Creating and Supporting a Management Quality Improvement Learning Center for Federal Managers

White Paper

Executive Summary

Good management is central to the successful performance of every organization. The pandemic has brought into sharp relief the importance of good management in government operations. It is especially critical in large, complex governmental organizations – particularly those in this moment that the public depends on for health, safety, and well-being. However, the quality of an organization's management is not solely a function of those in leadership positions. Organizations are more successful if they have high-quality managers and well-functioning operational systems.

Given recent upheavals in many government operations, federal agencies face an imperative to modernize and improve. To effectively accomplish this, government managers and their teams need to first be able to assess their organization's strengths and weaknesses in order to identify where improvements would be most beneficial. Toward that end, they need practical, affordable ways to diagnose their organization's health coupled with insights and knowledge on how to best to put in place critical improvements.

This white paper – prepared by an *ad hoc* Task Force of current and former federal executives – identifies three overarching characteristics that should be the focus of assessing, diagnosing and improving the management quality of federal agencies:

- organizational performance that delivers mission results;
- organizational resilience to manage risk and respond to change;
- organizational agility to innovate and deliver better government in a world of rapid change.

The Task Force members call for action by the incoming Biden-Harris Administration - in partnership with career federal managers and employees and good government organizations - to elevate the importance of improving the operational health of federal agencies. It offers a roadmap to build and support a Management Quality Improvement Learning Center to benefit all federal managers. The Center would be the catalyst for this partnership to:

- Define actionable assessment criteria as to what constitutes "good quality management in federal agencies;"
- Develop and use a diagnostic tool or a set of diagnostic resources based on these criteria that federal managers can use to self-assess strengths and weaknesses of their organization to develop improvement strategies; and
- Form and support a voluntary community of practice to share insights on successful practices to assess and improve management quality.

About the *ad hoc* Task Force

The Task Force was formed following the publication of a report, *Measuring the Quality of Management in Federal Agencies,* in April 2020. That report was co-sponsored by the IBM Center for The Business of Government, the Senior Executives Association, and the University of Illinois – Chicago.

The report identified several existing public and private sector systems for collecting and using management quality metrics to assess areas of organizational strength and weakness. It recommended a temporary working group be formed to develop a roadmap for such an approach for the federal government.

Following publication of that report, the three co-sponsors convened a group of current and former career and politically appointed government managers to come together as an *ad hoc* Task Force to consider the findings of the report and develop a roadmap based on the report's findings and on their collective experience. The Task Force members are listed in Appendix 3.

The Federal Management Context

Over the years, the federal government has undertaken several organizational and performance management efforts, with varying degrees of success. By one count, Congress has adopted more than 200 laws since World War II in efforts to improve the quality of management in federal agencies. However, these laws do not reflect a coherent set of principles or provide a framework for their integrated implementation. That has been left to agency leaders to develop. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought into sharp relief the wide variation in agencies' resilience and agility to perform effectively in the face of this unanticipated event. This wake-up call offers the federal government and agencies an opportunity to rethink how they manage.

Recent presidential administrations have worked to improve management governmentwide through the President's Management Agendas, various cross-agency councils, and other means. These efforts also faced challenges but with time and experience, some of the management routines and efforts have taken root and are beginning to demonstrate progress. For example, for almost a decade the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) has supported a governmentwide "Mission Support Benchmarking" effort which identified and defined performance metrics for support functions such as IT, financial management, human resources, real property, and procurement. OMB and the General Services Administration (GSA) worked collaboratively with the councils to identify metrics that they collectively felt were measurable, valuable, and comparable across the 24 CFO Act agencies. The process revealed that agencies' widely different missions significantly affected how they measure management effectiveness. They also found the differences in internal processes made it difficult to define the metrics consistently. However, despite those hurdles, agencies realized the benefit of having actual data and often compared themselves to other agencies with like missions or operational issues to make strong business cases for investment and improvements. While there are always unique factors about every organization and their mission, we believe that a common framework can be developed for use by most, if not all, government organizations.

This benchmarking initiative and other performance improvement efforts offer some key insights and lessons around driving change and moving the needle on organizational and performance management improvements in the federal government. Notably, that an approach that delivers beneficial outcomes to agencies, and is developed in a collaborative, iterative manner that evolves over time with top level support is preferable to a heavy-handed, top-down congressional or White House mandates -- which often result in improvement efforts being treated as bureaucratic compliance exercises instead of practical improvements.

The Task Force's Vision

Task Force members call for action by the incoming Biden-Harris Administration -- in partnership with federal executives, managers and employees and other good government organizations -- to elevate the importance of improving the operational health of federal agencies. To that end, this White Paper offers a roadmap to build and support a Management Quality Improvement Learning Center. This Learning Center would benefit all federal managers and support them in continuously improving the quality of the management systems in their agencies in ways that enable higher quality mission delivery.

Selected Insights of the Task Force

The Task Force offers a roadmap for developing a Learning Center, which would collect best practices, develop one or more assessment tools, and create a cross-agency learning network. The Task Force did not attempt to develop or recommend a specific assessment or diagnostic tool or offer specific advice on how to improve management at the agency level. It believes that – in order to be sustainable over time -- the specifics of assessment and implementation of the Learning Center need to be developed and "owned" by those who will use and benefit from them. Task Force members strongly believed – based on their experience and the evidence -- that the assessment and diagnostic tools should not be used to "scorecard" or rank agencies. Past experiences show that these kinds of initiatives quickly turn into burdensome compliance exercises. Rather, they should be used as learning guides to identify strengths and weaknesses in order to develop an improvement strategy. These assessments could be self-administered or undertaken by a third party. In addition, the Task Force offers the following additional insights:

Defining the Characteristics of "Management Quality"

Based on the experience of Task Force members and a review of other assessment and diagnostic tools in use, the Task Force proposes that efforts to assess and improve the quality of management in federal agencies, programs, and managers should focus on the following three broad characteristics:

- **Organizational performance** and delivery of mission results in an effective, efficient, and equitable manner.

- **Organizational resilience** to manage risk, respond to crises, and anticipate, prepare for, and respond to changes in the broader environment.

- **Organizational agility** and ability to innovate to continue to find better practices to deliver better government in a world of rapid change.

Key Components of the Learning Center

- **Resources to Conduct Assessments and Diagnostics;** The Center would be a repository of reliable, consistent and repeatable methods to assess the dimensions that drive improvements in organizational performance, resilience and agility by diagnosing and pinpointing areas to focus on strengthening. The Task Force did not take a position on a single vs. multiple assessment or diagnostic tools but does offer its insights on notional areas to explore for the future design of these tools in Appendix 1 to this White Paper.

- **Create and Maintain Guidance/Playbook:** The Center would serve as a repository for successful practices that organizations have used to assess and improve their organizational health and management quality and to manage change and improvement efforts. Real life case studies and connections to potential champions would serve as learning devices and offer concrete, proven potential improvement strategies.

- **Sponsor a Community of Practice:** The Center would facilitate a government-wide grassroots community of federal managers and leaders to share insights and successful practices continuously as well as support each other in leading their organization's improvement efforts.

Principles for Designing the Learning Center

The Task Force believes that a Management Quality Improvement Learning Center for federal executives and managers should be developed and implemented in a way that:

- **Focuses on supporting needs of agency leaders and managers:** The Task Force believes that the design of the Learning Center should be informed by what would make it useful to managers in different circumstances. For example, new leaders interested in assessing and understanding the health of their new organizations, existing leaders interested in assessing their organization's health in response to challenges that are occurring or out of an interest in continuously improving their organization; and aspiring leaders to better understand the characteristics, practices and strategies of healthy organizations managed at a high level of quality.

- **Provides agency leaders with assessment and diagnostic insights that they can use to assess progress and benchmark against other agencies in constructive and fair ways.** The Task Force envisions that developing assessments around these characteristics of quality management will involve both a mix of analyzing common data as well as standard questions that leaders can use to assess the strength of their organizations in these dimensions. It will also involve finding and sharing feedback on existing management diagnostic resources. The assessment and diagnostic resources would be gathered in an open repository and used to design and pilot more consistent diagnostic tools. By providing assessment insights, toolkits/ playbooks etc., the resource would foster capacity building within and shared learning across organizations. The Learning Center's resources would also be used to catalyze the development of a common assessment protocol.

- **Encourages adoption and sustainability of the management improvement effort.** The diagnostic resources should be designed and implemented in a way that incentivizes participation by agencies and managers, demonstrates value/ results, integrates piecemeal management improvement policies and requirements, and transcends political administrations and leadership changes.

- **Encourages agency leaders to be champions for management quality.** Agency leaders (at all levels) should be enlisted in the effort to improve management quality. This collaborative effort should seek to build awareness, understanding, and support within and across the management and leadership of federal departments and agencies. Especially important in this regard are line managers at subordinate organizational levels.

- **Continuously learns from experience across agencies.** Recognizing the variations in mission types and levels of management quality maturity across and within a department and agency, advancing this cause would benefit from a mechanism that facilitates sharing of experiences

among agencies, build on lessons learned, and identify collaboration opportunities that help participating organizations accomplish more with available resources.

Implementation Roadmap for the Learning Center

The Task Force believes that this effort needs a champion – inside or outside the government -- and initial resources that support a "startup" organizational home that will lead the development of the Learning Center's focus, sustainability and impact. The organizational "home" could be within an existing entity, inside or external to the government. The Task Force has identified the following key steps and activities that should be accomplished by this "startup" entity:

- **Step 1: Define the Learning Center and Assessment Diagnostics.** Undertake the task of fully designing, rolling out and overseeing the Learning Center, including further developing the actionable assessment criteria as to what constitutes "good quality management of federal agencies."

    ○ Adopt an inclusive approach to the design of the Learning Center and the initial version(s) of the assessment diagnostics by involving the user groups identified above in the design and implementation of the Learning Center. In addition, leverage expertise from the behavioral sciences community in designing the Learning Center to encourage meaningful participation and adoption.

- **Step 2: Pilot the Assessment Diagnostics with Volunteer Agencies**. Design and assess a pilot phase of the Learning Center and iteratively update the Learning Center design based on use. The pilot phase would feature the development of a draft protocol for assessing the management quality of federal agencies. Pilot in 3-5 agencies that volunteer to participate.

    ○ The assessment protocol would identify practices associated with well-managed organizations and set forth a process for assessing the extent to which those practices are in place in each subject agency.

- **Step 3: Develop a Playbook Based on Experiences of the Pilots.** Develop the management quality assessment, diagnostic and improvement playbook which would include guidance on the use of the assessment tools as well as strategies and best practices to improve the various dimensions of management quality.

    ○ Help agencies define success in increments as well as identify and mitigate risks to making progress on management quality improvements.

- **Step 4: Create a Community of Practice.** Identify a community manager and facilitate a grassroots community of practice of federal managers to foster shared learning and exchange of best practices. Invite existing networks of managers to participate.

    ○ Monitor adoption of the resources and participation in the Learning Center and devise adoption strategies and incentives that encourage meaningful use and impact.

Potential Champions or Partners for Implementation

The Task Force identified the following entities as potential champions or partners to be involved in the design and support of the "startup" for the Learning Center and its eventual expansion. One or more could be its organizational "home:"

- Senior Executive Association, possibly in partnership with Senior Executive Service Presidential Rank Award recipients and other existing networks of government managers

- National Academy of Public Administration, possibly in partnership with its Agile Government Center

- Partnership for Public Service, possibly in partnership with its Excellence in Government alumni

- U.S. Office of Management and Budget, possibly in partnership with its White House Leadership Development Program

- U.S. Office of Personnel Management, possibly through an expanded Federal Executive Institute

- U.S. General Services Administration, possibly via its Centers of Excellence, Office of Evaluation Sciences, and/or Office of Shared Solutions and Performance Improvement

- A new or existing Federally-Funded Research & Development Corporation (FFRDC)

- An academic center at a university

- Some combination of the above, such as an FFRDC working in conjunction with the SEA and university

Appendix 1: Notional Areas for Future Design and Exploration of Assessment and Diagnostic Tools

The following table proposes a starting point for defining the characteristics of management quality in federal agencies to be assessed and diagnosed:

Organizational Outcome	Aspects to Assess and Improve to Achieve High Management Quality
Organizational Performance	• Clarity and coherence of mission, vision, goals and strategies • External reputation and trust in organization • People in key leadership and other positions have needed knowledge and skill sets • Clear governance and effective organizational design • Effective resource management • Setting and making progress on appropriate performance targets • Right-sized/ right-skilled/ high performing workforce • Work environment that fosters employee empowerment, inclusion, engagement, and a scientific and strategic mindset • Work environment that fosters continuous learning and improvement culture and treats missed stretch targets and failed trials as healthy indicators of an innovative continuous improvement culture • Operating in cross-functional teams and networks/ collaborating across silos to improve outcomes, operational quality, and transparency • Effective knowledge management • Efficient and effective processes • Modern technology architecture, systems and tools • Effective communication to support outcome improvement, strengthen democratic accountability and process quality, and build trust in government decisions and actions
Organizational Resilience	All of the above characteristics plus… • Strong risk identification, assessment and management • Future focus and contingency planning • Change Readiness • Situational Awareness • Ability to adapt quickly and responsibly to situational change
Organizational Agility	All of the above characteristics plus… • Customer-Driven Behavior, Human-centered design • External networks • Speed • Innovation • Persistence • Rapid, iterative adaptation

Designing the Management Quality Assessment and Diagnostic Approach and Tools.

The Task Force developed a separate working draft that builds on the characteristics described in the table above. The working draft includes an illustrative set of management quality questions that managers can ask to self-assess their own organizations. A copy of the draft is available from the Task Force chair.

The Task Force envisions these types of questions could be a starting point for identifying the federal managers would find most valuable to have answered, and what kind of shared and own-organization data, analytics, and other information they would like available to them to assess their organizations more accurately and appropriately in order to inform their decisions and actions to improve the quality of their organization's operations. These data would include, for example the results of the annual Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey and the annual survey of mission support functions conducted by the General Services Administration.

During the course of its deliberations, the Task Force identified a number of issues that it did not resolve but recommends further study and resolution:

- the extent to which standardized assessments are useful or practical;
- the extent to which the benefits of a self-assessment model (which may create a safe space for learning) outweighs the benefits of a more rigorous and consistent external assessment approach in terms of impact and adoption;
- the extent to which quantitative metrics or indicators of management quality are useful or practical;
- the benefits and risks of sharing the results of the assessments publicly or across agencies (benchmarking safely vs benchmarking transparently).

The Task Force recommends that a review of past efforts to improve management quality is a critical first step to designing a new assessment, diagnostic and improvement tools to continue the momentum of investments and efforts already in place that drove positive outcomes and to learn from and avoid repetition of failures. Some of this work has already been documented by the University of Illinois-Chicago research team that supported the Task Force.

See Appendix 3 for contacts for the Task Force chair and the University of Illinois-Chicago research team.

Appendix 2: Additional Resources

Following are selected resources the Task Force consulted in developing its insights:

Strengthening Organizational Health and Performance in Government (January 2018). Report.
National Academy of Public Administration.
https://www.napawash.org/studies/academy-studies/strengthening-organizational-health-and-performance-in-government

Measuring the Quality of Management in Federal Agencies (April 2020), Report.
Co-sponsored by: IBM Center for The Business of Government, Senior Executives Association,
University of Illinois-Chicago. Authors: James Thompson, Alejandra Medina Carrillo
http://businessofgovernment.org/sites/default/files/Measuring the Quality of Management in Federal Agencies.pdf

Building an Agile Federal Government: A Call to Action (December 2020), White Paper.
National Academy of Public Administration and the Program Management Institute
https://www.napawash.org/uploads/Agile_Gov_whitepaper_v4.pdf

The Road to Agile Government: Driving Change to Achieve Success (December 2020). Report.
IBM Center for The Business of Government. Author: Edward DeSeve
http://businessofgovernment.org/sites/default/files/The Road to Agile Government.pdf

Appendix 3: Members of the *ad hoc* Task Force

- **Noha Gaber,** *Task Force Chair.* Chief Strategy Officer, Economic Development Administration, U.S. Department of Commerce (serving on Task Force in an individual capacity)
    - noha.gaber@gmail.com

- ***Beth Angerman***, Client Service Partner at Slalom Consulting and former Principal Deputy Associate Administrator, Office of Governmentwide Policy, U.S. General Services Administration
    - Beth.angerman@slalom.com

- ***Jason Briefel***, Director of Policy and Outreach for the Senior Executives Association
    - Jason.Briefel@seniorexecs.org

- ***Nani Coloretti***, Senior Vice President for Business and Financial Strategy, The Urban Institute and former Deputy Secretary, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development
    - NColoretti@urban.org

- ***Robert Goldenkoff***, former Director, Strategic Issues, U.S. Government Accountability Office
    - goldenkoffr@gmail.com

- ***John Kamensky,*** Senior Fellow, IBM Center for The Business of Government, and former Deputy Director, National Partnership for Reinventing Government
    - john.m.kamensky@gmail.com

- ***Shelley Metzenbaum,*** Former Associate Director, Office of Performance and Personnel Management, U.S. Office of Management and Budget

    - smetzenbaum@gmail.com

- ***Jim Williams,*** Partner, Schambach & Williams Consulting and former Acting Administrator, U.S. General Services Administration, and former Commissioner, Federal Acquisition Service, GSA
    - jimwilliamsva@gmail.com

Advisors: University of Illinois – Chicago

- ***James Thompson,*** Associate Professor, Department of Public Administration, University of Illinois - Chicago
    - jthomp@uic.edu

- ***Alejandra Medina Carrillo,*** Ph.D. Candidate, Department of Public Administration, University of Illinois – Chicago; former civil servant, Republic of Mexico
    - Amedin54@uic.edu