MEMO #12

CROSS-AGENCY COLLABORATION:
Building the Ecosystem to Support Cross-Agency Capacity

Jane E. Fountain

The incoming administration must translate governing priorities into clear goals. Many priority goals inherently require cross-agency collaboration. How can new leaders leverage available processes to develop and support effective collaboration? The Government Performance and Results Act Modernization Act of 2010 directs the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) to develop government wide priorities in the form of cross-agency priority (CAP) goals. What lessons have been learned from the experience of interagency collaboration? What are the most promising models for networked collaboration within the executive branch?

This paper outlines key steps to align the many institutions within the federal government that must act with greater coherence and coordination to make cross-agency collaboration sustainable and effective. Based on previous research and roundtable discussions convened as part of the Management Roadmap initiative organized by the Partnership for Public Service and the IBM Center for the Business of Government (http://presidentialtransition.org/ready-to-govern/management-roadmap.php) this paper suggests specific recommendations for new leaders.

The Goals of Cross-Agency Collaboration

Contemporary policy problems are increasingly cross-boundary in nature and require cross-boundary responses. Moreover, imperatives for cost reduction, efficiency, effectiveness and streamlined services move cross-agency collaboration to the fore.

The goals in an increasingly interdependent federal government include:

- Strategic attention to cross-agency collaboration beginning with the transition teams;

- Political appointees in executive roles with the capacity to manage cross-agency, complex initiatives;

- Strong alignment from the White House to operating levels to ensure coherence between policy and implementation;

- Sustained focus on cross-agency priority projects even when crises and unanticipated events threaten to derail the president's priorities;

- Making evident the emerging ecosystem of institutions, roles, councils, and tools that constitute a supportive environment for cross-agency collaboration; and

- Clear understanding of differences between mission-oriented cross-agency collaboration, which brings together expertise across boundaries, and mission-support cross-agency collaboration which tends to focus more on streamlining and reducing redundancies.

Recommended Actions

1. **Focus on Cross-Agency Management and Implementation**

   Create a group within the transition team to focus on cross-agency management and implementation.

   Transition teams should include a group focused on cross-agency goals and the related policy and management objectives to support them. This group should identify which new administration priorities are government wide, cross-agency or single-agency and establish the appropriate management capacity required for their achievement. This team could foster planning to use management tools and systems already in practice--for example, the interagency councils--to support cross-agency goals.

   By making top management appointments quickly and with an eye toward expertise in cross-boundary management, the new administration will increase the likelihood that cross-agency initiatives will be implemented successfully during the first term. The next administration should build on existing initiatives, best practices and governance structures rather than embarking on new, untested measures.

2. **Appoint a White House Chief Operating Officer**

   Appoint a White House chief operating officer to oversee the portfolio of mission-focused cross-agency priority initiatives.

   Select a chief operating officer (COO), working for the president and reporting to the chief of staff, to ensure sustained attention and greater coherence to administration priorities that are cross-agency in nature. This individual would coordinate White House offices and federal agencies required for such initiatives while working with Congress to build support for cross-agency initiatives. The role requires a seasoned executive with federal government experience and demonstrated capacity to successfully manage complex initiatives. The COO should work closely with the OMB deputy director for management to align cross-agency goals with existing cross-agency councils as well as evolving resource priorities.

3. **Leverage Existing Ecosystem of Cross-Agency Institutions**

   Leverage the existing ecosystem of cross-agency institutions to support cross-agency collaboration.

An ecosystem of cross-agency institutions has evolved to support cross-agency collaboration. The next administration should strengthen the coherence of this ecosystem. New executive appointees should receive a directory or map of cross-agency institutions that support enterprise government; in 2008, OMB provided such an overview.

Key connections that require stronger alignment between policy and implementation include those between the policy councils, the President's Management Council (PMC), and the cross-agency councils. The deputy director for management within OMB should be given responsibility to link the PMC more closely with cross-agency councils perhaps by designating a PMC liaison to each cross-agency council in an ex-officio capacity and for each of the cross-agency councils to establish a liaison to the PMC.

The next administration should strengthen the role of agency chief operating officers (typically deputy secretaries and deputy administrators) by recruiting and selecting political appointees with expertise and experience in complex management operations. Similarly, agency COOs require strong career executives to work with them. The GSA Office of Executive Councils, including the Performance Improvement Council, play critical support roles for agencies and OMB.

The OMB can strengthen cross-cutting initiatives on the budget side by selecting an OMB examiner to coordinate program dollars. For example, the STEM cross-agency initiative includes several agencies and appropriate accounts for each. The budget examiner could produce greater coherence in funding through stronger coordination across these accounts.

In addition, better tracking of funds, perhaps with the help of the Digital Accountability and Transparency Act of 2014, would increase agency confidence in sharing funds for cross-agency projects by enhancing data visibility and transparency. For each cross-agency goal project, a goal leader might have a counterpart at OMB assigned, perhaps a program associate director or deputy associate director, with a branch chief tracking programmatic dollars across agencies tied to a given cross-agency project.

4. **Advance Mission-Focused Outcomes by Proactively Coordinating Cross-Agency Activities**

In tackling complex problems such as veteran homelessness, federal permitting, and sustainable communities, federal executives and their teams have demonstrated that effectively coordinating activities across agencies delivers strong mission outcomes. Yet there is less experience with cross-agency mission focused projects than with cross-cutting administrative support functions. Mission-focused cross-agency goals are qualitatively different from mission-support cross-agency projects because they require coordinating expertise and capacity that lies across agencies and departments whereas mission-support cross-agency projects focus on integration and standardization across boundaries.

Each mission-focused CAP goal has distinctive features related to mission characteristics. But in addition to distinct dimensions that must be considered, such initiatives nevertheless often provide opportunities for integration across agencies such as increasing standardization and harmonization of practices, data standards, metrics and terminology.

For more than 15 years, cross-agency projects have helped public managers build considerable knowledge base for how to work effectively across agency boundaries. The next administration has a unique opportunity to leverage lessons learned from the 2014-2017 mission-focused CAP goal projects to deepen the government's capacity to solve complex, highly interdependent, cross-boundary problems. The next administration will inherit a set of seven mission-focused CAP goals. These initiatives should be reaching maturation and should yield demonstrable results and "lessons learned". It will be imperative to distill lessons learned from these cross-agency executive teams to inform the next set of CAP goals to be launched in 2018 as well as other mission-focused cross-boundary initiatives.

5. **Set Ambitious Enterprise Level Goals**

Set ambitious enterprise level mission-support goals to drive efficiency, innovation and customer satisfaction. The next administration has an opportunity to harvest the substantial benefits of shared services, building upon the results of sustained work by federal officials for more than two decades. During the past decade alone several lines of business have matured to shared services models making further integration and streamlining possible. Several agencies are migrating to shared solutions with financial management and human resources shared services currently at the forefront (OMB 2015).

In 2015, the shared services leadership community moved to consolidate and formalize gains under development for several years. In October 2015, OMB and GSA announced the first government-wide shared services management and oversight operating model for mission support functions. The next administration should continue to develop the governance and management structures that provide support and migration paths as agencies transition to shared services. GSA should continue to support its Unified Shared Services Management Office to further implementation of cross administrative functions (Cordell 2015).

Conclusion

The next president will enter office with a long list of campaign promises and a strong desire to accomplish them. But implementation will rely increasingly on an ability to use complex management systems, many of which lie across agency boundaries. By taking a cross-boundary approach to governing, the administration can deliver faster, more effective results and solve problems that cannot be addressed through single agency approaches.

References

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