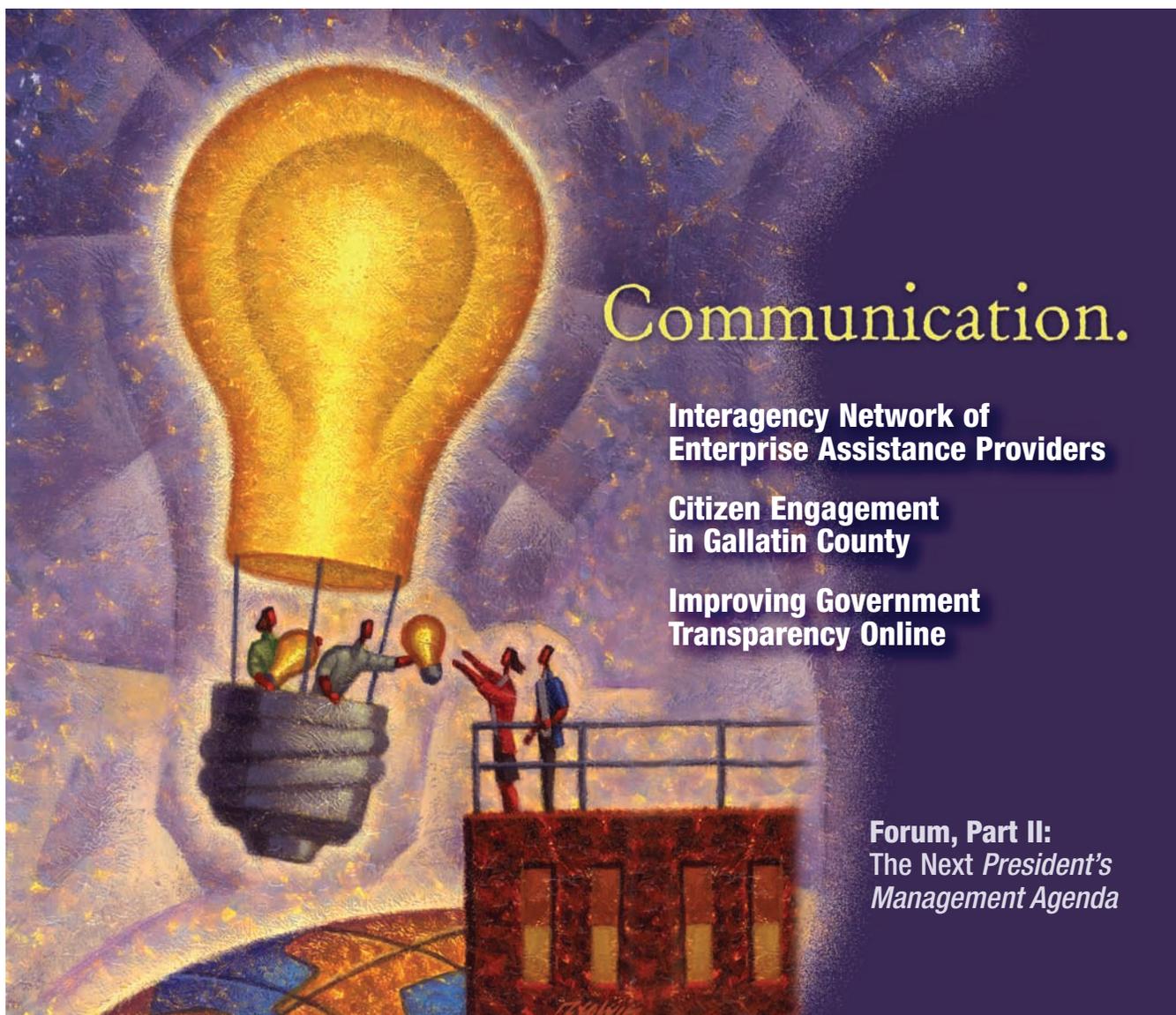


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The Challenge of Managing across Boundaries

by Mark A. Abramson and Alan P. Balutis

Starting in summer 2007, Cisco's Internet Business Solutions Group—the firm's global consulting arm—sponsored a series of seminars to bring leading thinkers on public management together with government and industry executives. Seminar discussions ranged from how a new administration might organize the next management improvement initiative to specific management issues, such as performance management, application of new technologies, and managing a blended workforce of contractors and civil servants.

The seminars also focused on which management initiatives set forth by the current administration should be continued by the next president. The participants agreed that the next administration would need to address government's antiquated personnel system, develop new ways to measure and improve performance, and strengthen the acquisition process.

This article focuses on one of the top challenges facing the new administration: managing across boundaries. Many seminar participants observed that government today is in many ways similar to government in the 1950s. Although computers now rest on the desks of government executives, legislators, and their staffs, the executive and legislative branches operate much like they did during most of the twentieth century. Both branches need to dramatically change to meet the anticipated demands and complexity of the twenty-first century. No organization in the federal government today can accomplish its program objectives without increased collaboration internally and with organizations in other parts of government, including Congress and state and local government, as well as the public and nonprofit sectors. Thus, boundary spanning needs to increase.

Government in the twentieth century was characterized by the traditional command-and-control hierarchical bureaucracy. Seminar participants agreed that government must now move to working in networks and collaborating with, not commanding, other organizations. One participant argued that the current hierarchical model of bureaucracy is now obsolete. Technology, such as social networking and collaborative software tools, can serve as enablers to increase collaboration and provide the ability to work across boundaries.

The federal government can't accomplish its program objectives without increased collaboration inside and outside the executive branch.

Between Branches

The participants generally agreed that Congress and the executive branch need to work closer together to develop new approaches to management in government. One example cited was the inability of the executive and legislative branches to agree on new ways to fund multi-agency or government-wide initiatives. Government is still encumbered by a twentieth-century system of accounts, which links funding to specific programs in specific agencies. Thus, funding a government-wide initiative that “spans” accounts and cuts across multiple departments and agencies is difficult. During the Bush administration, traditional budgeting and accounting systems created problems for funding the administration’s e-government initiatives involving multiagency participation. Negotiations between the U.S. Office of Management and Budget and Congress did not succeed in creating new approaches to funding these government-wide boundary-spanning initiatives. The executive branch and Congress also need to cooperate on goal setting and using the framework enacted in the Government Performance and Results Act to enhance communication and oversight between the two branches.

Between Departments

Another challenge for the next administration will be to find new ways for executive branch departments to work across departmental boundaries. During the seminar series, two types of boundary-spanning activities in government were discussed.

The first involves administrative boundary spanning, which includes activities such as agencies sharing services or providing one-stop Web portals. Although the Bush administration made progress in this area through its government-wide enterprise activities and increased the number of government-wide portals, much remains to be done.

The second concerns solving national problems that cut across single agencies. It was often said during the seminars that no national problem could be solved by a

single department or agency. An effective national response to any problem will require agencies working closely together and sharing information and perhaps staff members as well. The creation of the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) was a step toward increasing communication and boundary spanning among government’s numerous intelligence agencies. One ODNI goal is to foster increased networking among intelligence agencies. One participant in the series commented that some agencies in the Department of Homeland Security appear to be working as silos rather than fostering networks both inside and outside of government.

A related theme was the importance of measuring government-wide performance, which goes beyond the performance of individual departments or agencies. Participants saw a need for government to begin to sum individual agency performance and report to the public on government-wide performance. One participant also noted that such information should focus on outcomes rather than the traditional outputs.

Across Governments: Federal, State, and Local

Throughout the seminar series, participants commented on the need for increased interaction between the federal government and state and local governments. As noted, national problems are indeed “national” by definition and require programmatic interventions at all levels of government. No problems today can be solved by the federal government alone. The consensus was that current relationships between levels of government require dramatic rethinking and increased attention by the next administration.

An example of effective boundary spanning across levels of government was the October 2007 fires in California. Unlike the Hurricane Katrina experience, the federal government worked much more effectively with state and local officials than it had done two years previously. With the increased importance of homeland se-

Mark A. Abramson is president, Leadership, Inc. He has served as executive director of the IBM Center for the Business of Government and president, the Council for Excellence in Government. He can be reached at mark.abramson@comcast.net. Alan P. Balutis is distinguished fellow and director of the Cisco Internet Business Solutions Group. He served in government for more than 28 years and developed and organized the seminar series described in this article, with the assistance of Mr. Abramson. He can be reached at abalutis@cisco.com.

curity and effective responses to emergencies, the need for greater coordination and closer collaboration with state and local governments will be another major challenge facing the next administration.

Across Sectors: Public, Private, and Nonprofit

Seminar participants also agreed that the federal government needs to increase the number of partnerships with other organizations in the private and nonprofit sectors. This is related to a major theme that evolved during the seminar series: that government was moving toward serving as a manager of networks in addition to providing services by itself. Another participant discussed his vision that the job of the next generation of government executives will be to leverage activities in various sectors to accomplish government goals and objectives.

Government contracting can be viewed as one type of partnership between the public and private sectors. Government contractors and government employees now work side by side with one another in the same office space. Such working relationships are likely to continue throughout the next administration. Thus, government will face the challenge of managing a blended workforce in future years.

Twentieth-century government can be characterized by its command-and-control hierarchy. The challenge for the next administration will be to determine the most effective form and function for twenty-first-century government, which will surely have to employ collaboration and networking to span boundaries.



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