



# Six Conditions that Foster Innovation, Speed, and Performance

By Robert Shea

## Introduction

Fostering innovation, speed, and performance in government is not the impossible task it seems. I recall debates over the government’s broken security clearance process in which a lofty goal of 40 days for conducting background investigations was being considered. Those involved in the process said it was a ridiculously aggressive target. But the goal was set and, with steady attention and perseverance, background investigations are now being conducted faster and better than ever.

Another example is when agencies were asked to produce audited financial statements within 45 days of the end of the fiscal year. Financial managers balked. Today, all but one of the major federal agencies meet this deadline. And there are many other examples where the once considered impossible is now eminently doable. But it would be naïve to suggest that bureaucracies are always laboratories for innovation, speed, and performance. So, how do we create an environment that fosters these important qualities? Let’s first look at the real barriers that must be overcome.

## Barriers to Innovation, Speed, and Performance

**Barrier One: Aversion to risk.** The biggest barrier to innovation in government is a stifling aversion to risk. In the federal government, at least, there is an oversight juggernaut made up of congressional committees, the Government Accountability Office, and agency inspectors general waiting to find and advertise every stumble. The reward for risk-taking in government may well be a subpoena to testify in a congressional investigation—not everyone’s definition of fun.

**Barrier Two: Difficulty in setting clear goals.** Another shortcoming among government agencies is in clarity of purpose. It’s not always clear what it is we are trying to achieve. Federal agencies have a long-standing difficulty setting clear goals that capture the outcomes they are supposed to accomplish. Instead, they often simply report the amount of money they



spend or the activities they perform as an imperfect proxy for measuring the results they achieve.

**Barrier Three: Declining resources.** Finally, federal programs suffer from declining resources for the foreseeable future. That means they may not have all the money they need in each program to make it successful. Programs will have to find ways to leverage other programs to accomplish their objectives.

## Conditions to Foster Innovation, Speed, and Performance

The above barriers to success will take a concerted effort to overcome, but there are six conditions that give innovation, speed, and performance a fighting chance in government.

**Condition One: Set clear goals for speed and performance.** It sounds basic, but it is hard to do in government. One of the biggest intellectual challenges is setting goals for a program or organization that has minimal control over the outcome. This is a good time to remember that there are very few things over which we have total control. But the



often result in failure. Not all attempts at innovative ways to achieve aggressive goals for speed and performance will work. Those who take risks and fail are likely the ones who will try again and succeed. That's why when people fail, we should celebrate it, learn from it, and move on. If our people are being treated unfairly as the result of meaningful risk-taking, leaders should stand up for them and protect them.

Former Department of Commerce Secretary Gary Locke told an audience at the Partnership for Public Service, “[O]rganizations that fixate on failure never take the risks necessary to achieve the extraordinary.” He continued, “I have never faulted an employee for falling short of a goal that was difficult to reach. What is important is working diligently. What is critical is constantly challenging ourselves to perform even better.” Gary Locke is a leader who understands the need to create an environment in which risk-taking is not only permitted, but encouraged.

**Condition Six: Collaborate to achieve goals faster.** There is no program in the federal government that does not depend on numerous other programs, agencies, or entities for its success. And many of those programs could be barriers to improvements in performance and speed. Consider the inventory of duplication GAO puts out every year. In its 2011 annual report inventorying the extent of duplication among the government's programs, what GAO found was mind-boggling: “[t]here are 32 areas in which [GAO] found evidence of duplication, overlap, or fragmentation among federal government programs.” Among them: nine federal agencies charged with food safety, 53 programs designed to assist entrepreneurs, 50 programs promoting employment for people with disabilities, and 21 government programs that play a role in preventing and detecting smuggling of nuclear materials and illicit trafficking of related technologies overseas.

If you want to get something done in government, you're probably going to have to work with someone outside your program, perhaps even outside your agency. Sometimes, these programs are working at cross-purposes, competing for resources, or getting in the way of success. Working together—collaborating toward improvements in speed and performance—can illuminate barriers to improvement and more important, highlight different, better, faster ways of achieving goals.

The complexity at the federal level is multiplied exponentially, of course, when you have to work with state and local entities to accomplish your objectives. Territorial jealousies should be checked and collaboration with other agencies and programs and state and local government entities is a must. Establish shared objectives and clearly define roles and



responsibilities among different partners. Invariably, from this collaboration will develop a better way of getting the job done.

## Conclusion

As I write this, creating the conditions for innovation, speed, and performance seems a whole lot easier in theory than in practice. It's simple to say we should celebrate-risk taking, but the ramifications for failure in the public sector may be harsh. It's easy to suggest we need good leaders when few have the desire to focus on the mundane demands of management. And collaboration is a nice word, but having to get so many players on board with a plan is easier said than done.

But public servants don't come to work each day because the job is easy. Public service is about doing big, important things for the citizens of the United States. And if we're going to achieve such big things, we need to do the hard work of setting clear goals, insisting on transparency, developing strong leaders, creating a culture of accountability, celebrating risk-taking, and collaborating with others outside our cocoon. These steps won't guarantee success, but they will surely make it more likely.

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Excerpted from **Fast Government—Accelerating Service Quality While Reducing Cost and Time**. See page 35 for more information on this special report made available from the Center.