

Rebuilding Trust in Public Institutions Through Action

By Christine Springer



Most organizations— regardless of their size, complexity or mission— struggle with implementing new solutions and identifying, prioritizing, planning and managing change. Although these same organizations recognize the vital role that management plays in advancing their goals, most fail to ensure that new initiatives are actually effective. Every year too many dollars are budgeted and wasted on the wrong initiatives. Recently, 40 organizations talked with me about what was important in improving their services and trust in them. They ranked, in order of priority, processes that contributed to success. First was restoring trust organizationally and organizational alignment, followed by strategy development, planning and budgeting and action/initiative management.

Restoring trust within the organization is critical because high-trust organizations outperform low-trust organizations. However, restoring relationship trust often involves money problems. The very effort of trying to resolve the issue of cost and delivery can make relationship trust flourish often through collaboration with other agencies. In order for the process to work, relevant criteria must first be used to make decisions about how to proceed and then a consistent management process needs to agree upon using five key elements:

1. Identifying and collecting ideas.
2. Evaluating and prioritizing ideas.
3. Planning and approving implementation.
4. Launching project management and portfolio management practices.
5. Keeping the process open to stakeholders.

These actions usually involve projects or programs outside the organization's day-to-day operational activities that are meant to help the organization achieve its mission. They are such things as instituting change, creating capability to do something new or better or improving performance by improving a process. I have found that the reason few new actions achieve desired results is due to the inability to restore or maximize trust for one or more reasons:

1. Work overload: the organization tries to implement too many changes at once and ends up spreading its resources too thin.
2. Lack of alignment: one change is at cross-purposes with another.
3. Inability to prioritize actions: leaders fail to come to agreement on which change should take top priority, resulting in the adoption of strategic actions that are less relevant being pursued and receiving limited support.
4. Poor project management: changes are often poorly communicated or not managed through to completion.

Choosing which action to pursue requires that the organization ensure that the action is aligned with key goals and objectives. By organizing actions into portfolios, managers can then analyze them in order to understand how they individually or in aggregate:

- Impact the organization's strategic goals.
- Determine the impact of one action on another.
- Phase actions in order to meet short and long-term goals.
- Get an idea of what the total investment needs to be in order to support each action and measure the return on investment.
- Prioritize actions within each portfolio and reallocate resources to those with the greatest impact on achieving strategic goals while deferring those that have less impact.
- Discard actions that don't support the strategy or do so at too high a cost.

These action portfolios become the organizing framework by which leadership teams can make important decisions about how to ensure a successful action occurs.

Leaders then need to have the ability to manage the process from idea gathering to progressive management over time and to share the process with key stakeholders. Four key elements define whether or not they will do so successfully.

First, identifying and collecting ideas. It is essential to create a way that allows new ideas to be fed from employees of all levels and also from stakeholders within and external to the organization. Sometimes that means using technology such as Intranet channels to open and speed the flow of ideas from all sources. To be effective, organizations shouldn't just count on ideas flowing in but also establish procedures for managers to solicit those ideas as well. Ideas that are submitted should be fully described and outlined including costs and benefits that can be shared with stakeholders. The leadership team reviews the submissions and selects those actions that they believe deserve sponsorship which means that someone in leadership will be accountable for marshaling resources to support its implementation.

Secondly, the idea is evaluated using an established set of sound criteria. . .not simply the loudest voice or organizational politics. . . because doing so usually leads to disappointing results. In fact, I have found that leadership teams are more comfortable supporting change when politics is removed from the decision-making process and decisions are based entirely on objective information. Sometimes, organizations facilitate such an evaluation by including standardized criteria in a proposal template that is used by those who submit the ideas. It is then possible for the leadership team to evaluate the ideas based upon strategic fit and benefit, resource demands and risks involved. They are able to prioritize proposed changes by checking the rankings of each and then building a priority list using facilitation techniques to gain consensus and if necessary mediate any disagreements.

Thirdly, the prioritized action becomes part of a plan that defines the purpose of the change and demonstrates its alignment to strategic and operational objectives. As part of the planning process, resources that will be needed are defined and how and from where they will be allocated as well as things like project management, target dates, cost/benefit trade-offs and a start date. A strategic action sponsor is identified and they review the plan as part of the leadership team and get approval when all agree that key questions have been answered. Once action plans have been reviewed and approved, start dates are communicated to the strategic action managers and resources are allocated. Plans should also be reviewed after the strategic

action is completed so that the organization can identify performance deviations and planning miscalculations, advance organizational learning, maintain sponsor and manager accountability and generally improve the strategic management process.

Finally, the use of standard project and portfolio management practices is critical to success. This is particularly true in complex organizations where coordination and collaboration is important to achieving desired outcomes. For example, strategic actions often require long timeframes to take effect thereby spanning multiple quarters and sometimes years. Quarterly progress needs to be documented and celebrated. Without an organizational commitment and management processes in place, they run the risk of not staying aligned with changing organizational goals and needs thereby running into problems and fading due to lack of support. Project management ensures that the strategic action is actively managed throughout its life cycle and portfolio management ensures that the most strategically valuable set of actions are kept within each portfolio.

As strategic and operational goals evolve, the organization's leadership needs to make sure that they are implementing the right strategic actions to achieve goals. During the initial review, this can mean canceling up to 20% of existing actions because they are not strategically viable. Portfolio reviews are usually conducted quarterly or semi-annually, adjustments are then made for changing conditions and those changes are communicated to key internal and external stakeholders. Together, project and portfolio management can help rebuild trust by taking action on schedule, on budget and true to the original intent while at the same time maximizing return on investment.

Christine G. Springer, Ph.D.

Director - Executive Master of Science in Crisis and Emergency Management (ECEM)

University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV)

Department of Public Administration

Greenspun College of Urban Affairs

4505 Maryland Parkway Box 456026

Las Vegas, Nevada 89154-6026

702.895.4835 Office 702.497.1216 Cell 702.895.1813 Fax

EMAILS: christine.springer@unlv.edu or cggs@aol.com

WEBSITE: <http://publicadministration.unlv.edu/programs/ecem.html>