Success Factors for Government Reforms

Lessons Learned from 30 Years of Government Reform Efforts ~ A new report that we co-authored, along with a set of distinguished contributors, shares insights, lessons – and stories – about our experiences in developing and implementing different kinds of government reforms over the years.

Reforms come in three “sizes:”

- Governmentwide, such as the Clinton-Gore Reinventing Government effort;
- reforms focused on mission support functions (e.g., personnel, finance, IT), such as the Bush reform efforts; and
- initiatives specific to improving mission delivery, such as improving customer service, cross-agency collaboration in delivering related services to common customers, and increasing the use of data-driven decision making on the front line.

But regardless of the size of reform, three phases with common success factors have emerged for every reform effort: (1) developing the reform initiative, (2) implementing the initiative, and (3) sustaining the initiative.

Contents

Vision ........................................................................................................................................................... 3
Mission ......................................................................................................................................................... 3
Phase One. Development ............................................................................................................................ 4
  1.1. Business Case ................................................................................................................................... 4
  1.1.1. Justification ................................................................................................................................... 4
  1.1.2. Means ............................................................................................................................................ 4
  1.1.3. Stakeholders .................................................................................................................................. 4
  1.2. Champions ..................................................................................................................................... 5
  1.3. Prioritization ................................................................................................................................... 5
Phase Two. Implementation ........................................................................................................................ 6
  2.1. Governance ....................................................................................................................................... 6
  2.2. Engagement ...................................................................................................................................... 6
  2.3. Communities .................................................................................................................................... 6
Phase Three. Sustainment ........................................................................................................................... 7
  3.1. Structures & Routines ....................................................................................................................... 7
  3.2. Dual Tracking ................................................................................................................................... 7
  3.3. Routines ............................................................................................................................................ 7
  3.4. Congress ........................................................................................................................................... 8
Administrative Information .......................................................................................................................... 8

Page 1
Daniel Chenok (DC)

Description:
Executive Director, IBM Center for The Business of Government

Stakeholder(s):

Government Leaders:
What should new leaders to government know about what reforms efforts happened before they arrived?

White House Staffers:
One of the most striking things new White House staffers encounter when they first walk into their office in the White House — or the large, gray Eisenhower Executive Office Building next door — is its emptiness. The previous occupants leave no files or other records — other than records retained by career staff in White House agencies like the Office of Management and Budget, all policy documents went to the National Archives, and the General Services Administration cleaned everything else away before the new staffers arrive. This can reinforce a natural assumption that new leaders have a clean slate to reform government policies and programs from scratch. But context and perspective on what came before can have great value: What worked? What didn’t?

Office of Management and Budget:
We hope these success factors serve as useful guideposts for the management team at the Office of Management and Budget, the departmental deputy secretaries and other leaders on the President’s Management Council, as well as other central management agencies and political and career executives across the government, to collectively build government back better.

President’s Management Council
National Archives
General Services Administration
Presidential Administrations:
Each presidential administration over the past 30 years has promoted some form of government reform. Some were broad — such as the Clinton administration Reinventing Government initiative in the 1990s and the more recent Trump administration effort to reorganize the federal government. Others were more targeted — such as the George W. Bush President’s Management Agenda and the Obama Campaign to Cut Waste. Some led to more tangible outcomes than others.

Vision
Government is built back better

Mission
To outline success factors government reform efforts
Phase One. Development

*Develop a Reform Initiative.*

Typically, the development of a reform initiative is time-bound, often the work of a temporary task force to staff the initiative.

1.1. Business Case

*Make the case for change*

Make a compelling case for change.

**Stakeholder(s):**

**Don Kettl**: According to public management scholar Don Kettl, developing a management reform initiative starts with the political and administrative context facing government leaders in the White House, Congress, and agencies. They have to articulate why they want to pursue reforms, what proposed actions are needed, and who needs to be motivated to act.

1.1.1. Justification

*Articulate why reforms are needed*

1.1.2. Means

*Articulate what proposed actions are needed*

1.1.3. Stakeholders

*Identify who needs to be motivated to act*

1.2. Champions

*Engage champions*

Engage top leaders as champions. The most successful efforts had top level support, sustained for the duration of the initiative.

**Stakeholder(s):**

**Vice President Al Gore**: For example, the Reinventing Government initiative in the 1990s was supported by Vice President Al Gore for the full eight years of the Clinton administration.

**Clinton Administration**

**Vice President Biden**: In the Obama administration, then-Vice President Biden was effective in successfully implementing the Recovery Act, in part due to his personal involvement in calls and meetings with agency heads, governors, and mayors. Staff at all levels saw this and knew that implementation was a top priority for the administration.

**Obama Administration**
1.3. Prioritization

*Prioritize opportunities*

Prioritize among competing opportunities.

**Stakeholder(s):**

**George W. Bush Administration:**
The George W. Bush administration was very disciplined in its reform initiatives. For example, it inherited more than one thousand ongoing e-government projects from the Clinton administration.

**Mark Forman:**
Then-chief information officer Mark Forman created the “Quicksilver” taskforce to prioritize those projects with the greatest potential impact. They ultimately selected 25 to invest in and scale.

**Peter Levine:**
Similarly, Peter Levine, who was the Pentagon’s chief management officer in the Obama administration, faced hundreds of demands for projects to streamline Defense management processes and had to prioritize among them to ensure focus and attention.

**Pentagon**

**Obama Administration**
Phase Two. Implementation

Implement the Reform Initiative.

Historically, many reform efforts stumbled after their initiative plans were developed. Several critical success factors have emerged as keys to successful implementation:

2.1. Governance

Create a governance structure

Create a governance structure for the initiative. The task force that develops a reform initiative typically is transitory in nature, and often dissolves after making recommendations. The resulting initiative needs both a champion and a governance structure to implement the initiative. In the Bush administration, the Quicksilver initiatives led by Mark Forman established a set of co-owners for each of the 25 projects it recommended, along with a “portfolio manager” in OMB to help address roadblocks.

2.2. Engagement

Engaging a range of staff at different levels in agencies

Engage staff at different levels. Over the past two decades, reform initiatives have been largely top-down. In contrast, engaging a range of staff at different levels in an agency increases the chance of successful implementation.

Stakeholder(s):
Agency Staff

Bob Stone:
For example, Defense career executive Bob Stone, who helped lead the Reinventing Government initiative, made a concerted effort to engage frontline staff via the creation of “reinvention labs” and the use of “Hammer Awards” to recognize teams of federal employees who improved services to citizens or significantly improved administrative functions. This led to a greater level of commitment by field and other frontline staff, with about 100,000 people recognized over the course of the Clinton administration.

2.3. Communities

Create communities of self-motivated employees

Create a community. As one element of an engagement strategy, creating communities of employees self-motivated to pursue a particular initiative can provide an effective implementation strategy.

Stakeholder(s):
Employees

Communities of Practice:
Numerous efforts to create communities of practice and centers of excellence have been institutionalized and made potentially more sustainable over time.

Centers of Excellence

GSA:
GSA, for example, hosts several centers of excellence, such as the Center for Artificial Intelligence and the Center for Customer Experience.

Center for Artificial Intelligence
Center for Customer Experience
Phase Three. Sustainment

Sustain the Initiative.

The large scale, highly visible overarching reform efforts such as Reinventing Government, specific initiatives under President’s Management Agendas, and various reorganization initiatives can evaporate at the end of a presidential administration when their political champions disappear. However, initiatives with a statutory basis tend to have greater continuity. The following success factors have shown to improve sustainability of such initiatives over time:

3.1. Structures & Routines

Create institutional structures and new routines

Create on-going institutional structures and new routines. For example, the Chief Financial Officers’ (CFO) community worked together to ensure the long-term viability of the role of CFOs by building a strong network, staff capabilities, and a long-term plan of action for the CFO community, strengthening implementation of the CFO Act.

3.2. Dual Tracking

Provide top-down vision, support, and policy framing and engage employees from the bottom-up

Use a dual-track approach. Effective management reform requires a dual-track approach – top-down vision, support, and policy framing; along with bottom-up engagement by frontline employees involved in implementing the initiative. The current communities of practice and centers of excellence could enable more systematic bottom-up engagement of frontline staffs in future top-down initiatives.

3.3. Routines

Embed into administrative routines

Embed into pre-existing administrative routines. Agencies have many existing administrative routines and typically resist adding new ones. For example, the budget process represents the most enduring, and most central, administrative routine in most agencies. Based on the experience of the implementation of laws such as the CFO Act and the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA), initiatives that align with existing administrative routines and timetables tend to have greater sustainability. For example, both the CFO Act and GPRA reports provide information to Congress at about the same time they receive the President’s Budget each February.
3.4. Congress

Collaborate with Congress

Ongoing collaboration with Congress. A crucial success factor is the importance of involving Congress, even if absent a requirement for legislation to act on the initiatives. The lack of uptake from the Obama administration’s trade agencies’ reorganization and the Trump administration’s proposed merger of the operational functions of the Office of Personnel Management into the General Services Administration suffered in part from this skipped step.

Stakeholder(s):
Congress