

# Creating a Cadre of Enterprise-Wide Leaders: Fledgling Efforts Underway to Create Cross-Agency, Career Level Capacity Building

By John M. Kamensky

Several years ago, then-recently retired U.S. Coast Guard Admiral Thad Allen spoke to a gathering at his alma mater, George Washington University, about his experiences in leading large-scale cross-agency emergency recovery efforts. He had been called in to fix the botched Hurricane Katrina recovery in 2005, lead the international response to the 2010 Haiti earthquake, and manage operations during the 2010 BP Gulf Oil Spill. In each case, the president called and asked him to take charge because of his renowned interagency collaboration skills. He was asked after his presentation, “Now that you are retired, how do we find and train the next ‘Thad Allens’ in the government?” He said he didn’t have an answer. But in the past couple of years, an answer to this question has started to look more promising.

## Background

Public administration researcher Professor Donald Kettl at the University of Maryland has written several books examining the increase in the number and complexity of cross-agency challenges that traditional government structures are ill-equipped to address. These span the policy spectrum and include: cybersecurity, food safety, climate change, international trade, health and wellness, as well as intelligence and law enforcement. In fact, in a recent assessment that he conducted of the underlying root causes of programs on the high-risk list compiled biennially by the Government Accountability Office, he found that agencies’ “inability to span boundaries” was the leading contributor to program failures.

Cross-agency leaders have emerged in times of crisis. Admiral Thad Allen was one. John Koskinen led the effort to stem the potential computer failures tied to Y2K in 2000, and Ed DeSeve coordinated the implementation of the \$800 billion Recovery Act in 2009. The country was lucky these individuals were where they were at a time the president needed them. But how can government move more deliberately to create a cadre of leaders with enterprise-wide skills and experience? We shouldn’t leave these roles to chance any longer.



A 2012 report by Professors Rosemary O’Leary and Catherine Gerard surveyed federal career senior executives, asking what skills they saw as important to leaders of collaborative efforts. They said: “Our survey respondents surprised us.” They found that executives felt the most important were individual attributes, interpersonal and group process skills, and strategic leadership skills. Less important were substantive or technical expertise. The authors asked “whether effective collaborators are born or made” and wondered “whether the individual attributes needed by collaborative leaders can be acquired.”

## Recent Activities

The Government Performance and Results Modernization Act of 2010 (often referred to as GPRAMA) provides an opening for the role of collaborative leaders and the authority to develop this kind of talent across and within agencies. In the past two years, the deputy secretaries on the President’s Management Council and the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) have encouraged the development of such efforts. In early 2016, Congress allowed budgetary resources to be made available for them.



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Starting in 2014, a series of seemingly disconnected—but clearly interrelated—initiatives were launched that could be a strategic lever for being able to deliver on enterprise government activities, if these initiatives are assessed to be effective and are sustained over the coming years. The initiatives are:

- As part of the career Senior Executive Service (SES) reform initiatives announced by the president in December 2014, the White House created the White House Leadership Development Program for promising future career executives. The participants are assigned to cross-agency priority projects. The inaugural cohort was launched in October 2015 and it is loosely based on the long-standing, prestigious White House Fellows program.
- The Performance Improvement Council created a Leaders Delivery Network in 2015, comprised of federal managers charged with leading agency-level priority projects.
- The Office of Executive Councils, which provides staff support for several cross-agency mission support councils, launched a “CXO Fellows” program in 2015 for agency staffers working in financial management, information technology, and acquisition career specialties.
- In the FY 2016 appropriations bill, Congress agreed to allow agencies to jointly fund up to \$15 million for cross-agency initiatives, including career development in these initiatives.

So far, these are a series of pilots. Each is targeted to a different audience, but they all have a similar objective: to create a cadre of talent across agencies that will have an enterprise-wide lens on how government works.

## **White House Leadership Development Program**

President Obama in his address to a gathering of the Senior Executive Service in December 2014 announced the creation

of a White House-level leadership development program for a select group of promising career managers. The program launched its inaugural cohort in October 2015, comprised of 16 participants at the GS-15 level, from 16 different agencies.

The individuals were selected from a pool nominated by their departments’ deputy secretaries. The program is a full-time, one-year temporary assignment. Participants help to staff cross-agency priority goals—such as improving customer service and combatting cybersecurity breaches—and several other government-wide priority initiatives.

The stated objectives of the program are to:

- Develop talent within the next generation of career senior executives “through a rotation focused on the complex, cross-agency challenges...and build and strengthen enterprise leadership skills.”
- Deliver results by harnessing top talent from across the government to support the implementation of key priorities such as the cross-agency priority goals.

Their assignments on government-wide initiatives are mostly located in the Executive Office of the President and comprise about 80 percent of their time. They are purposely placed in roles where they don’t have prior technical expertise so their focus will be on developing their collaborative skills.

They also meet every Friday as a group for skill set development and sharing of experiences. This includes developing their executive core qualifications (a prerequisite to competing for a position in the Senior Executive Service); gaining exposure to agency mission-support functions/roles (e.g., what do chief financial officers, chief information officers, etc. do and how can they help); and meeting different types of stakeholders they would need to be familiar with in a cross-agency context and learning how to work with them (e.g., unions, auditors, media). They also have speakers from topical areas (e.g., presidential transition).

The program has a steering committee overseeing its development and operation. It includes the deputy director for management at the Office of Management and Budget, the director of the Office of Personnel Management, and career OMB staffers.

### Leaders Delivery Network

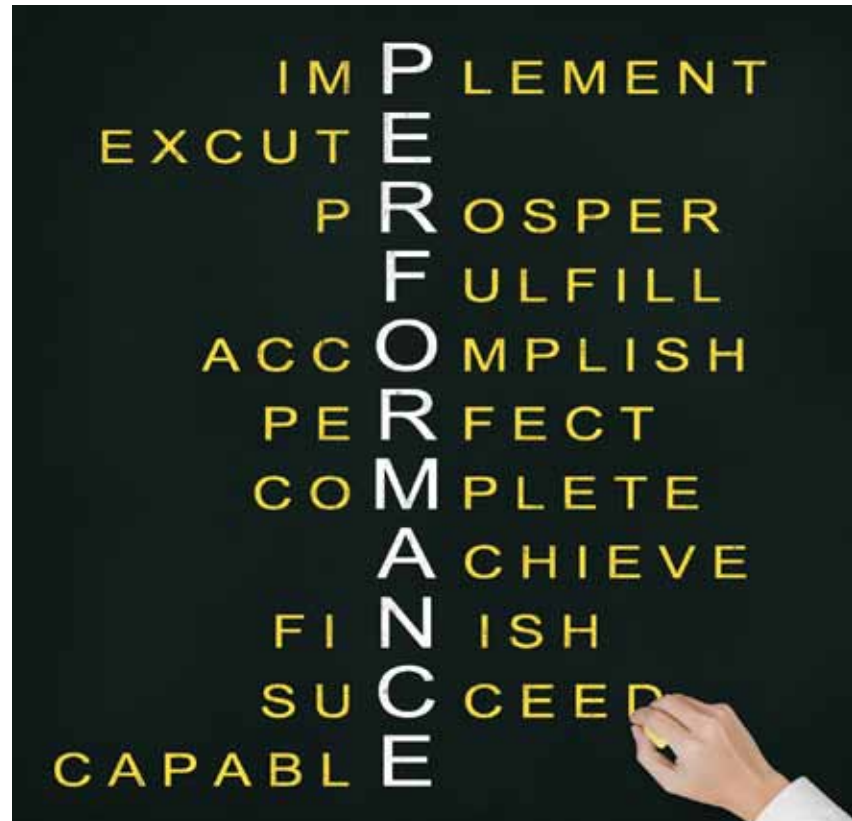
This initiative is targeted to senior staff (GS-15 and career SES) who support their agency's priority goal leaders. It is a two-year program, co-terminus with the agency priority goals (APGs) set every two years. There are currently a total of 92 APGs government-wide (see the full list on performance.gov). These include efforts such as improving energy usage in defense and combatting antibiotic-resistant bacteria in Health and Human Services. The program extends to the agency's teams and expanded networks as well. The program is part time and participants enter it voluntarily.

Currently in a pilot stage, the first cohort of 20-25 participants volunteered in late 2015. The program has adopted the "insight-to-action" model instead of a traditional classroom training model. It is designed to serve several purposes:

- At the most basic level, it is intended to help participants amplify progress and results on select agency priority goals by motivating and equipping program participants with "the insight, access, advice and tools to accelerate progress" on their APGs.
- It aims to cultivate a network of senior leaders working on APGs across federal agencies. It recognizes participants in a way that "conveys the prestige and responsibility to lead/manage an APG."
- It is intended to help create visibility into success stories and lessons learned in different programs, and to celebrate and share progress among participants.
- It hopes to highlight common issues, challenges, and opportunities that exist across agencies, or across mission support or mission delivery activities, with the goal of sharing strategies that work across the network of participants.

The Leaders Delivery Network focuses on three developmental dimensions for its participants:

- **Personal and team leadership development:** This includes individual skills assessments and coaching—e.g., how to develop "strategic narratives" and



"Performance 101" training—considering most of the participants are not familiar with GPRAMA and the "performance stuff" in their agencies.

- **Training and support for the participants' agency-level teams:** Interestingly, this element is reinforced by Professor Jane Fountain, an expert in collaborative teams, who stressed the importance of creating effective teams.
- **Participation in broader networks:** This includes connections with the White House Leadership Development Program's participants, participants' own agencies' performance management offices, and mentoring opportunities. There are also plans to create an alumni network to leverage experiences of participants' predecessors as the program grows over time.

### CXO Fellows Program

This program evolved from a successful pilot initiative sponsored by the Chief Financial Officers (CFO) Council, and it has been expanded to include participants sponsored by the Chief Information Officer and the Chief Acquisition Officer Councils.

The objectives of the CXO Fellows program are to: identify rising talent; connect the “rising stars” of federal financial management, acquisition, and IT sectors with each other; foster cross-community relationship building; and broaden the knowledge base of outstanding employees on how the federal government works from an enterprise perspective.

Like the Leaders Delivery Network, this program is part time. The first cohort began in fall 2015 and will participate for one year. Participation is competitive; each of the 24 departments and major agencies can put forth three participants (one each from finance, IT, and acquisition), for a total of 72 individuals (in the first year, there are actually 52 participants). Participants range from GS-11 through GS-15.

Participants are provided five days of professional development seminars in the form of functional and technical training at the National Defense University’s CFO Academy and iAcademy (training covers topics such as enterprise risk management and earned value management). They are also provided “soft skill training” such as business etiquette and collaboration skills. Like the other two programs, the CXO program provides interactive seminars on topics such as how OMB works, how to tell stories effectively, etc. The manager for the program said that a common refrain she has heard from participants has been: “I had no idea the government worked that way.”

Participants also have visited private sector companies, such as Amazon Robotics, to understand the type of managerial training used in the private sector. In addition, participants attend informal events that they organize among themselves to create personal interactions, such as a book club, a coffee hour in a common neighborhood, etc. Like the other networks, they aspire to create an alumni community to keep themselves connected.

## Conclusion

While these initiatives were launched late in the Obama Administration, they are actions that finally address the concerns of many, including GAO, who have watched the increase in risks facing the federal government. The risks come about due to the federal government’s lack of

adequately addressing cross-agency challenges because there has not been a cadre of executives with the temperament, skills, and experience to lead it.

Will the next administration adopt, adapt, or abolish these fledgling efforts? That’s an unknown. But these pilots should be assessed upon the completion of their first cycles this fall. If they are found to be valuable, the pilots should be continued and expanded to ensure the federal government has the capacity to address enterprise-wide challenges. ■

## Additional Resources on Enterprise Leadership

Jane Fountain (March 2016). *Building an Enterprise Government: Creating an Ecosystem for Cross-Agency Collaboration in the Next Administration*, IBM Center for The Business of Government: Washington, D.C.

Donald F. Kettl (2016). *Managing Risk, Improving Results: Lessons for Improving Government Management from GAO’s High-Risk List*, IBM Center for The Business of Government: Washington, D.C.

Partnership for Public Service (2013). *Building the Enterprise: Nine Strategies for a More Integrated, Effective Government*, Washington, D.C.

Jane Fountain (2013). *Implementing Cross-Agency Collaboration: A Guide for Federal Managers*, IBM Center for The Business of Government: Washington, D.C.

Bruce Barkley (2013). *Developing Senior Executive Capabilities to Address National Priorities*, IBM Center for The Business of Government: Washington, D.C.

Rosemary O’Leary and Catherine Gerard (2012). *Collaboration Across Boundaries: Insights and Tips from Federal Senior Executives*, IBM Center for The Business of Government: Washington, D.C.