

An Agile “Tipping Point” for Governments?

By G. Edward DeSeve

Introduction

Author Malcolm Gladwell popularized the expression “tipping point” as a moment “When an idea, trend, or social behavior crosses a threshold, tips, and spreads like wildfire.”

My more than 50 years of experience in and around government leads me to believe that we may be at such a point now. In the United States, trust in government at all levels and in all branches is at extremely low levels. Close to two-thirds of those polled by the Gallup organization in September 2019 indicated that they had little or no trust in the federal government’s ability to handle domestic problems. In a similar Gallup survey, state and local governments fared better with only 37 percent and 29 percent of respondents believing that their governments were not functioning well.

Internationally, there are countries where trust is higher than in the U.S. but the Organization of Cooperation and Economic Development (OECD) reports— based on the Gallup World Poll— that trust levels are declining almost everywhere.

Certainly, the political rancor at the U.S. federal level is contributing to this mistrust, but failure to deliver on key issues that the public cares about and a continued perception of inefficiency—waste, fraud, and abuse—also fuel the negativity.

The 2019 President’s Management Agenda identified five major problems at the federal level. These problems are likely to persist at the state and local level and perhaps internationally.

How will the federal government deal with these problems? In dealing with sour customers and falling profits, the private sector is increasingly turning to management methods based on the Agile Principles used in software development. In the *Age of Agile*, author Stephen Denning calls the shift to agile management principles, “An unstoppable revolution . . .

Major Challenges at the Federal Level

Accumulated Regulatory Burden: Regulations are “outdated, duplicative or unnecessary.”

Structural Issues: “Silos across federal agencies and offices can hurt cross-agency collaboration, resulting in fragmented citizen services or excessive cost to deliver the mission.”

Decision making and processes: Efficient and effective decision making is fact-based and transparent. However, government agencies do not consistently apply data-driven, decision-making practices.

Leadership and culture: Achieving beneficial outcomes that serve the public should be the government’s primary focus. Managers need sufficient direction to execute programs effectively, foster the highest-performing workforce, and solve real-time problems

Capabilities and competencies: Antiquated, unsecure technology risks can leave the public frustrated and vulnerable.

Source: President’s Management Agenda 2019
[whitehouse.gov/omb/management/pma/](https://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/management/pma/)

conducted in plain sight by some of our largest and most respected corporations.”

Interestingly, Denning spent many years at the World Bank, which has also begun an “agile journey.” Begun in 2016, and continuing through today, the Agile Bank Program is attempting to change the narrative of management reform at



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the World Bank by inspiring staff to rethink approaches to work and to develop new solutions for clients.

Let's look at what Agile Principles are, how they are being applied in corporations, in the military and in public policy development and implementation. Further, let's see what next steps might be taken to bring agile management techniques to governments around the world.

What is Agile?

In software development, agile features small, cross-functional, self-organizing teams that include customers working quickly to deliver solutions in increments that immediately provide value. The development is customer centric and networks are used for development and deployment.

What are Agile Principles?

The Agile Manifesto was developed in 2001 by a group of software developers who were frustrated by the paradigm governing their industry at the time. These principles continue to guide projects and programs of software development today. Agile developers use “scrums” and “sprints” as techniques to produce products quickly that have a high degree of customer acceptance and satisfaction.

Application of Agile Principles

Denning gives us three “laws” for the application of agile management principles. These are “The Law of the Small Team, The Law of the Customer, and the Law of the Network.” His prescription for each of these is:

- **The Law of Small Teams:** “In a VUCA (Violent, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous) world, big and difficult



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problems need to be disaggregated into small batches and performed by small cross functional autonomous teams, working in relatively short cycles in a state of flow, with fast feedback from customers.”

- **The Law of the Customer:** Denning suggests that “the epic shift in power in the marketplace from seller to buyer (creates) a need for firms to radically accelerate their ability to make decisions and change directions in light of unexpected events.”
- **The Law of the Network:** This is the “lynch pin.” He suggests that a vertical hierarchy is no match for an interactive network. We will see support from other scholars for this point of view.

Anne-Marie Slaughter brings networks to the public realm in her book, *The Chessboard and the Web—Strategies of Connection in a Networked World*. Just as Denning contrasts vertical bureaucracies with agile organizations, Slaughter contrasts the traditional approach to diplomacy—the chessboard—with the web. She espouses “the network mind set the ability to convert three dimensional human relationships into two dimensional maps of connections, and to see the relationships between people and institutions.”

General Stanley McCrystal reinforces Slaughter’s points with his actions as head of the Joint Special Operations Forces, which confronted al Qaeda in Iraq and later the Taliban in Afghanistan. McCrystal knew that al Qaeda operated as a series of networks and he determined to change his own organization from a hierarchy into a network. He describes his successful transformation in *The Team of Teams*. McCrystal created small groups with divergent skills each of which was bound together by trust and a shared sense of purpose, which allowed them to act as a “seamless unit” exercising joint cognition in changing circumstances.

While neither Slaughter or McCrystal used the term agile to describe their prescriptions for success, they are very consistent with Denning’s findings and my own experience in implementing the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. Our mission was clear—save the economy from further collapse. President Obama and Vice President Biden provided the top cover for our eight person Recovery Improvement Office. In a very short period of time, we were able get a set of interconnected networks at work rapidly, meeting the objectives of the Act in distributing more than \$800 billion quickly with virtually no allegations of waste, fraud, or abuse.

Central to this effort was the continuous communication by White House Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel to other White

House staff members, by the vice president to the cabinet, governors and mayors, and the bi-weekly calls between our office and the 22 departments responsible for spending the money. Additional networks using public interest groups like the National Governor’s Association and the National Organization of State Auditors, Controllers and Treasurers created an action orientation that allowed the Recovery Act to meet its objectives of creating and saving jobs, helping those most hurt by the great recession, developing infrastructure, and making sure that states were not forced to raise taxes or cut services.

Now, the question before us is, “How do we take the lessons learned, as described above, and apply them to helping governments around the world become more agile?”

Toward Agile Government

The National Academy of Public Administration (NAPA) is in the process of considering the creation of an Agile Government Center. The Center would:

- Identify Draft Agile Government Principles in concert with many stakeholders.
- Research these principles to determine a final set for publication.



- Identify instances of agile government around the world. This will be a continuing process and cases will be made available for use by governments and researchers.
- Collaborate with governments around the world who wish to use agile in their projects, programs overall organizational design, and assist them in implementation.

At a Round Table on September 3, 2019, convened by NAPA and the IBM Center for The Business of Government, a diverse group of individuals with expertise in government management met to comment on draft Agile Government Principles. A revised copy of the principles is shown on your right. These principles will be used to obtain further comments.

The need for a movement toward “agile government” grows from the lack of public trust in government around the world. Better management is one of the factors that can improve trust in government. Agile government shares characteristics with agile software development and project management. “Agile government is mission centric, customer focused, communication and collaboration enabled, and continually demonstrates success to customers and the public.”

Agile government recognizes the values of putting the customer—both the direct and indirect beneficiaries—and the public as a whole at the center of governmental actions. Leaders serve as coordinators of the actions of small teams that include customer participation. Leaders empower these teams to take rapid action to deliver timely, transparent results that customers—who are actively included in the process—care about.

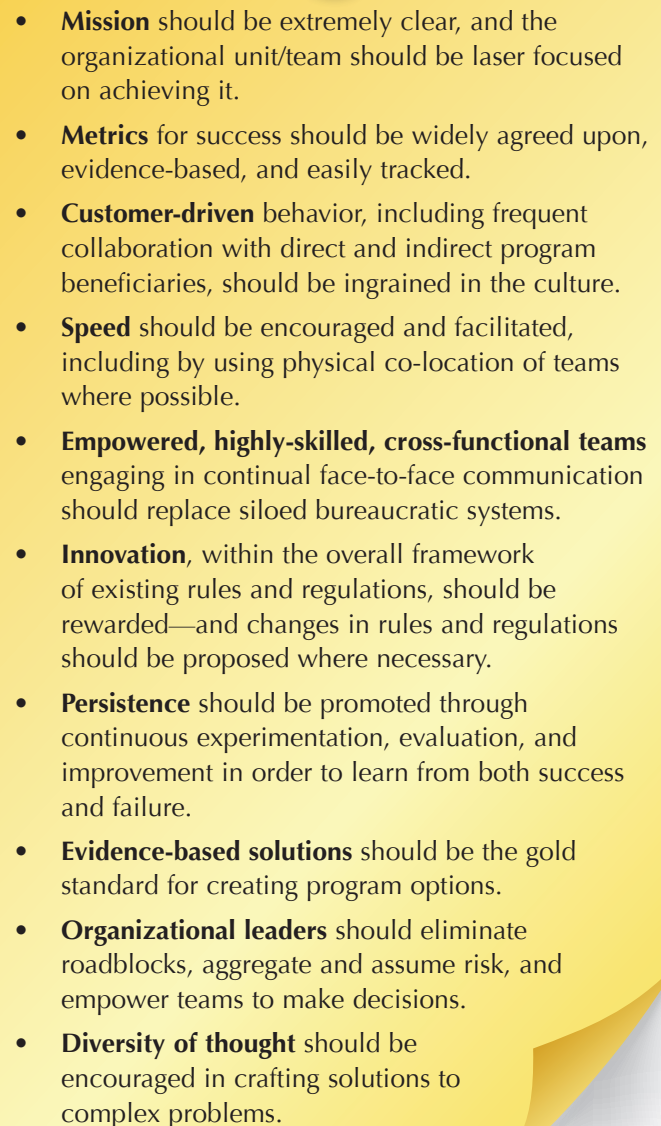
The purpose of the Agile Government Center is to develop Principles for Agile Government, to document cases where it is currently being practiced for use as reference, and to create a supportive network of users of agile government that can share their experiences.

If successful, the work of the Center will be adopted by governments around the world and lead to greater public trust.

Conclusion

In his book *Tides of Reform*, author Paul Light identified reform efforts from 1945 to 1995 that sought to improve how government operated. I believe that agile government can be a new tide that lifts governmental ships around the

world. It will require a new mindset in government and new organizational models to be successful. It may be that not every activity of government can adopt agile principles. However, the same “unstoppable revolution” that Denning describes may be headed toward the public sector.

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- **Mission** should be extremely clear, and the organizational unit/team should be laser focused on achieving it.
 - **Metrics** for success should be widely agreed upon, evidence-based, and easily tracked.
 - **Customer-driven** behavior, including frequent collaboration with direct and indirect program beneficiaries, should be ingrained in the culture.
 - **Speed** should be encouraged and facilitated, including by using physical co-location of teams where possible.
 - **Empowered, highly-skilled, cross-functional teams** engaging in continual face-to-face communication should replace siloed bureaucratic systems.
 - **Innovation**, within the overall framework of existing rules and regulations, should be rewarded—and changes in rules and regulations should be proposed where necessary.
 - **Persistence** should be promoted through continuous experimentation, evaluation, and improvement in order to learn from both success and failure.
 - **Evidence-based solutions** should be the gold standard for creating program options.
 - **Organizational leaders** should eliminate roadblocks, aggregate and assume risk, and empower teams to make decisions.
 - **Diversity of thought** should be encouraged in crafting solutions to complex problems.