Interagency
Leadership

Many of the meaningful results that the federal government seeks to achieve, such as those related to protecting food and agriculture and providing homeland security, require the coordinated efforts of more than one federal agency, level of government, or sector.

— U.S. Government Accountability Office[1]

Editor's Note: This article is designed to provide an introduction and best practices in leading interagency groups, so that readers can benefit from the firsthand experiences of the author as he participated in and led such activities at the highest levels within the federal government.

by Duane M. Blackburn

After they have proven themselves within their own organizations and find themselves working on a priority topic, federal employees will likely lead an interagency team. Unfortunately, the behaviors and mindset that have made them and their team members successful within their agency are often quite different from what is required for success within an interagency setting. This article provides insights on leading interagency activities that will help lessen the learning curve for these individuals.

The federal government is a collection of stovepipes, formally created to focus attention on a group of activities that must be coordinated to meet a specific need. Each stovepipe has its own formal rules and informal processes that were developed to ensure that the stovepipe operates with little deviation and delivers consistent results. The stovepipe's stakeholders (e.g., parent agencies and departments, the White House, Congress, and impacted constituencies) value this consistency and often resist alternative approaches or activities that upset the status quo.

The need for interagency coordination occurs because these stovepipes are quite often stovepipes in practice but not in reality. Many operational issues are not constrained within the sole control of a single agency, and most science and technology initiatives benefit from leveraging multiple perspectives. Interagency activities are established when the need for coordination outweighs the

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inherent pain of implementing that coordination.

A natural conflict will quickly manifest among many individuals on a new interagency team, and the interagency leader must recognize this conflict. These members attained their senior status within their own organizations and gained the trust of their superiors largely because they ensured their stovepipes' consistency. They know the ins and outs of what they are supposed to do and how to get things done within their organizations. Upon joining an interagency team, these leaders are entering an unknown working environment, often with the task of redesigning

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their stovepipe's existing approach. Some may take this as an invigorating opportunity to be innovative. Many, however, will be shell-shocked because they are unsure of how to be successful on an interagency team that functions differently from others they have experienced in the past. Some may also be hostile to any concept that leads to a change in their stovepipe's existing processes or plans.

The challenge for the interagency team leader is to understand these internal conflicts and overcome them. The leader must ensure that team members arrive at the same understanding—that each of their organization's best chance of future success is to follow the path developed by the interagency team. Team members must become champions of change within their own stovepipes to achieve an interagency-developed outcome. That is not an easy transition to make, and it can often take considerable time and effort to achieve. There is also no single "best practice" path to success, as each interagency endeavor

is unique. Still, leveraging the following three concepts can provide a starting point:

1. Provide overall leadership of the team and encourage team members to lead aspects of the interagency activities themselves. This is not only a force multiplier, but also encourages individual team members to take ownership of the group's success.

2. Treat the interagency team as a change-management initiative. After all, the team was created to change existing approaches within the stovepipes. Using change-management methods can help consolidate the interagency team, as well as provide examples and experiences that individual team members can leverage within their own stovepipes.

3. Allow the interagency team to evolve over time. It is very rare for an interagency activity to devise and implement massive changes in one step. Meaningful change is usually an evolution that takes time. The interagency team must similarly evolve, in both its activities and its membership, to guide and support this evolution. Interagency leaders must have a dual focus of ensuring success on the team's current initiatives, while also looking ahead to what the team will need to do next, and bringing those experts on to the team in advance.

Interagency Leadership versus Interagency Management

The fundamental concept of leading an interagency team requires that the individual recognize that he or she is providing interagency leadership rather than interagency management. There are significant differences between management and leadership:

•   Management involves directing people through existing processes to ensure they

meet previously set expectations.

- Leadership involves inducing individuals to think outside their typical experiences about how to achieve greater successes in a different way.

Individuals who approach leading interagency teams with a management mindset fail for at least two reasons. First, a management mindset is a surefire way to kill the collective collegiality that is required for an interagency team to succeed. Team members come to an initiative with marching orders from their home organizations. Simply telling them to abandon those orders and do something else instead will be viewed by most as a non-starter. While this dynamic is rare in ad hoc interagency teams of peers, it has historically occurred too often in formal, White House-led activities in which politically-connected but inexperienced staffers misread their power and influence. Second, the management mindset can inhibit the creation of just the kind of innovative approaches that interagency teams require to accomplish their primary objectives. The management mindset practically creates a mandate for a pre-determined approach, with the manager ignoring the fact that the approach he or she has selected may not be optimal, or even possible, for the other team members.

Another key factor in leadership is recognizing that leadership can come from anyone on the team. While one individual is usually designated as the interagency team lead, teams usually achieve more when they encourage multiple members of the team to exert leadership. Interagency team leads should set the end-goal and define the boundaries of permissible activities to ensure the team is focused on reaching the same desired outcome. After that is established, the team lead can shift to a servant-leadership model in which the leader focuses on helping the team succeed, with multiple team members exerting

thought-leadership and coordinating lower-level activities that advance the team toward the end-goal. This model not only inspires innovation, but also a sense of personal ownership of the team's success, both of which are required for the interagency team to succeed.

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Finally, the interagency team lead is responsible for taking and managing risks but in a different sense than the government norm. Within team members' individual stovepipes, risk management often involves issues such as cost, schedule, and communication—things that must be managed for a project to be successful. Risk in an interagency context is completely different. Here, the interagency team is investigating alternative approaches and trying to decide if adopting one is worth the risk to the team as a whole and to the individuals who may be upsetting their home agency's apple cart. The stovepipe agencies may feel the changes being proposed will increase their own risk. This pushback cannot be overcome by management fiat; rather, each team member must exert leadership to convince his or her agency of the benefits of the change. The interagency leader must be continuously mindful of this need by allowing feedback into interagency plans and activities, as well as doing whatever possible to support team members during moments of discord with their home stovepipes.

Interagency Leadership Is a Change-Management Initiative

The government creates an interagency team when it recognizes the existing individual approaches of agencies are not working well and

a greater outcome could be achieved through collaboration. First, the mindset of interagency team members must be changed to think of the problem in a fundamentally new way, and they, in turn, must act to change their organizations' processes and plans to support the larger plans developed by the interagency team. That is a lot of change and why it is important to think of interagency team leadership as a change-management initiative.

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John Kotter, a well-respected thought leader in the field of change management, provides eight steps to transform an organization:[2]

- Establish a sense of urgency.

- Create the guiding coalition.

- Develop a vision and strategy.

- Communicate the change vision.

- Empower employees for broad-based action.

- Generate short-term wins.

- Consolidate gains and producing more change.

- Anchor new approaches in the culture.

With a little creative adjustment of Kotter's message on each point (as his work focuses on changing a private-sector corporation), these steps constitute a good recipe for leading change within an interagency activity.

Establish a sense of urgency

Emphasize why the interagency team was created in the initial meeting invitation and reinforce it in the first few meetings: "What's the need? What's the justification for doing it now? What's the anticipated repercussions if we don't? What's the expected outcome from our collaborative work?" Interagency teams may be chartered to pursue efficiency, to achieve some overarching mission, or simply to afford individual agencies the opportunity to coordinate to ensure the success of all. The justification and goals for creating the team should be explained so that everyone understands the intended outcome and why it is important, both collectively and individually. Knowing the purpose ahead of time helps the individual organizations identify the proper representatives to send to the team, as well as to prioritize the effort properly within their own large list of demands.

Create the guiding coalition

An interagency team must have the proper membership to meet its goals. All directly-impacted agencies should have a seat at the table, of course, but it is also important to consider second- and third-order effects of potential decisions. How will the implemented changes impact other agencies, and should they be included in the team? If so, how do you deal with having primary and secondary team members? Similar questions arise when you consider the extent to which agency stakeholders, such as the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), should be involved. Once agency membership is determined, agencies will want to choose people who can properly represent their interests within the interagency group. The interagency team lead needs individuals who have enough clout within their home agencies to return to those agencies with the outcomes of the team's work and make the changes necessary to meet the new obligations. The interagency team lead also should analyze the backgrounds of the assigned team representatives and ensure that their collective backgrounds and experiences can properly support the team's work.

Develop a vision and strategy

The convener of the interagency team (and/or the interagency team lead) will have created the team with a desired outcome in mind, but that should be just a starting point for creating the team's vision. The team lead must ensure that each team member views the success of the interagency group as critical to his or her own stovepipe's success. The first step in achieving that state occurs as the group fine tunes its overall goal and decides how the group will work toward that goal. Sometimes this step takes a painfully long time to work out, but interagency teams will not succeed without reaching consensus.

Communicating the change vision

Once the interagency team develops a clear vision, the lead must consistently reinforce the message to keep the team on track. In addition, the vision must be effectively communicated outside the interagency team. The management of each member agency should understand the team's vision, how it impacts them, and how they will be expected to support it. This message should be individually tailored by each team member to take back to their agency to ensure that their management supports the vision. To some team members, this communication will come naturally, to others it may not, and a few will even be hesitant to stir the waters at home by sharing much of anything. The interagency team lead will need to reinforce the importance of this communication and ensure that it occurs.

Empower employees for broad-based action (or Empower others to act on the vision)

At this stage, the team begins to take action. Usually such action is a mixture of formally-planned activities combined with individual initiatives, though most interagency teams focus on the former. While formally-planned activities are often required to overcome the team's most complex hurdles, individual initiatives can also be beneficial as they support each team member's sense of ownership of the team's success, while simultaneously encouraging innovative ideas. As long as individual initiatives support the vision and do not negatively impact formally-planned activities, interagency teams should strongly encourage them.

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Generate short-term wins

Short-term wins are beneficial in most activities but are especially beneficial within interagency teams. Interagency work requires overcoming a daunting number of obstacles. Wins provide positive reinforcements that encourage team members to keep moving forward. They are important tools for the interagency team lead, who should constantly look for potential "wins" to highlight. These wins should be celebrated by the team, and the interagency team lead should recognize the leader's effort.

Consolidate gains and produce more change

While celebrating wins is important, it is even more important to use the momentum created by the short-term wins to take on bigger and more complex issues. Wins not only create a sense of excitement and accomplishment, but also help to overcome skeptics and to open everyone's eyes to potential outcomes that had previously seemed unattainable. Existing team members become more willing to invest their resources once they experience some successful outcomes. Outsiders may also want to join the team after witnessing its success. The interagency team lead should use these wins as prime opportunities to tell individual

agencies, stakeholders, and third parties about the significance of the win, the nature of the next hurdle and the team's intended approach, and how the win and the next hurdle are steps toward fulfilling the team's ultimate vision.

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Anchor new approaches in the culture

The federal government and its processes are monolithic beasts— large, powerful, and intractable. Presidents and Congress, with all their available powers, have difficulty modifying federal government practices. Without nurturing, successful interagency outcomes are often short-lived, and the stove-piped organizations revert to their prior ways. Team members must therefore work to institutionalize the new approaches as their organizations' new normal culture. This institutionalization will be a long-term and laborious process for most team members, and the interagency team lead must keep the pressure on these individuals to persist in this uncomfortable undertaking while simultaneously driving the team to tackle its next hurdle. Successful institutionalization within each stovepipe should be celebrated and lessons-learned shared so that others may benefit from their experiences.

The Evolution of Interagency Teams

Occasionally an interagency team is created to overcome a simple hurdle; thus, it accomplishes its goal and then disbands. More often, however, interagency teams persist because the end state to which they aspire requires a significant amount of work to reach. In these cases, it is necessary to consider how interagency teams evolve over time, tackling increasingly difficult tasks on their way to their ultimate outcome. Using wins as a springboard to start working on harder tasks is a key part of continuing a team's work; however, there are times when a fundamental rethinking of the team's focus, structure, and messaging is required.

Consider, for example, the 10-year lifecycle of the National Science and Technology Council's Subcommittee on Biometrics and Identity Management. It grew organically out of multiple agencies providing guidance to the Federal Aviation Administration immediately after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, evolved into a formally-chartered, interagency team led by the White House, and survived an administration transition when the presidency changed political parties.

The size, membership, and activities of this Subcommittee changed considerably during its existence, but it maintained one overarching goal: to provide a foundation for the nation's screening capabilities through proper application of identity technologies, while protecting the privacy and civil liberties that make our nation strong.

Most interagency teams will not endure for as long as this Subcommittee has, and few will need to evolve in a similar manner. The common concept is that interagency teams that do not evolve will be unable to tackle more complex hurdles and are doomed to a stationary status with no chance of meeting their ultimate objective. Overcoming future, more complex hurdles often requires more formality within the interagency team as well.

The Subcommittee above, which originated as an ad hoc group but evolved into a formally-chartered organization. happened because the team and political leaders recognized that doing so was necessary for the team to meet its objectives. Once the team met those objectives that required White House-level support, its

formality devolved back into an ad hoc nature. The group continues to meet and collaborate to this day, even though its stature and influence is significantly smaller than in its heyday.

There are many potential forms an interagency team can take on the path from isolated work to formal White House collaboration. What follows is a list of these potential states, from least to most formal. The list is presented within five distinct groups of pseudo-likeness for additional analysis. Interagency team leads can assess their current state and upcoming hurdles and use this list to help them plan their team's future.

Group 0, Single Agency Focus

Within this group of states, there is no interagency coordination taking place. Individual activities are so stovepiped, there is little recognition that anyone else is working on the issue at all. Only one agency focuses on the issue.

- Multiple agencies focus on the issue, but mistakenly believe they are the only ones doing so.

- Multiple agencies focus on the issue and are vaguely aware that others are doing so as well, but have no interest in information sharing or collaboration.

Group 1, Interagency Enlightenment

Within this group of activities, stovepipes realize they are not alone and begin talking with their peers. This is usually done on an ad hoc basis, but an occasional memorandum of understanding will formalize the data exchange.

- Two or more agencies exchange information and ideas irregularly.

- Two agencies decide to work on small projects in a bilateral fashion.

- One or two agencies realizes the need for and benefit of including other agencies in their developmental plans.

- Multiple agencies exchange information and ideas regularly.

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Group 2, Interagency Cooperation

Within this group of activities, organizations begin to shift from coordination to formal collaboration via jointly funded projects. Stovepipes begin to see beneficial outcomes from joint efforts and begin to question the wisdom of doing whatever they want without their peers' influence.

- One-time workshop (over one or more days) that results in a better understanding of the community's players; the effect is transient.

- Multiple agencies start collaborating on small, single-year projects sporadically with some management visibility; there is purposeful transience.

- Multiple agencies collaborate on small projects regularly with some management visibility.

- Multiple agencies recognize that a more difficult problem exists and determine how they can address it jointly.

- Multiple agencies separately work projects that are loosely tied together, with periodic interagency meetings to discuss individually and in aggregate.

- Multiple agencies collaborate on medium-sized, multi-year projects regularly with ongoing management visibility.

Group 3, Fertilization of Collaboration

Within this group of activities, an organization's activities and decisions are heavily influenced by the work and thinking of outsiders. That can be quite upsetting to individual stovepipes, which place a premium on self-control and consistency. The stovepipe's management will thus become much more interested and involved in external collaboration. Each organization begins to see impacts from joint work that outpaces what it can accomplish on its own, and the enhanced visibility of the work leads to greater management and policy-level oversight.

- Agency leadership (management) determines that more formal coordination and higher visibility is necessary to meet needs. Media or Congress may be fanning interest, and the group wants to seize that attention as an opportunity to advance capabilities.

- Multiple agencies routinely perform activities individually as components of a joint body that does not have the charter to press for genuine collaboration.

- Management within multiple agencies recognizes the existence of critical needs that cannot realistically be met by their agencies alone.

- Multiple agencies informally identify and prioritize needs so that plans to address them can be developed.

Group 4, Interagency Collaboration

Within this group of activities, an organization's activities are driven largely by interagency planning and consensus. Each stovepipe's leadership and stakeholders views its alignment with and support of interagency plans as critical to the its own success. The higher visibility and need can lead to enhanced appropriations funding, and activities at the interagency and individual stovepipe levels come under enhanced scrutiny by political leadership within agencies and the White House.

- Multiple agencies routinely work jointly with others.

- Formal agreements to work collaboratively are developed.

- The interagency group performs a formal analysis and prioritization of interagency needs.

- Multiple agencies identify best practices for overcoming the priority needs and work to address them collectively.

Group 5, Formal Interagency Collaboration

Within this group of activities, the administration views the work of the interagency team as critical to meeting its priority objectives and, as such, formally charters the group within the structure of an Executive Office of the President (EOP)-level interagency body. Funding and other resources necessary for the interagency team to succeed are much easier to obtain, but plans undergo significant scrutiny and must be approved by the EOP. Individual organizations are expected to fully support interagency activities and will see significant budget and authority restrictions if they fail to do so.

- An administration-wide strategy for prioritizing and overcoming the critical needs is produced.

- The strategy becomes a focus for OMB during an agency's budget preparation.

- OMB examiners begin to study the strategy and budget plans from an interagency perspective.

- A formal, staffed office is created to help

foster interagency planning, budgets, and activities.

- OMB performs a "cross-cut" analysis of agency budgets to ensure precise alignment with the strategy.

Conclusion

Establishing and leading an interagency team is one of the most complex and rewarding tasks that a federal employee could undertake throughout his or her career. Success depends on having a different mindset than is typically required for senior federal managers, along with a willingness to continuously evolve the team itself. In conclusion, the most important overarching principles to keep in mind to achieve success are:

- Lead the team and encourage others on the team to do so as well.

- Interagency teams often exist as change-management initiatives, so treat them as such.

- Teams must evolve to succeed. Use your "wins" as springboards and strategically plan future activities so that outcomes are achieved with as little extra pain as possible.

- For an interagency group to succeed, its members must take ownership of the group's success, perceiving it as necessary for each stovepipe's success. *IAJ*

NOTES

1   United States Government Accountability Office, GAO-14-220, "Managing for Results: Implementation Approaches Used to Enhance Collaboration in Interagency Groups," Washington, DC, February 14, 2014.

2   John P. Kotter, *Leading Change*, Harvard Business Review Press, Boston, MA, 2012.