



Center for Technology in Government

New Models of Collaboration *A Guide for Managers*

Leadership and Project Success: Lessons from High Impact Government Innovations

**Patricia Diamond Fletcher, Ph.D, Department of Public Policy,
UMBC, Baltimore, MD 21250**

Center for Technology in Government
University at Albany, SUNY
187 Wolf Road, Suite 301
Albany, NY 12205
Phone: (518) 442-3892
Fax: (518) 442-3886
<http://www.ctg.albany.edu>

Defining a Moving Target

"Leadership is the ability to get good things done with the help of others."

This seemingly simplistic common sense definition of leadership from the Kellogg Foundation has considerable merit. Implicit in it is the notion of achieving *agreed upon goals*, a shared sense of *vision* and *values*, the willingness to *follow*, the importance of *communications*, and the merit of *teamwork*.

Effective public organizations and high quality leadership go hand in hand. While many leadership qualities are taken as a given, (e.g., dedication, charisma, engagement, communication), the public leader must also draw upon the tools and constraints afforded by being a part of a government. Thus, public leaders must also work within legislative and policy frameworks, the agenda of elected officials, the scrutiny of the media, and electoral and budget cycles which constrain both innovation and long-term strategy. Decision making occurs in a highly proscribed environment and decisions are enacted often with minimal to no new resources.

Public leadership is often a thankless role, fraught with public scrutiny and the condemnation of the press. Environmental pressures make it difficult to exert organizational or individual control. Given these constraints, you might expect that few leaders emerge in public organizations. This is not the case. As citizens we have seen stellar examples of leadership throughout the public sector, at all levels of organization, at all levels of government, and in all branches of government.

Many of these have been used countless times as exemplars of the public leader. The valiant leadership of Rudolph Giuliani as Mayor of New York after the terrorist attacks of September 11; Indianapolis Mayor Steven Goldsmith's innovative leadership in using technology to enhance public service; Lee Kuan Yew, a former Prime Minister of Singapore, and his visionary leadership which made possible the "Singapore Miracle"; the quiet heroic leadership of Jim Lovell during the fateful Apollo 13 mission to the moon; the persistent leadership of India's Mahatma Gandhi in the struggle for self leadership of the nation. A all of these leaders are well known – and every day, other examples are enacted through public organizations, sometimes quietly, sometimes with great fanfare.

Public Leaders Emerge in Innovative Partnerships

Our recently completed multi-national study of new models of collaboration for delivering government services provides yet more evidence of the importance of leadership in the success of public organizations. All of the projects were initiated by public sector leaders. And much of the leadership exhibited in this research illustrates the definition above – *the ability to get good things done with the help of others*.

What are the “good things” here?

Our case studies suggested a range of goals for the government projects studied – but all of them shared a vision of better government. The leaders in each project were committed to partnerships and innovation.

To do this they engaged in new relationships within government and between government and private and nonprofit organizations. They often embraced information technology to enable a government that is available to everyone at any time; a government that provides quality services; a government that meets top standards of performance. Their commitment was demonstrated at all levels, from the President of the United States to the project team members at the Canadian Treasury Board Secretariat, to local government GIS experts.

- In the FirstGov case, presidential leadership was visible from the start as then President Clinton believed in the power of the Internet to create a more accessible and useful government for citizens. Leadership was also visibly assumed by the U.S. General Services Administration whose leaders and staff worked “tirelessly” because they “knew it was right.”
- At Ontario Business Connect, leaders believed that service delivery in general, and job creation in particular should not “be hampered by the red tape of government.” In this project, the overall goal of the Ontario government was to increase citizen satisfaction with government services. In New Brunswick, the “Partners in Change” project was led from a belief in doing good things. One of the key success factors for the NB Department of Human Resources Development was an inspirational vision of enabling self-sufficiency for all of its clients.
- In the case of the New York State Geographic Information Coordination Program, the lack of state-level leadership was seen as an early barrier that kept New York from influencing, participating in, and benefiting from the national spatial data infrastructure. When state leadership was established to promote this common good, both the state and all its partners began to benefit from more robust and flexible data.
- One more example of leading with the power of the common good comes from the City of Bremen in Germany. Its Online Services project was based on voluntary participation by public agencies responding to the visible and active support of the First and Second Mayors . The Mayors made clear the economic good that would accrue to the City from the successful innovation of Bremen Online Services.

What is the value of the “help of others?”

A second clear lesson from these projects is that a leader cannot be successful without the help of others who offer commitment, engagement, and belief in the goals of the project. Often these people are also leaders in these initiatives.

- At the Internal Revenue Service (U.S. Department of Treasury) one aspect of leadership that was consistently stressed was the ability of the program director to

engage the staff in the job at hand. Making tax payments available online was a complex and risky business for the IRS. As a consequence, the project team had to buy into the leader's vision that this was a worthy and achievable goal.

- The Service Canada initiative shows that leadership had to come from the ranks to motivate people to be committed to success. Leadership had to arise from the peer group itself to sustain the necessary cooperation for this government-wide project.
- At FirstGov, a number of stakeholders noted that it was the very visible leadership from the President of the United States that motivated them to work together to meet the extremely demanding goals for the creation and implementation of this portal. The CIO at the General Services Administration got the team excited and engaged in meeting the very tight and very visible project deadlines. And the effort of the team itself was also a critical success factor for this project – without the team's extraordinary commitment, the FirstGov launch would not have occurred on time or with a high level of quality.

Another way leaders engage the support and help of others is by having a top level official create oversight, advisory, or decision groups composed of project stakeholders.

- This occurred in the Access Indiana case, where the Governor of Indiana created the Enhanced Data Access Review Committee, composed of top agency administrators and other key public and private stakeholders. This committee is directly involved in the workings of the program and gives Access Indiana strong and visible promotion.

Who is a Successful Leader

We have seen leaders emerge at all organizational levels in our case studies. First, we observed the very top level of leadership –often elected officials – who espouse a particular cause and engage others to follow.

- Among the Canadian cases, many initiatives under the Connecting Canadians program have the imprimatur of the Canadian federal government. These leaders created this umbrella program in order to “make Canada the most connected country in the world.” At the Partners in Change project in New Brunswick, the strong and steadfast leadership from the Premier and the Minister were “greatly appreciated and helped with getting through hard times” during the project.
- In the United States, President Clinton created the necessary conditions for a federal portal; Clinton announced his support of this policy in the “first ever Internet address” by a U.S. President, a highly symbolic statement of the importance of electronic government.
- In the City of Bremen the Mayors who represent the dominant political parties gave their personal attention to the project. In Belgium, the Hotjob project, a public employment and training service, was created by a Walloon Regional Council decree – and fit into the Wallonia government's strategic plan to modernize public services.

At the agency level, many instances of leadership emerged that proved critical to project success.

- The New York State GIS project was given life by the leadership from several state agencies. Project participants averred that the early involvement of these agencies was crucial to convince other agencies to become active in this statewide coordination effort. This agency-level leadership gave the project the necessary credibility for success. The GIS project further benefited from strong leadership from its Program Director at the NYS Office for Technology. His leadership style was to promote consensus, and his willingness to do so was seen as accounting for “a large part of the success of the collaboration.”
- At the IRS, the Commissioner for the Electronic Tax Administration was viewed by all as a superlative leader. He was willing to take risks and to be innovative, and his passionate support for this project gained the necessary operational support from a staff that was seen as neither risk taking nor innovative.

In other instances, leadership emerged from within the project team, at a peer level.

- In the Service Canada Initiative, the lines of authority were “fuzzy” and the project itself was experimental in nature. Team members had to step up to the plate, make sense of where they were headed, and then lead the way for their colleagues. The Ontario Business Connect project was successful in part due to the ability of the stakeholder team to call upon its own leadership skills and be given the necessary “room to operate” on its own merits.

Lessons Learned

In brief, a number of lessons for leaders and for public organizations can be learned from these cases.

First, there are good leaders in government. Some are enabled by the electoral process, others from policy directives granting them authority. Others emerge to respond to the demands of a given situation, leading until the situation has been resolved satisfactorily.

Second, all these types of leadership matter. We saw that without the top-level, policy support projects could not succeed. There needs to be someone in the organization at a high level who is committed to the goals of the project, someone who engenders belief in the “goodness” of the project. And when goals are not clear, or when there is considerable uncertainty about the outcome, or when the leadership at the top is not well-defined or evident, projects can be saved by the skill and commitment of team members. All these kinds of leadership are necessary, no one type is sufficient in itself.

Third, leadership styles work best when they fit the nature of the project. If cooperation is a necessary ingredient for success, then leading through consensus gives the clear message that everyone will be heard. If a massive culture change is coming, a

charismatic, risk-taking leader is called for. If change is inevitable but unsettling and unwanted, leaders have to be both convincing and consistent in their commitment to change. When the goals are very visible to the public, leaders have to inspire and pitch in personally to get the work done. When a project embodies high risk and complexity, a leader at the top of the government who supports the project is of immense value, both for symbolism and for resources.

Leaders were a critical success factor in all of these innovation projects. Leaders communicated the value of the undertaking, they engendered and encouraged commitment from the working group, they negotiated the environment to get resources and build support, and handle criticism. They created the environment to get the work done. They rolled up their sleeves and did the work themselves. Each of these aspects of leadership contributed to progress, acceptance, and success.

Online Resources for Leadership

University Programs:

[Center for Public Leadership](#)

The Kennedy School, Harvard University

Education, research, publications, and networking for students, scholars and practitioners committed to the idea that effective public leadership is essential to the common good.

[The Chief Executive Leadership Institute](#)

Yale School of Management

A forum for peer-driven leadership education among the nation's top executives and scholars.

[Wharton Center for Leadership and Change Management](#)

University of Pennsylvania

Research and dissemination of research on leadership and leadership development.

[Academy of Leadership](#)

University of Maryland

Offers custom-designed programs on the development of leadership in practice.

Government Programs:

[The Leadership Network](#)

Treasury Board of Canada - Secretariat

Courses, workshops, publications, resources, and networking – a virtual leadership network – for public service in Canada.

[The Federal Executive Institute and Management Development Centers](#)

Great Leaders for Great Government

Focus on enhancing leadership and organizational performance through residential seminars, courses, and consulting.

Professional Groups/Institutes:

[Leadership and Management Research Center](#)

CIO magazine

Networking, publications, resources for leaders who want to innovate with IT and lead a successful IT workforce.

[Center for Creative Leadership](#)

To advance the understanding, practice and development of leadership through programs, products, publications, and research.

[Council for Excellence in Government](#)

To improve the performance of all levels of government through research, training initiatives, seminars, and publications.

[National Institute for Leadership and Institutional Effectiveness](#)

Center for survey research and dissemination of information on Leadership effectiveness in higher education.

Foundations:

[Leadership Online](#)

A new leadership development program of the W. K. Kellogg Foundation to promote local and community-based leadership.

A Kellogg Foundation Publication. "Leadership Lessons and Competencies: Learning." John A. Beineke and Roger H. Sublett. Retrieved from the World Wide Web July 11, 2003 at: <http://www.wkkf.org/Programming/RenderRes.aspx?CID=0&ID=748>