

MEMO #11

COLLABORATION ACROSS BOUNDARIES

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The next President will enter office with ambitious visions to execute and many promises to keep. No problem that matters fits any longer within individual government agencies or, for that matter, any single level of government. Therefore, the Administration will need a fresh approach to collaboration across boundaries—between federal agencies, across levels of government, between government and the private and nonprofit sectors, and across global boundaries. Collaboration across boundaries will help the new Administration implement policies and results well beyond the power of any one agency (Kettl, 2016).

At a minimum, the failure to collaborate across boundaries would limit what the new administration could accomplish (DeSeve, 2013). At worst, the new Administration would risk falling into catastrophic traps like those that captured past Administrations from both parties: the George W. Bush Administration's struggles with Hurricane Katrina; and the Obama Administration's difficulties with the launch of the Affordable Care Act. In both cases, the failure to collaborate across boundaries brought enormous costs in dollars, lives, time, political capital, and trust in America's governing institutions. The lessons are clear: success depends on building strong alliances; and treating those partners as genuine collaborators, instead merely as subcontractors.

The new Administration faces legislative imperatives it can transform into collaboration opportunities. In particular, the Government Performance and Results Act of 2003 (GPRA) and the Government Performance and Results Modernization Act of 2013 require that the new Administration *must* identify its most important strategic goals; define a limited number of cross-agency priority goals and individual agency priority goals; and regularly report on progress toward those goals. The new executive budget, the congressional budget resolution, and the Budget Reconciliation Act provide other opportunities for strengthening collaboration across boundaries and achieving Administration priorities.

There are many examples of how effective collaboration can improve policy implementation and government performance. There are just as many examples of how failed collaboration can cripple it. The new Administration will face unprecedented challenges, with constrained resources and ever-rising expectations. It also has a set of legislative mandates that give it unmatched opportunity.

The upside of more collaboration is better use and allocation of resources and better results. The downside? Missed opportunities and failed attempts at reaching the goals set out by the Administration at its onset.

The recommendations below draw from experiences in various arenas in which collaboration has been successful and offer suggestions on how to build upon those successes, in addition to outlining opportunities for implementing collaboration across government.

Advancing the President's Highest Priority Goals:

1. Use the GPRA Modernization Act to Promote Collaboration

Several aspects of the GPRA Modernization Act foster collaboration, including the Cross-Agency Priority Goals (CAP Goals) and the Performance Improvement Council, which consists of the Deputy Director for Management as chair and Chief Improvement Officers from each agency.

2. Propose a Revised FY18 Budget

The new President should propose a revised FY18 budget and use FY18 Budget Resolution, the FY18 Budget Reconciliation Act, and the FY18 appropriations bills to promote collaboration and help achieve the Administration's highest priority goals. Passage of the Budget Reconciliation Act could change existing laws and create new performance partnerships.

Administrative Collaboration:

3. Establish Collaborative Approaches

Establish approaches whereby multiple agencies or sectors contribute to a cause (in dollars, ideas, staffing, facilities) to improve the chances of success. When more entities have a stake in the game, more "resources" are incentivized to ensure the success of their respective investment. Some program designers build efforts requiring grant or contract recipients to provide matching funds to trigger federal participation. Others, who miss the point, think an unfunded mandate will produce the desired results, which not only is far from collaborative, but can be seen as an act of mere coercion.

4. Fully Utilize the Experience of Civil Servants

It is imperative that each transition team spend some time understanding the federal system and preparing appointees to work effectively with civil servants, particularly in high-grade positions. These federal employees have spent decades learning how to make a large bureaucracy work and how to further the mission of their particular agency, department, division, or cause and will provide valuable insight to the new Administration.

5. Build Cross-Unit Collaboration as a Criteria for Annual Bonuses

OPM should build cross-unit collaboration into criteria for annual bonuses for all high-grade employees and should build cross-sector, cross-division, and cross-department collaboration into the qualification criteria (ECQs) for the Senior Executive Service (SES).

6. Assign a Pool of Funds as a Resource

OMB should assign a pool of funds to provide resources to cross-agency collaborations on significant national issues involving three or more federal agencies or single federal agencies with multiple state, county, and local agencies.

7. Publicize the Action Tracker

GAO should more widely publicize its Action Tracker. The Action Tracker identifies areas of fragmentation, overlap, and duplication, and publicizing this would lead federal employees to take more corrective actions and general citizens to insist on more accountability.

Accountability and Collaboration:

8. Reinforce Formal Accountability Systems

Reinforce formal accountability systems (reporting and oversight) by instituting informal dynamics such as shared norms, trust, and facilitative behaviors. These can include reports of interactions, facilitative information sharing, and mutual feedback among collaborators about progress toward goals. This has the potential to reduce competition, turf battles, and staff turnover. Additionally, these actions build trust, which reduces the cost of operating in collaboration.

Lessons from the Recovery Act:

9. Utilize Past Lessons

When dealing with large-scale spending efforts that span multiple states and counties, utilize lessons from the Recovery Accountability and Transparency Board (RATB) to ensure effective collaboration.

The actions and strategy of the Recovery Accountability and Transparency Board (RATB) helped codify a new vision for future administrations on how government spending should be reported on, displayed, and overseen in order to maximize transparency and accountability for the public. Collaboration between federal, state, and local governments, as well as between federal agencies themselves, allowed for the effective implementation of two complex systems that maximized transparency on government spending.

FederalReporting.gov, an inbound site for recipients of Recovery Act contracts and grants, and Recovery.gov, a public-facing site that utilized geospatial technology to allow citizens to see exactly where government funds were being spent in their own neighborhoods, served the dual benefit of promoting collaboration across governments and establishing a system of accountability amongst those governments. Each state and federal agency named a Recovery Czar, who reported directly to the Governor or the Agency Head and communicated weekly with the Vice President's office, OMB, and the RATB.

In broad spending efforts similar to those of the Recovery Act, the government must evolve and make greater use of new tools like geospatial mapping, which will in turn promote collaboration within the federal government and across federal, state, and local governments.

Environmental Policy Collaboration:

10. Utilize E-Enterprise as a More Efficient Method of Environmental Enforcement

There has been a growing recognition that traditional methods of environmental enforcement through on-site inspections, fragmented approval of permits across environmental media, and spot checks to test compliance tend to waste scarce resources and leave sizable gaps in environmental protection. E-Enterprise options make greater use of modern technology and new techniques such as remote sensing, continuous emissions monitoring, and geographic information systems. The National Environmental Information Exchange Network was established in the 1990s to explore these possibilities, and has gained momentum through a robust partnership between the Environmental Council of the States (ECOS) and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and has evolved into a formal collaborative partnership between these organizations and other intergovernmental partners, guided by a Charter for State and EPA E-Enterprise Leadership Council.

11. Leverage E-Enterprise

Leverage E-Enterprise to revitalize environmental performance partnership programs of the 1990s and 2000s. These programs featured federal incentives for state, tribal, and local partners to introduce ways in which they could achieve environmental performance outcomes superior to those that would be expected through adherence to existing routines. The federal government can then approve and support the proposals through more flexible oversight and use of grants to state and local governments.

Additional Recommendations for Enhancing Collaboration:

12. Develop a Robust Engagement Strategy

While state and local governments don't always agree on issues, involving them early will improve both the development of policy and reduce the risk of implementation failures. Engagement between federal partners and state & local governments is often paternal, directive, without shared goals, and one way. Some lessons for success in developing strong relationships with the intergovernmental partners include:

- Focus on what to achieve, not how;
- Develop options for flexibility on the how;
- Agree up front on the metrics of success; and
- Leverage the resources of the national associations representing state and local governments,

such as NGA, NCSL, CSG, USCM, NLC, NACo, ICMA and GFOA.

13. Create Institutional Capacity to Work with Intergovernmental Partners

There is no longer any institutional capacity to judge the “health” of the intergovernmental system or to understand the complexity of the federal, state, local, and nonprofit interaction in delivering national policy. Developing an advisory panel of state and local experts within the Domestic Policy Council and recruiting staff to OMB who have significant experience across the intergovernmental system would be helpful steps.

14. Realize that if Results Count, Management Matters

Regardless of the domestic policy, most of the risk is not about bad policy but poorly executed implementation. Investing in the capacity of federal agencies and the intergovernmental partners to manage complex, multi-disciplinary and multi-sector strategies is an important investment. These skills can be developed and should be recognized as the new administration thinks about appointees and the Senior Executive Service.

Collaboration is a powerful antidote to stagnation. When government collaborates with other organizations – within or outside of government – the payoffs can be invaluable. But like any payoff, collaboration needs early investments. Spending time and other resources on clarifying expectations of roles and responsibilities in advance and subsequent investments in relationship-building, laying a foundation of trust, and finding ways to celebrate individual and collective achievements early on, will almost certainly pay off during the transition to the next Administration.

References

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DeSeve, G. E. (2013). “Managing recovery: An insider’s view.” Washington, DC: IBM Center for the Business of Government.