Trend Six: Leadership
Leading Across Boundaries in an Era of Complex Challenges

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Governments today face serious, seemingly intractable public management issues that go to the core of effective governance and leadership, testing the very form, structure, and capacity required to meet these problems head-on. These challenges run the gamut from the 2008 near-meltdown of the global financial system to the Y2K challenge, pandemics, ending veteran homelessness, and natural or man-made disasters. Many are difficult to anticipate, get out in front of, and handle. In most manifestations, they do not follow orderly and linear processes. Along with responding to such complex and non-routine challenges, government leaders must also operate in the "new normal" of fiscal austerity. Yet as resources diminish, government's responsibilities seem to have increased (e.g., homeland security, home loan modifications, cybersecurity).

Difficult Choices and Unprecedented Opportunities

Given these dynamic conditions, government leaders are presented with difficult choices, but also unprecedented opportunities. Within this environment, the right kind of leadership approach and style can drive change in government. As Roger Martin, dean of the Rotman School of Management at the University of Toronto, observes, "There was a time when leaders shared a sense that the problems they faced could be managed through the application of well-known rules and linear logic. Those days are gone. Most of today's important problems have a significant wicked component, making progress impossible if we persist in applying inappropriate methods and tools to them."

This contribution explores the intersection where leadership, complex challenges, and the need for transformation meet. It will offer leadership lessons and highlight effective tools that may help today's government leaders tackle complex changes and transform the way their agencies or the government as a whole operate.

Understanding Context is Crucial for Effective Leadership

There are different types of leadership approaches, from transactional to transformative and beyond. A survey of insights from leadership experts and gurus makes one thing clear—there is no one-size-fits-all approach to leadership. What does seem evident is the importance of context when honing one's leadership approach. It becomes apparent that effective leaders must possess and exercise a certain level of contextual intelligence.

As Professor Joseph Nye stresses in *Leadership, Power and Contextual Intelligence*, "Understanding context is crucial for effective leadership. Some situations [may] call for autocratic decisions and some require the [exact] opposite. There is an infinite variety of

contexts in which leaders have to operate, but it is particularly important for leaders to understand culture, distribution of resources, followers' needs and demands, time urgency, and information flows."

Leadership occurs within a specific context; how a leader responds most certainly depends on that context. However, this is not to say that the context drives leadership. Rather, context spawns the leadership necessary to address a situation or challenge.

Leading through Complex, Non-Routine Challenges

Complex challenges, or so-called wicked problems, tend to have innumerable causes and are hard to define, making their mitigation resistant to predetermined solutions or traditional problem-solving approaches. In certain instances, the scope, nature, and extent of these challenges eliminate the notion of quick fixes or one-size-fits-all solutions. The resources needed to properly address these wicked problems often transcend the capacity of any single agency.

As a result, government leaders will find it necessary to go beyond established parameters and institutional strictures, working across organizational boundaries in pursuit of multilayered, networked approaches tailored to a specific challenge, or what some have called collaborative or shared leadership. This often demands that today's government leaders be more innovative, collaborative, and flexible. It also may require government to supplement core skills with additional expertise that may be better suited to tackling complex, non-routine challenges.

Five Qualities of an Effective Collaborative Leader

In *Leading Across Boundaries*, Russ Linden identifies five qualities of an effective collaborative leader:

- Driven to achieve a goal through collaboration, with a measured ego

- Listens carefully to understand others' perspectives

- Looks for win-win solutions with shared interests

- Uses pull more than push

- Most important, thinks strategically and connects to a larger purpose

Linden notes that an effective collaborative leader realizes that challenges take on a life of their own, and that the leader needs to both anticipate and respond quickly to change. He highlights Thad Allen's leadership in the Gulf Coast to illustrate such a leader. "[Allen] told his partners that they would develop a 'strategic intent,' by which he meant a clear goal and a general strategy, which the various partners would adapt and modify as conditions required."

Ed DeSeve puts a finer point on this leadership approach in his IBM Center report, *Managing Recovery: An Insider's View*. "Meeting complex, or wicked problems requires a new approach based on an integrated system of relationships that reach across both formal and informal organizational boundaries—a managed network." DeSeve led the implementation of the $840 billion Recovery Act in 2009. He points out that the lessons learned from this non-routine government action created a new way of doing business

that relied on effectively using managed networks. DeSeve also outlines lessons for how government leaders can address major government-wide challenges in the future: leaders need to act quickly; attention from the top is paramount; collaboration maximizes speed of execution, and federalism can be a key form of collaboration; and most of the information must be transparent, timely, and relevant.

Since complex challenges confront people with the unknown and unpredictable, they also demand a different style of leadership—one that shapes vision and fosters alignment and commitment through collaborative action. It is about pursuing ideas and engaging in activities that resonate with the situation, combining a particular context and the attributes needed to lead in that context. In many ways, Dr. Francis Collins represents a new type of leader in government. Prior to becoming NIH director, Collins led an international coalition consisting of other government organizations, the private sector, and the academic community as part of the Human Genome Project (HGP).

In *Managing "Big Science:" A Case Study of the Human Genome Project,* Professor Harry Lambright highlights key leadership lessons from Collins' experience. Collins faced the challenge of reorienting HGP from a loose consortium into a tight alliance with a small circle of performers and decision-makers. Instead of relying on the traditional command-and-control leadership style, Collins relied on a more collegial, collaborative style. In describing his experience leading the HGP, Collins frequently cited the importance of goals in the project's success.

Lambright concurs with Collins' assessment that large projects need clear, unmistakable goals. Lambright writes that a clear goal "provides a constant point of reference against which to measure, direct, prioritize, and modify actions by various individuals and organizations involved." In any government endeavor, political support is crucial. NIH leadership, including the then-NIH director and Collins, worked closely with the White House and Congress in gaining support and continued funding for HGP. The management of the Human Genome Project was a major challenge. After assuming leadership of the project, Collins concluded that the existing management was too loose and too uncoupled. He then developed a more centralized management model.

Leading Transformational Change

Depending on the challenge faced, government leaders may need to fundamentally transform how their organizations operate to meet mission. For example, when facing the challenge of budget cuts and significant resource reallocation, transformational change that can deliver mission value more efficiently will be increasingly important.

Once again, Dr. Francis Collins provides a worthwhile example of this leadership in action. In *Forging Governmental Change: Lessons from Transformations Led by Robert Gates of DOD and Francis Collins of NIH*, Professor Lambright profiles Dr. Collins' and Robert Gates' transformational initiatives in their organizations; by all accounts both have been effective leaders of change.

Collins set clear, bold, but limited goals at the beginning of his tenure as director of the National Institutes of Health (NIH). Collins thought in transformative terms from the outset. He wanted to translate NIH research into actual health cures with the establishment of the National Center for Advancing Translational Sciences (NCATS).

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"The Center," explains Collins, "strives to develop innovations to reduce, remove, or bypass costly and time-consuming bottlenecks in the translational research pipeline in an effort to speed the delivery of new drugs, diagnostics, and medical devices to patients." Collins wants to catalyze the generation of innovative methods and technologies that will enhance the development, testing, and implementation of diagnostics and therapeutics across a wide range of human diseases and conditions. "Having made basic discoveries, we're poised to be able to translate them into action and that is in fact a major focus of the National Center for Advancing Translational Sciences," says Collins.

What he wanted to achieve had to be implemented in a context of increasingly tight resources. This meant following a strategy of reallocation and reorganization. Collins hit the ground running; the context in which he operated helped determine the style of leadership. Leaders focused on change need to be conscious, especially at the front end of the process.

Agencies across government, however, have needed to cut costs while maintaining, if not improving, the performance of their operations. The challenge being faced by current government leaders is whether they can use this unprecedented opportunity to transform their organizations while also making the necessary reductions in spending.

Steps for Undertaking Transformation Initiatives. To assist government leaders in better understanding the characteristics of successful transformations, the IBM Center published *A Leader's Guide to Transformation* by Bob Reisner, who interviewed a select group of federal executives who had recently undertaken major transformation initiatives in their organizations. Based on these interviews, Reisner framed a series of interrelated steps which government leaders should consider when they undertake any transformation initiative:

- Develop a compelling transformation game plan

- Align the transformation game plan with your mission

- Center your game plan with a reliable innovation process

- Transform strategically

- Design implementation to sustain transformation

Transformational change is not the steady, incremental improvement most government officials have spearheaded in the past. Success in transformation depends on getting the right changes done right. A key lesson from those interviewed is that transformation is indeed hard work, requiring intensive engagement with all stakeholders, including employees. All the leaders interviewed emphasize the importance of engaging employees and other stakeholders to shape the transformation.

The steps, lessons, and insights offered to government leaders who are tackling complex challenges or seizing opportunities to transform the ways their agencies operate will no doubt be applied differently, depending on the leaders' operating environment. This is why context matters and why government leaders today must strengthen their contextual intelligence so as to lead most effectively within their unique operating environment.

Collaboration Can Make a Difference

In the end, today's government leaders must also recognize that much of what they need to get done requires other agencies, the whole of government, and possibly other sectors of society. Therefore it is of critical importance to forge collaborative networks and work across established structures and boundaries.

Dr. Jane Fountain, in *Implementing Cross-Agency Collaboration: A Guide for Federal Managers,* offers advice on successful cross-agency relationships. She says there is a recipe for success, but it depends on a number of factors. Fountain has found that effective collaboration consists of two dimensions—the right people skills and a consistent set of organizational processes. She believes that interagency collaboration is sustainable if, and only if, leaders make strategic use of both elements to manage in a networked government.

Fountain says that people skills are key to developing trust, norms, and connections essential to effective multi-agency initiatives. In cross-boundary teams, informal relationships outside regular hierarchical channels must be forged. Cross-agency collaborative initiatives also need effective organizational processes. Fountain describes seven processes that are generally present in successful collaborations. These include:

- Set significant goals with milestones

- Specify roles and responsibilities

- Formalize agreements among key parties

- Develop shared operations

- Obtain adequate resources

- Create effective communication channels

- Adapt through shared learning

Conclusion

We are in the midst of an exciting, engaging, yet trying period marked by uncertainty, significant challenges, undeniable opportunities, and indelible aspirations. Today's most effective government leaders can spark the imagination to look beyond the day-to-day urgencies and reflect on the serious problems and critical challenges they face today into tomorrow.

Leaders are responsible for envisioning, shaping, and safeguarding the future, creating clarity amidst uncertainty. This is no small feat and it is made increasingly difficult in the 21st century, where rapid, unforeseen change seems to be the only constant. Today's conditions require government executives to go beyond simply doing more with less—to find smarter ways of doing business, using resources more efficiently and investing them more wisely. The dramatic nature of this historical moment cannot be overstated. It is fully revealed by the depth of the challenges being faced. How government leaders respond matters and the conditions require more than vague changes. It is to be understood that today's actions affect future choices and lost opportunities can result in significant costs. In the end, it is not necessarily about retrieving something ideal from the past, but discovering a new path forward in the present. The right kind of leadership is key to finding such a path.

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