

Trend Four: Mission

Aligning Mission Support with Mission Delivery



Agency and program leaders depend on a range of mission support functions, such as finance, technology, acquisition, or workforce management, to get their jobs done. A 2009 study of the U.S. Department of Energy by the National Academy of Public Administration puts it succinctly: “The mission support organizations provide the grease that makes the department run. Without mission support, work in the program offices would grind to a halt.” With the increased complexity imposed by cost-cutting initiatives and increased oversight of agency operations, the ability to align mission support functions with mission delivery is a key trend driving change in government.

Creating the C-Suite in Government to Support Mission Delivery

Twenty-five years ago, federal agencies typically did not have key executives leading mission support functions. These functions were largely seen as administrative transaction services. However, ineffective mission support operations can be quite costly. For example, in 2010, the Postal Service had \$641 million in grievance settlements because of poor management training and inadequate labor-management relations. In another example, a study found that poorly trained contract officers in Iraq and Afghanistan contributed to at least \$30 billion in contract fraud and abuse. And, as widely reported in 2006, the lack of appropriate data security at the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs led to the exposure of private information for more than 26 million veterans.

As a consequence of such persistent failures and a lack of clear leadership in mission support functions, Congress has intervened over the past two decades by raising the profile, formalizing leadership roles, and defining more authority for many of these functions. Formalizing these roles mirrored similar trends in the private sector to create chief financial officers, chief information officers, chief acquisition officers, and chief human capital officers. Most recently, Congress formalized the role of chief operating officers and performance improvement officers as well.

These various “chiefs” reflect different disciplines that have their own professional communities and ways of defining success. The distinctiveness of these communities is reinforced through a series of cross-agency “chief” councils, such as the Chief Financial Officers Council and the Chief Information Officers Council. These councils often spearhead government-wide initiatives. For instance, the CIO Council developed an inventory of all federal data centers and committed to cutting the number in half in the name of increased efficiency. Along with pursuing government-wide initiatives, these councils also share best practices across agencies.

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Core Functions of Agency Mission Support Leaders. Generally, most of these “chiefs” report to the heads of their agencies and have at least three core functions.

- Providing *services* to internal agency customers (such as hiring or installing computers or providing office space)
- Ensuring *compliance* with government-wide requirements (such as merit principles or capital investment guidelines)
- Providing *strategic advice* to agency leaders (such as strategic workforce planning or financial risk management)

Depending on the function, federal mission support leaders may have different customers or stakeholders. For example, when providing services, a chief’s customers may be line managers and employees. When a chief focuses on a compliance issue, the customers may be the government-wide Office of Management and Budget (OMB) or the Office of Personnel Management (OPM). If a chief acts as a strategic advisor, their customer may be the agency head. These functions are not mutually exclusive. In fact, one of the challenges for federal government chiefs is balancing these distinct functions.

Developing a Stronger Mission Focus

Over time, the institutional roles of various mission support chiefs have become clearer within and more organized across agencies. In fact, today there is a common support office for many of the cross-agency mission support councils; it sometimes serves as a convener across the different councils around specific issues.

However, the increased prominence of internally focused mission support functions has raised concerns among externally focused, mission oriented line managers in agencies. Mission managers deliver services to the public, such as air traffic control, environmental cleanup, export assistance, disability benefits, or immigration enforcement at the border. These mission managers rely on, but more importantly, can capitalize on, centrally directed mission support functions, which is a trend found in the business sector. Having common services provided centrally is not only less expensive but often results in higher quality. However, one former mission manager recently noted that in his experience, “the [C-Suite] community is the biggest obstacle to success.”

For example, a 2009 study by the National Academy of Public Administration (NAPA) of several mission support functions at the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE), *Managing at the Speed of Light: Improving Mission-Support Performance*, observes that these centralized functions in the department are seen as dysfunctional by line managers, largely because the various functions do not coordinate with each other. The lack of coordination within and among these functions results in “an inwardly focused, regulation-based, transactional organization.”

The NAPA study concludes that “DOE needs to better integrate and manage the mission support offices’ efforts in order to develop a coordinated approach to providing essential support services.” In addition, it found the mission support offices needed to develop a stronger mission focus: “DOE does not have formal systems to assess how well the mission support offices are meeting the needs of the department and to hold them accountable for doing so.” Anecdotal evidence suggests similar perceptions by mission leaders in other federal departments as well.

Many of these mission support leaders have the resources to help mission leaders get things done. They have staff with specialized expertise; they have access to contractors; and often they have budget and legislative authority. The chiefs can begin to dispel the negative perceptions of mission leaders by proactively using these resources to help deliver agency program results.

Creating Governance Structures that Support Mission Leaders

In addition to encouraging mission support chiefs to focus greater attention on mission delivery, the NAPA study also recommended that the U.S. Department of Energy, for example, create a cross-bureau governance structure. This new structure would better coordinate mission support activities by integrating them more effectively into mission delivery priorities. These include creating:

- An undersecretary for management
- An operations management council
- A mission support council

Moreover, Congress recently established another chief—the chief operating officer (or undersecretary for management). Having been enshrined in law and possessing statutory authority, the COO serves as a nexus between policy and management. Depending on the agency, this role may be held by the deputy secretary or filled by an undersecretary for management.

These recommended structures and new roles alone will not change tendencies found in mission support areas to act independently. Chiefs have to connect with one another through formal and informal means, and balance their three functional roles. The proposed councils referenced above and recommended by NAPA make these connections. The operations management council can serve as a way of addressing cross-functional business system issues. For example, the Defense Business Council is chaired by the U.S. Department of Defense's deputy secretary and is composed of the 19 key mission delivery and mission support leaders from across the department. They collectively develop the strategies for moving forward on the design and investment in key business systems for the department in ways that maximize the effectiveness of mission delivery in the field. At some points during the year, they meet as often as two to three times a week.

Likewise, a mission support council can be a way of focusing attention on the needs of key mission initiatives by serving as a bridge between mission support functions and mission delivery functions within an agency. For example, the mission support executives at the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs have formed a mission support council, holding weekly meetings to address strategic questions—“Do we have the right skill sets?” and “Will this training lead to improvements in mission performance?”—on common intra-departmental initiatives.

Mission Leaders and Mission Support Chiefs Working More Effectively Together

Some senior mission leaders perceive mission support chiefs as hurdles to achieving mission and program results. For them, the mission support executives' priority should be, first and foremost, helping department leaders achieve their mission. The mission

results, such as air traffic control, export assistance, or disability benefits, must be the overriding objective for mission support chiefs. Some mission leaders think the success of support offices should solely be measured by how well the chiefs work with the rest of the organization to achieve a department's mission.

To assist in achieving programmatic results, some former mission leaders recommend mission support offices have a stronger mission orientation and better integration and coordination among the mission support offices. Other former and current mission leaders recognize that several cross-agency mission support communities have matured over the last two decades, providing efficient and effective support functions within and across agencies. In doing this, the mission support chiefs balanced their government-wide stewardship function and day-to-day compliance role with the broader goal of achieving their agency's mission.

Both mission support and mission delivery executives say there are opportunities to improve results if they work together more effectively as a team, both within and across agencies.

The responsibility for improving and integrating mission support services with mission delivery responsibilities does not lie just with mission support chiefs. Effective mission leaders proactively leverage the resources and infrastructure of their agency's mission support functions to meet mission goals. For example, the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Federal Student Aid (FSA) provides loans and grants to millions of students and families to attend college, and the FSA chief financial officer may have expertise in controlling funds that are disbursed across a large population. In this example, mission performance could be enhanced by the mission leader leveraging the mission support expertise. Encouraging better integration among mission leaders and mission support chiefs involves evaluating their formal performance by how well these groups work together.

Both mission support and mission delivery executives say there are opportunities to improve results if they work together more effectively as a team, both within and across agencies. One way to do this is to have agency executives serve in both mission support and mission delivery roles as a part of their career development, much as the commercial sector does. Government executives can develop a better understanding of enterprise-wide priorities that goes beyond just mission level priorities. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs is doing just this within its executive development program, which focuses on creating executives with an enterprise-wide perspective. To do this, its professional development program is proactively developing executive talent through career experiences and expectations that leaders will serve in a range of management functions during the course of their careers. And finally, there is the increased use of cross-departmental councils that regularly convene to tackle issues of integration—examples are the USDA's Operations Council as well as the PerformanceStat meetings at the U.S. Department of the Treasury and at the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Promising Practices for Aligning Mission Support with Mission Delivery

Aligning mission support with mission delivery can drive change in government, and there are promising practices across federal agencies that improve this integration. The following are some of the promising practices that can work to better align mission support chiefs with mission delivery leaders:

- **Departmental chief operating officers serve as mission champions.** Given the roles nexus between policy and management coupled with its statutory authority, the

departmental COO can make a difference by being a mission champion. The chief operating officers have the ability to proactively coordinate the mission support chiefs on behalf of agency mission and program executives, serving as their champions. COOs could continue to focus on initiatives to gain greater efficiencies in mission support services, but ideally not at the expense of strong support for mission managers.

- **Mission support chiefs collaborate more effectively with mission delivery executives.** The operations management council approach employed by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs presents a model for this type of collaboration. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's HUDStat approach can also be adopted across agencies to foster mission support and mission delivery collaboration on meeting critical department priorities.
- **Mission support chiefs use resources to help mission delivery executives.** Chiefs have the discretion to shift resources from compliance-enforcement functions to help integrate the delivery of mission support services. Some agencies have devolved resources to the field, while others have centralized resources into integrated one-stop shared services centers.
- **Encourage greater transparency to the chiefs' various stakeholders.** The chief operating officer at the Office of Personnel Management, Chuck Grimes, says his agency created a dashboard of key mission support measures, such as "time to hire" or "veterans hiring," and made the data widely available. He says this helps program managers make better decisions because they have immediate access to useful data. This approach could be adopted more widely by other agencies.
- **Engage the chiefs' stakeholders in defining what constitutes value to mission.** U.S. Department of Transportation Chief Human Capital Officer Brodi Fontenot says his agency now sponsors an ideation platform to engage employees in joint problem-solving, much like the Transportation Security Administration's IdeaFactory. At the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, former Chief Information Officer Jerry Williams says the leadership team convenes regular meetings of top executives to jointly address mission challenges, such as reducing homelessness.

Cross-Functional Collaboration

In addition to agency-specific initiatives, there are several cross-agency initiatives that could be undertaken by OMB or cross-agency councils. For example, OMB could reintroduce the Quad Council. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, leaders of the four councils of chiefs—finance, information technology, acquisition, and human capital—came together as the Quad Council, which worked with OMB to leverage cross-agency mission support activities that supported a number of e-government initiatives. This model provides an important lens through which to view the issue of collaboration across professional disciplines from a government-wide perspective. The existing cross-agency council support office would be a natural focal point for such an effort.

Mission support chiefs each undertake management improvement initiatives that could benefit from strategically working cross-functionally with their mission support peers. For example, efforts to reduce federal agencies' use of real estate has a human capital component via telework strategies, a technology component relative to connectivity of employees, and financial and acquisition components related to investments to pursue such a strategy.

This cross-functional mission support collaboration could also extend to cross-agency mission delivery initiatives. For example, agencies are now working across boundaries to solve major public challenges such as climate change and food safety. Mission support services for these initiatives have previously been ad hoc. The cross-agency mission support councils could support these initiatives in innovative ways that increase efficiency and accountability.

Conclusion

In the end, mission delivery focuses on what agencies do and how they do it while mission support enables mission delivery. Given the critical challenges facing government today, the ability of government executives to properly align mission support functions with mission delivery can help them respond more effectively to their mission and management challenges as well as drive change within their departments. Both mission support and mission delivery executives acknowledge there are opportunities to improve results, but that it requires them to work more effectively as a team, both within and across agencies.

Resources

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U.S. Government Accountability Office. *Organizational Transformation: Implementing Chief Operating Officer/Chief Management Officer Positions in Federal Agencies*. GAO-08-34. November 2007.