

Strengthening the Connective Links in Government

By John M. Kamensky

Over the past five years, the Obama administration has pursued a host of innovation-fostering initiatives that work to strengthen the connective links among and within federal agencies. Many factors contribute to the rise of such efforts, including presidential support, statutory encouragement, and an ongoing evolution in the way government does its business. The challenge now is how to solidify the best of them so they remain in place beyond the upcoming 2017 presidential transition.

Increased Use of Collaborative Governance

Dr. Rosemary O’Leary, an astute observer of trends in government, describes how government has steadily increased its use of collaborative approaches in lieu of the traditional hierarchical, bureaucratic approach. According to O’Leary, there are several explanations for this shift:

- First, “most public challenges are larger than one organization, requiring new approaches to addressing public issues” such as housing, pollution, transportation, and healthcare.
- Second, collaboration helps to improve the effectiveness and performance of programs “by encouraging new ways of providing services.”
- Third, technology advances in recent years have helped “organizations and their employees to share information in a way that is integrative and interoperable.”
- Finally, “citizens are seeking additional avenues for engaging in governance, resulting in new and different forms of collaborative problem solving and decision making.”

Early in his administration, President Barack Obama publicly placed a premium on the use of collaboration. One of his first directives to federal agencies set the tone for how he envisioned his administration would govern, directing agencies to be “collaborative” and “use innovative tools, methods,



and systems to cooperate among themselves, across levels of government, and with nonprofits, businesses and individuals.” To that end, the Obama administration undertook a series of supporting actions, including establishing cross-agency priority goals around issues such as reducing veteran homelessness, data sharing, and streamlining the sharing of social media licenses between agencies. Tackling many of these issues successfully involved the transformative intersection of innovation and technology.

In 2010, when Congress passed a series of amendments to the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA), it provided the statutory basis for a broader, more consistent use of collaboration as a way of implementing policies and



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programs. These changes put in place a series of administrative processes:

- The designation of agency and cross-agency priority goals
- The naming of goal leaders
- The convening of a set of regular progress reviews

Taken together, these legislative changes embedded the value of collaboration into the administrative fabric of the governing bureaucracy. In addition, the evolution of technology tools and the advances in the use of social media has dramatically lowered the technical and bureaucratic barriers to working in a more collaborative environment.

Ongoing Innovation Initiatives

There have been longstanding efforts to work within and across agencies more collaboratively, and the trends noted above have accelerated efforts in recent years. Following are three sets of examples, both large and small, of efforts underway in the federal government today. They are at different stages of maturity, but when taken together, their cumulative impact on the federal culture is increasing in significance.

Most of these collaborative efforts focus on initiatives to develop, encourage, and sustain collaborative capacity building; they include the creation of informal communities of practice, rather than specific policy initiatives, such as cross-agency efforts to streamline construction permits for large-scale infrastructure projects.

Community Capacity Building

One of the more encouraging sets of initiatives in terms of changing the federal mindset is the evolution of collaborative capacity-building tools and communities that can be applied to a wide range of policy areas. These include:

- **The MAX Community.** Over 150,000 federal employees have joined the “MAX Community,” a cross-agency electronic sharing platform, so they can work with colleagues in other agencies more readily than through traditional channels. This platform is one of the pioneering efforts in cross-agency collaboration, launched in the mid-2000s. One of its key attractions to federal employees is its secure authentication capabilities, so colleagues can verify who they are working with.
- **Office of Executive Councils.** By statute, a number of cross-agency councils for mission- support “chiefs” have evolved, such as the Chief Financial Officers Council and the Chief Information Officers Council. Each council previously had its own staff support, but today, there is a single office providing joint support to all of the councils. This not only creates efficiencies, but also increases the opportunity for cross-council collaboration.
- **Informal Communities of Practice.** The General Services Administration’s Office of Citizen Services and Innovation Technology provides facilitation, training, and coordination, and serves as a catalyst for cross-agency collaborative efforts. Its goal is to drive adoption, overcome legal and other barriers, help organize a coalition of the willing, and share best practices and infuse them



into the fabric of the government. Examples of some of its efforts include:

- The Challenge.gov and other competition awards programs that crowdsource new innovations, such as the “robo-call killer” app that the Federal Trade Commission recently commissioned.
- The Citizen Engagement Playbook, which smoothes agencies’ approaches to involve citizens in their programs.
- The cross-agency Open Data, Mobile, and Community Experience communities, which foster best practices and lessons learned in targeted initiatives.

- **Benchmarking Mission-Support Operations.** The various cross-agency mission-support councils are sponsoring a series of cross-agency benchmarking studies to better understand the commonalities and differences in the costs and delivery of common services, including human resources, financial management, real estate, and IT. These studies will help agencies better understand their own operations in the context of other agencies, and identify potential opportunities for moving to shared services arrangements.

Technology and Innovation Capacity Building

In a recent *Fast Company* article, former federal Chief Technology Officer Todd Park describes the Obama administration’s three-part systematic effort to build government-wide and agency-level capacities for technology and innovation.

- **The U.S. Digital Service.** The first is the creation of the U.S. Digital Service in 2014 within the Office of Management and Budget (OMB). This is “a group of technologists who strategize about what projects should become government priorities and which people should work on them.” According to its website, it “was launched to bring in the country’s brightest digital talent to transform how government works for American citizens and businesses by dramatically improving the way government builds and buys digital services.”
- **18F.** The second is 18F in the General Services Administration. This is a group of approximately 90 technologists and designers who take on jobs from anywhere within government that are in need of digital help. It has informal ties to the U.S. Digital Service, but it is essentially a service agency.
- **Agency-Level Digital Services.** The third is a series of tech teams, ranging in size from five people to 50,



that are being created in the two dozen largest federal agencies. These teams will work closely with the U.S. Digital Service for guidance and may turn to 18F for its services.

In addition to these organizational units, the administration created an IT talent pipeline into government via the Presidential Innovation Fellows (PIF) program. First launched in 2012, the Fellows program brings top talent from the technology sector and has them tackle specific projects across the government for a 6- to 24-month period. Of the nearly 100 fellows to date, nearly two-thirds have decided to stay in government. In August 2015, the president issued an executive order that institutionalized this program.

Individual Capacity Building

The Obama administration has sponsored a series of other targeted initiatives to help develop the collaborative skills and competencies of individuals in agencies across the government.

- **GovConnect.** The largest capacity-building effort is sponsored by the Office of Personnel Management and is dubbed “GovConnect.” It is an effort to allow individuals to develop their skills and professional portfolios by volunteering for project-based “micro-tasks” in other agencies or units. For example, in the Environmental Protection Act, one person working on pesticides policy had Geographic Information Systems skills, and applied to work on a part-time project in the IT office to map key facilities around the nation that were listed in the toxic release inventory.

- **White House Leadership Development Program.** In December 2014, President Obama announced the creation of a White House-level leadership development program for cross-agency collaborative leaders. The program was launched in Fall 2015 with an inaugural class of 17 individuals who are high-potential candidates for the career Senior Executive Service.
- **Performance Enthusiasts and Ambassadors.** The cross-agency Performance Improvement Council has created a training and mentoring program to allow agency staff who are not working directly in performance offices to develop measurement and analytics skills that they can bring to their own workplaces.
- **Leaders Delivery Network.** The Performance Improvement Council is also sponsoring the development of a learning, best practices, and mentoring network among the 100 or so agency-level “priority goal leaders.” These roles were created by law in recent years and this network is designed to help them develop relationships across agencies and develop their skills as collaborative leaders.

Creating Sustainability

Since many of these initiatives are relatively new, the administration may want to take steps to help sustain them during the transition to the next administration. Following are some examples used in the past to help bridge the transition:

- **Third-party Case Studies.** Showcase a successful initiative in media or have a third party document the initiative via a case study. Something similar to this occurred in the Clinton-to-Bush transition in 2000 when a third-party case study was written about the value of the President’s Management Council. Career staff at OMB used that study to validate the value of the Council, and the Bush administration re-established it.
- **Executive Orders.** Have the president sign an executive order to cement an initiative. This was done toward the end of the George W. Bush administration to solidify its performance management initiatives by having each department designate a “performance improvement

officer,” and create a cross-agency Performance Improvement Council. Many of these elements were included in the update of the GPRA statute in 2010. More recently, this approach was used to formalize the Presidential Innovation Fellows program in August 2015.

- **Career Champions.** Recruit well-respected career-level senior executives to be champions for an initiative. This is how the MAX Community made a seamless transition from the Bush to the Obama administration. In this case, both OMB and agency career executives convinced incoming political appointees that continuing and expanding the community’s MAX platform was a smart move.
- **Entrepreneurial Leaders.** Entrepreneurial career leaders in agencies can proactively reach out to their new political appointees to explain ongoing initiatives and how they can be helpful in implementing their political priorities.
- **Congressional Support.** Work with the appropriate congressional staffs to ensure authorizing language and/or appropriations are on tap. This helped in the development of the well-regarded Performance Partnerships initiative, which was developed late in the Bush administration and set the stage for its rapid implementation in the early Obama administration.

Conclusion

When developing collaborative capacities, Dr. O’Leary notes that: “Working in a collaborative capacity means that the individual is not in charge and is leading in a way that is nontraditional.” She says that in a world where collaboration is commonplace, the types of leadership skills are very different. The skills are no longer those needed to control large bureaucratic organizations, but rather the ability “to bring people together, to engage partners horizontally, and to bring multiple collaborators together for a common goal in a situation of interdependence.”

Continuing to develop the connective links for making this new approach to governance possible is a key challenge facing the next administration. Building on the foundation of initiatives underway today may speed success. ■