

Memo #2: Managing Large-Scale, Non-Urgent Presidential Initiatives (by John Kamensky)

Abstract: *Presidents often launch large scale “signature” initiatives on coming into office that are oftentimes implemented through executive directives, not legislation. Their governance structures differ from those used in urgent initiatives because they are longer-term and also they will be – after a time – no longer central to the attention of the President because of the press of events, even if they are still seen as important. We recommend the President use some of the strategies that provided success to other similar initiatives.*

Presidents run for office because they want to do great things for the nation and the world. But how do Presidents get large-scale initiatives done? The President’s White House staff typically focuses on developing policy initiatives and getting them adopted. But historically once a policy is adopted; it is delegated to an operating agency for implementation.

This hierarchical model has historically been effective and will continue to work for targeted policy initiatives in areas where a single agency is clearly the exclusive agent for action, such as the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act. However, increasingly in recent years, success on really large Presidential priorities – climate change, health care reform, management reforms – has depended on extensive cross-agency, and sometimes cross-sectoral, efforts.

The traditional tools of governmental control -- accountability, resource allocation, and congressional oversight jurisdictions – are designed for the hierarchical agency model for implementation and oversight. Managing large-scale initiatives outside the bounds of these traditional tools does occur, but often as an outgrowth of a specific, time-bound, administrative implementation challenge, such as the government’s response to the Y2K computer bug, the implementation of the Recovery Act, or to natural disasters.

The governance structure for administratively-initiated large-scale initiative will differ somewhat from government’s response to unanticipated, large-scale emergencies – where pre-existing structures are in place and where the agencies involved regularly conduct actual or table-top exercises to keep their skills and networks active. The structure will also differ from Presidential involvement in large-scale scientific endeavors, where it is important to develop long-term consensus among key stakeholders around outcomes that may take many years to bring to completion, often across Presidential administrations.

Three Cases of Successfully Managed Large-Scale Non-Urgent Presidential Initiatives

A review of recently large-scale administrative efforts has identified some conditions for their success, which largely build upon those conditions mentioned earlier for the urgent initiatives – effective leadership and appropriate organizational structures. For example, the following recent initiatives reflect these, as well as several other common attributes:

Reinventing Government Initiative. The Bill Clinton Administration during the 1990s launched a government reform initiative to make the government “work better and cost less to get results Americans care about.” That effort extended the duration of the Administration’s two terms in office. It was led by the Vice President and an interagency staff of career managers on rotation from their home agencies. Each agency had its own internal reinvention team. The initial project generated over 1,000 recommendations whose implementation were

overseen by the Vice President's project team. These included procurement reform, streamlining administrative functions, and technology reform. In later years, it also sponsored a number of other initiatives, such as streamlining regulations, customer service improvement, advocacy of plain writing in government, and the use of balanced scorecards to manage. The effort ended at the conclusion of the Clinton Administration.

Faith-Based and Community Initiative. The George W. Bush Administration undertook efforts to open up billions in grant money competition to faith-based and non-profit charities so they could be close partners of government in providing social services to the needy. He signed several executive orders, including one that laid out principles and policymaking criteria, and created a White House office devoted to this initiative, which was led by a deputy assistant to the President. Eleven major grant-making agencies were directed to create centers for faith-based and community initiatives and launch their own initiatives. Progress was tracked by the Office of Management and Budget. Thirty-three governors and 100 mayors created similar organizational structures in their respective state or city governments. The effort continued, with a number of changes, in the Obama Administration.

Open Government Initiative. The Barack Obama Administration launched a broad open government effort that focused on the principles centering around increased transparency, collaboration, and citizen engagement. The effort was White House-led with agencies creating their own teams and plans of action. The President also advocated a parallel global initiative on open government, with nearly 50 other countries committing to a set of principles and developing their own plans of action.

Common Attributes of Successful Large-Scale Non-Urgent Initiatives

These various initiatives were typically based on guiding principles rather than detailed guidance. This allowed each agency to adapt the principles to their own operating cultures. Cross-agency working groups permitted the sharing of ideas and created a network of committed individuals. This also helped the White House embed these initiatives into the bureaucracy. In addition, each initiative relied on periodic symbolic events – such as new executive orders, awards, progress reports, and conferences -- to demonstrate the continued commitment of the President toward the initiative.

The common attributes of success among these initiatives include:

- Pairing a political head with a career deputy to offer “reach” into agencies involved in implementation
- Replicating the function or initiative within agencies (and states, where appropriate) to provide greater reach and ongoing commitment within agencies
- Measuring and reporting progress on a regular basis
- Relying on agency-provided staff on temporary assignment
- Relying on shared agency funding, either direct or in-kind.

Based on the experiences of these initiatives, the President should proactively anticipate the need for both the talent and the administrative governance framework necessary for successful implementation of his key policy initiatives.

Recommendations to the President to Ensure Capacity to Address Large-Scale, Non-Urgent Challenges in the Future

Recommendation 1: Identify a Cadre of Seasoned Executives. The President’s transition team should consider designating someone – such as the Deputy Director for Management, a Deputy White House Chief of Staff, or the Director of the Office of Administration – as the point person to help lead the implementation of any large initiative once a particular policy has been adopted. Having such a contingent capacity in place will make it easier to take action and to ensure the elements of success from past efforts can be put into action.

This person should develop a list of highly-regarded individuals, from among the existing cadre of career senior executives, with experience in managing large-scale initiatives that reach across agency boundaries. This list should number between 50 – 100 people from across the government in different policy arenas. They should have prior experience in working on cross-agency initiatives.

Provide these people with targeted training and opportunities to convene among themselves, or at least with counterparts with common areas of expertise, so they can create informal networks. This approach is used successfully in developing senior military flag officers and should be expanded to their civilian counterparts. Also consider high-profile rotational assignments for these individuals, so they can expand their experiential knowledge across agency and expertise boundaries.

Recommendation 2: Develop a “Lessons Learned” Guide for Network Governance. Seasoned and experienced leaders cannot operate alone. Past experience shows that they operate most effectively in the context of an effective governing approach. Recent experiences have been that such governance approaches either evolve before an initiative is undertaken, or one is put in place once a leader has been designated. For example, Ink, Koskinen and DeSeve all chose to use a small staff located in the White House, instead of a large team. They found it much less costly and far less time consuming to quickly streamline existing processes and expedite agency operations than to complicate operations with adding a series of new structures and processes.

Sometimes, however, a leader finds him- or herself designed and constrained by structures or processes that may have been put in place shortly before they took the position and they find themselves having to work within those constraints. Understanding these statutory or procedural constraints in advance is critical to developing an effective strategy.

Since a President will likely undertake a large-scale initiative during his term, he should early in his administration ensure a common understanding of effective practices is developed among key stakeholders who would be involved in implementing any such initiative. The GPRA Modernization Act offers the statutory basis for expanding the use of cross-agency initiatives to achieve policy priorities. This law also requires the President to identify a handful of cross-cutting priorities for implementation by February 2014. A handful of interim priority goals already exist, but each priority goal leader has been left to his or her devices in developing and staffing their individual priority goal teams. These interim efforts should be assessed and effective practices developed for use, beginning in early 2014, more widely by each of these teams, and by any other large-scale efforts proposed by the President.

The President’s staff should undertake a “lessons learned” review of the governance approaches developed to manage the existing cross-agency priority goals. Successful practices from previous large-scale administrative initiatives, such as the implementation of the Recovery Act, should also be included. The resulting guide would speed the implementation of any new large-scale effort as well as improve the chances of success.