Driver Two: Agility

Adopting new ways for government to operate, using agile principles and putting user experiences and program results at the forefront

Given the increased pace of change across all facets of society, government must keep abreast of inevitable changes in the economy, advances in technology, and increases in citizen expectations. Government often appears slow to adapt, while citizens expect services and results more quickly in ways that mirror their experiences with the private sector. Agencies can accelerate change by adapting "agile" methods from the field of software development. Agility across public-sector operations provides a promising approach to improve program management and achieve mission outcomes. Approaches that demonstrate how to increase agility in the way government works will add value to citizens in the future.

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Adopting New Ways to Operate

Agility refers to the ability to act quickly and easily. This often runs counter to traditional government approaches of detailed planning premised on a stable and predictable environment. Managers today cannot fully anticipate future external forces that will affect the success of a program or initiative, and instead must adopt a more flexible approach. Managing with agility involves a series of attributes, strategies and tools, including:

- Start with a clear vision, expectations or intent, not a set of detailed requirements.

- Shift from a linear to an interactive approach in program design and implementation.

- Insist on rapid, iterative, and continuous development of functionality of a program or service.

- Use "design thinking" techniques that focus on the needs of customers—sometimes called customer-centered design—and that result in value to the public.

- Empower employees to act in ways that bring the visions/expectations to reality.

- Engage in ongoing collaboration with stakeholders, where the end client participates in the development process. This is an approach linked to greater transparency and open data and networks for implementing programs and deliver services.

Governments cannot use these approaches in isolation or attempts to become more agile will fail. Rather, agencies must adapt how mission support functions traditionally operate. Methods for hiring, buying, and auditing should change as well. For example, the U.S. Digital Service (USDS) began using agile approaches when it was launched in 2014, but quickly found that traditional government contracting approaches stymied their ability to be agile. It worked with acquisition officials to develop new contracting vehicles that incorporated agile principles.

The IBM Center for The Business of Government has addressed critical success factors for becoming a more agile enterprise in *A Guide to Critical Success Factors in Agile Delivery.* The guide sketches out success factors for implementing an agile delivery approach, such as "using existing knowledge and not reinventing the wheel" and "including the right product owner and mission subject matter experts."

An earlier IBM Center report, *Fast Government: Accelerating Service Quality While Reducing Cost and Time,* finds that addressing the specific metric of time provides a key lever for improving service quality and reducing costs. The report notes that setting a goal of reducing time taken to deliver a service "almost invariably results in higher service levels and lower cost points." As the report also suggests, focusing on time as a key performance metric is premised on having the agility in an organization to "automate repetitive tasks… accelerate the delivery of goods and services through process innovation… create interactive services… [and] use predictive analytics to reduce or eliminate entire processes (e.g., preventing improper payments)."

The Value of Agility

Agility involves a set of values and principles that incorporate the use of customer experience and design thinking when developing and delivering programs and services. These attributes are increasingly being reflected in U.S. federal government priorities. A number of examples follow.

- The USDS, General Services Administration's (GSA) 18F program, and digital service teams within federal agencies have become leading proponents of agile development approaches. In a 2017 report for the IBM Center, *Digital Service Teams: Challenges and Recommendations for Government,* Ines Mergel highlights the value of digital service teams in government and describes the institutional challenges that these teams face in adopting the use of agile approaches in a public sector environment.

- The tenets of increased agility are increasingly reflected in federal program management. For example, when the U.S. Department of the Treasury and the OMB used agile processes to implement the Digital Accountability and Transparency Act (DATA Act), the implementation program manager remarked that implementing the Act by the statutory deadline was possible due to agile methods. The undersecretary leading the effort commented, "We were able to do something in six months that took us four years using a traditional design process—at a fraction of the cost." Expanding the use of agile approaches in statutory implementation may become more likely, given that Congress recently passed the Program Management Improvement and Accountability Act which requires OMB to develop guidance to agencies on improving program management approaches that could include the use of agile methods.

- OMB released a brief four-part Management Agenda in March 2017 that includes strategies reflecting the tenets of agility. For example, the agenda commits to increasing the use of waiver authority by 2020 to grant agencies more administrative flexibility, increase delegations of authority to lower levels in organizations, and increase government responsiveness to the public.

- OMB's April 2017 guidance on the preparation of presidentially-mandated Agency Reform Plans directs agencies to include strategies and investments that would improve customer service and identify opportunities for greater efficiency and effectiveness. The guidance specifically directs agency plans to "provide managers

greater freedom to manage administrative tasks efficiently." This is a key strategy in moving agencies to rely more heavily on the tenets of agility.

- Finally, the White House Office of American Innovation (OAI) incorporated the tenets of agility into its agenda, with a focus on improving customer experiences in their interactions with government. For example, it highlights the value of the U.S. Department of Education's College Scorecard, which compiles information from various sources to help college applicants select a school best suited to their needs. And OAI promotes the development of strategies to make government-delivered services more "intuitive, stable, secure, and efficient"—all attributes related to agility.

Embedding Agility into Government Culture

Recent government actions have set the stage for the greater use of agility in its approach to developing and delivering programs and services. Thus, agencies can take a number of steps to embed greater agility in their operations and, ultimately, their organizational culture. Potential options for this might involve the following actions:

- Set new expectations among agency senior executives on how work gets done, by encouraging them to focus on agile principles such as user experience, program results, transparency, and collaboration. This might also include the incorporation of tools such as crowdsourcing, contests, and gaming.

- Revise and streamline existing administrative processes by rolling back low-value activities and requirements. OMB has begun this process by cutting back some of its own requirements of agencies, noting that "Government-wide policies often tie agencies' hands and keep managers from making commonsense decisions." OMB seeks to reduce the burden of low-value activities and create alternative approaches to holding agencies accountable. One alternative, for example, might be the use of incentives such as a phased approach in reducing required reports for agencies and programs based on "earned autonomy" for those agencies or programs that meet defined criteria.

- Revisit common mission support systems used in government—such as project management approaches and accountability systems—to make them more flexible in accommodating new requirements that respond to user needs quickly and effectively.

- Make procurement processes more rapid and flexible. OMB and the GSA have worked across agencies to streamline acquisitions in a way that provides agencies timely access to commercial services and products. These steps have seen the most progress in the digital area, sparked by initiatives like the Digital IT Acquisition Program to train agency teams on how to work together quickly and effectively and the increasing use of agile procurement vehicles by digital service teams. Other functions of government can adapt these lessons to accelerate acquisition as noted by Dan Chenok and Joiwind Ronen in their blog, *Government Gone Agile: How "Agile Management" Can Enhance Agency Success,* for the IBM Center.

- Adopt "Time" as a key metric for assessing the efficiency and effectiveness of program performance. As noted above, setting a goal of reducing the time needed to deliver a service often leads to more efficient and less costly results, but requires agility to achieve such outcomes.

- Integrate the principles and approaches of agility into pending OMB guidance for

implementing the Program Management Improvement Accountability Act, to institu-tionalize professional program management skills across the government.

• Identify and reduce barriers that inhibit the use of agile approaches to improve program outcomes, which can stem from existing mission support compliance requirements set long ago by legal, acquisition, risk management, and audit offices.

Conclusion

To achieve the goal of an agile and fast government, research can help leaders and stakeholders understand promising strategies and practices. A shift from a linear to a more interactive approach to develop and deliver programs represents a significant shift in policy, culture, roles and responsibilities, and program oversight. By understanding agile techniques, and identifying and overcoming potential obstacles, agencies can embed and expand agility in how government works on behalf of the public.

Resources

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