



# HOW PURPOSE CAN EMPOWER THOSE IN PUBLIC SERVICE

By Sharon Marcil, Meldon Wolfgang, Danny Werfel, Brooke Bollyky, Ashley Grice, Troy Thomas, and Catherine Manfre

*This article is the last in a three-part series providing insight on how new government leaders can hit the ground running. The first article explored how leaders can get smart by gaining a deep understanding of their agency, and the second examined how leaders can get organized by preparing a plan for the first 100 days.*

**A**MERICANS MAY NOT REALIZE it, but they have great faith in their government. Every day, millions of people in the US get on planes, eat in restaurants, or pick up medicine at the pharmacy without thinking twice about it. They have the confidence to do so because government institutions—such as the Federal Aviation Administration, the US Department of Agriculture, and the US Food and Drug Administration—keep the country’s air travel, food system, and medicine supply chain safe and reliable.

Such faith in the system reflects the fact that the US government is filled with committed, knowledgeable, hard-working professionals. As new agency leaders take the

helm across the US federal government, one of their key tasks is to unlock the potential of that workforce—and, by extension, the potential of their organizations. For incoming appointees who have done their homework to understand the organizational DNA of their agency and to develop a clear set of priorities, successful implementation of their agendas will hinge on their ability to mobilize and energize their workforces.

On the basis of BCG’s experience with thousands of leadership transitions in both the public and the private sectors, we have identified two things that agency leaders must get right in order to ensure their employees are engaged, motivated, and able to drive progress on the organization’s priorities. First, they must rally the workforce around the agency’s purpose—reflected in the value it creates for the American people—in a way that motivates and energizes people. Second, they need to mobilize the organization to act on the agency’s priorities, such as by fostering a culture of trust and transparency and setting up teams to

drive implementation of certain critical priorities. If new leaders do both things successfully, they will unleash the power and potential of their workforces.

No doubt, additional headwinds may make this period unusually challenging. Many newly appointed leaders will be entering agencies that have been on the frontline of the pandemic response and are therefore stretched thin in terms of human and physical resources. In addition, government employees are still adjusting to last year's rapid shift toward remote working—with a complete return to the traditional operating model unlikely anytime soon, if ever. And given recent, repetitive turnover at the top of several agencies, many employees may be cautious to embrace a new chief. However, incoming agency leaders who tap into the power of their people will be able to overcome such obstacles and hit the ground running.

## The Power of Purpose

In times of transition, such as the arrival of a new leader with a fresh strategic agenda, the organization's purpose is a critical source of stability and inspiration. It can serve as both a touchstone and the jet fuel that helps leaders drive progress on strategic priorities. Ultimately, those who connect their agenda to their agency's purpose can create a reinforcing feedback loop that will evangelize stakeholders within the organization as well as throughout the greater public.

**Focus on the why.** Government agencies typically have a clear mission. According to [Best Places to Work in the Federal Government](#), many government agencies score well on issues related to whether employees feel that their skills and talents are actually used, both in general and in support of the organization's mission in particular. Often, such agencies will outperform the private sector in this area. That mission is the *what*—the objective on which the agency must deliver. Purpose answers the *why*—why does that mission matter? Consider the US Environmental Protection Agency, for example. The

organization's stated mission is to protect human health and the environment. This mission is vital because access to clean air, land, and water is fundamental—and compromising those assets results in significant, negative impact on the daily life of everyday Americans.

An authentic and timeless purpose can be vital during periods of upheaval. Humans do not naturally deal well with change and uncertainty. As Kelly Goldsmith—an associate professor at Vanderbilt University's Owen Graduate School of Management and an advisor to [BrightHouse](#), a BCG global creative consultancy—has said, “[humans] are not wired to tolerate uncertainty. That's why we come up with structures and rules to try and make things predictable.” Purpose can act as the core constant for employees, helping them grasp intellectually, and feel emotionally, the link between new strategic priorities and their own responsibilities. Understanding not only what they need to do but why their work matters motivates people in powerful ways. And there is strong evidence that it can bolster overall organization performance. According to BCG research, in the private sector a [deeply ingrained purpose correlates strongly with returns to shareholders over a ten-year period](#).

**Use purpose to motivate.** The key for new leaders, then, is to make explicit the connection between the work people do and the value they deliver to the public. Storytelling can be a powerful tool in this regard. Recently, a defense organization aimed to enhance mission readiness by improving the availability of replacement parts for key equipment. Historically, supply management teams responsible for acquiring parts worked tirelessly but were far removed from day-to-day operations. Leadership decided to better connect those supply managers to the organization's purpose, including by bringing in end users to thank them and explain the impact of specific parts on mission accomplishment and safety. The end result: the organization moved from a mission-capable rate of 60% (meaning that 60% of its equipment was ready to deploy at any one time) to the

targeted rate of 80% by the end of the effort's first year.

To amplify the focus on purpose, new leaders can create champions within management. These champions, who can reinforce the connection between the purpose and the agency's priorities through their behaviors and decisions, should be supported with coaching. And new leaders should periodically conduct what is known as a beliefs audit to ensure there is no significant gap between the agency's actions and its purpose. A beliefs audit is a quick way to clarify potential areas of disagreement among leaders and redefine project goals at an early stage.

## Mobilize the Workforce

With the workforce focused clearly on the organization's purpose, new leaders can begin mobilizing to deliver on the agency's agenda. They must foster the right culture in the organization and put processes and structures in place to drive rapid progress on certain critical priorities.

**Promote the agency's defining culture.** If the mission is the what, and the purpose is the why, then the culture reveals the how. Culture codifies the behaviors that determine the way an organization operates and gets things done. And, much like purpose, culture has a direct impact on performance: research from BCG and others has found that companies with a strong and well-defined culture outperform on a variety of metrics, including return to shareholders, employee retention, and customer satisfaction.

Incoming leaders who want to foster the right culture should do three things. First, they should start by listening to their people, which signals their respect and engagement with the civil servants in the organization. They could, for example, hold early town halls with career staff to hear their concerns and suggestions, have regular meetings with field or regional leaders, and bring political appointees and career civil servants together at regular offsite sessions. They should also strengthen professional

development for civil servants, including through training, mentorships, and rotations into other departments or agencies. And new leaders should learn how the career personnel system works in order to leverage, reward, and promote the best talent and hold underperformers accountable.

Second, they should identify the behaviors they want people to embrace within the organization. This should include an ability to accept and respond constructively to bad news, readiness to take risks, willingness to fail, making decisions on the basis of data, sustainability, and a bias toward rethinking the value added by internal business processes.

Third, they must walk the walk—that is, adopt those desired behaviors. If, for example, leaders want their leadership teams to minimize time consumed by meetings and maximize time for high-impact activities, they must lead by example. They can dedicate a percentage of the time on their calendars to meetings and set aside another portion for thinking. Then they can ask their team members to do the same.

**Kick-start progress on priorities.** To accelerate progress on priorities, agency leaders need to make some smart, tactical moves. Many create program management offices (PMOs), for example, to advance their strategic agendas. Such entities can manage and coordinate cross-functional work; prioritize deployment of scarce resources, such as workforce time and budget; and ensure proper communication across the organization. By taking an activist stance, truly understanding the progress being made, and anticipating the challenges ahead, a strong PMO will accelerate success in the early days.

However, new leaders should explore additional steps to drive rapid progress on specific high-profile priorities that are particularly technical and tied to data. Demonstrating clear and quick gains on such priorities to internal and external stakeholders will reinforce trust for the new leader and, by extension, the agency.

## PIONEERING DELIVERY UNITS IN THE UK

National and regional governments around the world have achieved varying degrees of success with delivery units. The first major undertaking, back in the early 2000s in the UK, remains the classic example of a successful effort—and offers valuable lessons that governments can draw upon today.

After winning his second term as prime minister, Tony Blair tapped advisor Michael Barber to set up the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit (PMDU). The goal: to drive progress on important and challenging priorities. Several factors helped set up the unit for success. First, the PMDU had significant resources, including a €2 million budget. Second, it

had both a strong team, which comprised civil servants and outside professionals with deep experience in public-sector delivery, and solid commitment and involvement by the prime minister. Finally, it had clear objectives to advance specific government priorities and specific metrics for measuring progress.

Ultimately, the PMDU helped the government advance a number of critical programs, including a health care effort that helped reduce the number of patients waiting at least a year for a surgical operation from more than 40,000 to less than 10,000 in a two-year period.

One option is to establish delivery units. A delivery unit is a centralized group of highly skilled people who drive a specific mission-critical initiative. When traditional bureaucracy is unlikely to accelerate progress, a delivery unit can provide additional oversight, approaches, and perspectives to surmount typical barriers, bureaucratic delays, and silos. Success with delivery units tends to be in discrete, measurable tasks.

Two elements make delivery units effective. First, they have senior sponsorship and are granted decision rights, so they are independent from the existing functions or departments that would otherwise be responsible for success and therefore be subject to the typical bureaucratic speed limits. This senior sponsorship comes with an explicit mandate to rapidly resolve problems, connect the right people, access necessary resources, and mitigate risk. Second, delivery units typically have access to live data, which allows them to move quickly.

The makeup of the delivery unit is just as important as its mandate. These units are most effective when they include three levels of talent. The first should encompass professionals from the private sector, with deep expertise and a proven record of de-

livering results in program management or product development. The second should comprise people from the agency who truly understand the organization's ways of working, policies, and procedures. And the third should consist of experts in the specific topic at hand. With the right elements in place, delivery units have proven to be potent drivers of change. (See the sidebar "Pioneering Delivery Units in the UK.")

**L**EADERSHIP TRANSITIONS ARE a time of significant uncertainty and change, which can bring both risk and opportunity. The risk is that uncertainty will undermine morale and motivation, making it difficult for new leadership to advance critical priorities. But the opportunity is that the transition opens the door for a fresh start that energizes and empowers employees. New government leaders can tap into that opportunity by rallying their organizations around purpose and taking steps to drive some early, quick wins. Those who do so will unlock the true potential of their people and their organizations.

## About the Authors

**Sharon Marcil** is a managing director and senior partner in the Washington, DC, office of Boston Consulting Group and heads BCG's US Federal business. You may contact her by email at [marcil.sharon@bcgfed.com](mailto:marcil.sharon@bcgfed.com).

**Meldon Wolfgang** is a managing director and senior partner in the firm's Boston office. He is a member of BCG's People & Organization, Public Sector, and Industrial Goods practices, and he leads talent management for the firm in North America. You may contact him by email at [wolfgang.meldon@bcg.com](mailto:wolfgang.meldon@bcg.com).

**Danny Werfel** is a managing director and partner in BCG's Washington, DC, office. He leads the firm's Public Sector practice in North America. You may contact him by email at [werfel.danny@bcgfed.com](mailto:werfel.danny@bcgfed.com).

**Brooke Bollyky** is a managing director and partner in the firm's Washington, DC, office. She leads BCG's people and organization work in the public sector for North America and is a member of the firm's Center for Digital Government. You may contact her by email at [bollyky.brooke@bcgfed.com](mailto:bollyky.brooke@bcgfed.com).

**Ashley Grice** is the CEO and managing director of BrightHouse, a BCG global creative consultancy based in Atlanta, Georgia, that pioneered business purpose consulting. She specializes in purpose-driven cultural transformations that boost employee engagement. You may contact her by email at [agrice@thinkbrighthouse.com](mailto:agrice@thinkbrighthouse.com).

**Troy Thomas** is a partner and associate director in BCG's Washington, DC, office. He is a core member of BCG's Public Sector practice and leads the firm's defense and security work for North America. You may contact him by email at [thomas.troy@bcgfed.com](mailto:thomas.troy@bcgfed.com).

**Catherine Manfre** is a partner in the firm's Washington, DC, office. She is a core member of the Public Sector practice and works with both federal and state government agencies. You may contact her by email at [manfre.catherine@bcg.com](mailto:manfre.catherine@bcg.com).

Boston Consulting Group partners with leaders in business and society to tackle their most important challenges and capture their greatest opportunities. BCG was the pioneer in business strategy when it was founded in 1963. Today, we help clients with total transformation—inspiring complex change, enabling organizations to grow, building competitive advantage, and driving bottom-line impact.

To succeed, organizations must blend digital and human capabilities. Our diverse, global teams bring deep industry and functional expertise and a range of perspectives to spark change. BCG delivers solutions through leading-edge management consulting along with technology and design, corporate and digital ventures—and business purpose. We work in a uniquely collaborative model across the firm and throughout all levels of the client organization, generating results that allow our clients to thrive.

© Boston Consulting Group 2021. All rights reserved. 2/21

For information or permission to reprint, please contact BCG at [permissions@bcg.com](mailto:permissions@bcg.com). To find the latest BCG content and register to receive e-alerts on this topic or others, please visit [bcg.com](http://bcg.com). Follow Boston Consulting Group on Facebook and Twitter.