

By Jonathan D. Breul, Forum Editor

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Forum Introduction: Helping the Next Administration Succeed in Washington

The 44th president of the United States takes the oath of office on January 20, 2009. Throughout the rest of the year, 1,200 presidentially appointed and Senate-confirmed officials, 1,400 Schedule C appointees, and 800 non-career Senior Executive Service appointees (not to mention another 3,000 appointees to boards and commissions) will join the 6,500 career senior executives in managing the federal government.

Management Matters

The transition from campaign to governing requires that presidential policies be transformed from rhetoric into an actionable agenda and then into concrete results. Neither good policies nor sound investments are likely to work, let alone succeed, if undermined by poor implementation. Too often, however, federal management issues are considered somewhere between “uninteresting” and “a waste of time.” The reason: Washington is a policy town. If you are focused on politics or policy, “management” is often ignored or simply left for someone else to figure out.

Managing the federal government remains a complex and difficult assignment, both technically and politically. Numerous failures in recent years—such as the response to Hurricane Katrina, veterans’ care at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, regulatory lapses, and bungled contracts in Iraq—underscore the need to pay attention not only to policy but also to whether and how policies and programs are actually executed.

What Is ‘Management’?

Management includes not only administrative management functions (such as financial management, personnel, and IT), but also program and policy management (for example, program delivery and “outcomes”). It encompasses leadership and oversight of how agencies devise, obtain enactment of, implement, manage, evaluate, and then, if necessary, modify the statutory programs and policies for which they are responsible, consistent with the policies of the incumbent administration.

Why Is Managing in the Federal Government So Difficult?

So why, then, does managing the federal government prove to be so difficult? First, the extraordinary size of the federal government makes it hard to manage. There must, of necessity, be substantial delegation of authority. And delegation in any organization poses risks. These risks can be reduced by appropriate oversight and control systems. But, for a variety of reasons, such systems have suffered from an ironic combination of underattention (producing laxity) and overattention (producing confused accountability and micromanagement).

Second, the political leadership, in both the executive branch and Congress, tends not to be interested in management. The conspicuous exception to this general observation concerns pinpointing blame for scandals. The political system rewards this behavior. There is the related problem of expectations in the selection of top-level policy and program leaders. Heads of agencies, deputy heads of agencies, and program directors are rarely chosen for, explicitly charged with, or generally held accountable for “management and performance” in the nuts-and-bolts sense.

Third, short-term budget objectives tend to override interest in the management effectiveness of longer-term investments, whether in physical or human capital.

Fourth is the problem of the short tenure of political appointees. Their average term in office remains all too brief. New administrations want to make their mark, develop their own programs, and advance initiatives of their own in relatively short time frames. There is little building across successive waves of leadership, and less attention to the invisible returns from which successors might benefit.

Two Books to Help the New Administration Succeed

This Forum highlights core insights from two recently published books by the IBM Center, which seek to help the new administration succeed in Washington: ***Getting It Done: A Guide for Government Executives*** and ***The Operator's Manual for the New Administration***.

The first book, *Getting It Done*, describes how to successfully operate in the political environment of Washington. It begins by spelling out an insider's view of "Six 'To Dos'" to succeed in the federal government. It follows with key insights and advice from 14 well-respected "veterans" from key stakeholder groups, such as the White House, Congress, citizens, interest groups, the media, and others. In each case, these authors explain how to successfully deal with their particular organization in order to advance "your agenda."

Getting It Done's "Six 'To Dos'" raise a number of interesting issues and highlight pitfalls confronting government executives. The IBM Center's Presidential Transition website offers you an opportunity to comment or provide your own illustration of how previous officials may have successfully, or not so successfully, dealt with such issues. Take a look at www.businessofgovernment.org/transition2008 to share your thoughts or examples with others.

The second book, *The Operator's Manual for the New Administration*, is an instruction guide on how to operate the "machinery" of government. It too is written for newly appointed agency heads—those who lead departments, bureaus, or programs, and their senior management teams, consisting of both political and career executives. *The Operator's Manual* describes how new agency heads and their management teams can use eight important "tools" (such as performance, money, contracting, etc.) to help them implement their policy and program objectives. Rather than looking at the operation and management of government from just one perspective (for example, people or IT), this book examines a full set of operational tools with the aim of showing how they can help achieve your goals.

In the Foreword, *Government Executive* Editor in Chief Tim Clark describes *The Operator's Manual* "as a primer ... on techniques leaders can use to achieve better results, and as a guide to deeper research." This is because much of the content is drawn from over 200 of the IBM Center's research reports produced by the likes of the Urban Institute's Harry Hatry, Harvard's Bob Behn, and the University of Maryland's Jacques Gansler.

For those who would rather go online than thumb through the book, the IBM Center's Presidential Transition website has an easy set of pull-down windows highlighting the eight operational tools, a two-page memo providing succinct, practical advice on the topic to department and agency heads, followed by a series of questions and answers addressing key issues. Check it out for yourself at www.businessofgovernment.org/transition2008. ●