

“MAKING GOVERNMENT WORK AGAIN”: Trump-Style!

The chaotic waves of activity during President Trump’s first 100 days—headlined by Tweetstorms, budget cuts and a sparsity of political appointments—belie some potentially encouraging management reform actions underneath. Mick Mulvaney, director of the U.S. Office of Management and Budget (OMB), remarked, “This is probably the biggest story that nobody is talking about.”

President Trump signed a series of executive orders and presidential memoranda that gave an impression of a scattershot of actions. Yet OMB has released implementation guidance to agencies that weave those directives into a coherent action plan, along with a two-year timetable. To date, four presidential actions outline the Trump Administration’s management reform initiatives.

The Directives

The first directive deals with restructuring the federal workforce. President Trump announced a 90-day freeze on government hiring shortly after taking office, but it was lifted early—in mid-April—and replaced with an agency-driven strategy to reduce the size of the federal workforce. Although the directive calls for reduction by attrition, this will not be the only approach.

The second is a set of strategic management priorities in the president’s initial FY 2018 budget proposal. The budget outlines four goals to be achieved by 2020:

1. Manage programs and deliver services more effectively by using hard data to make decisions.
2. Eliminate costly, unproductive compliance requirements.
3. Fix mission support services by adopting leading practices.
4. Report critical performance metrics and show demonstrable improvement at the agency level.

The third directive is an executive order to “reorganize the executive branch.” A closer reading shows that it really asks agencies to take a fresh look at what they are doing, whether they should be doing it at all and, if so, whether there are better ways to operate. The emphasis is more on “rethink” or “restructure,” not as much on “reorganize.”

The fourth creates a new White House Office of American Innovation, headed by Jared Kushner, charged with working with private sector executives to “improve government operations” in part by “scaling proven private-sector models.”

Tying together these four directives, OMB sent guidance to agencies in mid-March for “reforming the federal government and reducing the federal civilian workforce.” It creates a framework and timetable for action rooted in the use of existing management, planning and budget decisionmaking processes; it does not create a separate effort.

The Timetable and Encouraging Signals

OMB set several deadlines in its guidance. Agencies are to deliver high-level Agency Reform Plans, plus more detailed plans to improve employee performance, by June 30. OMB and agencies will discuss and revise the plans, with agencies providing final versions by mid-September, along with their FY 2019 budget requests. These will be jointly delivered to Congress in February 2018. The goal: Tie any reforms to the budget process.

In addition to the agency-by-agency plans, OMB plans to create a series of teams during the summer to address cross-cutting management issues in such areas as workforce, acquisition and financial management. These efforts will be rolled into a Government-wide Reform Plan that aligns with agency-level ones.

Interestingly, OMB political and career staff have emphasized that there is a “genuine, sincere interest in fixing things that are broken,” not a disguise for budget-cutting. OMB Senior Advisor Linda Springer told *Federal News Radio*, “Why go through all of this evaluation if all you are interested in is cutting? So, that’s not the objective.” She acknowledged there will be budget cuts, but those efforts will be on a separate track.

In a press briefing, Mulvaney remarked that the effort is a key presidential priority. “The president uses different words. He doesn’t use ‘restructuring government;’ he uses ‘drain the swamp,’” Mulvaney said. “We are not going into this with some ideological preconception about what this is going to look like.” When asked if this was an effort to “deconstruct the administrative state,” he said no;

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PUBLIC SERVICE EXCELLENCE

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We also have presence. For public service leaders, this is critical. Leaders in any position make important decisions constantly about how they spend their time, sending very real and visible messages about their importance. How we engage with others speaks volumes about the relationships we do and do not value. Presence extends not just to those inside our organizations, but to the citizens and residents we serve. For those in leadership positions, let's log how we spend our time for a month. Then, take a close look at the patterns and objectively consider the messages we send. Are we as committed to diversity as we often espouse? What groups do we privilege or ignore based on our presence? Most important, how can we improve?

...and Move from Our Spot

For all the excellence in public service, we sometimes fall short. We have experienced enormous and distressing failures, such as the Space Shuttle Challenger explosion, Hurricane Katrina and the Flint water crisis. We confront struggles like underperforming and unsafe public schools, poor public housing and rural homes that lack indoor plumbing. We tackle daily vulnerabilities related to cybersecurity. Despite these shortcomings, we are committed to realizing excellence. We always must pick ourselves up and keep moving forward. We must continue to proceed with bright minds and a true commitment to all of the communities, citizens and residents we serve.

Sometimes the challenges we face in the public sector can appear truly daunting. But, we are the bold and noble profession. We have an unwavering commitment to excellence. As Nelson Mandela so poignantly reminded us following the end of apartheid in South Africa, "It always seems impossible until it's done." We must remind ourselves that despite what we see and hear, we can attain educational excellence in all of our public schools, have safe water in all of our communities, end discrimination throughout the public service—including our criminal justice system. We can have strong economic development in economically distressed communities. We are bold and noble public servants—we do not run from these challenges; we confront and successfully conquer them. We move from our spot. Our 21st century public servants will continuously advance and improve, as others carry the torch of public service into the 22nd century and beyond.

The Path Ahead

Fear not, use what we've got and move from our spot. Keeping these rules in mind, we will continue to advance public service excellence. We must

always remember that we are the bold and noble profession. Our work is not for the timid or the weak. It is for those who are strong, dedicated and committed to the often thankless task of perseverance. Whether or not our hard work and daily successes receive the recognition they deserve, we will eagerly rise to the challenge each day and purposely face the day ahead. We remain committed to public service excellence, our core values and the society we so proudly serve.

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it is about restructuring government to work better using a bottom-up, not top-down, effort.

Reactions to Date

Donald Kettl wrote in *Government Executive*, "No administration has ever bitten off quite so much with its management plan...It pulls together the analytical threads—strategy, structure, metrics and budget—into the single package many experts have long supported."

Meanwhile, *Federal News Radio* quoted industry executive Alan Chvotkin who stated that OMB's guidance memo "was clearly written by knowledgeable insiders," and that OMB is providing agencies substantial leeway in defining their reform approaches by encouraging all ideas to be put on the table. *Federal News Radio* surveyed its listeners; while it found some apprehension, one-third were supportive of the restructuring efforts.

Mulvaney wants ideas from across the public, too. "If you're an academic and you've got an idea on how to fix the government, tell us how to do it. Give us the ideas," he said. The White House website had a dedicated link for comments through June 12: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/reorganizing-the-executive-branch>.

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