

Fewer goals, clear strategy contribute to effective leadership, study shows

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Federal executives preparing to enact major changes in financial industry regulation, national security, health care administration and other areas on the Obama administration's agenda might be interested in a new study that examines the leadership qualities necessary to successfully reform federal agencies.

The good news is you don't have to be a charismatic leader with deep connections to the White House and Congress or spend longer hours at the office than other executives to get the job done. The bad news is if you're not a good day-to-day manager with a clear strategy for achieving only one or two major goals, then you aren't likely to be very successful.

Those were some of the takeaways from *What It Takes to Change Government*, an 18-month study by Booz Allen Hamilton consultants Dave Mader and Jeff Myers, and Harvard University public management professor Steven Kelman, released on Wednesday during a symposium sponsored by the nonprofit Partnership for Public Service.

"The successful executives used well-known management techniques" to achieve their objectives, Kelman said, whereas the control group did not. The study results strongly suggest that while luck and charisma are nice assets, they are not determining factors in successful leadership, he said.

Three of the eight former federal executives deemed successful by the study spoke about their experiences at the symposium: retired Adm. James Loy, commandant of the Coast Guard from 1998 to 2002; Charles Rossotti, commissioner of the Internal Revenue Service from 1997 to 2002; and David M.

Walker, comptroller general and head of the Government Accountability Office from 1998 to 2008.

All three executives found they had to substantially restructure their agencies to achieve success. They undertook a methodical approach to strategic planning upon assuming their positions.

Rossotti said it was essential for him to understand the roots of dysfunction at the IRS before he attempted major organizational reforms. For example, while it was widely recognized that the agency had failed spectacularly in implementing new technology, what was less well understood was that there were dozens of separate IT organizations within IRS. "Even if we had had the perfect technology solution we couldn't have rolled it out," he said.

Critical to his success was getting to know the men and women who had worked at the agency for years and understood its problems better than any outsider. "It's wrong to think that everybody resists change," he said. "In my experience there are almost always a significant number of people in any organization who want change."

To determine what factors differentiated successful and unsuccessful leaders, researchers asked members of the National Academy for Public Administration and fellows of the Council for Excellence in Government to nominate two federal agency leaders from the Bush and Clinton administrations who succeeded in making significant changes, and two who tried to make significant changes but failed.

Out of 200 nominations, researchers identified 11 federal executives, eight of whom were deemed successful and three who were not. To create a control group for comparison with the successful leaders, the three unsuccessful executives were then combined with six leaders identified as counterparts of the successful leaders serving in other administrations. All executives were granted anonymity to ensure their candid participation, and they were not told if they were viewed as successful or not.

Researchers then conducted extensive interviews with the executives; reviewed strategic plans, congressional testimony, performance reports and other documents; and interviewed managers and staff within each agency, and stakeholders including union leaders and congressional staff.

Data collected touched on 46 hypotheses pertaining to political management, leadership and internal capabilities and strategy. When executives claimed to use a particular management technique, researchers attempted to confirm those claims through multiple sources. The result was a number of key findings that most clearly differentiated the successful leaders from the unsuccessful ones.

Among the findings:

- While all executives spent more than half their time engaging external stakeholders such as members of

Congress, the successful ones spent considerably more time collaborating with agency employees than the unsuccessful ones.

- Executives who followed a deliberate strategic planning process were more successful than those who didn't.
- Those who used well-crafted performance measures, particularly ones focused on quality and customer satisfaction, were more successful than those who focused primarily on cost and production measures.
- All the successful executives reorganized their agencies, because it was the only way to accomplish the reforms they sought.
- Successful leaders established clear lines of accountability within their organizations and reassigned subordinates when they failed to meet expectations.
- Time on the job doesn't equal results. While all the executives put in long hours, the most successful ones worked about 10 percent fewer hours per week than those who failed to implement reforms.

Rossotti, Loy and Walker agreed that fundamental to their success was the ability to make difficult or unpopular decisions.

"The real test of leadership is about doing what's right, not what's popular," Walker said.