staff members, and citizens. They can and, when appropriate, should be creatively combined with each other and with other management strategies for dynamic effect. The problems our public institutions face require clear and new thinking, stretching beyond current conventions and single-pronged solutions.

Further research and multiclient studies should provide additional understanding and insight into how each of these solutions can be most effective. We invite your participation and collaboration with us in moving this new generation of change solutions forward to help make government work.

References

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Give a scientist a problem and he will probably provide a solution; historians and sociologists, by contrast, can offer only opinions. Ask a dozen chemists the composition of an organic compound such as methane, and within a short time all twelve will have come up with the same solution of CH₄. Ask, however, a dozen economists or sociologists to provide policies to reduce unemployment or the level of crime and twelve widely differing opinions are likely to be offered.

—Derek Gjertsen