# DELIVER RESULTS

Your main thing will be keeping "the main thing" as your main thing, as one former federal agency head remarked. Your vision, agenda, and leadership team will be pulled in multiple directions, and the more directions you pursue, the harder it will be to deliver any results.

A former deputy secretary divided issues crossing his desk into three buckets and consciously ensured an appropriate balance among them to effectively deliver expected results:

- The first bucket is comprised of new initiatives—reforming the tax code, standing up a new poverty program, launching a food safety education campaign, a "cyber sprint" to reduce vulnerabilities, etc. These might be self-generated or imposed by the White House or the Office of Management and Budget. These may be initially small and time-intensive activities, but with some discretion over their progress.
- The second bucket is comprised of the day-to-day operations of the agency's mission—air traffic control, processing patents, collecting employment statistics, inspecting meat plants, etc. This is where the majority of your agency's staff will be focused. Oftentimes, these are run efficiently and effectively by career staff and will likely not require a great deal of your personal time.
- The third bucket is unanticipated events—like the BP oil spill, an especially vicious hurricane, a pandemic outbreak, a scandal in another agency where "fixes" suddenly affect your agency, etc. These cannot be planned for but need to be expected. They oftentimes have the capacity to consume a large part of your time and energy.

Having a clear vision and priorities helps, even when you're buffeted by many other demands.

## Leverage existing processes, including strategic reviews.

Avoid the temptation to start by creating your own decision-making processes or new operating committees. Conduct a review of what processes and committees are already in place. Typically, there are decision processes such as strategic planning, budgeting, and performance management; and there are operating processes such as contracting, grants, and personnel. Many of these have statutory roots and may not be easily susceptible to change.

Determine if the processes work and add value, and if so, use them. It will take less time and energy to leverage what is there than to create new ones. For example, if you want an external advisory body, see if one already exists that you can adapt. Because of existing open government laws, creating a new one could take up to a year.

In recent years, agencies have created regular data-driven review forums (e.g., HUD-Stat and the deputy secretary of Veterans Affairs'

monthly performance reviews) to convene agency leaders around targeted priority goals to assess progress and solve problems. Agencies also hold annual strategic reviews to assess progress on broad objectives and resources needed to ensure progress in the future.

## Make sure agency operations are running effectively.

You cannot ignore the need for the agency to be managed. You will have a more than full-time job managing political and stakeholder relationships, your own priorities, and the various crises that will occur during your tenure. Management is a difficult discipline that requires a set of rare skills. The federal government also offers a manager unique challenges because it puts such a high premium on adherence to process and has multiple points where external organizations (e.g., Congress or OMB) can intervene.

You will need someone, or perhaps several people, with the right management skills, including an ability to manage in the federal government "ecosystem." We cannot emphasize enough that effective management depends on a high degree of skill and it will be critical to get people who have those skills. Don't go for people who just have the right idea on the policy. This is a different skill from getting that policy implemented.

One effective model is to pair a political appointee with a career deputy to manage day-to-day operations, but the effectiveness of that model depends on how well that deputy works with your political appointee and how often you would need to get engaged. Whatever approach you take, make sure you have skilled managers overseeing agency operations.

## Maintain a results-oriented climate and a sense of urgency.

Maintaining a results-oriented climate in your agency will be important to mission success and may require you to overcome two tendencies within the bureaucracy. First, the federal government puts a high value on process, but it has multiple organizations establishing and overseeing these processes. The federal government, however, has poor methods for resolving the inevitable contradictions resulting from these overlapping processes. Worse, the established processes are buffeted by external pressures from Congress, OMB, and other stakeholders who will impose reporting, reducing or changing budgets, and adding extra requirements.

Second, individuals tend to be rewarded more for process adherence than for program results. There are few individual financial rewards for mission success, and penalties for mission failure tend to be modest as well. Many people motivated to achieve the mission work in spite of the incentives, but many go with the flow.

You can overcome these two factors by maintaining a climate that frames issues around how they help or hinder achieving the agency's mission. You can require that the right issues be handled at the right level. You can make

sure that there is a governance framework around your programs that at least gets the basics right: authority and accountability in the same place, people in charge of their programs having control over the budgets to deliver those programs, clarity on who can make what decisions, and a clear and quick process for raising and resolving issues.

## Make sure your mission-support executives (chief financial, acquisition, information, and human capital officers, as well as the general counsel) are focused on program results, not their fiefdoms.

You will depend on your program managers for program results, but they will be dependent on other support organizations to deliver. Someone needs to manage the supporting people, technology, contracts, and financials. You should not be personally involved in these questions, but you will want to make sure that you have strong people in charge of these areas and that they can work together to support the programs. This is a special case of the discussion just above, but worth emphasizing in its own right.

Unfortunately, these different professional communities are often better at dictating what they want the rest of the agency to do for them rather than finding a joint strategy to support the larger mission. The financial community will tell you it needs a clean audit. The acquisition community will stress the need for good contract oversight. The information technology community will stress the importance of a standard infrastructure. The human capital community will stress the need for a human capital plan. And the attorneys will stress the need for legal sufficiency.

All of these are important, but they only matter in the context of your mission. You cannot afford to spend time refereeing disputes about whether a financial computer system falls under the financial area or information technology. It is both. You can tell the various areas' leadership that you expect them to work together and the test of success is whether the agency mission succeeds. Your programs need the legally sufficient joint product of technology, contracting, finance, and human resources, not the clash of each community's independent view.

## Keep the discussion on evidence-based measurable results.

The trend in recent decades has been to move more of the government conversation to the results achieved rather than the resources expended. Not all constituencies embrace this approach and any discussion of results is open to spin. Nonetheless, an ongoing concentration on results has value beyond the ideas of good government, particularly as the American people have become less trusting of the government. Focusing on results helps your agency concentrate on the things that matter.

In recent years, there has also been an emphasis on evidence-based approaches, and many of these are embedded into existing programs, mostly

on the domestic side of government. For example, data-driven analyses have contributed to reductions in crime and recidivism, and recent legislation has created demonstration pilots to better coordinate disability activities across the federal government based on what works. Several agencies have created "what works" clearinghouses of program evaluation studies on different programmatic interventions in areas such as education, employment, and law enforcement. Because many of these "what works" initiatives focus on creating measurable results, they have bipartisan appeal.

Finally, using measurable results gives you the moral high ground in debates with critics and can help you in the court of public opinion. Keep yourself and your agency focused on measurable results.

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### Takeaways

- Leverage existing processes, including strategic reviews.
- Make sure agency operations are running effectively.
- Maintain a results-oriented climate and a sense of urgency.
- Make sure your mission-support executives (chief financial, acquisition, information, and human capital officers, as well as the general counsel) are focused on program results, not their fiefdoms.
- Keep the discussion on evidence-based measurable results.