

DEVELOP A VISION AND A FOCUSED AGENDA

You may have come to your agency to manage an ongoing operation that works reasonably well following traditional processes. You may have come to help your agency deliver new programs. You may have the goal of completely transforming your agency and redefining its mission.

Your efforts at your agency may be an integral part of the administration's core agenda with regular senior-level direction from the White House. Or, you may find that it is almost completely up to you to decide what your agency priorities should be. Whatever your situation, you will want to convey your overall vision but concentrate on a few key priorities.

Your vision can inspire your colleagues, workforce, and constituents to think and act creatively in carrying out your strategic priorities in the context of your agency's mission. As Beth Noveck and Stefaan G. Verhulst, both of the Governance Lab at New York University, wrote, "Innovation can be a critical tool for the next administration to achieve presidential priorities and improve government operations."*

Develop a vision for your agency with input from your political and career staff, but make sure it is your own.

A vision gives the big picture view of where you want to take your agency. It should clearly describe the broad outcomes you want to have accomplished when you leave the agency. State your vision simply and do not weigh it down with too many adjectives or dependent clauses. It needs to be aligned with your agency's core values and programs. It needs to be realistic, but it also needs to be aspirational and push your agency beyond what it is achieving today. It should make sense to the agency's customers. Ideally, it will give your employees a line of sight between what they do in their jobs and the vision.

The administration taking office in 2017 will be the first to benefit from a law passed in 2010 that creates a new lever for incoming agency leaders to embed their new visions into the institutional processes of their agencies. The Government Performance and Results Modernization Act requires agencies to refresh their strategic plans at the beginning of each new administration and deliver those plans to Congress along with their first budget in the subsequent year. Agencies must also align their annual operating plan (technically called the "agency performance plan") with the goals in the new strategic plan. Many agencies also tie their executives' personal performance agreements to their progress of these plans. This gives you a mechanism and a set of processes to influence action on the vision and priorities important to you and the new administration.

Test your vision against the administration's agenda and your political and senior career staff, but make sure it is yours. Your career staff can tell

* See *Additional Resources*, page 138.

you how what you say may be heard, what words are “loaded,” and how your vision compares to what has been tried in the past.

Work with your senior political and career staff in crafting the vision, but don't let a committee write it. Committees add adjectives and clauses as they labor to cover all the contingencies. You want something that inspires, not something exhaustive. Good visions tell a story in which people can see themselves.

Convey a sense of urgency.

If your vision is centered on outcomes that matter, it is important to get there sooner rather than later. The tendency in Washington is for complexity, scale, and responsibility diffusion, which slows things down. If you don't convey a sense of urgency, your agency may never get there.

Communicate the vision.

An effective vision drives behavior. It cannot simply be a slogan on a wall or a new brochure. It needs to be real. You will need to communicate the vision regularly. You will need stories that illustrate what it means. Your agency will need to have short-term objectives that get it closer to that vision.

You will need a strategy to convey the vision to more than your immediate staff. They have a good idea of what you are looking for, but there are hundreds, perhaps thousands, of others who lack that advantage. Talking about what you want to achieve and why it matters will be important. You can supplement your personal efforts with staff's efforts to help with written material and with choosing the right media venues. You may even want to start your own blog and participate in social media.

Communicating your vision will be critical to keeping your agency on track and should be a priority. It will take a continuous effort to communicate to the rank and file what you want to do and why it matters in a way that enables them to see themselves in the picture. The more you can convey what you want in terms that make sense to them, the more effective your organization will be. It is almost impossible to over-communicate. So many voices talk to them that even your voice will have trouble getting through. The same is true of your key stakeholders. Keep the message simple and in terms that matter to your agency's customers, and repeat it over and over again. Make sure the message makes sense in the larger context of what the administration wants to deliver.

Harness agency plans to your new vision.

The agency's strategic and tactical plans will need to be adjusted to reflect your new vision. There may be budget implications as well. Task your staff with making those changes and briefing you quarterly on their progress.

Do not get too engaged in the details, but use the meetings to assess whether the agency is moving in the right direction overall. Use the agency's existing planning mechanisms rather than developing new ones.

In alignment with your agency's priority goals (see Chapter Six), select a few priorities where you can personally make a difference.

You have more to get done than you can get done. Your agency faces a large number of pressing issues calling for your attention. Many of them you know about and care about because that is what made you want to take this job in the first place. You can't do them all, and the more you spread your energies, the less you will get done. When everything is a priority, nothing is a priority. You will need to decide on a few big things that you want to accomplish during your tenure. Pick those that matter and are possible. Tie them to your vision.

You may want to get up every morning and go through a mental checklist of how your actions that day will advance these big things. This does not mean that you ignore everything else your agency does, but it does mean that you keep personally focused on the big things.

Keep your goals in outcome terms and revisit them regularly. Keep asking yourself:

- What does success look like?
- What do I want to achieve?
- What outputs or milestones do I need to achieve this month to move toward one of the outcomes?
- Am I being pulled off course by the crisis of the moment?

You should regularly look up and make sure you are still going in the right direction.

Develop a strategy for your top priorities in consultation with both political and career staff.

An effective strategy will combine what you and your fellow political appointees know and want to do with your agency's expertise and resources. Developing that strategy will take a joint effort of the two communities. Your career staff has a huge amount of knowledge and experience that you will need. Many of them have dedicated their careers to the programs you now lead, but they cannot get things done without your political leadership. Each community needs the other to get it done.

Listen to the career staff, but weigh their advice carefully. They may feel more limited in their options than you or your political staff. Combining the two viewpoints will lead to a better result. You can learn much from discussions around some basic questions:

- What has been tried before that was similar to what I am proposing?

Now What?

“The challenge in Washington, I began to realize, was not getting the job, but figuring out what to do with it.”

– David Kessler, former Commissioner,
Food and Drug Administration

From *A Question of Intent: A Great American Battle with a Deadly Industry* by David Kessler (New York: PublicAffairs, 2001).

- Why did it work or not work and how do I know?
- What are the legal and regulatory constraints? If your staff tells you something is illegal or contrary to regulation, get them to show you exactly where it is written in law or regulation. There is a lot of lore within the government about what is legal or illegal that is more tradition than fact. Probe to make sure this is not tradition or legal interpretation that could be interpreted in some other way. But assess whether an incorrect legal argument is fronting for a valid policy or stakeholder issue.
- Who cares about what we are doing? What do they want? Will they weigh in and try to affect the outcome? In what way? How do we know? How should we respond?

Make sure there is a person accountable for implementing each of your priorities.

At the broadest level, a strategy requires a goal and a plan to get there. That plan includes the basics like putting someone in charge, making sure resources are available and managed, and following up periodically to make sure progress is being made. That strategy should place a particular emphasis on stakeholder management and be designed to adjust to contingencies.

The strategy should provide you and your agency with a roadmap to successfully negotiate a path through all the diverse interests that make Washington so difficult. An effective strategy leverages supporters and neutralizes adversaries. Resist the temptation to concentrate only on supporters. Concentrate on groups who disagree with you or are neutral. It is often more important to pay more attention to those who disagree with you than those who agree. The nature of Washington is such that it is easier to stop something new than it is to do something new, and neutrals don't always stay neutral.

As noted earlier, your strategy to achieve your top priorities will be a product of the insights from your political staff as well as the knowledge and experience from your career staff. The combination of political knowledge and

agency experience will give you a far stronger approach than either could on its own. Although you will want to keep some distance from the mechanics of executing a strategy, you will want to make sure that there are good answers to the following questions:

- Who will be in charge and accountable for delivery? Why does that person have the qualifications to do this job? Does that person have control of program resources or is he or she dependent on others in my organization?
- What resources will be needed in dollars and staffing? You will need to make sure resources are set aside and fenced off to support the program. Will the fence hold or will the next priority bleed off the resources? You don't want to fall into the trap of your agency always pursuing the next better idea before it finishes the last one.
- How much of my personal time will be needed and in what ways?

Finally, your strategy should plan for the inevitable surprises. No important project unfolds as planned in this environment. Stakeholders weigh in on objectives and force adjustments. Congress does not always appropriate all the necessary funds. Contract award dates slip. Being flexible and always having a “plan B” are key ingredients of success. That said, there may come a time when plan B is so far from the original goal that it is better to cancel and move on. Thinking through that contingency at the beginning is a useful, albeit depressing, exercise. Some deals are worse than no deal, but that can be harder to discern months later after major resources have been spent in the heat of the moment.

Make sure there is an effective governance framework for your top priorities.

Big initiatives cross organizational lines or depend on other initiatives for success. Successful big initiatives depend on sound program management, but they also depend on clarity about who makes decisions on what. Your top priorities will be no exception. You not only need to have a sound strategy and someone strong in charge of execution, but you also need to ensure that the program management operates in a governance framework that will allow it to succeed. Some of this can be handled by staying actively engaged, but you will find it easier if there is a clear process for raising and resolving problems that does not require your personal attention.

We have seen many political appointees differ on the question of on how many issues they should focus. One former agency head received advice from several former appointees to just select a couple of issues and focus on those items. She chose instead to focus on a cluster of activities aimed at improving the entire organization. Some of the best appointees have “tiered goals”—more like concentric circles—where they focus on a few key priorities that everyone knows, with additional, more targeted goals in specific areas that they support but do not engage with on a daily basis.

Different strategies can work well in different situations. The key is consistent and ongoing focus. This ongoing focus includes what one executive calls “relentless follow-up.” Thus, the most important factor in having an impact on your organization is continued focus—whether it be on a limited or a larger number of items.

Relentlessly follow up.

The daily pressures on your time and attention will make it hard to concentrate on those few items that will be your most important legacy. Your agency will be buffeted by many issues that risk displacing your key priorities and pushing them to the back burner. Find a way to always keep your top priorities in front of you. Regularly follow up with those tasked with implementing the strategy for your highest priorities. Probe. People tend to put the best face on what the boss wants. Get second opinions and compare them to the internal reports. You want a realistic, not an optimistic, picture. You may want to make your top priorities a topic at every staff meeting.

Track measurable milestones, monitor key stakeholder relationships, and watch for the unpleasant surprise. Don't let the urgent drive out the important, and don't succumb to the tyranny of the many. Concentrating on what matters most will help you deliver on what matters most.

Your staff, particularly your senior staff, may need regular reminders of what is important. Follow up with them so they stay focused on your priorities. Just as you will wake up every morning thinking about how to make progress on the things that matter most to you, you want them to wake up every morning thinking the same.

Takeaways

- Develop a vision for your agency with input from your political and career staff, but make sure it is your own.
- Convey a sense of urgency.
- Communicate the vision.
- Harness agency plans to your new vision.
- In alignment with your agency's priority goals (see Chapter Six), select a few priorities where you can personally make a difference.
- Develop a strategy for your top priorities in consultation with both political and career staff.
- Make sure there is a person accountable for implementing each of your priorities.
- Make sure there is an effective governance framework for your top priorities.
- Relentlessly follow up.