

GOVERNMENT EXECUTIVE

Turn Styles

Which leadership techniques work and which don't in the quest to change government.

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The broad, sometimes little-defined concept of change—especially as it relates to improving government management—was a central theme of the 2008 presidential election. Now our new president is faced with having to make good on the promise of change during one of the most challenging economic environments the nation has seen since the Great Depression.

The question is which management and leadership techniques deliver effective, meaningful change—and which do not. If there is a recipe for successful government reform, what are its core ingredients? Is there anything similar about the leaders who have been the most successful—or was it even skill, or just chance? Did those who failed make avoidable mistakes, or did they encounter an obstacle that no one could have overcome?

Although change is inevitably complex, the prescriptive measures are often most effective when they are simple and intuitive.

A recent study, “What It Takes to Change Government,” by the consulting firm Booz Allen Hamilton found similarities in the methods used by public leaders who succeed. The study examined successes and fail-

ures of 12 federal agency leaders in the two most recent administrations.

Based on the experience of successful former agency chiefs such as David M. Walker of the Government Accountability Office, Charles Rossotti of the Internal Revenue Service and James Loy of the Coast Guard and compared with less successful ones, 10 key considerations emerged as a roadmap for political appointees and career executives alike.

1. Get a Running Start

Use the time between nomination and confirmation to meet with Congress and key stakeholders. Successful agency heads are twice as likely as less successful ones to use this period to interact with stakeholders and start to develop their strategy.

2. Fewer Goals, Greater Success

The successful leaders generally focus on three, or fewer, goals. Those who failed often had four or more. But it's not as simple as trimming back. Goals should be outcome-oriented, such as improved results for customers in an observable way. Unsuccessful leaders most typically set tactical, action-based goals, such as: We need a new

computer network. We need a new payroll system. We need a new building. Moreover, the goals of successful leaders are intuitive, free of jargon and communicated consistently across audiences.

3. Collaborate With Employees

Resist the knee-jerk temptation to focus on political appointees. Nearly every successful leader emphasized a collaborative style of developing and implementing change, compared with those who did not attempt ambitious change. Also of interest, the successful cases typically had a smaller percentage of political appointees than federal agencies on average.

4. Manage Within

Don't focus only on the outside world. Successful leaders said they spent nearly half their time on efforts inside the agency, versus with Congress, media and interest groups. They spent internal time building capability, providing vision and guidance, and holding people accountable. Unsuccessful leaders spent just one-quarter of their time internally.

5. Use Performance Measures

Most successful agency leaders use performance measures to advance their agenda, while most unsuccessful leaders do not. Where they use measures, the failures most often evaluate only cost and production, while successes more often add measures of customer satisfaction and quality. A few successful leaders chose to rely on measures developed for their industry by outside organizations—something akin to Ford Motor Co. executives paying attention to JD Power and Associates' quality ratings rather than internal staff reports on the quality of the cars they make.

6. Be Ready to Reorganize

A sizable majority of successful leaders reorganize their agencies—not because they want to, but because they believe the organization's structure will hinder achievement of their goals. Unsuccessful leaders rarely attempt to reorganize their agencies.

7. Focus on Customers

Don't focus on the White House. Many leaders assume the president's bully pulpit is a strong tool

for changing strategy. In reality, most agencies and leaders make their case to their customers, employees and Congress without seeking active support from the White House.

8. Don't Be in Such a Hurry


Don't be so anxious to set strategy that you neglect to gather the data needed to inform your judgment and the right perspectives to vet the choices you make. A common feature of unsuccessful leaders is they set strategy quickly (and not always by choice), often without good data on customer needs, stakeholder expectations or employee ideas. A poor process, or no process, for setting strategy almost always ends in failure.

9. Don't Think Spending More Time Produces Better Results

Successful leaders actually reported spending about 10 percent less time on the job than unsuccessful ones, but they spend their time more effectively. They work proactively with Congress and stakeholders to set the agenda, and present and justify their strategy. Leaders who deal with Congress primarily and stakeholders reactively, such as defending budgets and preparing extensively for investigative hearings, require more time.

10. Don't Focus So Much on Change

Too much emphasis on reforms could mean you're neglecting to manage performance. Both successful and unsuccessful leaders focus on building employee support for change, such as appealing to their public service motivation. Where unsuccessful leaders fail, successful ones concentrate on improving the enterprise in general through performance measures, strategic planning, reorganization and a focus on just a few goals.

For more information on "What It Takes to Change Government," visit www.boozallen.com/what-it-takes-to-change-government. 

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