

5 Ways to Juice Performance

Individual and agency performance alike will remain top concerns in the next administration

The Bush administration will be finishing work on a raft of government management issues until the final day of President Bush's term in January 2009.

Management always is a top concern for the executive branch, from the managers and agency heads all the way up to the president. The Bush administration had a clear list of priorities, and Bush's successor will set his own roster.

It's already possible to foresee what at least some of the issues for the next administration will be. According to a variety of observers and prognosticators, here are the top five management priorities for the next president.

1. Think in terms of results

Results-oriented government was a priority through the last transition in administrations and will continue to be, said Robert Shea, a fellow at the National Academy of Public Administration. But that commitment "has to be made loudly and clearly from the highest levels of the organization," he said.

Shea, who is due to leave his post as associate director for management at the Office of Management and Budget Sept. 12, said he also believes leaders should publicly and candidly admit when things go wrong.

Bush issued an executive order to stress the need for this kind of effective government, Shea said, and the incoming president needs to be at least as visible with his support.

The government has created an appetite for transparency, and people want to see more of these measurable outcomes, said Norm Lorentz, a vice president at the Council on Excellence in Government.

"We now have unlimited [technological] resources at our disposal, so there's no technology limitation to transparency," he said.

2. Link individual performance to organizational results

The good news is that agencies do not have to be convinced that there are links between per-

formance and results, said Jon Desenberg, policy director at the Performance Institute.

That was not the case during the early days of the President's Management Agenda, when agencies treated the agenda's requirements as a checklist rather than a management tool, he said. Now agencies are working to figure out what they can meaningfully measure.

Shea isn't sure that government has enough experience with the performance-based approach to effectively evaluate the performance/results links, particularly when it comes to evaluating individuals' performance.

"This administration may have focused too much on the pay part of pay for performance," he said. "We need to remind folks that it's not so much about reward and punishment as it is about expectations."

The next administration's choice to lead the Office of Personnel Management will be critical, he said, because it's OPM's job to help find that balance.

3. Make performance data transparent

Agencies should increase the accessibility of performance data, but Shea said the quantity of available data is adequate. The real difficulty – and the priority for Bush's successor — is in making it useful for the various stakeholders.

USAspending.gov, an online database of government spending that Shea was instrumental in developing, reports on many transactions every month. But, he said, it remains unclear who is using the information.

Both presidential candidates support greater access to government data, Desenberg said. "So I think there will at least be an emphasis on getting these [performance] summaries out to the public," he said. "The OMB is working on that now."

But they need to focus on usability. "People are really looking for evaluation and assessment and how effective [performance programs] have been," he said.

4. Bring the CFO to the table

Agencies still use their chief financial officers primarily to manage agency compliance, Lorentz said. And when agencies have used CFOs in a broader consulting role, the role has been ad hoc, not statutory.

And recognition of the CFO's place in the strategic management of an agency needs to happen, he said. Whether it will "depends on how shrill the scream is for results-oriented government," Lorentz added. "If it is loud enough, then there'll be a broader role for CFOs."

5. Make talent management a priority

The experiences of the public and private sectors clearly show the importance of having leaders who solicit, value and act on the ideas of frontline employees, but this approach "has been conspicuously absent over the years of the present administration," said Colleen Kelley, president of the National Treasury Employees Union.

Combining those leadership skills with working conditions and benefits that reflect the workforce's changing needs will go a long way toward ensuring that federal agencies will be able to recruit and retain talented employees, she said.

The government also needs to be more active in marketing itself as an employer of choice, said Bill Leidinger, former assistant secretary for management and now chief human capital officer at the Education Department.

"That's something it does precious little of now," he said. "There's just a very small amount of experimental advertising in this vein."

Then, when they do find people, agencies need to make certain they bring them in quickly.

It can take as long as three months for agencies to decide whether they want to hire someone, Leidinger said, and when you are in competition with the private sector for good people, that's way too long.