

# Mission Support: Managing a Balancing Act

by John M. Kamensky

*Senior executives leading agency mission support functions (chief financial, information, acquisition, and human capital officers) face a range of cross-pressures from different stakeholders. How can they—and key federal mission leaders—jointly leverage their efforts to improve agency mission results?*

## Background

Twenty years ago, federal agencies typically did not have senior executives leading key mission support functions such as finance, technology, acquisition, or workforce. These functions were largely seen as administrative transaction services. In the past two decades, reflecting trends in the private sector, Congress created a series of “chief” positions—chief financial officers, chief information technology officers, chief acquisition officers, and chief human capital officers. Performance improvement officers were recently added without the chief title.

These various chiefs come from different professional disciplines with their own preexisting communities and ways of defining success. The distinctiveness of these individual communities was reinforced by the creation of cross-agency chief councils, such as the Chief Financial Officers Council and the Chief Information Officers’ Council. These councils often spearheaded government-wide initiatives, such as the CIO Council’s development of a comprehensive data-center inventory. Once identified, the number of data centers was cut in half, leading to greater efficiencies. The councils also shared best practices across agency boundaries.

The chiefs generally report to the heads of their agencies. They also generally wear three hats:

- Providing **services** to internal agency customers (such as hiring or installing computers or providing office space)
- Ensuring **compliance** with government-wide requirements (such as merit principles or capital investment guidelines)
- Providing **strategic advice** (such as workforce planning or financial risk management)



Depending on which hat they wear, chiefs may have different customers or stakeholders. For example, if the chief is wearing a customer service hat, the customers may be line managers and employees. If the chief is wearing a compliance hat, the customer may be the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) or the Office of Personnel Management (OPM). And if the chief is wearing an advisor hat, the customer may be the agency head. These hats are not mutually exclusive. In fact, one challenge of the chief’s job is balancing the differences.

## Does the Chiefs Function Support Mission Leaders Effectively?

The roles of the various mission support chiefs (sometimes collectively referred to as CXOs) have become clearer and more organized across agencies. In fact, there is a common support office for all the cross-agency CXO councils, and it sometimes convenes the different councils to address specific issues.

However, there are problems from the perspective of mission-oriented line managers in agencies. Mission managers deliver services to the public, such as air traffic control, environmental cleanup, export assistance, disability benefits, or immigration enforcement at the border. These mission managers both rely on, and could capitalize more on, mission support functions such as those provided by chiefs. But, as one former mission manager recently noted, in his experience “the CXO community is the biggest obstacle to success.”

*Managing at the Speed of Light: Improving Mission-Support Performance*, a 2009 National Academy of Public Administration (NAPA) study of the chiefs’ functions at the Department of Energy (DOE), found that mission support functions were seen as dysfunctional by line managers, largely because the various functions did not coordinate with each other. The lack of coordination within and among these functions resulted in “an inwardly focused, regulation-based, transactional organization.”

The study concluded: “DOE needs to better integrate and manage the mission-support offices’ efforts in order to develop a coordinated approach to providing essential support services.” In addition, it found the mission support offices needed to develop a stronger mission focus: “DOE does not have formal systems to assess how well the mission-support offices are meeting the needs of the department and to hold them accountable for doing so.”

But the solution is not to devolve all authorities to mission managers. After all, the study also found: “The mission-support organizations provide the grease that makes the department run. Without mission support, work in the program offices will grind to a halt.”

## How Can the Chiefs Integrate Their Services to Benefit Mission Leaders?

The NAPA study recommended the department focus on creating cross-bureau governance structures within each agency to coordinate mission-support activities, to include:

- An undersecretary for management
- An operations management council
- A mission-support council

The designation of another chief—chief operating officer (or undersecretary for management)—is a solution favored by the Government Accountability Office. This role has been enshrined in the new GPRM Modernization Act, so it now has statutory standing along with the other chiefs and serves as a nexus between policy and management.

But new structures and roles alone don’t change tendencies to act independently. Chiefs have to connect with one another through formal and informal means, and balance their three-hat roles.

The proposed operations management council can serve as a way of addressing cross-functional internal services and compliance functions. The mission support executives in the Department of Veterans Affairs hold weekly meetings about common initiatives and address strategic questions such as “Do we have the right skill sets?” and “Will this training lead to changes in mission performance?”

Likewise, the mission-support council can be a way of focusing attention on the needs of key mission initiatives. For example, the Department of Housing and Urban Development convenes a series of meetings on its priority goals and its strategic objectives on at least a quarterly basis. These forums, often led by the secretary or deputy secretary, serve to regularly focus leadership attention on place-based programs in communities, instead of just on policy initiatives.

## Potential Initiatives over the Next Four Years

The CXO communities have matured over the past two decades as valuable contributors to the support of missions within and across agencies. They have had to balance their different roles and have made real progress in improving operating efficiencies, saving billions via their initiatives.

But over the next four years, there are new opportunities they could pursue in order to improve mission results for their agencies and government-wide. These might include both agency-level and cross-agency initiatives.





## Agency-Level Initiatives

**Departmental chief operating officers should become mission champions.** The chief operating officers should proactively coordinate the mission support chiefs on behalf of agency mission and program executives, serving as their champions. They can continue to focus on initiatives to gain greater efficiencies in mission support services, but ideally not at the expense of strong support for mission managers.

**Mission support leaders should collaborate among themselves as well as with mission delivery executives.** The collaborative operations management council approach, such as the one used in the Department of Veterans Affairs, should be a model for other agencies, as should the HUDStat approach used in the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

**Ensure transparency to the chiefs' various stakeholders.** The chief operating officer at the Office of Personnel Management, Chuck Grimes, says his agency created a dashboard of key mission support measures such as "time to hire" or "veterans hiring," and made the data widely available. He says this helps program managers make better decisions because they have immediate access to useful data.

**Engage chiefs' stakeholders in defining what constitutes value to missions.** Department of Transportation Chief Human Capital Officer Brodi Fontenot says his agency now sponsors an ideation platform to engage employees in joint problem-solving, much like the Transportation Security Administration's "Idea Factory." At the Department of Housing and Urban Development, Chief Information Officer Jerry Williams says the leadership uses regular meetings of top executives to jointly address mission challenges such as reducing homelessness.

## Cross-Agency Initiatives

**Reintroduce the Quad Council.** In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the four councils of chiefs—finance, information technology, acquisition, and human capital—came together as the Quad Council, which worked with OMB to leverage cross-agency mission support activities that supported a number of e-government initiatives. This model provides an interesting lens from which to view the issue of collaboration across professional disciplines from a government-wide perspective. The existing CXO council support office is a natural focal point for such an effort.

**Develop cross-functional, integrated management improvement agendas.** The chiefs all have management improvement initiatives. But they, not the mission managers, should serve as the integrators of initiatives to improve mission support services and compliance requirements. For example, efforts to reduce federal agencies' use of real estate has:

- A human capital component of telework strategies
- A technology component relative to employee connectivity
- Financial and acquisition components related to the investments needed to pursue such a strategy

**Develop a strategy to support cross-agency mission-oriented initiatives.** Increasingly, agencies are working across organizational boundaries to solve major public challenges, such as climate change and food safety. Mission support for these efforts has largely been ad hoc. The cross-agency councils should undertake efforts to develop approaches to provide mission support functions for these initiatives in ways that ensure appropriate accountability and efficiency.

Will steps such as these serve as a bridge between the perceived gaps between mission managers' needs and the roles of various mission support chiefs? Probably not at first, given the historical tensions in their respective roles. But proactive steps from top agency leadership should be a key expectation in coming years. ■

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