Collaboration Series

# The Quest to Become "One":
## An Approach to Internal Collaboration

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IBM Center for
**The Business
of Government**

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On behalf of the IBM Center for The Business of Government, we are pleased to present this report, "The Quest to Become 'One': An Approach to Internal Collaboration," by Russ Linden.

"It's like herding cats" is a refrain heard from many leaders of large government organizations. Setting goals, it seems, is the easy part. But how do you get organizations with 100,000 or more employees to move in concert toward the achievement of those goals?

In recent years, several large federal agencies did indeed try. They created initiatives that attempted to get all their units to work as "one." These efforts—*One VA*, ONE DOT, and One NASA—each had different approaches, but undertook their efforts for common reasons: Their customers demanded it, their organizations dealt with complex challenges requiring collaboration, and they found they could not succeed as fragmented entities. Dr. Linden presents case studies of each of these initiatives. He then shares lessons learned from each and suggested strategies for enhancing "oneness."

This report examines what it means for a large federal organization to become "one," the hurdles agency advocates of "one" initiatives face, and which strategies appear to work well. All federal executives, especially in large agencies, will find the insights and lessons in this report well worth the time to read as they craft their own reform agendas, which will likely require increased cooperation and collaboration across traditional "stovepipes."

We trust that this report will be helpful and informative to executives across government, many of whom face the challenge of leading their organization to becoming "one."

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Government leaders face numerous external challenges today that require collaboration across internal boundaries. Whether the agency is dealing with rising customer expectations, demands for greater accountability, constantly changing technology options, the global economy, or the struggle against terrorism, it is more important than ever to get all units pulling in the same direction.

But the difficulties remain huge. Leaders in most agencies continue to deal with employees who hoard information as a career strategy, who don't understand how their unit contributes to the larger mission, and who aren't moving in the same direction. Indeed, the units in many government organizations resemble a collection of tribes, each with its own language, symbols, culture, and traditions.

An emerging approach used by some leaders to deal with this dilemma is to create initiatives aimed at having all units act as "one." Such initiatives challenge employees to think from an agency-wide perspective and make decisions based on what is best for the whole organization and its constituents. This is extraordinarily difficult work, with potentially huge payoffs if done well.

## Purpose of This Study

This report summarizes the experiences of three large federal organizations that have used "one" initiatives to get all employees moving in a common direction. It addresses four major questions:

1. What does it mean for a large federal organization to become "one?"

2. What are some of the key hurdles in the quest for "oneness," and how can those hurdles be anticipated and managed?

3. Which strategies appear to work well? What are some critical success factors?

4. Is the effort worth it? On balance, given the opportunity costs of engaging in this change initiative, given the vested interests in maintaining the status quo, do the benefits exceed the costs?

To answer these questions, the report details the "one" efforts at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), Department of Transportation (DOT), and National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA).

## The Case Studies

### One VA—Internal collaboration for seamless, integrated service to veterans.

The Department of Veterans Affairs has three large administrations: health, benefits, and memorial and interment services. Historically, each administration had its own independent field and management reporting structure, its own chief information officer, and its own chief financial officer. As someone who works closely with VA puts it, "When veterans go to a different VA office and try to obtain service or information, they're always starting over."

The *One VA* effort was the creation of Deputy Secretary Hershel Gober, who came to VA in 1993 after serving as a state VA director. He demonstrated his passion for improved customer service, frequently telling employees that they had to find a way to "start acting as one VA."

The formal *One VA* phase began in 1997. Its goal was to "provide seamless, integrated service to veterans." The initiative included a series of five large conferences that included over 2,500 employees, and the use of state councils to implement *One VA*

goals. Where state councils were active, *One VA* produced some positive results: better customer service, cross training of staff, improved communications between the huge VA administrations, and improved employee awareness of how they fit into the larger picture.

When the Bush administration came to office in January 2001, VA's new leaders brought a different leadership approach. Incoming VA Secretary Anthony Principi emphasized unity at the top, accountability, centralization, and standardization of certain practices. While the new VA leaders no longer pursued *One VA* as a formal program, they continued to work toward its customer service goal.

The approaches taken by the initial *One VA* leader and those of his successors offer an interesting contrast. One strategy, led by an impassioned senior leader, empowered the front line, articulated broad goals, and fostered bottom-up participation through the state councils. The other is more of a corporate strategy, emphasizing accountability, a single leadership structure at the top, standardized processes, and reduced structural fragmentation. Both have contributed to the customer service goal, in different ways.

### ONE DOT—Internal collaboration to implement department-wide policies and programs, and deliver improved service to state and local entities.

Since the Department of Transportation opened for business on April 1, 1967, it has been organized around agencies focused on single modes of transportation (for example, highways, transit, and railroads). DOT leaders have struggled to get their units communicating and coordinating on intermodal efforts. When Rodney Slater became the new DOT secretary in 1997, he was determined to do something about its fragmentation.

Slater worked with a group of leaders from across the department to create a new DOT strategic plan for 1997–2001 containing five intermodal goals (for example, safety, mobility, economic growth). ONE DOT was developed as a means to implement the five goals in the strategic plan.

ONE DOT became visible to employees through the same kind of large conferences utilized at VA, each attended by hundreds of employees. One of the

conferences' main products was a series of "flagship initiatives," major projects that supported the department's five overarching goals and required collaboration among several modes. ONE DOT regional teams were formed to work on aspects of the flagship initiatives. Different members of the leadership team were made "regional champions" for each regional team, and those teams were held accountable to headquarters for results.

ONE DOT led to several significant results, including greater security at the 2002 Olympic Games at Salt Lake City, one-stop service for local government transportation planners and providers in several locations, and increased usage of seat belts. ONE DOT was not continued as a formal initiative at the change of administrations in 2001. However, a number of the regional teams continue to meet on their own and are working more effectively across internal agency boundaries, which is a testimony to the impact it had on many regional managers and leaders and the relationships they formed through ONE DOT.

### One NASA—Internal collaboration to reduce unnecessary competition, utilize resources for the common good, and make decisions on an agency-wide basis.

Since it opened for business on Oct. 1, 1958, NASA has employed a motivated, creative workforce that is strongly committed to the agency's mission. While enormously proud of its many accomplishments, many NASA employees have worried about the degree of competition (for funds, projects, and so on) among its 10 centers. This competition and other factors have made it difficult for the agency to act with a focused mission and agenda since the mid-1970s.

In 2001, a group of middle managers began discussing these problems and developed ideas for improving internal collaboration. A senior NASA leader learned of their plans, and within a year their ideas were formalized into the One NASA initiative. A cross-agency One NASA team was created with the purpose of helping NASA "work as one team applying many unique capabilities in the pursuit of one shared vision."

Using a bottom-up approach whenever possible, the team created an action plan that includes eight major themes. It involved headquarters and center leaders in creative ways to ensure senior support, while trying to maintain its independence (to avoid

being seen as the latest management fad brought in by agency leaders). As One NASA was gaining momentum, President Bush announced a very broad new vision for NASA in 2004, and the NASA administrator decided that achieving the vision would require a transformation in how the agency operated. The NASA administrator enlisted the One NASA team in working on some of his initiatives.

In addition to the agency transformation effort, NASA leaders began efforts to standardize and centralize certain functions and practices, leaving many employees concerned over the amount of authority being brought to headquarters (and taken from the centers). Inevitably, some employees started associating One NASA with these changes, making its task more complex.

One NASA has produced some impressive early results. Communications across centers and with headquarters is improving. Managers must rotate to other centers to be eligible for promotion to leadership roles (a major departure from the past), and there is considerable cross-center collaboration on Senior Executive Service (SES) selection panels. One NASA is a powerful example of how much middle managers can accomplish to increase collaboration when they think and act strategically. It is also an important reminder of the fragility inherent in such approaches because of the potential for political and external factors to overwhelm employee-led change.

## Strategies That Work Well in the Quest for "Oneness"

No single overarching strategy emerges from these cases. However, some conclusions can be drawn concerning the specific approaches that seemed to help.

- **Use both passion and systems to launch and sustain "one" initiatives.** A passionate champion began each of these initiatives, and that passion was necessary to get people's attention, create a change team, develop a plan, and show early successes. However, passion doesn't sustain such enormous change efforts over time. They also require systems to communicate the goals and lessons learned, establish roles for people

to contribute at their level, measure success, and leverage best practices.

- **Passion and systems are necessary but not sufficient; it's also necessary to apply a strong dose of accountability.** Most employees, even those very committed to change, are more likely to follow through on major changes if they know that they and their unit are accountable for results. But getting the degree and type of accountability right is tricky business. If the initiative relies too heavily on headquarters monitoring, employees may resent it and go through the motions. Without some level of central accountability, however, it's all too easy to ignore change activities and allow immediate daily demands to dominate.

- **Use the initiative as a means to a larger end—*if* there is agreement on that end.** It's not collaboration for its own sake, but collaboration for an important external purpose. And if there is strong support for that purpose (for example, serving the veteran), then the "one" initiative will generate more employee support.

- **Don't keep the vision at 30,000 feet; bring it down to earth.** Focusing a quest for "oneness" on a larger end can be compelling, but that vision must be broken down into objectives and actions that employees can accomplish at their level. Targeting concrete, operational changes (say, sharing information across units) gives employees early wins, and a clearer understanding of how the initiative can help. And focusing on changes that affect people's careers (requiring rotations in order to apply for leadership positions) proves that the initiative is serious.

- **Actively engage middle managers; that's where the biggest challenges and opportunities exist.** Middle managers often believe they have more to lose than to gain from huge change efforts. Frontline employees usually appreciate collaboration because they see its necessity to get their work done. For middle managers, the payoffs are more distant and less clear. They need to be engaged in the initiative from the start. Engagement leads to commitment. The goal isn't "buy-in"; it's ownership. Middle managers need to feel a sense of ownership of these change efforts.

- **Create a constituency for the initiative.** It's difficult to get a "one" initiative started, and far harder to sustain it across a change of leadership and change of administrations. One approach is to create a constituency for the change, a group of people who clearly see its benefits and have the desire (and clout) to sustain it over time. External constituencies (for example, in Congress, among powerful special interests) have the most power, but are the most difficult to create. Internal constituencies (for example, among SES members) can also be important.

- **Provide quality training—*after* the initiative is operating and the leaders have demonstrated their commitment.** To use an economic term, training is a lagging, not leading, indicator during change efforts. Most employees will make much more use of training if the change has produced results and the leaders are clearly committed to it.

# Introduction

*"I don't see why it should be so difficult to get the benefits/services I need. I only see* one *VA, not several!"*

A customer of the Department of Veterans Affairs

*"We're really* one *DOT, aren't we?"*

A member of the Department of Transportation's Senior Leadership Team

*"NASA has ten centers, filled with very bright and talented people who do extraordinary work. Unfortunately, the NASA culture has reinforced considerable competition between the centers. These center rivalries are fierce, and sometimes bloody."*

A veteran NASA manager

## A Timeless Challenge: Getting Everyone to Move in Unison

Why is it frequently difficult to get the whole organization pulling in the same direction? At some point, most leaders ask these questions: Why can't the workforce see the big picture? How can it be that we have communicated our vision dozens of times, yet few people seem to know what it is (much less are motivated by it)? Why do these middle managers continually bash each other when their units can succeed only if they collaborate closely? How come we still have managers and employees whose career strategy is to hoard information in order to be indispensable? Why are several units creating their own informal IT or HR units, doing "end runs" around the centralized administrative functions? Why is it so hard for our myriad systems to talk to each other?

Perhaps these leaders took their management texts a bit too seriously. If we were to pick up any one,

we probably would find that it suggests a relatively rational environment in which senior leaders set policy and priorities, managers and supervisors establish goals to support those policies and priorities, and employees understand how their unit's output contributes to the goals. Resource allocation decisions are based on the interests of the whole organization; best practices are documented and shared; people are rewarded and promoted, in part, for collaborating with others. Would that it were so!

Contrary to this neat and tidy world, many organizations resemble a collection of tribes. Each has its own language, rites, rituals, symbols, traditions, and ways of getting things done. And each has its own collective memory, its shared understanding of what's gone before, of how the unit developed as it did, of good or difficult relations with other units, of its great and terrible leaders. For the unit's old-timers, these cultural factors are part of the landscape, hardly noticed. Newcomers become very aware of these differences, since learning them is a key to career success. And the organization's senior leaders wonder, how do we get all units working together and moving in the same direction when they seem to speak different languages, use different measures, have distinct goals, and work with different definitions of success?

A difference in cultures is only one of several factors making internal collaboration and common direction difficult to gain in government organizations. Here is a starter list of key hurdles to internal collaboration:

- Constitutional system that separates powers and functions

- Myriad congressional committees and oversight groups, many of which focus on only one part of the agency

- Lack of a constituency for collaboration across agencies

- Line-item funding, different funding streams

- Different agency rules and cultures

- Turf, egos

- Fear of losing control, identity, or resources

- Lack of rewards

- Lack of senior support for collaborative efforts

- Stovepiped operations and information systems

- No perceived benefit to collaboration

- Time

## Responding to This Challenge

Experienced leaders and managers are familiar with the problem of getting units to work together. And they have experience with several familiar solutions: ordering a reorganization, creating their own team at the top, using vision and mission statements, developing a list of organizational values, getting all units to work on a cohesive strategic plan, doing team-building retreats, and integrating IT systems, to name a few. A strong leader who stays for several years can make considerable progress by using one or more of these methods. Unfortunately, this progress often comes at the expense of losing the unique cultural elements in the organization's units that have contributed to past successes.

Can large federal organizations get internal units to move in a unified direction and achieve shared goals (while respecting and benefiting from the diversity of their "tribal cultures")?

### A Recent Response: The Attempt to Become "One"

Since the mid 1990s, several large government departments and agencies have responded to this challenge by creating initiatives to get all units to work as "one." These efforts—"One HHS," "One-ED," and the like—challenge employees to think from a much broader perspective, to make decisions based on what's best for the whole agency and its constituents, to let go of unhealthy practices that have been rewarded in the past (e.g., hoarding infor-

mation and resources), and to work with people from other organizational cultures and technical areas.

This is daunting work indeed. Yet an increasing number of federal leaders are developing "one" initiatives for important reasons: their customers demand it, they deal with complex challenges that require collaborative efforts, and they cannot succeed with fragmented organizational processes and practices. "One" initiatives offer an intriguing approach for knitting together an agency's or a department's key units to better serve customers and deal with its external challenges, while respecting its cultural differences.

The purpose of this report is to describe the key issues facing federal organizations that want to become "one," and to offer guidance on how to address those issues. More specifically, it deals with these four questions:

1. What does it mean for a large federal organization to become "one"?

2. What are some of the key hurdles in the quest for "oneness," and how can those hurdles be anticipated and managed?

3. Which strategies appear to work well? What are some critical success factors?

4. Is the effort worth it? On balance, given the opportunity costs of engaging in this change initiative, given the vested interests in maintaining the status quo, do the benefits exceed the costs?

To answer these questions, we will first look at the experiences of three large federal organizations that are trying to become "one": the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), Department of Transportation (DOT), and National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA). The VA and DOT went through formal one initiatives in the late 1990s; NASA started its effort in 2002 and continues as of this writing.

The three organizations differ in many ways. NASA is a relatively new agency, while the roots of the VA go back more than 200 years. DOT helps develop transportation systems, NASA produces products and missions, and the VA is in the business of serving customers. They differ in size: the VA employs more than 230,000, DOT has approximately 60,000 full-time equivalents (FTEs), and NASA has about 18,500. Their technical work and cultures are also diverse.

But their leaders all wanted to increase internal collaboration and create one organization for important operational and strategic reasons:

- **VA:** The initiative aimed to improve customer service. The focus was on collaboration at the operational level.

- **DOT:** The leaders wanted to improve implementation of department-wide policies and provide better service to state and local entities. The focus was on interagency coordination at the policy and program level.

- **NASA:** Leaders and middle managers wanted to reduce unnecessary competition and break down stovepipes among its 10 centers so that resources and capabilities would be applied efficiently and for the common good. The focus was on decision making with an agency-wide perspective.

The next three sections of this report describe each organization's experience in trying to become "one." The last section addresses the four research questions listed on the previous page.

# *One VA*: Strategies for Becoming "One"

## About the Department of Veterans Affairs

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs was established as a cabinet-level department on March 15, 1989, succeeding the Veterans Administration. It provides federal benefits to veterans and their dependents, operating nationwide programs for financial assistance, healthcare, and memorial and burial services. With more than 232,000 employees, it is the second largest federal department in terms of workforce size (the Department of Defense is the largest). The origins of the VA date back to 1776, when the first veterans' disability compensation program was created by the Continental Congress. It has offices in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Virgin Islands, Guam, the Philippines, and Puerto Rico.

The agency's historic mission—"to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan"—is taken from Abraham Lincoln's second inaugural address. And caring for its customers—veterans, spouses, survivors, and dependents—can last a very long time. In 2004, more than 400 children and widows of Spanish-American War veterans were still receiving VA compensation or pensions, as were six children of Civil War veterans.

The department has three large administrations—health, benefits, and memorial and interment services. The Veterans Health Administration (VHA) runs one of the largest medical programs in the country (and the largest medical education training program in the U.S.). It includes 163 medical centers (at least one in each of the 48 contiguous states, Puerto Rico, and the District of Columbia), 850 ambulatory care and community-based outpatient clinics, as well as 137 nursing homes and comprehensive home-care programs. Approximately 75 percent of all disabled and low-income veterans use VA healthcare facilities. VHA spent $25.9 billion serving more than 4.8 million people in fiscal year 2003, approximately 18.5 percent of the country's 26 million veterans.

The Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) provides benefits for veterans, their spouses, their children, and for parents of deceased veterans. It provides such services as vocational rehabilitation, education, life insurance, pensions and disability compensation, and home loan guarantees through 58 regional offices across the country. The VA spent $32.8 billion in benefits for 3.4 million people in FY 2003.

The National Cemetery Administration (NCA) maintains 120 national cemeteries as well as 33 soldiers' lots and monument sites, which include more than 2.5 million grave sites. It handled almost 90,000 interments in national cemeteries in 2003. NCA also provides headstones for veterans' graves and supports the development of state veterans' cemeteries.

### A History of Fragmentation

The VA's three-part structure has created problems for its customers from the start. Consider:

- Historically, each administration had its own independent field and management reporting structure, leading up to separate undersecretaries; there was no integrating mechanism for the three administrations below the secretary.

- Each administration had its own chief information officer and chief financial officer.

**Figure 1: Organization of the Department of Veterans Affairs (FY 2004)**

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                    │    Department of     │
                    │   Veterans Affairs   │
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│ Veterans Benefits │  │ Veterans Health │  │ National Cemetery │
│ Administration    │  │ Administration  │  │ Administration    │
│ (approximately    │  │ (approximately  │  │ (approximately    │
│ 13,000 FTEs)      │  │ 210,000 FTEs)   │  │ 1,500 FTEs)       │
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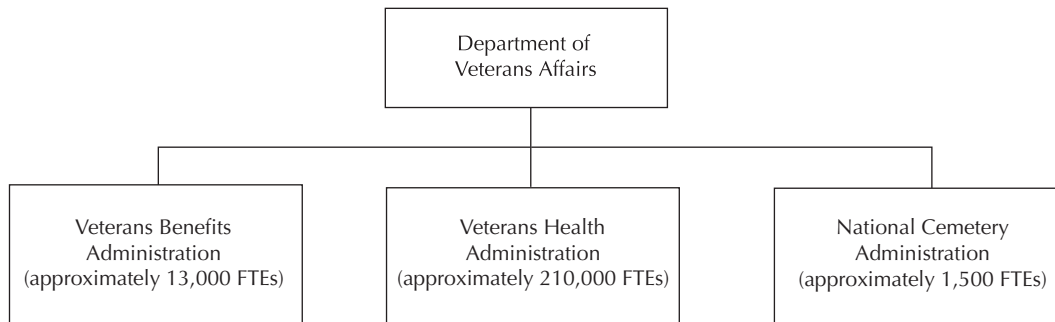
- VBA and VHA, the two largest administrations, reported to different appropriations subcommittees.

- VA benefits are an entitlement to veterans, but healthcare is discretionary (based on available funding).

In addition, external political pressures have contributed to the fragmented nature of the department. As one senior VA official put it, "Our administrations go through different appropriations processes, they report to different subcommittees in the House, and they each respond to different pressures from veterans' service organizations. This has made it difficult for us to act as one in the past." Joe Thompson, former undersecretary for benefits, has called the VA "Balkanized": "There was little communication between the business lines [administrations] of the VA during my career there."

The VA's structural problems have been reinforced by its stovepiped information systems. VA employees, many of whom have a great passion for their work and their customers, often find it too hard to pull together the services that veterans and their families need. "There really is no 'one VA,'" concluded several OMB officials familiar with the department. They place much of the blame on fragmented information systems. As one noted, "When veterans go to a different VA office and try to obtain service or information, they're always starting over."

The bottom line: the U.S. spends more than $60 billion annually to serve some 26 million veterans and their families. The VA provides them a wide array of services, literally from cradle to grave. Yet the long-standing problems inherent in the VA's structure, systems, and environment leave many veterans enormously frustrated, and often underserved.

## The First Phase of *One VA:* An Informal Start

Hershel Gober became the new deputy secretary and chief operating officer of the VA in January 1993. As a veteran and former director of Veterans Affairs for Arkansas, he often heard veterans say, "I don't see why it should be so difficult to get the benefits/services I need. I only see *one* VA, not several!" Having worked with veterans for decades at the state level, he saw the problems, understood their impact on veterans and their families, and came to the VA determined to do something about it.

Gober initially spent considerable time in the field to get a sense of the employees' and customers' experience. "I would go to a VA medical center and ask if the employees were talking with certain VA employees in the nearby regional benefits office. Often, the medical employees didn't even know who those benefits staff were, didn't know they existed."

Gober's commitment to improving life for veterans coincided with congressional enactment of the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA) of 1993. "GPRA was used as a driver for *One VA*," recalled a manager in the policy and planning area. "From an internal perspective, it was simply not possible to write an integrated strategic plan working with our separate administrations." To meet the requirements of GPRA, VA established focus groups with employees and external stakeholders. Employees complained about the difficulty of working across internal boundaries. Veterans and their

**The VA During the Clinton Years**

In the past, VA leaders have varied in the amount of autonomy they gave to field units. Jesse Brown and Togo West, the two VA secretaries during the Clinton years, emphasized a decentralized style. They delegated significant responsibility and authority to the field and allowed regional managers and medical centers to experiment with new operational designs. Two VA undersecretaries, Dr. Ken Kizer (VHA) and Joe Thompson (VBA), made considerable use of this openness to innovation.

In VBA, Joe Thompson encouraged regional offices to move beyond the traditional assembly-line approach to processing claims, in which they had used highly structured and narrow jobs, specialized functions, and steep hierarchies. Thompson had experienced success by using a very different approach when he ran the New York Regional Office. There they created cross-functional teams and expanded narrowly defined positions into case managers (who managed a set of claims from start to finish). They instituted performance measures to track and improve performance, looked at other organizations to learn best practices, and emphasized sharing knowledge. Thompson empowered employees to use their minds, work in teams, and collaborate across internal boundaries. When he became undersecretary for benefits in the second Clinton administration, Thompson encouraged VBA units around the country to try similar innovations.

Some VBA employees thrived on the broader jobs and emphasis on customer service, but others felt frustrated and overwhelmed by the complexity of the new approach. Many within VBA were pleased when Thompson's successor reversed his major changes in 2001 and re-established the narrower job descriptions and standardized processes. Others worried that customer service would suffer.[1]

VHA also went through a period of considerable decentralization and autonomy during the Clinton years. Ken Kizer, undersecretary for Veterans Health from October 1994 to June 1999, has been credited by many with leading a true transformation of the VHA. He established 22 Veterans Integrated Service Networks (VISNs), small, multihospital systems throughout the country that replaced the individual VA hospitals as the primary planning and budgetary units within VHA. Kizer gave each VISN director clear goals and made them accountable for meeting those goals (including performance contracts each director was required to sign). He also gave them considerable flexibility in how they operated and met the goals. Performance and results on network goals were measured continually, and many VISNs reported impressive improvements in performance.[2]

families described the lack of communication and coordination among VA employees. The feedback got VA leaders' attention.

Gober became an internal champion for change. He frequently told employees that the department had to do something about the problems created by its three enormous stovepipes; they had to start integrating across internal boundaries, to "start acting like one VA."

One of the early moves was to co-locate certain VA regional offices with local VA medical centers, to improve communication and coordination between the two units. This was done in Jackson Mississippi; Atlanta, Georgia; Waco, Texas; Hartford, Connecticut; and St. Petersburg, Florida. Gober also gave numerous talks on the importance of working across internal boundaries at the "Leadership VA" program, an executive education institute for mid- and senior-level civil servants.

The agency also began holding integrated conferences. In the past, each administration had its own conferences. Getting people from all three organizations to talk and think together was a symbolic and substantive step in moving toward one department.

## The Second Phase: Formalizing the Initiative

At the start of the second Clinton administration in 1997, Gober gathered a team led by Gary Steinberg, the deputy assistant secretary for planning, with other senior officials from each of the three administrations as well as union representatives, to put more energy and direction into the effort to act as "one VA." The planning team created a series of conferences to communicate the concept throughout the department, and give it a structure and an identity. It was now officially called *One VA* (its leaders put *One VA* in italics, for emphasis). The goal: to provide seamless service to customers so that veterans' needs were easily met in one place.

To prepare for these conferences, the planning team invited VA employees from across the country to interview their colleagues and submit stories and examples of *One VA*–type behavior: providing seamless customer service, making the processes more efficient, and increasing cooperation across organizational lines. More than 300 such success stories were submitted.

The team then organized a series of five conferences to get the *One VA* message out and engage people in it. Approximately 2,500 employees and external stakeholders participated in one or more of the conferences in 1998. Participants included all levels of management, front-line employees, union officials, representatives from veterans' groups, and other key stakeholder groups (e.g., OMB budget analysts and Hill staffers).

At each conference, VA leaders articulated the *One VA* goal: *to provide seamless services to veterans*. The theme of the conferences was "One Mission, One Vision, One Voice." The conferences showcased approximately 20 success stories, and four were shown on video to help people see and understand concrete examples of a more collaborative organiza-

tion. In addition, presentations were given from other organizations trying to make similar changes: FedEx, Saturn Corp., Xerox, and the Departments of Interior, Agriculture, and Transportation.

Most participants viewed the conferences as very successful. The conferences led to heightened awareness of the goals in the VA strategic plan, development of strategies for achieving *One VA*'s goals, plans for communicating the *One VA* vision and strategies to others, and creation of state councils made up of people from across its functions to pursue local initiatives. The conferences also helped participants see how pieces of the VA fit together and how their unit contributed to the whole.

The creation of state councils were mandated by the VA's central office and were given considerable latitude in structure and operations. The councils, comprising employees, veterans, and other stakeholders, set their own goals and crafted implementation plans. They also oversaw the implementation of those plans. For a detailed example of one state council's work, see "Cross Training Nurse Practitioners to Improve the Compensation and Pension Exam Process."

**Table 1: Overview of the *One VA* Initiative**

| Purpose of "One" Initiative | Major "One" Strategies, Activities | Results to Date |
|---|---|---|
| **1997–2000:** Improve operations for better customer service | Primarily leader led, with emphasis on empowering employees at local level and use of state councils.<br><br>Held large conferences for employees/ stakeholders, use of state councils to plan/implement "one" activities, co-location of some units, cross training between certain functions, some process improvements, new partnerships with veterans' service organizations and with the Department of Defense. | Increased employee awareness of how they fit into the big picture, increased collaboration between some units, creation of an integrated IT architecture, better communications between certain VA field offices, some process improvements for improved customer service. In addition, improved coordination between benefits and health-care services in co-located units. |
| **2001–present:** Increase accountability and improve customer service | Emphasis on accountability through a unified corporate governance structure, efforts to integrate IT systems and IT planning, standardization of certain processes. | |

# Cross Training Nurse Practitioners to Improve the Compensation and Pension Exam Process

The Jerry L. Pettis Memorial Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Loma Linda, California, serves 30,000 veterans, one of the highest veteran service levels in the nation. More than 3,000 veterans visit the center annually to determine their eligibility for compensation and pensions (C&P). By the mid-1990s, many people were concerned about the C&P process, the long waiting times, the quality of the exam reports, and a very large backlog of exam requests.

There were also problems with coordination and information exchange. Medical exams took place in the Medical Center; the information was sent to a rating specialist at the Regional Office. Managing the information transmitted between the two offices was a key challenge to improving the process.

"By 1997, change was in the air," recalled Dean Stordahl, executive director of the Pettis Medical Center and senior leader of the change effort. "The national VA leaders had created an environment to think and work across boundaries."

To deal with its problems, the Medical Center initiated a pilot project in September 1997. The pilot's key component was the hiring and cross training of a nurse practitioner. This individual would be the nexus between the Regional Office and the Medical Center, trying to break down the cultural and communication problems between the two units, streamlining the exam and rating process.

Maudie Foy was recruited to fill the nurse practitioner role. She began by receiving three months of training as a rating specialist. "Loma Linda had a large backlog of exams that needed to be processed," Foy recalled. "Another important problem was the quality of exams. The main cause was the inability to understand the language being used. The C&P staff was not trained on either the legal terms used by the VBA or the medical terms used by our own examiners."

Foy spent time with staff at the Regional Office as well as the C&P office of the Medical Center, helping each understand the other unit's terminology. She also found ways to make better use of the information system to track each case and react to delays quickly.

One of Foy's tasks was to review the exam requests to determine the appropriate medical clinic for each veteran. Even more important, Foy reviewed completed exams, prior to their being sent to the Regional Office, to check for omissions or clarifications needed (for instance, use of complex medical terms). This review led to a reduction in the percentage of exams that were sent back by the Regional Office as "insufficient."

After three months of the pilot, Foy was named administrator of the C&P process. In this expanded role, she worked with staff to take aggressive action on the large backlog of appointments for exams. By July 1998, the improvements were clear and impressive, and five years later the gains were even greater:

| | FY 1997 | April–June 1998 | Dec. 2003 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Average Processing Time | 50 days | 27.3 days | 21 days |
| Insufficient Exams | 3% | less than 1% | less than 1% |
| Exams pending | >550 | 125 | 0 |
| Number of exams over 90 days | >60 | 0 | 0 |

## Postscript

When a very successful pilot occurs, the natural question is, "Who else is using this model?" At least six other VA sites have adopted this model, including large medical centers in Miami and Los Angeles. In addition, Loma Linda Medical Center won the department's Robert W. Carey Organizational Excellence Award in 2003. This award, based on the Malcolm Baldrige Award criteria, is given to VA offices that have demonstrated high quality. Loma Linda received the highest level of the Carey award and was deemed the best VA facility within all branches of the VA in 2003.

## Some *One VA* Results, through 2000

Most state councils met regularly through the end of the second Clinton administration. By most accounts, they provided a useful mechanism for achieving *One VA* goals. Many people who observed or participated in these councils or in other activities give *One VA* good marks for including large numbers of employees in creative ways, and for empowering those at the local level to try innovative approaches to achieve *One VA*'s goals.

But what about actual results? The results have been uneven. Certainly, though, some positive accomplishments took place. They include:

- Development of programs that help employees become more aware of the other parts of the VA

- Improvement of certain business processes at the local level

- A new orientation program that helps new employees learn all aspects of the VA

- Development of a strategic plan for VA employees, showing how each unit contributes to the department's goals and objectives

- A capital investment board that looks at proposed major purchases to determine their likely organization-wide impact

- Co-location of some healthcare and benefits offices, improving communication and coordination between them and providing easier accessibility for veterans

- Cross training of certain staff, enabling them to provide more information to customers and back each other up

- Improved communication among VA offices through the state councils. For instance, one state council in the Northeast created a state veterans' coalition that deals with cross-organizational issues. It helps tens of thousands of veterans in the state who are eligible for veterans' benefits but do not use them. It helps veterans coming out of prison find jobs, and it has integrated the VA information systems within the state, which is making a significant difference for employees and veterans.

# The Bush Administration: A Sea Change in Leadership Style

Anthony Principi was named secretary of the VA when the Bush administration came to office in January 2001. He had been deputy secretary of the VA under President George H. W. Bush. During the transition, Gober briefed Principi on *One VA* progress during the second Clinton administration.

The VA leadership approach to *One VA* changed from the Clinton to the Bush administrations. During its formal phase from 1997 to 2000, *One VA* reflected the VA's prevailing leadership approach: articulate a compelling vision, provide visible and impassioned leadership to the effort, decentralize decision making, and empower those in the field. Principi's approach was more centralized and top-down: He integrated VA's three administrations in the Central Office and within IT, centralized the decision-making process, gave clear performance targets to the field, and insisted on accountability and standardization of business processes.

Principi made clear that he supported the *One VA* goals, and that term still appears in parts of the VA strategic plan. The term "*One VA*" is rarely heard in the Central Office, however, and no senior leader was named to spearhead the effort.

The VA's management priorities under Principi included the following:

### Creation of an Integrated Corporate Governance Structure

In May 2001, Principi created a new, formalized corporate governance structure. The purpose was to create a strategic management process that would integrate IT, performance planning, budget formulation, legislative development, and program execution at the top of the department. He created the VA Executive Board, chaired by the secretary, and the Strategic Management Council, chaired by the deputy secretary. The Executive Board deals with strategic and policy decisions. The Strategic Management Council reviews policy and management issues and provides recommendations to the Executive Board. It also deals with performance and operational issues, and tries to standardize business processes. VA leaders believe this helps the agency speak with a single voice.

## Information Technology Integration

Consistent with its new corporate governance structure under Principi, the VA enhanced the position of a department-wide chief information officer (CIO). Principi directed the three administrations' CIOs to report to the department CIO, in order to integrate planning and implementation of information systems. The new CIO also created an Enterprise Information Board, made up of officials from each administration. This board tries to use a department-wide perspective to review and approve (or deny) proposals for new information projects, and to approve funding for each phase of each project.

These changes have proven a challenge to implement. The board has struggled to fulfill its broad role. And VHA managers successfully resisted the change in reporting relationships. Rather than having the three administrations' CIOs report to the department CIO, the department CIO had to settle for concurrent authority on major IT purchases.

## Emphasis on Accountability and Standardization

Under former Secretary Principi, the VA placed a major emphasis on Central Office decision making, accountability, and standardization. These priorities represented major departures from the leadership style during the Clinton years. Under Principi, each of the 58 VBA regional office directors was given clear performance goals. In the VBA, employees also went back to the specialist approach, with relatively narrow job descriptions and standardized work processes. Regional office directors who don't meet their targets get a phone call, often from the undersecretary for benefits himself.

Employee and external stakeholder reactions to these major changes have been mixed. On the positive side, there were small but continuing gains in customer satisfaction among VBA customers in 2002 and 2003. Veterans' services organizations like the emphasis on accountability and standardization. As an executive at the Veterans of Foreign Wars puts it, "Regional office directors were very autonomous in the past … [agency leaders] took away that autonomy and they have iron fist control now. When they make a decision, all the regional offices fall in line. That is really critical and that has worked."[3] And some employees and supervisors appreciate having less complex jobs and knowing exactly what's

expected of them. Concerning its IT strategy, some inside and outside the VA believe that the creation of an enterprise architecture is a critical step in fostering a truly unified organization.

On the other hand, some employees and supervisors worry that there is less opportunity to innovate, and believe that the emphasis on production and meeting timeliness goals will reduce quality service to customers. One VBA supervisor noted that "we can meet the target to get claims done in $x$ days, but that doesn't mean we'll get it done right. We might be improving productivity at the expense of accuracy and customer service." Achieving its vision of an integrated IT system has also been elusive. And some VA managers believe that the expenditure of time, energy, and resources on a single IT architecture and Enterprise Information Board will do little to affect the attitudes and skills of the front-line VA employees, who make the biggest impact on the VA's customers.

## *One VA* in Retrospect

Interviews with over 30 VA employees and external stakeholders suggest that the *One VA* initiative during its formal phase from 1997 to 2000 produced mixed results. Some of its strengths and shortcomings, as reported by those who were interviewed, included:

### Strengths

- Hershel Gober was a visible, passionate champion for *One VA*. He spent significant amounts of time in the field, met hundreds of employees, and built a network with them. His strong, consistent commitment encouraged many in the field to try new approaches.

- Gober clearly empowered those in the field. As one state council leader put it, "Hershel articulated a broad vision, communicated it passionately and continuously, gave local units a lot of autonomy for implementing the vision in their own way, emphasized local creativity and initiative." Many employees responded well to this approach.

- Where state council leaders worked well together and were committed to the *One VA* concept, the results were often impressive. Some state councils highlighted best practices at individual facilities, and those practices spread.

- There is a closer working relationship between several VBA regional offices and the nearby VHA medical centers, improving communications and coordination with their common customers.

- The 1998 conferences were inclusive, well designed, and effectively communicated the *One VA* message. Further, they energized people to spread that message and act on it. In addition, the creative aspects of the conferences encouraged some employees to think and act in new ways back on the job.

- The conference participants gave very high priority to the integration of departmental information systems, which led to efforts that increased and broadened under Secretary Principi. For instance, VA now has a single e-mail system; prior to *One VA,* it had five.

- Cross training and rotations occurred at several field locations, which helped employees see the bigger picture outside their job and office.

- In field offices where managers were committed to *One VA* principles, the employees and customers often benefited. Two middle managers in a VBA office recalled that "perhaps the most important thing *One VA* did for us was to improve employee *attitudes*. We started treating employees better, and it made a big difference. That's done more for us, and our customers, than a number of other changes."

## Shortcomings

Two general comments capture the *One VA* shortcomings. First, the positive outcomes noted above occurred in specific locations only; they were not implemented in a systematic way. Second, *One VA* did little to address the structural issue that some consider to be at the core of the problem: the VA's three separate administrations, reinforced by separate information systems, separate goals, separate reporting chains and accountability, and separate power bases within Congress and the White House.

More specifically:

- There was little central direction concerning expectations for all units. Some managers thrived on this freedom, but many apparently needed more clarity and direction.

- It was difficult to get best practices shared across organizational units.

- Most state councils felt no real accountability for producing results. Because so much was left to local discretion, the results were very uneven.

- There wasn't sufficient training to help field employees translate concepts into operations.

- The initial conferences were energizing and successful, but the efforts often stopped there; they filtered down to frontline employees only occasionally.

- *One VA* initiated several efforts to improve communications and connect IT systems, but there was no significant effort to integrate IT and create a single enterprise architecture until the Principi administration arrived. Principi's efforts were also slowed by the three VA administrations' inertia and cultural resistance.

- Despite the many efforts to help employees understand how their office fit into the larger system, many observers agree with the leader of a veterans' service organization: "It would be great if a vet could go to one VA office and get any service or information needed. Today, we're still sometimes told [at local offices]: 'We don't know what you're talking about!' To make *One VA* a reality would require enormous support from the top, integrated information systems, massive training, and a clear and long-standing priority being placed on it."

One experienced VA manager (who strongly believed in the *One VA* goals) sums up his colleagues' views this way: "When you hear *'One VA'* in headquarters these days, it's not taken seriously. Some think it was a joke. I don't agree. It didn't make major changes in our culture or work processes, that's for sure. But it did open up communications in some areas. And it began certain technology improvements that are continuing today."

And looking at the *One VA* efforts across two very different presidential administrations, many people would echo the comments of a veteran middle manager:

> Most of *One VA*'s initial implementation approach in the 1990s reflected Hershel Gober's leadership style. He had a big heart, was people oriented, empowered

those on the front line, and that excited many people who created positive changes. However, it lacked a clear structure. We didn't have a strategy to help best practices spread through the department; we lacked department-wide metrics to track progress; we didn't know how to create system-wide change.

Today, we're working more systematically. At least at the top, we speak more with one voice. Many employees, at least in the VBA, appreciate having a narrower set of tasks and responsibilities. But we lack the passion of a champion who pushes for change, who urges us to innovate, who reminds us that this is about service to human beings.

# ONE DOT: Strategies for Leadership and Accountability

## Department of Transportation in 1997

DOT opened for business on April 1, 1967. By the time Rodney Slater took over as secretary in 1997, it had grown to about 100,000 FTE positions (that number is now approximately 60,000, largely because the Coast Guard and Transportation Security Administration were moved from DOT to the new Department of Homeland Security in 2003). Since its creation, DOT has been organized around agencies that are focused on single modes of transportation (e.g., highways, mass transit, railroads). DOT interest groups and congressional committees are also organized around individual transportation modes, and they push for change and legislation supporting their specific mode. Budgeting has also been done by transportation mode. Thus, Slater inherited a department that was highly fragmented; the parts were all related to one another, but they operated with considerable autonomy.

Prior to the 1990s, there had been unsuccessful attempts to get congressional approval to reorganize the department in an intermodal framework (e.g., merge transit and highway agencies). In response to the Clinton administration's National Performance Review and the Republican control of Congress in 1994, DOT sent a formal proposal to the Hill to restructure itself in a more integrated fashion around surface, sea, and air modes of transportation, but Congress never acted on its major recommendations. As former Deputy Secretary Mort Downey commented, "It's extremely difficult to accomplish what you want through that kind of structural change."

With this history in mind, Slater and his top leadership looked for a better way to achieve integration across the modes. Slater was also influenced by the change model of Harvard Professor John Kotter (as described in his book *Leading Change*) and the practice for building strong teams outlined in the book *Real Dream Teams* by Bob Fisher and Bo Thomas. Some of the key lessons DOT leaders gleaned from Kotter were to start small with a core group of about 15, get this group of people dedicated to a few common ideas, and then grow the initiative as they try some activities, learn from them, adjust, and try some more. "We started without a complete plan," Downey recalled. "We continued to plan as we went along, and we looked for ways to expand from a united core group of 15 [their Senior Leadership Team], to several hundred people."

## The 1997–2001 Strategic Plan and the Beginnings of ONE DOT

In addition to the above factors, ONE DOT grew out of the departmental leaders' work on a strategic plan. Rather than compiling the individual plans of each DOT agency, the objective was to develop a commitment to a shared, department-wide vision and set of strategies. Leaders from across the department met to explore the emerging forces and trends that would impact transportation in the coming decades.

These meetings required agency leaders to take off their mode-specific hats, step back from their commitment to individual programs, and think from a more systemic point of view. They were challenged to understand how the various transportation modes interacted; set department-wide goals and detail the resources needed to meet those goals; identify likely obstacles to achieving the goals, and the like. They also tried to find ways to maximize the department's contribution to the nation's economic growth.

**Figure 2: DOT and Its Agencies (2004)**
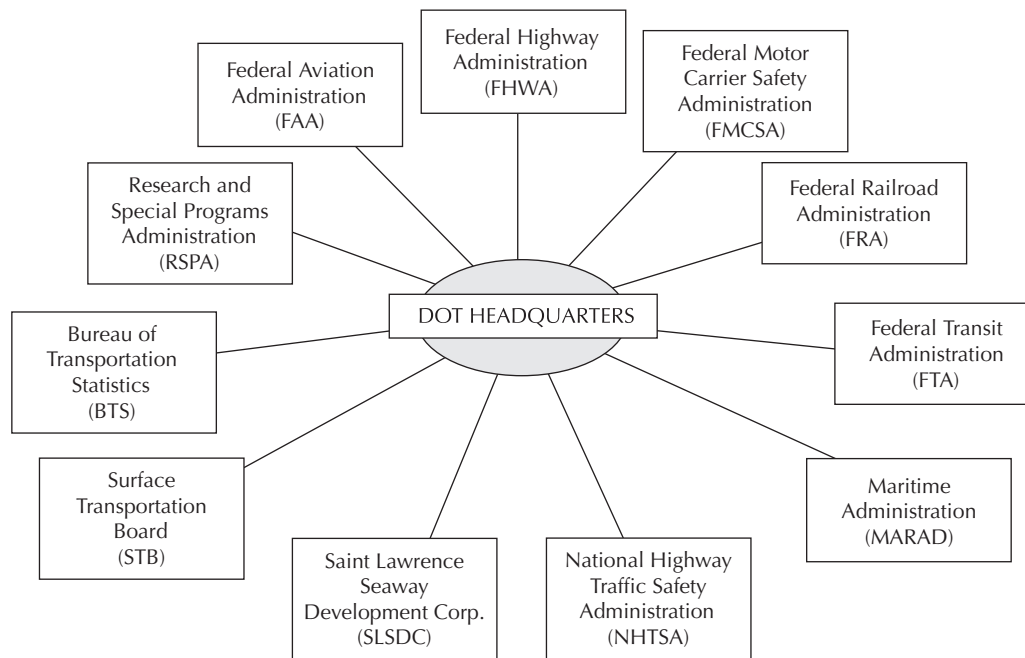


The strategic plan identified five overarching goals:

- **Safety.** An ever-present standard providing direction for all important department decisions.

- **Mobility.** A key expectation of the public. Slater often said that "we are about more than concrete, asphalt, and steel," such as giving people more choices, more freedom, and creating a more livable world.

- **Economic growth and trade.** DOT under Slater focused on a range of educational programs (such as informing youth about career opportunities in the transportation industry) and other activities that supported economic growth.

- **Human and natural environment.** DOT sought ways to develop transportation systems that would protect the environment, and also to focus on ensuring fairness and equity in making transportation decisions.

- **National security.** DOT supported a number of efforts to provide for the country's defense and security, including aviation security, drug interdiction, and partnership with the Department of Defense to protect the transportation infrastructure.

The goals all supported the department's mission, which is to "serve the United States by ensuring a

fast, safe, efficient, accessible, and convenient transportation system that meets our vital national interests and enhances the quality of life of the American people, today and into the future." It's worth noting that a congressional committee named DOT's 1997 strategic plan the best in the U.S. government.

In order to meet these broad goals, the strategic plan called for major increases in the level of intermodal collaboration. But collaboration required new ways of thinking and acting across internal boundaries. The department's leaders needed a management strategy that would promote such intermodal work. This led to the start of ONE DOT (as they later spelled it out). It didn't focus on the substance of the department-wide goals, nor did it call for a major reorganization; rather it gave employees a *process* for pursuing those goals together. "In the course of planning, we came to the notion that it makes more sense to change people's heads than to move the boxes around," Downey noted. "We said to employees, 'You can keep your own uniforms [agency identity] and still work together.'"

## ONE DOT Begins

To get the change process started, Slater used his Senior Leadership Team as a "guiding coalition" to lead the change. This group included Downey, the

operating administration heads and the assistant secretaries. During one of the team's planning sessions in 1997, someone said, "We're really *one* DOT, aren't we?" The group started using the term "ONE DOT," and articulated its goal: to transform the department's agency-specific (and transportation-mode-specific) focus into a shared vision that promoted an integrated, intermodal transportation system.

Throughout 1997, Slater convened the Senior Leadership Team weekly to work on ONE DOT and seek consensus on crosscutting initiatives. By the end of 1997, most of the up-front thinking about ONE DOT had been done. Importantly, the team had become committed to the ONE DOT concept. By 1998 the leadership was ready for more visible actions.

### The Executive Conferences and Flagship Initiatives

By most accounts, ONE DOT became visible to DOT employees when the leadership held several two-day conferences in 1998, each attended by up to 200

people. Participants included Slater and the Senior Leadership Team, regional leaders, members of the Senior Executive Service (SES) from across the department, and union representatives from the major organizations representing DOT employees. The union involvement was complemented by the creation of a Labor-Management Committee for the department as a whole, which included top labor officials at the national union level and senior people from the agencies.

Slater and Downey came to each conference and stayed the entire time, which made a real impact; it was critical for the participants to see departmental leaders embracing the ONE DOT concepts. Another purpose of these conferences was to help change the way people were thinking about their work and about DOT in general. The Senior Leadership Team brought in outsiders to address each conference, corporate leaders who had made major change in their organization, such as Wal-Mart, American Airlines, GE, and IBM. At each conference, Slater

**Table 2: Overview of the ONE DOT Initiative**

| Purpose of "One" Initiative | Major "One" Strategies, Activities | Results |
|---|---|---|
| Improve interagency coordination for better implementation of department-wide policies and better service to state and local entities. | Initiated by top leadership team. Agency regional directors worked in teams, accountable to senior leaders and supported/held accountable by "regional champions."<br><br>Strategic plan was the springboard; department leaders used ONE DOT to implement department-wide priorities in that plan. Before engaging others, Senior Leadership Team worked for a year to create a unified team, common goals, and an agreed-upon approach to ONE DOT.<br><br>Large conferences engaged hundreds of employees in ONE DOT. "Flagship initiatives" gave focus to the effort. Regional teams developed plans to achieve flagship initiatives at their levels. | Some intermodal offices were created, giving customers one-stop shopping. Certain projects at the regional level increased safety (e.g., reduced level of child fatalities in auto accidents) and security and increased transportation options.<br><br>Some regions helped cut red tape and provided more integrated assistance to localities that were trying to develop transportation systems.<br><br>Some regional teams improved communications and coordination among agencies, and achieved cost savings in some regions. Relationships were created and strengthened among a number of managers at DOT agencies, which allowed for collaboration on joint projects. Different agencies increased their efforts to advertise other agencies' projects and services (e.g., signs in an airport directing passengers to high-speed rail options). And there was some increase in systemic thinking and planning; seeing the impact of one mode's work on other transportation modes. |

would set the theme at the beginning and give a stirring talk at the end. Downey also spoke at the end, summing up the substantive issues that were addressed and noting the follow-up steps needed. At the first conference, DOT leaders explained that the strategic plan was the department's road map, and ONE DOT was a management strategy to help the department and its agencies achieve the strategic plan's goals. The Kotter change model was introduced at this first conference.

At another conference, over 60 "flagship" initiatives were identified. Most of the initiatives were intermodal and required people to think and act systemically. These initiatives became the department's priorities during the second Clinton administration, driving legislation, budget decisions, and allocation of time priorities for senior officials. The initiatives fell within the department's five strategic goal areas outlined in its strategic plan. Employees from the various modes were assigned to work on the flagship teams. They developed action plans, identified a lead agency, and crafted strategies for meeting the goals. And the directors of each DOT agency regional office (FAA, FHA, etc.) were directed to form ONE DOT regional teams to forge closer relationships and work on the flagship initiatives at the regional level.

### And What about Accountability?

Accountability was achieved through a variety of mechanisms. One strategy was the appointment of members of the Senior Leadership Team to work with each ONE DOT regional team. These "regional champions" helped the regional teams achieve their own ONE DOT goals. They also identified local leaders for each regional team. Regional teams created a structure to work together, created action plans for achieving their initiatives, and were held accountable for results.

The regional teams submitted monthly progress reports to the Senior Leadership Team and Deputy Secretary Downey for review. Those reports were frequently the major agenda items for the Senior Leadership Team's weekly ONE DOT meetings. Downey and the senior leaders also incorporated ONE DOT initiatives into DOT managers' performance agreements. And Downey conducted ongoing individual performance plan reviews with senior leaders, which kept the flagship initiatives on their

radar screens. Finally, he convened a weekly meeting with political appointees and some SESers from each DOT agency to keep their focus on ONE DOT goals, activities, and follow-through. Downey found this an effective method for helping these senior people to expand their thinking and move beyond an exclusive focus on their own programs.

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### Examples of ONE DOT Flagship Initiatives

The flagship initiatives focused on substantive, mission-related business (not internal management changes). Examples included:

- **Corridors and Borders Programs Flagship:** Encouraged states to work with other states when developing a corridor. It led to better multistate planning and improved safety along the country's borders.

- **Seat Belt Flagship:** Involved all DOT agencies in a cross-cutting goal of reducing child fatalities from auto accidents by 15 percent. They accomplished the goal one year ahead of schedule through coordinated efforts to mobilize partners to increase seat belt usage. All modes helped through a coordinated educational campaign showing how seat belt usage saves lives.

- **High-Speed Rail Flagship:** Initiated Amtrak's high-speed Acela Express service between Washington and Boston.

It's important to note that these and most flagship initiatives could not be accomplished by any one DOT agency. It was apparent from the start that they required active collaboration. Because of that, because they addressed mission-related issues, and because the department's leaders were expecting results, they captured managers' attention.

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## Efforts to Institutionalize the Changes

Department leaders also looked for ways to ensure that the various changes and initiatives, and the new integrated way of thinking that they sought, would continue after the end of the administration. To begin institutionalizing the changes, the leaders agreed to change four major systems: the budget process, communications, employee development, and accountability.

- **Budget process:** It was changed in 1999 to align major expenditures with strategic priorities (prior budgets emphasized the agencies; DOT started to show a clear crosswalk between budget investments and strategic goals).

- **Integrated communications:** ONE DOT led to the creation of one e-mail system for the entire department (there had been several before).

- **Employee development:** DOT made a major investment in employee learning and development and in management development. It created an Executive Leadership Institute and began a rotational assignment program for senior leaders.

- **Accountability:** Systems were created allowing each DOT employee to connect his/her work with the strategic plan and performance expec-

tations, in order to see how the person's work makes a difference in DOT's major goals and priorities. Downey later noted that a ONE DOT shortcoming was its assumption that accountability for ONE DOT goals would cascade down through the performance system. "It worked well in some places, not so well in others," he commented.

Interestingly, Downey reflected that changing department-wide administrative systems is less significant than changing the ways program managers think and act. "Gaining program and policy integration is where you get greater payoffs, but that's hard. The program offices in each administration are led by SESers, they focus on their own program, and it's very difficult to change their thinking."

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### Example of ONE DOT in the New England Region

Soon after the first two-day conference, leaders of each DOT agency in Region 1 met to form a regional ONE DOT team. Then Coast Guard Commandant Admiral James Loy was the departmental leader appointed to be the champion for Region 1. The team was made up of the leaders of each regional DOT agency (FTA, NHTSA, Coast Guard, FHWA, etc.). They decided to put a special focus on education, and to use their resources to foster educational initiatives throughout the region.

One of the team's initiatives was a Transportation Expo, held at Logan Airport in Boston. The purpose was to educate students on the opportunities and challenges involved in a career in the transportation field. The regional team had exhibits and displays from each transportation mode at the expo, and invited students from the region to attend; between 3,000 and 4,000 came. They repeated this expo each year until 2001 (after the 9/11 attacks, it was no longer feasible to hold such events at an airport). The team also created a guide that described how they organized the event, and distributed it throughout DOT.

The regional team also found ways to share administrative tasks and resources. For instance, instead of having government-owned cars at each local DOT agency, they started sharing cars (and reduced the number of government-owned cars needed). They also shared secretarial time, allowing an overloaded office to get help from another that has some time to give, and started sharing certain equipment. Since the regional DOT agency offices are all located in one building, this sharing proved feasible and helped reduce costs.

The regional team met quarterly. In addition to specific initiatives, the members regularly shared information on each agency's activities and operations. They formed partnerships on activities such as educational projects to promote seat belt usage, an initiative to increase safety at highway-rail grade crossings, and improved access to seaports. Admiral Loy was a strong and enthusiastic supporter of ONE DOT; in fact, he flew up to Boston to attend several quarterly meetings of the regional team each year. They presented him with updates on their activities, and involved him in plans for future initiatives. "The admiral's involvement was a key to our success," recalled Dick Doyle, the Region 1 team leader and regional administrator of the Federal Transit Administration. "And the Secretary's [Slater's] involvement was also very helpful."

Doyle believes ONE DOT was a significant effort with ongoing impact. He says, "It was great. It provided a lot of energy, top-level interest, and a clear focus on helping us work more closely together. It was a strong, sustained effort for four years; the secretary never lost interest, he got his top people involved in it, got them out into the field, and it has made a lasting difference for us."

The department also created a Partnering for Excellence training program that gave employees at various levels the skills and knowledge to work in partnership with other DOT agencies and external organizations. The training, based on the practices described in the book *Real Dream Teams*, was custom designed for DOT. Secretary Slater and the Senior Leadership Team set a goal of training 5,000 managers in team and partnering skills. Eighty managers and employees volunteered to receive the training. Then, using a train-the-trainer format, they went back to their regions and trained other DOT managers and supervisors.

It's important to note that this training in team and partnering skills wasn't done in a vacuum. Rather, the emphasis was on training people who were already working in teams, many of which had intermodal projects. Thus, the training had a real-world context and could immediately be put to use. To recognize those teams that used the model well, Slater created an annual Partnering for Excellence Award, which went to several DOT teams that worked well across modes to achieve ONE DOT goals.

### Examples of Other ONE DOT Results

- In several cities (New York, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, and Atlanta, among others), an intermodal metropolitan office was created to house both the Federal Highway Administration and Federal Transit Administration. The agencies' employees work together in these offices to provide one-stop shopping for customers of their own and other DOT agencies.

- Some regions created intermodal safety goals, and action plans to meet them. In one region the plan is comprehensive, including action steps to be taken not only by DOT agencies, but also by state, local, and private organizations.

- One regional team that met frequently since the start of ONE DOT worked together in preparing for the 2002 Olympic Games in Salt Lake City. They coordinated to ensure security for the Games, including the highways and airlines most used by visitors coming to the Games.

- In Fort Worth, Texas, the regional leaders of each DOT agency tried to go beyond planning; they wanted to coordinate programs and create

common objectives. In one example, the city of Arlington, Texas, wanted to create a light rail system. The ONE DOT regional team met with local officials, identified obstacles to the plan, and found ways to overcome them. The ONE DOT team acted as a facilitator for the local government, helping it to anticipate and surmount hurdles (e.g., in some instances, DOT agencies have goals for a specific project that conflict with the goals of other federal agencies, such as the Department of Housing and Urban Development or the Environmental Protection Agency). In such cases, the facilitator role is critical.

- One of the most important, though difficult to measure, results is the improved *relationships* among DOT managers in different agencies. As one agency regional administrator noted, "Consider our goal of reducing child fatalities by 15 percent, through increased usage of seat belts. There is no way we could have met that goal prior to ONE DOT. The relationships just weren't there in the past to work across transportation modes. We wouldn't have gone to someone in aviation, transit, or railroads and asked them to help us improve seat belt usage. Our ONE DOT regional teams changed that, because they helped us build the relationships to work across modes." Since DOT agencies and partners deal with such sensitive and high-risk activities as transporting hazardous materials and coordinating emergency preparedness, it is impossible to overstate the importance of maintaining strong relationships across the modes and agencies.

## ONE DOT and the Bush Administration

Norman Mineta, secretary of transportation in the Geroge W. Bush administration, placed less emphasis on the ONE DOT initiative. He never spoke against it, but his team had other concerns when they took over in 2001. Mineta praised the ONE DOT concept, but DOT no longer had a formal process for pursuing it. On the other hand, it's worth noting that Mineta and his top team chose to retain the substance of the existing DOT strategic plan when they came to office. "They looked at it, liked what it contained, and saw no reason to change it," Downey recalled.

In addition, Mineta continued his predecessor's practice of giving the secretary's Partnering for Excellence Award to intermodal teams that used the Partnering for Excellence model to pursue the DOT strategic plan goals. For instance, one of the 2003 awards went to the Corporate Average Fuel Economy team, made up of employees from three different DOT units. It established new fuel economy standards for light trucks that were expected to save over 3.5 billion gallons of gas annually.

Several of the regional ONE DOT teams continue to meet and work together without headquarters direction. As a DOT regional leader notes, "We know we need to meet, to keep each other informed, and this is simply the way we do the work today. We don't need to be reminded anymore. It's how we do business now." Some other regional teams no longer meet, and some do so on an ad hoc basis.

## Reflecting on ONE DOT's Critical Success Factors

Former Deputy Secretary Downey believes that two factors had the biggest impact on moving the department toward being "one":

1.  Creating a strategic plan that was a true department-wide plan (not an accumulation of agency plans). The process forced people to think in broad terms and get outside their narrower program focus.

2.  Holding the large 200-person conferences every quarter in 1998. When DOT managers and leaders worked with others from different transportation modes and realized they had some goals in common, it helped alter how they looked at their work. And seeing the department's secretary and deputy secretary devote two full days to each conference also made a significant impact on their commitment to ONE DOT.

Dick Doyle, leader of the Region 1 ONE DOT team, cites these additional factors:

1.  Slater made this a top priority for his entire four years as secretary. He backed it up with money: brought hundreds of DOT people together several times for the conferences; brought in first-rate business leaders to talk about how they get their employees to work together; and brought in excellent consultants to address the conferences.

2.  Slater went well beyond talk. He worked hard with his top administrators to see that they understood and embraced the vision. Because Slater is such an effective communicator ("he's like a preacher," according to Doyle), he infused the team with enthusiasm. Because it was an excellent team that worked well together, their enthusiasm filtered out to the field.

3.  Finally, Slater and Downey expected accountability. Regional teams had to report on their activities monthly to headquarters. The regional champions got out to the regional teams regularly and worked hard with them.

Cecelia Hunziker, regional administrator for the FAA in the Great Lakes Region and its regional team leader, notes these key factors:

1.  The inclusion of the field throughout the process—"it wasn't just top down, everyone at every level had ownership."

2.  The secretary's personal commitment and leadership. The continuation of the success was based on the headquarters' champions (who worked with the regions)—their commitment and leadership.

As is so often the case, the parties' different perspectives on ONE DOT reflect their positions in the organization. Downey, operating at the top, cites high-level activities that made a difference, such as the department-wide strategic plan, the large conferences that helped people see the big picture. Regional leaders, on the other hand, are much more focused on their leaders' specific behaviors (ensuring that the Senior Leadership Team was walking the talk, including the field in meaningful ways, requiring accountability), and how those behaviors affected them in the field.

One lesson for senior leaders that emerges from the ONE DOT experience is this: Vision, strategy, and broad goals are very helpful, but they are not likely to work unless leaders take concrete steps to demonstrate how the initiative affects employees *in their everyday work*. That means communicating what employees need to do differently (and why), what is being provided to help them work in different ways, and how those changes will be measured and recognized.

# One NASA: Strategies for Building Change from the Inside Out

In contrast to the VA and DOT, where "one" initiatives were initiated at the top, the One NASA program had grassroots origins.

At a leadership development program held for NASA middle managers in 2001, participants were discussing some of NASA's pressing challenges. Someone mentioned the "center centric" nature of NASA's culture. They were referring to NASA's 10 centers and their long history of competing with one another for funds, projects, and people. Such competition can be healthy, of course, and some of the centers often cooperate on projects. But many at NASA have worried for years that excessive competition has prevented agency employees from focusing on the agency's overall needs. "These center rivalries are fierce, and sometimes bloody," one NASA veteran manager observed. Moreover, center competition often led to wasteful practices: 10 different financial systems, 10 different computer systems, and so on.

There are many reasons for the competition. Under some NASA administrators the best way for a center to survive was to demonstrate unique and special capabilities (which reduced collaboration and sharing). NASA's decentralized structure contributed to the problem. The political environment has also traditionally been a big factor, as members of Congress have fought hard to maintain and strengthen the NASA centers in their districts. Another cause was the lack of a single, unified agency strategic plan that defines the roles and relationships among the centers. Some point to the lack of an overriding goal to unify all of NASA's centers and enterprises, such as the *Apollo* moon project of the 1960s and early 1970s. NASA's budget has been flat or declining (controlling for inflation) since the end of the *Apollo*

project, resulting in a shortage of resources to fund all of the missions and maintain an infrastructure.

The middle managers at the development program decided to do more than simply gripe about the center-centric problem; they developed some ideas for encouraging collaboration across NASA centers. That wasn't new; previous management classes had generated the same kind of discussions, but they hadn't led to any real change. These ideas were brought to broader senior leadership discussions as part of NASA's "Freedom to Manage" (F2M) efforts. Jim Kennedy, who was involved in the F2M effort, volunteered to take the class ideas and develop them further.

Kennedy, then deputy center director at the Marshall Space Flight Center, formed a small task force in July 2002, which included some of the middle managers from the class. The group produced recommendations on how to develop a "specific and targeted approach to becoming One NASA." This group's recommendations were reviewed and approved by the F2M Committee. Shortly after the approval, Kennedy was named the deputy director of the Kennedy Space Center in Florida, and Johnny Stephenson was given leadership for the One NASA team. Prior to this time, Stephenson had been serving as the Marshall Space Flight Center representative and co-chairperson of the team.

## The Context for One NASA

The move toward One NASA came at a turbulent time for the space agency. On Feb. 1, 2003, as the One NASA team was preparing to issue its report, the shuttle *Columbia* crashed, leading to an intensive investigation of NASA's safety procedures and

**Figure 3: NASA and Its Centers**
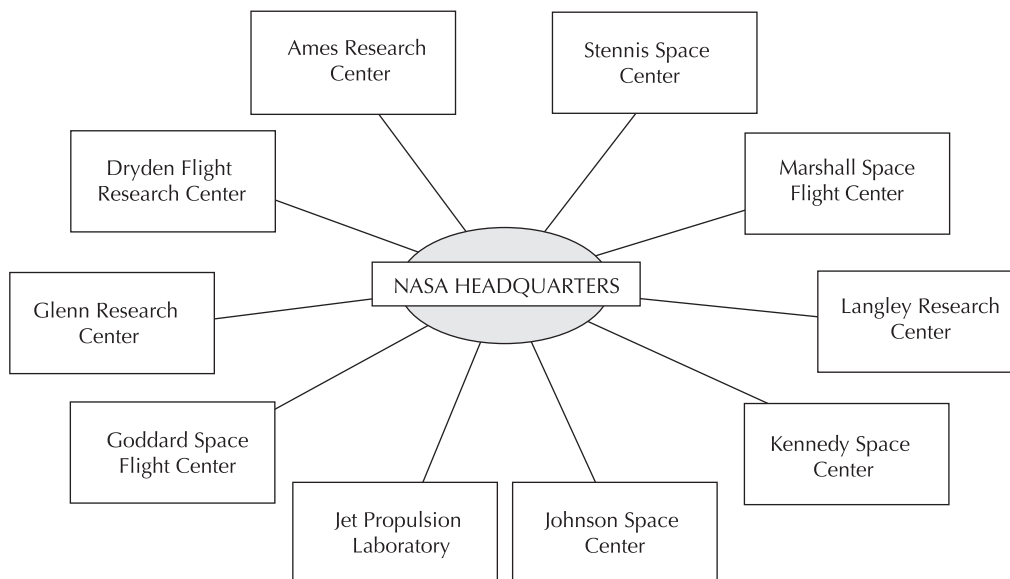


entire corporate culture. A year later, on January 14, 2004, President Bush proposed his "Vision for Space Exploration," calling for the agency to finish the International Space Station assembly and to renew its human exploration of the moon and Mars. Five months later, then NASA Administrator Sean O'Keefe announced an agency transformation designed to give it the flexibility and focus to carry out the president's aggressive vision for NASA. It consolidated functional offices, clarified reporting relationships, emphasized accountability, and reduced NASA's seven strategic enterprises to four mission directorates: exploration systems, science, space operations, and aeronautics research.

## Creating a Plan, Building Support in the Workforce and at the Top

"One of the first questions I asked after becoming the One NASA team leader," Stephenson recalled, "was, how do we avoid the 'flavor of the month' problem? How do we sustain the effort beyond Mr. O'Keefe's tenure here?" One answer was to rely heavily on middle managers (who are usually GS/GM 14-15s at NASA, running branches and divisions). So he expanded the team from six to 23 individuals, including middle managers and others from each of the 10 NASA centers, from headquarters, and three members from the middle managers'

2001 class that had conceived of the idea. One of the team's principles was that center Points of Contact (POCs) had to have access to the center leadership and specifically the center director.

The team also provided some clarity to One NASA, articulating One NASA's overall purpose and goals. Its purpose: to help NASA work as one team applying many unique capabilities to the pursuit of one shared vision. In order to achieve this, the team focused on three goals for One NASA:

1. Making decisions for the common good

2. Collaborating to leverage existing capabilities

3. Standardizing to achieve efficiencies

And the team communicated the reasons for pursuing One NASA:

- There is more work at the agency than talent available

- To build on what is unique and "value added" from each center for the good of the whole

- To minimize the duplication of effort that "steals" money from our programs and infrastructure

- To increase our credibility with the public

- To increase the level of trust and teamwork within the agency

# NASA's First Four Decades

NASA was the result of an emergency climate that shook the U.S. It opened its doors on Oct. 1, 1958, almost exactly one year after the Soviet Union astonished the nation by launching *Sputnik 1*, the world's first artificial satellite. *Sputnik* had a "Pearl Harbor" impact on most Americans and created a crisis of confidence in our technological abilities and educational achievements. NASA inherited the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics and its 8,000 FTEs, three major government research labs, and two test facilities.

During an address to Congress on May 25, 1961, President Kennedy announced a daring new goal: "I believe that this nation should commit itself to achieving the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to earth." Thus started the *Apollo* project, an all-out effort to demonstrate America's scientific and technological superiority over the Soviets at the height of the Cold War. NASA started conducting space missions quickly, first Project *Mercury* (to determine if humans could survive in space) and then Project *Gemini* (in which astronauts practiced space operations).

After 10 *Apollo* missions, American astronauts Neil Armstrong and "Buzz" Aldrin landed on the moon on July 20, 1969. Five more lunar missions followed; in all, a total of 12 American astronauts walked on the moon.

In 1975, NASA collaborated with the Soviets on the *Apollo-Soyuz* project, the first international spaceflight. The space shuttle program began in 1981, and has been building the International Space Station ever since. NASA's spectacular successes became so routine over the years that they lost much of their popular appeal (in the late 1950s and early 1960s, many schools stopped classes during the launch of a new satellite, so that the students could watch on TV). Then came two shuttle tragedies, and the public learned about the true nature of the risk involved. The *Challenger* exploded 73 seconds after launch on Jan. 28, 1986, killing all seven crew members. And on Feb. 1, 2003, the shuttle *Columbia* disintegrated about 15 minutes before its scheduled landing; another seven astronauts perished.

The two shuttle disasters led to major investigations into NASA's safety procedures and, ultimately, into the agency's culture. After the *Challenger* exploded, many worried that NASA's engineers and engineering mind-set had been overtaken by an overly ambitious flight schedule, which was fueled by the desire to show Congress and the White House that the agency could produce shuttle results as promised. The *Columbia* Accident Investigation Board (CAIB) went into a deeper investigation of NASA's culture and operations. The CAIB report warned that even if all shuttle technical flaws were corrected, "significant structural changes" to NASA's culture were required for it to succeed. The *Columbia* investigators found that, again, NASA decision makers were overly influenced by pressures to launch on time. They also pointed out major downsides to NASA's storied "can-do" attitude: lack of effective vertical communications and an unwillingness to listen to critics.

Creating the necessary changes for NASA to return to flight and fix the problems leading to the shuttle disasters will be an enormous challenge. When asked about the CAIB report, then NASA Administrator Sean O'Keefe repeatedly said, "We get it." But even that comment worries some agency observers. For decades NASA has been a proud, some say cocky or arrogant, agency. Most of its 18,500 employees are strongly committed to the agency; indeed, it has been voted the best place to work in the federal government for several years. Can its leaders and managers, most of them agency veterans, truly understand and change the very culture that has produced so many successes?

In addition to the manned flight missions, NASA continues to explore the universe through unmanned flight. Its *Viking*, *Pioneer*, *Galileo,* and *Voyager* spacecraft have explored the moon, Mars, and other planets. And the Hubble Space Telescope helps scientists make ongoing discoveries about the universe.

NASA has done aeronautics research from the start. Aeronautics, the "first A in NASA," includes aerodynamics, wind shear, and other topics related to supersonic flight. It also does research on lower-speed flight that produces knowledge for commercial applications.

In December 2002, the team sent a survey to all NASA employees to learn how NASA's culture could become more collaborative. The survey was endorsed by NASA's senior leadership. Over 5,000 employees and contractors responded, contributing more than 14,000 ideas.

The team read every one of the ideas, and identified 38 action items to target for the first phase of One NASA, divided into eight themes. The themes were:

- **Vision, mission and strategy:** Link the work of all employees to the agency's vision, mission, and strategy.

- **Leadership:** Identify and implement leadership accountabilities that support One NASA.

- **Organizational structure:** Review and modify organizational structures and roles to facilitate cross-center/agency collaboration.

- **Organizational culture:** Revalidate and advance common organizational values to build a unified culture.

- **Human Resources:** Develop HR strategies that serve to broaden the perspective of all employees.

- **Tools and business practices:** Increase agency-wide collaboration through the use of common tools and business practices.

- **Communication:** Enhance current communication practices to promote greater understanding of NASA's capabilities.

- **Measurement:** Measure One NASA's progress and results.

Their plan was issued in a report released on March 31, 2003.[4]

## Some Early Successes, Some Long-Term Initiatives

The action items included both short-term and long-term activities. Quick successes included three in Human Resources:

1. Vacancies at all NASA centers are now open to all agency personnel (previously, openings were only advertised within the center where they existed, and centers hired almost entirely from within).

2. SES selection panels are required to include agency leaders from several sites, not just from the site doing the hiring or promoting. This was the practice at some centers in the past; now it is done agency-wide.

3. A new requirement that managers must have experience in more than one center to be eligible for promotion to the SES. Note: Some NASA managers don't see this as a success at all, and are very concerned that many of NASA's qualified personnel won't apply for SES slots because of family concerns (e.g., a spouse who cannot move, etc.).

O'Keefe and other senior NASA officials began selecting center directors (CDs) from other centers. As one NASA manager puts it, "I think this is an absolutely *huge* development. To have CDs from another center would have been completely unthinkable before O'Keefe [and before One NASA].… New center directors might have worked at headquarters, but never at another center." He notes that One NASA's emphasis on rotations will help reduce unhealthy competition between centers, improve communications, and send a powerful message: Senior managers are serious about changing the culture. When this NASA manager sought a rotation several years earlier, "it was a struggle to get people to let me go." To move ahead in his career, it was expected he would stay at his own center. That's changing.

Other short-term activities include development of a peer award program, creating a NASA-wide directory, streamlining transfer of funds (which has always been a barrier to cross-center collaboration), and standardizing research announcements. In addition, 87 documents that used to guide various NASA work routines have been eliminated after it was determined that they added minimal value.

Some of the biggest gains will require much more time, such as the development of virtual teams across the centers, reviewing common databases, creating a knowledge management system, and gaining alignment with the large number of NASA contractors. And some activities will never be "finished," such as the modeling of collaborative behaviors by leaders and the reinforcement of agency-wide values.

All of this focus on grassroots input was well received, but it didn't guarantee support for follow-

**Table 3: Overview of the One NASA Initiative**

| Purpose of "One" Initiative | Major "One" Strategies, Activities | Results |
|---|---|---|
| Help people take an agency-side perspective, make decisions for the common good, and make better, more efficient use of resources and capabilities. | Initiated at mid-management level. Significant employee input and involvement on One NASA priorities and activities. Top-level support came (in part) because the initiative helped leaders achieve certain key priorities.<br><br>"Leader-led workshops" on One NASA took place at each center to communicate the plan, demonstrate commitment. One NASA principles were made part of SES development programs.<br><br>Gave managers incentive to rotate and see the big picture: SES positions, center director, and deputy director positions only available to those who have worked in more than one center (major departure for NASA).<br><br>Other changes made it easier to transfer funds across centers and easier to apply for openings in different centers. Also considerable standardization and centralization of several administrative functions took place in a parallel effort to One NASA. | Improved employee communications, increased level of collaboration between some of the centers, some changes in leadership behaviors that foster collaboration. Increased career opportunities for those willing to move to different centers.<br><br>A broader, agency-wide perspective is being taken by some managers as unhealthy inter-center competition is reduced and managers gain a better understanding of how the different centers and functions interact.<br><br>Increased information sharing among managers at certain centers, more open communications between centers and with some leaders at headquarters. |

up and implementation. To gain that, Stephenson interviewed 28 senior leaders (high-level people at headquarters as well as each center director) in late 2002, trying to identify the likely hurdles to creating a more collaborative culture and learning what each leader could do to promote One NASA. Once his team created its action plan, he debriefed these same leaders to gain support while asking individual leaders to be an "action sponsor" for one of the action items. Being an action sponsor meant that the leader supported the actions being taken, and was accountable for its implementation. "Everything the One NASA team accomplished was the result of influence rather than dictatorship," Stephenson recalled. "Therefore, we needed action sponsors to be the champions … to get the actions implemented."

A team's use of influence is clearly important. When a group made up largely of middle managers is given the enormous task of changing long-standing agency practices and norms, it has to be very adept at the art of influence—and it needs a number of champions at the top.

## Engaging the Leadership

Stephenson's team developed some creative ways to involve agency leaders. From August through December 2003, the team sponsored a series of one-day workshops at each of the 10 centers and at headquarters. At each center meeting, a senior leader from headquarters would talk to the center's employees, describing how their function contributes to NASA's vision and mission. What made this unusual was that the leaders were from functions outside that center's technical area. Stephenson spoke about One NASA at these sessions, as did the director of another NASA center.

"We thought it was important to get leaders to communicate with people outside their normal functional area," Stephenson recalled. "The sessions really went well. Our leaders were operating out of their comfort zone, but they did fine. And the approach helped get the speakers and center employees at the workshops to think outside their usual boxes." More than 80 percent of respondents considered these "leader-led" workshops to be successful.

In order to affect current and future leaders' actual behavior, the team put together a list of leadership behaviors that are being added to the performance evaluation criteria for SES members. Center directors' evaluations and rewards now include an emphasis on collaboration (in the past the measures were entirely based on center-specific products). Moreover, NASA SESers now attend an off-site conference where they learn about the agency vision, One NASA's status, One NASA behaviors, and agency-wide changes. It's all a part of an ongoing effort to reinforce thinking and acting with an agency-wide perspective.

## An Encouraging Start

One NASA is a work in process, and it may seem premature to talk about "success" after less than three years. That said, many at NASA are impressed that the concept is spreading as quickly as it has. One veteran manager at a NASA center noted, "I doubt you would find anyone working for NASA who hasn't heard of One NASA, and most people I know are encouraged by its progress already." And an official at headquarters reflected that "I worked at one of the space centers for years and the usual attitude toward change was, 'what's in it for me (or us)?' I saw some of the same attitude when I came to headquarters five years ago, but I see far less of it now across the agency. And there's much more willingness now to help out when another headquarters unit or center needs assistance."

Another manager noted that "I have seen an increased willingness to share information and best practices, but much of this cooperation has always existed at the worker-bee level. Now folks can share more openly without fear that their management will criticize them for it." An agency veteran who is skeptical about One NASA's ability to create a unified purpose or set of business practices praises the initiative for providing a forum where creative and critical thinking can occur and where serious problems can be addressed openly. And a 15-year veteran in an administrative function (who disagrees with some of One NASA's directions) gives it credit for improving communications. "It's far easier now to talk with officials from headquarters," he said. "They often come to our center for dialogues, and our center director is more available now as well. And they're listening."

Former Administrator Sean O'Keefe mentioned One NASA frequently in his talks, and increasingly used One NASA to serve other purposes. For instance, after the *Columbia* Accident Investigation Board published its report, the One NASA team was asked to help by analyzing the report to determine the applicability of its findings to segments of NASA outside the realm of spaceflight.

## Challenges to One NASA: The Move to Standardization and Centralization

At the same time that One NASA was being developed, NASA leaders were moving on a parallel track to standardize and centralize certain functions in order to gain efficiencies. In 2003, NASA initiated a new Integrated Financial Management Program (IFMP), under which all NASA centers use the same system to pay bills and manage financial accounts. It replaced over 100 legacy systems formerly in use. "Under the new system, we'll be able to track our finances all the way from the overall agency budget down to the individual transaction level," said Patrick Ciganer, program executive for the new system. "We'll be providing NASA managers with up-to-date information on where their programs stand financially, and they'll have the tools to evaluate trade-offs required in the program planning. We'll also be able to take a consistent look across programs," he said.

Under IFMP, NASA replaced nine of 10 legacy travel-management systems with one system, Travel Manager. In addition, NASA's Human Resource offices have been using other modules to allow job applicants to create résumés online. With the new system, prospective applicants can apply online for jobs across NASA, and prospective employers can evaluate résumés from anyone.

These changes may lead to significant efficiencies. But some managers in the field worry that the push to standardize and centralize certain functions reduces NASA's effectiveness because it inevitably leads to a larger headquarters role and diminished roles for the centers. As one veteran NASA manager put it, "I'm all in favor of creating more efficiency by centralizing some administrative functions, like

grants. But the scientists and engineers will probably hate it! They want 'their' grants contract person to be right at their center."

Before leaving NASA in December 2004, Sean O'Keefe took a number of steps to centralize policy formulation at the headquarters level. He put people in senior positions (both in headquarters and at the centers) who supported his view that policy must be made at headquarters, not by politicians on the Hill or by center directors. He also supported a change that would have the centers' chief financial officers reporting to the agency CFO at headquarters (they currently report to the center directors). Responsibilities for a number of programs have been merged and moved from the field to headquarters as result of changes to support the president's vision for NASA.

One experienced manager at headquarters notes that center directors have always survived challenges to their power base in the past, but O'Keefe made the biggest changes in creating a stronger role for headquarters and reducing some of the center directors' authority. He adds that center directors continue to have the administrator's ear and are invited to leadership meetings. An engineer at one of the centers sees it quite differently: "Center directors used to be in the inner circle of agency leadership when Mr. O'Keefe came to office … now they're not. The role of center directors may be changing from agency leader to center manager." These are powerful substantive and symbolic changes, and the flow of power is not the result that many wanted or expected from One NASA.

Certain things can be standardized in the short run, but they may not be worth doing. For example, one change that occurred during One NASA's start-up phase involved removing the name of a given center from NASA employees' e-mail addresses, so that all employees have a standard e-mail address format (e.g., mary.jones@nasa.gov). This change proved highly controversial; many employees have a close identification with their center, and including the name of one's research center in the e-mail address immediately shows where an employee works.

Finally, some NASA managers question the wisdom of a significant One NASA theme: to advance common organizational values and "build a unified culture." A NASA veteran notes that "the missions of the various centers have … been very different. Manned

spaceflight is not the same as basic aeronautics research; researchers and engineers think differently because they have different roles and responsibilities. Culture shouldn't be a one-size-fits-all-approach." On the other hand, another veteran points out that "we have several cultures within our research center, but that's no problem because we know we all work for the same organization." What should be standardized in a complex agency like NASA, and what should be customized according to a unit's mission and culture? When is it important to speak with one voice, and when is a diversity of voices needed? (For more on this issue, see the Appendix.)

## Will One NASA Fall Victim to Political and Financial Tensions?

While many NASA managers are quite enthusiastic about One NASA's prospects, a number are not. Some experienced employees see it as part and parcel of O'Keefe's organizational transformation initiative, which was begun to help NASA move toward the president's vision for exploration of the moon, Mars, and beyond. Because these managers have a good deal of skepticism about that vision, the organizational methods being used to implement it, and the move toward centralization and standardization of administrative functions, their skepticism extends to One NASA.

Funding is another concern. To support his vision for NASA, the president initially announced his intention to increase the agency's funding by $1 billion, far less than the amount needed to support his vision. In September 2004, the Congressional Budget Office reported that NASA intended to fund the Bush vision, in part, by shifting $10 billion from other science programs that don't support the vision to those that do (a change that created significant resistance on Capitol Hill and at certain NASA centers). Then, in November 2004, Congress passed an omnibus spending bill that included all of NASA's $16.2 billion request for FY '05, enough to enable the agency to move forward on the vision without having to take from other space programs (some programs are being changed to align with the new space vision, which will free up some funds; those programs that do not support the vision will be discontinued). Whether this elevated level of funding continues, given the government's enormous budget deficits, remains to be seen.

The final and perhaps most critical question is this: What should be the role of senior leaders in One NASA? Some skeptical NASA managers believe One NASA is driven by political imperatives, not organizational needs. They also question the One NASA team's independence from senior leaders. This isn't surprising given the timing of One NASA's emergence (the former administrator utilized One NASA to support his transformation initiative). And they wonder whether the initiative will have any staying power beyond the tenure of administrators.

The question of senior leadership involvement in One NASA is a fascinating one. Members of the One NASA team emphasize their independence from senior leadership, noting that the One NASA concept originated at the mid-management ranks, and that they have taken many steps to ensure that One NASA isn't identified with any one administrator or presidential administration. However, some managers at NASA centers believe that no significant change in NASA's culture will occur without continuing, aggressive involvement and direction from headquarters.

Thus, the prospects for One NASA may rest on achieving an elusive balance in two key areas. First, how to ensure enough leadership involvement that the centers' leaders and managers believe it is important to get on board and support One NASA, but not so much leadership involvement that One NASA is overly identified with the current NASA administrator and his agenda? As a One NASA team member notes, that would quickly divert the team's focus from its original, worthy goal.

Second, NASA (like all organizations undergoing a "one" effort) must find a way to balance the need to speak and act as one with the need to support diversity of thought and action. It's difficult to justify 10 different procurement, financial, or HR systems; there are clear advantages to standardization. Just as clearly, agencies must speak with one voice when setting priorities and articulating policies. But how does NASA gain the advantages of standardization and having a unified voice, while maintaining diversity of thought in such critical areas as research, exploration, and safety? How does it gain the advantages of a strong leadership team at headquarters without losing the contributions of 10 strong center

directors? Managing the creative tensions in these areas is a major challenge for NASA's leaders and the One NASA team.

## Critical Success Factors

One NASA is only two and a half years old as of this writing. To the extent that it is off to a promising start, these are the major reasons for its early successes:

- The One NASA team kept senior leaders informed, but it never waited for permission. Rather, it has adopted the attitude of "One NASA wasn't started by Administrator O'Keefe, and it won't end when he leaves." This approach helps it take the long view toward building credibility and support within the workforce. Wisely, Administrator O'Keefe endorsed this approach.

- The One NASA team has no political agenda, is well connected across the agency, and has a reputation for action, communication, and accomplishment. Perhaps because of that, the team has become a mechanism for agency leaders to get things done outside the normal chain of command.

- Related to the above point, One NASA's goals are in the interest of senior leaders. For instance, O'Keefe wanted greater collaboration across the agency, and One NASA may be an effective mechanism to enhance collaboration. That's why some NASA leaders are actively supporting One NASA initiatives that can only succeed with their involvement (e.g., the requirement of rotations for promotion to senior positions, adoption of some common agency-wide tools and business practices, and the like).

- Creative involvement of NASA leaders and managers has helped. The leader-led workshops were new to everyone, and helped get leaders and the workforce out of their usual comfort zone. Also, it was useful to invite NASA leaders to be action sponsors of key items in its plan.

- The One NASA team has emphasized involvement of the workforce. Its members determined early on that they had to have considerable involvement from the bottom up (including considerable middle management involvement) in order to reduce cynicism about "management *du jour*" fads.

- Rotating some center directors and deputy directors, as well as office directors, is a promising approach. Such rotations can expand the managers' understanding of other units' ways of doing business, increase the sharing of ideas, and form stronger relationships across centers.

- The One NASA team works hard to maintain its professional credibility by producing operational results, while working in a political environment.

- The administrator's support—several NASA managers call it "critical." O'Keefe actively endorsed One NASA, gave the One NASA team important tasks, and validated the effort through his endorsement.

And what about the future; will One NASA build on its promising start? Middle management helped give birth to One NASA, senior leaders are giving it credibility and support, and many are heartened by its progress to date. But NASA operates in a political environment, as do all federal agencies, and if One NASA becomes associated with certain political agendas (or overly associated with one administrator), that can seriously compromise its longer-term potential.

# Conclusions about "One" Initiatives

In the first section of this paper, four key questions were posed.

1. What does it mean for a large federal organization to become "one"?

2. What are some of the key hurdles involved?

3. What strategies work well in the quest for "oneness"? What are some critical success factors?

4. Is it worth it? On balance, given the opportunity costs of engaging in this change initiative, given the vested interests in maintaining the status quo, do the benefits exceed the costs?

This final section addresses these questions.

## What It Means for a Large Federal Organization to Become "One"

The definitions used by these three organizations were fairly general. The *One VA* leaders said their goal was to "provide seamless service so that veterans get their needs met in one place, easily." The ONE DOT team said its purpose was to create "a shared vision that promotes an integrated, intermodal transportation system." At NASA, being "one" means "that we will operate as one team that applies our many unique capabilities to the pursuit of our shared vision and in keeping with our clearly defined mission."

Each definition and goal reflected the specific nature of the organization and the challenges it faced. The VA is a very different organization; its mission revolves around one customer: the veteran and his or her family. Thus, the *One VA* emphasis was on seamless (and consistent) service to customers. And ONE DOT was trying to do a better job of creating an integrated

transportation system by improving coordination among its agencies and across the various transportation modes. NASA was trying to overcome unhealthy competition among its centers, in order to improve performance on its products and projects.

There is no single definition of the quest for "oneness," and that is appropriate. What these various definitions have in common, however, is the effort to act as one organization, to have the units moving in the same direction. How that effort is translated into action depends on the nature of the organization and what its leaders are trying to achieve through their "one" initiative, whether their goal is to:

- Improve operations for better customer service, like the VA;

- Improve interagency coordination to implement department-wide policies and better serve state and local entities, like DOT; or

- Reduce stovepipes and increase agency-wide thinking for better decision making and use of resources, like NASA.

## Some Key Hurdles to Becoming "One"

These three initiatives faced a variety of hurdles and challenges, many of them familiar to veterans of any organizational change. For instance:

- The initiatives had to communicate the need for, and purpose of, the initiative to large numbers of employees and other stakeholders, and had to do so in a consistent way over and over and over again; put another way, they had to get the attention of very large numbers of people.

- They had to provide credible answers to the (usually unspoken) question, "What's in it for me/for us?"

- They dealt with huge organizational units that have their own cultures, history, processes, products, and issues in an effort to get them working much more closely, when some of those units' managers and leaders thought the costs of doing so outweighed the benefits.

- They confronted some skeptical and cynical employees who had seen too many change initiatives come and go, who greeted this change with a "wait 'em out" attitude.

- The change leaders needed to engage large numbers of informal leaders in the field and at headquarters in the initiative.

- Headquarters leaders had to find ways to reach well into the bureaucracy and affect the attitudes and behaviors of first-line supervisors and middle managers, the people with the most impact on employees' beliefs about change.

- Change leaders needed ways of measuring progress and documenting results of activities that, in many instances, are difficult to quantify.

- Leaders had to find a way to make it very clear that this initiative was a priority, that they expected real changes in behavior, without micromanaging the change effort.

No surprises here. What may be more instructive is to look at some of the hurdles and challenges that aren't necessarily common to most change efforts. These included:

- How to define "oneness."

- How to respond to employees' questions about what the initiative means, what it will look like once implemented, how they are supposed to behave differently.

- How to engage external stakeholders, some of whom may not be excited about the initiative. External stakeholders sometimes worry that "their" part of the department will lose identity and focus in a "one" initiative, that accountability may be lost, and that their own stakeholder role may be diminished.

- How to ensure that the succeeding administration supports the initiative. This, of course, is not a unique challenge, but is especially difficult given the huge scale of "one" initiatives.

- How to create a more unified, seamless organization when many factors reinforce fragmentation. When funding streams, organizational structure, oversight committees in Congress, and legacy information systems are separate, it's extremely difficult to get employees thinking and acting as one. Indeed, it is the rare and brave leader who even tackles such a task.

This last challenge is enormous. Consider James Madison's statement about the Constitution: "*We have consciously designed an inefficient government to keep men free*." No, that's not a typo. The framers wanted to fragment authority (e.g., separation of powers, checks and balances, division of power between federal and state levels), in the interest of achieving their most cherished goal: the avoidance of tyranny. The framers were willing to live with a good deal of inefficiency as a necessary condition for avoiding tyranny. The system has been a brilliant success in meeting its stated goal. The problem it gives us, of course, is that the same system makes it difficult to act as one integrated entity and collaborate across boundaries to deal with the complex challenges we face today.

Leaders who want their organizations to become one need to remember that this goal seems to make great sense in management terms, but from a political and constitutional point of view it faces powerful headwinds.

A related issue is the selection process for political appointees. When the White House selects an appointee, when the Senate confirms that person, when that person reports to various congressional committees and subcommittees and is expected to maintain close relationships with certain external stakeholder groups, what leverage does the department secretary or agency head have with the appointee? How does the organization's leader develop a strong "one" initiative when the political appointees' allegiance may not be to one, but to several?

## Strategies That Work Well in the Quest for "Oneness"

No single pattern emerges from looking at these three organizations. In two, the VA and DOT, specific senior leaders played a prominent role in beginning the initiatives; at NASA that was less the case. Both the VA and DOT made creative use of large conferences in their early phases, which seemed to help get employees' attention. The One NASA team engaged employees through surveys, used the survey results to highlight eight key themes, and created a project plan with milestones and sponsors for each action item, much as it might do in any complex project plan. At the VA, a key strategy has been the effort to integrate information systems across its huge stovepipes; that hasn't been emphasized at the other two organizations.

While no single overarching strategy emerges from this study, certain approaches seem to be important in these cases. These approaches are:

**Use both passion and systems to launch and sustain "one" initiatives.** It surprises nobody that senior leaders must be committed to this kind of change effort if the initiative is to be successful. By all accounts, Hershel Gober was a passionate advocate for *One VA* during its formal phase, 1997–2000. Nobody doubted that it was at the top of his priority list. His energy and zeal for the project certainly had an impact, especially in the early phase. But he was disappointed that the *One VA* successes didn't spread more widely. On the other hand, the VA leaders who succeeded Gober in the Bush administration put into place clear systems for fostering a more unified and integrated organization, and those also had some impact. But there was no passionate champion for creating a "one" culture in the new administration, and many employees missed the active encouragement of a Hershel Gober to innovate, to be totally focused on serving customers, and to try new ways to collaborate across internal boundaries.

The DOT seems to have found a useful balance in this regard. Its secretary and deputy secretary were passionately committed to ONE DOT from 1997 through 2000 and, like Gober, were present at many conferences and meetings on the topic. In addition to their passion, they also instituted effective systems

that provided a structure and method to work on "one" activities. The Senior Leadership Team, "flagship initiatives," training program, regional teams, and regional champions played important roles in telling employees what was expected, why it mattered, and how they could contribute. *One VA* leaders did create some structure with the state councils (some of which were very productive), but it lacked other needed elements to get the message through to its huge workforce. Indeed, given the incredible difficulties of communicating effectively with over 230,000 employees, the VA clearly needed both leadership passion and a strong "one" system for its initiative to succeed.

NASA also had a useful combination of leadership passion and effective systems. Begun in 2002, the One NASA team included people who care deeply about their agency and about One NASA's goals. Many of the systems being put into place to foster One NASA thinking and acting were suggested by middle managers. Whether they will have the clout to effectively move the initiative forward and sustain it across changes of administration remains to be seen.

**Passion and systems are necessary but not sufficient; it's also necessary to apply a strong dose of accountability.** Any organization trying to increase collaboration across internal units faces this dilemma: The organization *as a whole* will benefit from greater collaboration, but individual managers don't necessarily see the benefits to *themselves and their unit* (this is especially true at the beginning of a collaborative effort). Indeed, the senior and middle managers may see collaboration as a threat. In most agencies they probably rose up the ranks by demonstrating an ability to get things done within their unit (not across units). For more on this issue, see "Actively engage middle managers; that's where the biggest challenges and opportunities lie," on page 42.

Leaders try various approaches to solve this dilemma—educational sessions, incentives, off-sites, and the like. These all make sense, but they're not likely to have the desired impact unless leaders hold unit managers accountable for collaborating.

ONE DOT handled the accountability issue well. Its leaders directed field offices to set up regional teams, set goals, and come up with their own plans

support for the *One VA* goals. It wasn't collaboration for its own sake, but collaboration through *One VA* to better serve the vet.

The ONE DOT initiative was undertaken to help meet the goals in its strategic plan. Those goals required major improvements in intermodal collaboration in such areas as safety, mobility, economic growth, and trade. These goals were widely supported by department employees and external stakeholders. Framing ONE DOT in this way helped ensure that there was little resistance to the initiative. ONE DOT was a means to a valued end.

By contrast, the One NASA effort has been used by senior leaders to help achieve a transformation in agency structure and culture. It didn't start that way; the middle managers who created it wanted to reduce unhealthy competition and increase decision making and resource allocation from an agency-wide perspective. But in the aftermath of the *Columbia* accident and the articulation of President Bush's challenging vision for NASA, agency leaders chose to work with One NASA to support an organizational transformation they hoped would achieve the vision. This vision was somewhat controversial; it involved perceived winners and losers, it required a major shift in funding, and some saw the administrator's embrace of the vision as a political act (that wouldn't survive the current administration). Tying a "one" initiative to a controversial priority that is uniquely identified with one administration can reduce its overall impact.

**Don't keep the vision at 30,000 feet; bring it down to earth.** While it helps to articulate a "one" initiative as a means to achieving a larger, shared purpose, that purpose must be broken down into concrete objectives and actions that speak to employees' everyday activities and interests. For instance, there's widespread support at NASA to improve collaboration among the centers, but how exactly do employees do that at their level? When NASA developed a requirement that managers need to work in more than one center in order to be more promotable to leadership roles, when it started filling center director positions with people from other centers, those actions sent very powerful signals and brought the vision closer to ground level.

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### Strategies That Appear to Work Well in the Quest for "Oneness"

- Use both passion and systems to launch and sustain "one" initiatives.
- Passion and systems are necessary but not sufficient; it's also necessary to apply a strong dose of accountability.
- Use the initiative as a means to a larger end—*if* there is agreement on that end.
- Don't keep the vision at 30,000 feet; bring it down to earth.
- Actively engage middle managers; that's where the biggest challenges and opportunities exist.
- Create a constituency for the initiative.
- Provide quality training ... *after* the initiative is operating and the leaders have demonstrated committment.

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for supporting DOT's "flagship initiatives." They also provided a senior headquarters leader to be the regional champion for each regional team (and to expect results from their team). Further, the leaders required the teams to send monthly progress reports to the department's top leaders, and responded to those reports.

The DOT's senior leaders also incorporated ONE DOT initiatives into DOT managers' performance agreements. Former DOT Deputy Secretary Downey conducted ongoing individual performance reviews with department leaders, which kept them focused on the flagship initiatives. Finally, he convened a weekly meeting with political appointees and some SESers from each DOT agency, to keep their focus on ONE DOT goals and progress. That is the kind of sustained and focused accountability effort that communicates leadership's commitment and expectations.

**Use the initiative as a means to a larger end—*if* there is agreement on that end.** *One VA* was often communicated as a means for better serving VA's customers. Because the department is focused on one kind of customer—veterans (and their families)—and because most VA employees seem dedicated to serving those customers, there was general

Similarly, the use of *One VA* state councils and DOT regional teams had an important, local impact. The teams worked on concrete, operational matters that they cared about, and did so in new ways that engaged frontline workers. Another example of bringing the vision down to earth is the development of new roles and tasks for frontline workers. When a VA nurse is cross trained and given responsibility for coordinating the whole compensation and pension process, it changes how that person thinks and behaves.
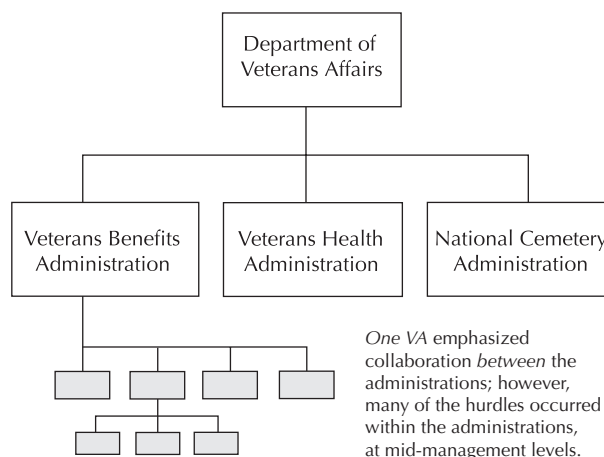
Most frontline employees and first-level supervisors will be pleased to hear their leaders talk about the need for their organization to act as one. What leads to real change in behavior at the frontline level isn't the lofty vision statement, however. Change on the ground requires a change in the employees' tasks, roles, and means for career advancement—and the belief that their supervisors are putting a priority on these changes.

**Actively engage middle managers; that's where the biggest challenges and opportunities exist.**
Senior leaders of most large organizations will have little difficulty convincing frontline workers of the need to increase internal collaboration. Employees who do the organization's technical work, who deliver products, information, and programs to customers, often collaborate quite well for one simple reason; *they have to in order to get the work done*. When efforts to increase internal collaboration fall short, it's usually because of concerns among middle managers and at the senior leadership level. If an organization's senior leaders attempt to create a "one" initiative, they have taken a positive first step. How can they help their middle managers (in the field as well as at headquarters) get past their fears and support it?

An experienced VA manager who supported the *One VA* effort and wished it had spread further described the problem this way: "Our deputy secretary was a strong champion for *One VA*, but how do we convince people to work across our huge administrations (health, benefits, and cemeteries) when we couldn't get them to collaborate *within* each administration at the mid-management level?" He drew a chart (see Figure 4) to capture the dilemma.

**Figure 4: The Challenge of Collaboration**



*One VA* emphasized collaboration *between* the administrations; however, many of the hurdles occurred within the administrations, at mid-management levels.

Why the resistance to collaboration at the middle-manager level? There are many reasons, but the most significant one is this: Middle managers often see much more to lose than to gain from internal collaboration. When they are responsible for a program or function, they worry about what they might lose (control, resources, identity, etc.) that affects their ability to demonstrate results. If collaboration isn't part of the culture, middle managers understandably wonder if their unit will come out as a net loser (while still being accountable for its mission and outcomes).

Further, in most organizations people aren't promoted to supervisory and mid-management levels for their collaborative skills. Quite the contrary, they frequently move up by virtue of their individual skills—technical competence, ability to manage programs, skill at acquiring resources, and related talents. In a number of agencies, collaboration is not viewed as an asset to one's career.

One way to counter these fears is to give middle managers some control over the initiative. At NASA, the One NASA team had strong middle-manager representation from the start. Further, employees and managers had a number of opportunities to give input to the One NASA team, which used their input in creating One NASA priorities. At DOT and VA, regional directors and members of state councils were directed to work together on department-wide priorities, but they had the authority to decide which initiatives to target and how to work together

on them. As a DOT regional leader noted, "Most important was the inclusion of the field throughout the process. It wasn't top down; everyone at every level had ownership."

These are useful first steps, and they need to be accompanied by training and by changes in the reward and promotion systems. And yes, senior leaders have to model collaborative behavior if their reports are to believe that collaboration is real. But it's easy to point the finger at senior leaders and say, in effect, "We'll start working together when we see change at the top." That's often an excuse for not working across boundaries at one's own level. One of the leaders' most significant tasks is to include managers in designing and implementing "one" activities such that the managers *experience* the value collaboration can add to the agency's operations and to their own work. When that occurs, middle managers often become strong advocates for the initiative.

**Create a constituency for the initiative.** It is difficult enough to begin a "one" initiative and demonstrate results. It's even more daunting to sustain it through a change of administrations or top leadership. The initiative may be producing positive change, but the new team has no stake in it and can easily let it die from neglect. How to improve the prospects for continuity?

One approach is to create a constituency for the effort. "Constituency" means a group of people who are clearly benefiting from the initiative and have a strong interest in seeing it continue. One place to build such a constituency is outside the organization. For instance, the VA involved a variety of external stakeholders in its initial large conferences. Veterans' service organizations (which have great power), OMB budget analysts, and Hill staffers were included and consulted during *One VA*'s start-up period. These efforts helped gain initial support for the initiative.

ONE DOT's leaders also involved a number of external constituents in its effort. As Mort Downey put it, "It's absolutely critical to engage the external stakeholders early on. Without that, it's dead on arrival." DOT's leaders included union representatives at the large ONE DOT conferences held during its kickoff phase. They also spent considerable time

getting input from various special interest groups on the department's strategic plan. "That didn't necessarily build great support from all of the groups, but it did neutralize opposition to the plan," recalled one of the department's leaders.

A greater level of external stakeholder involvement (e.g., engaging key congressional committees and chairmen) might have helped these two departments continue their "one" initiatives after the change of administration in 2001.

Another place to build a constituency is inside the organization, at the SES and GS/GM 14-15 levels. As was discussed earlier, these managers can become strong believers in the effort when they are involved in planning the effort, and when they see its value and how it benefits their operations and their own work. This, of course, is where the whole One NASA effort began. Recall how Johnny Stephenson, the One NASA team leader, approached his task: "One of the first questions I asked … was, how do we avoid the 'flavor of the month' problem? How do we sustain the effort beyond Mr. O'Keefe's tenure here?" His answer was to expand the One NASA team from six to 23 individuals, adding a number of middle managers from across the agency. The One NASA team has continued to build an internal constituency by involving large numbers of NASA middle managers and employees in setting One NASA priorities, surveying them on results, and acting on the input from those surveys.

Another way to build an internal constituency is to give managers roles in which they help others see the value of the initiative. DOT's training-of-trainers program did just that. The target group to be trained was 5,000 managers and supervisors in the field. A subset of middle managers was trained in certain teamwork skills, and they became the trainers for their colleagues in their regional offices. Because they worked with existing teams that were focused on intermodal projects, the training was valued and quickly put into practice.

Dick Doyle, a leader of the ONE DOT regional team in New England, considered this training "one of the most important steps taken by the department" to help ONE DOT–type efforts continue past the change of administrations. And that's just what former Secretary Slater had anticipated; that including many managers beyond the political appointees would

give the initiative greater longevity. While the new DOT leaders who took over in 2001 didn't maintain the ONE DOT initiative, several regional ONE DOT teams continued to meet because the teams worked well, experienced some successes that improved interagency coordination, and built relationships that helped them do future projects together.

Federal managers and leaders frequently overlook the importance of building a constituency when trying to increase internal collaboration. It's an understandable oversight, but a costly one. As was noted in the discussion of hurdles, our federal system wasn't designed for collaboration. Many external forces tend to pull units away from each other. Politically astute managers find ways to engage their key external and internal stakeholders in collaborative efforts, so that those stakeholders put a positive pressure on the units to continue collaborating. And the best time to start building that constituency is at the start. A member of the One NASA team remarked that "One NASA wasn't started by Administrator O'Keefe, and it won't end when he leaves." That kind of thinking can spur the creation of a constituency.

**Provide quality training—*after* the initiative is operating and the leaders have demonstrated commitment.** Some leaders emphasize training at the start of a change program. Training can play an important role in supporting major changes, but it must be provided at the right times and circumstances. From a manager's or employee's perspective, why invest a lot of energy in training if you don't know whether the announced change will actually take place? If you don't have a way to apply the training? In economic terms, training is a lagging, not leading, indicator during change efforts. If the effort is showing promise, many employees will show interest in training that helps them manage the change.

At DOT, VA, and NASA, training was provided after the "one" initiative was up and running and there was reason to believe that the organization's leaders were serious about it. Once employees saw "one" projects get implemented, the skepticism about "flavor of the month" subsided and the interest in training grew.

Both *One VA* and ONE DOT put in place training programs to help frontline and management personnel understand and support the "one" goals,

after other visible steps were taken to demonstrate the leaders' commitment to the initiative. The One NASA effort focuses at a different level: Its training begins with top leadership. The One NASA team created a list of leadership behaviors that will be used in promotion decisions for grade 15 and SES positions, and NASA SESers now participate in intensive sessions focused on One NASA's status and One NASA behaviors. Again, it followed other visible actions by agency leaders.

Training can begin at several different levels of the organization. More important than where it takes place is when. Many Total Quality Management efforts in the 1990s suffered from the illusion that, given good training, employees will automatically start using the tools and methods they were taught. It was a mistake. Some agencies spent hundreds of thousands of dollars training employees in TQM, without any visible sign that their leaders were solidly behind the approach. There was little return on that investment. In most large-scale change efforts, training should take place *after* the leaders have demonstrated their commitment to support the initiative and there is visible evidence of progress.

## Weighing the Benefits and the Costs

Acting as one organization seems to be an obvious goal. Why question its value? Because, as this paper makes clear, there are powerful forces that tend to fragment our agencies; the costs of trying to act as one are significant. This question cannot be avoided.

### Some Benefits…

We can look at the potential benefits of "one" initiatives from the points of view of four key stakeholder groups: agency employees, agency leaders, customers, and policy makers (Congress and the White House).

Employees can benefit in many ways from "one" efforts. Perhaps the most significant advantage is the likelihood that their leaders will give clear, consistent messages concerning the organization's mission, goals, and priorities. Indeed, one of the most common employee complaints in many federal agencies is that they do not get coherent statements about organizational direction and priorities. As a middle manager from a natural resource agency said, "I ask my boss which of our eight initiatives should be given highest priority, and he says,

'They're *all* the highest priority!' I tell my boss that some of these initiatives work at cross purposes with each other, and he says, 'You'll have to work that out.' " Some leaders will always behave this way, of course, because it gives them flexibility, allows them to avoid accountability, and may reflect the mixed priorities of their own bosses. But "one" initiatives can reduce such confusion.

Employees also benefit when "one" efforts help to integrate IT systems so that everyone can look at the same data, everyone can give customers consistent answers. These efforts also help reduce the walls that grow between organizational units, especially when the goal is to provide seamless service to customers (as it was for the VA). As these walls become more permeable, employees find it easier to share ideas, to contribute to other units' efforts, and to share resources and work collaboratively toward shared goals.

"One" initiatives can help agency leaders as well. With the enactment of the Government Performance and Results Act, federal organizations had to take strategic planning seriously. But how does a large agency or department create a meaningful strategic plan if its managers never work across internal stovepipes, if they don't understand what other units produce, if they haven't had the experience of learning what customers need from the *entire* organization? The leaders at DOT and the VA were able to produce strategic plans that had real focus as their organizations started to benefit from their "one" processes.

And these initiatives can make a significant reduction in unhealthy internal competition between units. That was one of the key drivers for the One NASA effort, and there has been some progress in this regard. Indeed, one of the more common concerns voiced by middle and senior managers is: "How do we get our people to see the big picture?" The best response to that is, "You have to *show* them the big picture." "One" initiatives can help those on the front lines see how they fit into something much larger.

Customers may be the most important beneficiaries when organizations try to function as one. Why should a municipal transportation authority encounter different and contradictory regulations when dealing with several DOT agencies? ONE DOT helped

transportation providers cut through red tape and accomplish their goals faster and more efficiently. And when different federal units work closely together with the shared goal of providing seamless customer service, government is delivering real value to the American people. By the same token, members of Congress and the executive branch benefit when they have confidence that the agencies are acting in an integrated and focused fashion to implement their policies and budgetary guidance.

### … and Some Costs/Risks
In addition to the hurdles listed earlier in this section, there are clear costs and risks involved in these efforts. One is the opportunity cost of the time required. These initiatives, if done well, require enormous amounts of time from senior leaders, managers, and employees at all levels. This is time *not* available for other mission-related work. A risk is that the initiative will founder, or that it will do well, only to die with the next administration. Either outcome creates more cynicism when future changes are announced.

Another risk has to do with "groupthink," a term coined by psychologist Irving Janis in the 1970s that describes the process in which individuals try to shape their opinions to what they believe is the consensus of the group.[5] In some organizations, it is imperative to speak with one voice. A veteran should get the same answer to a question about his benefits at any regional VA office he visits. But does it make sense to insist that scientists speak with one voice when they are conducting research on cures for AIDS? Should analysts in intelligence agencies speak with one voice when trying to find the meaning in intercepted messages sent by terrorist groups? Indeed, one of harshest criticisms of the intelligence community by the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence was that the intelligence community succumbed to "groupthink" in dealing with the weapons of mass destruction issue prior to the Iraq war.[6]

Groupthink was also involved in NASA's *Columbia* tragedy. The head of the *Columbia* Mission Management Team clearly assumed that the foam that broke off during the shuttle's ascent and smashed into its left wing couldn't have caused any damage, and that there was nothing to be done about it if damage did occur. Her questions and comments affected the team, which never had an

open debate about the problem and the options (despite concerns expressed by technical experts). The point: "One" initiatives that lead to a single way of thinking can create significant risks for the agency's operations and customers.[7]

Because the various costs and risks are considerable, organizational leaders should do a good deal of analysis and reflection before embarking on a "one" initiative. This is demanding and complex work, requiring leaders' and managers' full attention. Anything less will reflect poorly on the organization and lead to subpar results.

Given that caveat, these case studies show that the quest for "oneness" is a worthy activity. Most employees will appreciate the effort because they know the costs of internal fragmentation, duplication, and unhealthy competition. Most customers will be pleased with the effort (again, assuming it is thoughtfully planned) because they will see how it can materially help them. Some stakeholders may have deep reservations for the reasons already discussed. If they are brought in early and listened to throughout, they can become fans who help future leaders maintain the initiative.

And, even if leaders take the steps noted in this last section, they still must know that long-term success remains an iffy proposition. The most carefully planned "one" effort can be quickly dropped (or altered radically) by a new administration or top leadership, as the VA and DOT leaders learned. There are few guarantees in this work. But we *can* say two things with confidence. First, if leaders do not make the effort to create one organization, it won't happen. And second, if they embark on this journey in a thoughtful way, continually reminding people why it matters and how they should become involved, they are likely to help employees think and act from a larger perspective. A number of employees will start to see possibilities they hadn't perceived before. Some will begin working across internal boundaries that always seemed impenetrable. And such changes will form the foundation for future leaders' efforts.

# Appendix: Open Issues Involved in the Quest for "Oneness"

The research for this report on federal organizations engaging in "one" initiatives has uncovered some open issues that require more inquiry. The four that follow warrant further attention by both practitioners and researchers.

## How to Resolve the Dilemma of Strong Leadership Involvement and Continuity During Change of Administrations?

Virtually every book on organizational change places some emphasis on leadership involvement. In government, where political (and military) leaders change frequently, leadership involvement in change is a two-edged sword. Strong leadership involvement is usually considered vital, especially at the start. When the top leader is firmly committed, employees pay more attention. Conversely, the more strongly a change effort is personally associated with one leader, the more likely a future leader will alter or drop it.

Both the DOT and the VA benefited from passionate involvement of their leaders in their "one" initiatives, which was a major factor in the successes they achieved. But neither initiative was given a priority by the succeeding administration. What would have happened had their "one" efforts been initiated in the first Clinton administration? With more time to develop before a different president took office, would more middle managers and supervisors have gotten involved and taken ownership (taking the spotlight off a single senior leader)?

One NASA may provide insights into this crucial question. The One NASA team made it an article of faith not to allow its initiative to become closely tied to any one NASA administrator. The team did

> ### Open Issues Involved in the Quest for "Oneness"
>
> - How to resolve the dilemma of strong leadership involvement and continuity during change of administrations?
>
> - Is structural change important?
>
> - What to standardize, what to customize?
>
> - Does size matter?

a number of things to engage the workforce in planning and implementing One NASA; it also engaged a wide spectrum of senior leaders in the effort, including a focus on changing leadership behaviors among SESers. One senior manager in NASA headquarters believes the key is time: Will an administrator stay at NASA long enough to ensure that One NASA changes take hold and become part of the culture? And can that person do so without playing an overly visible role in its implementation?

## Is Structural Change Important?

Mort Downey, former deputy secretary of transportation during the ONE DOT initiative, commented, "In the course of planning, we came to the notion that it makes more sense to change people's heads than to move the boxes around. We said to employees, 'You can keep your own uniforms [agency identity] and still work together.'" DOT had presented a reorganization plan to Congress in 1995 at the request of the White House. Congress never responded. So Downey and Secretary Slater looked beyond structural change.

Many new leaders seem to believe that changing an organization's structure (e.g., who reports to whom,

number of levels, span of control, etc.) will make a significant difference in performance. That's an understandable belief, but often a faulty one. "Reorgs" typically create huge anxiety, consume great amounts of employee time, and involve considerable bureaucratic infighting among those who perceive their units to be losers or winners in the proposed reorganization—without necessarily making any difference on mission performance.

In general, leaders may do well to avoid major reorganizations during their "one" efforts. The costs will probably outweigh the benefits. If leaders are convinced that a reorganization is required, it should be done later in the effort, after employees and external stakeholders are seeing concrete results. (Doing a reorganization later in the change also gives leaders and managers time to understand how the change is playing out; with this knowledge, they can make the reorganization more effective.)

That said, there are ways in which *systems* and *groups* can be created that support "one" initiatives, without trying to "move the boxes around." *One VA* utilized state councils, an Executive Board, and Strategic Management Council. ONE DOT created regional teams (and regional champions from headquarters), and One NASA led to the requirement that managers seeking senior leadership positions serve at multiple research centers. These are all useful examples of groups and system changes that support "one" behavior. The key, as was noted in the Conclusions section of the report, is to create a strong sense of accountability for such systems and groups.

## What to Standardize, What to Customize?

This is a significant issue for many organizations today, and it will confront those that try to become "one." The benefits of standardizing certain processes and activities are clear: efficiency and lower costs (why should each unit have its own procurement shop?), consistency (why should VA customers confront different processes at each benefits office?), ability to move personnel easily, and ability to adopt and spread best practices, among others.[8] Further, the very fact of being a public institution requires a good deal of standardization: Policies must be administered consistently, organizational practices cannot be discriminatory against any groups, etc.

But there are risks in standardizing, and benefits to customizing. For customer-oriented organizations like the VA, there must be a good deal of customization. If frontline staff members aren't allowed to use their judgment, make some exceptions, and find creative solutions to customer problems, such agencies risk becoming rigidly bureaucratic in their customer service. Establishing one-size-fits-all processes and procedures may provide a convenient "defense" against allegations of inconsistency, but the result isn't usually improved service. Customization allows agencies to treat different kinds of customers (and customers with different kinds of needs) differently. It also encourages employee innovation and empowerment, which helps attract and keep quality employees.

If agencies like NASA don't encourage their highly trained engineers and scientists to customize by inventing new methods, challenging assumptions, and following their intuition, such agencies will lose talented people, and more. They will be at risk of engaging in groupthink.

Both standardization and customization are needed in systems-oriented organizations like DOT, which deal with state and local governments in a wide array of transportation modes. Many transportation factors must be standardized (we can't allow states to be "creative" when it comes to setting height standards for bridges on major roadways). But DOT must always look for ways to give states the autonomy to come up with their own solutions to certain challenges, just as the ONE DOT leaders gave regional teams great latitude in how they achieved certain national goals and contributed to the DOT "flagship initiatives."

One solution to this standardization/customization dilemma is offered by Larry Bossidy, former chairman and CEO of AlliedSignal Corp., and former vice chairman at General Electric. Bossidy's approach is to "centralize paper and decentralize people."[9] Applied to the types of organizations studied for this report, that might translate to: *centralize information and decentralize operations*. That is, make information readily available and easily exchanged across internal stovepipes (which requires considerable standardization). And operations in the field should be decentralized (customized) as much as possible, while still meeting certain national goals and performance standards.

Such an approach will typically appeal to most employees and has real value for agency customers. But it leaves some questions unanswered. For instance, if a search for best practices turns up a superior business process, should that be mandated across the agency (which runs counter to the notion of customizing operations)? If customizing operations results in provision of a higher level of service in some branches than at others, what should you do when some customers complain that they weren't treated equally?

## Does Size Matter?

The three organizations studied range in size from 232,000 at the VA, to approximately 60,000 at DOT, to NASA's 18,500 FTEs. What impact, if any, does size have on an organization's ability to act as "one"?

On the surface, the answer would seem to be "a great deal." At the smallest agency, NASA, the "one" initiative produced some significant results in its first few years. Nobody is claiming success this early, but some long-term NASA managers believe that One NASA has the potential to knit together its 10 centers in a way that has never happened before.

The largest of these organizations, VA, had a number of small to medium successes, but they were uneven, and the *One VA* leaders found it difficult to expand its successes across the huge department. The change of administrations in 2001 brought different VA leadership, which created a unified leadership team and more systematic approach to leading and managing the department. These changes provided a much greater ability to take new methods to all parts of the department, to standardize best practices, to make managers accountable for quantitative goals. But it, too, had difficulty demonstrating significant impact.

For instance, an in-depth evaluation of VBA's Denver office, one of its top-performing units, demonstrated that its significant improvements in service to compensation and pension customers were not primarily due to its adoption of standardized processes. Rather, they were primarily due to specific steps taken by the office's leader to emphasize customer service, build a culture of teamwork and communication across the teams, provide quality training to those who take customer phone calls, and improve information systems. In other words, the specific

actions of this leader were the key, not the changes mandated by VA leaders.

And the ONE DOT initiative produced a number of successes built on an apparently solid model. DOT would likely be expanding those successes to all parts of the department today if there had been more continuity in leadership.

Given that the smallest of these organizations is demonstrating considerable success thus far in its "one" effort, the largest had mixed success, and the medium-size department made significant improvements but didn't sustain its initiative into the next administration, it would seem that size is an important factor. It may well be. But there are other differences between these organizations, of course, and further research is needed to determine which factors account for the differences in outcomes. For instance:

- VA is not only the largest of these three organizations, it is also by far the oldest. Is a major cultural change more difficult in organizations that date back to the 18th and 19th centuries (with structures and processes that are also quite old), than in newer organizations?

- At DOT, the entire Senior Leadership Team worked together for a full year to develop its ONE DOT plan. One NASA was pushed by a middle management group, then strongly supported by the agency's administrator. At the VA, the deputy secretary was a passionate champion (during the formal *One VA* phase), but he didn't have strong advocates surrounding him at the top. Can one senior leader successfully promote "one" initiatives? Is success only possible when a committed team takes ownership of the initiative?

- NASA had experienced its second shuttle disaster just as One NASA was beginning. A year later the president articulated a vision for the agency that would require huge internal changes. Neither DOT nor VA faced such daunting challenges. Is the presence of a crisis and/or a huge challenge from the executive branch a significant determinant of "one" successes?

- Each of these organizations reports to multiple congressional committees and subcommittees. As many as 27 different House and Senate committees and subcommittees exercise authorization and appropriation oversight for DOT. VA

has five different Senate committees, and four committees and seven subcommittees in the House. NASA, by contrast, has roughly half as many committees and subcommittees exercising authority as does VA. When a federal organization has a large number of congressional committees/subcommittees controlling parts of its budget (and when each committee oversees large parts of the organization), the task of acting as one integrated entity becomes more difficult. Does the nature of congressional oversight help explain the differences in organizations' "one" experiences?[10]

Studying more agencies that go through the "one" process may yield the answers. And it may well be that there is no one answer to these questions. That is, we may find that the issue of size, like the other three issues raised here, are dependent on factors such as the organization's culture, its political environment, the nature of its work and operations. If that's the case, then a key factor will be the champions' ability to design "one" initiatives that *fit* the culture, environment, and business operations. Finding the appropriate fit is almost always a key leadership task. What worked in the previous organization isn't necessarily a formula for the next one. That's what makes it so challenging to use the lessons learned from others' experiences. There are endless "lessons learned" out there. Smart leaders spend time trying to discern which of those many lessons to apply.

# Endnotes

1.  See "Reversing Reinvention," by James Thompson, in *Government Executive*, June 2003, pp. 45–51, for a more detailed discussion.

2.   For more, see "Transforming the Veterans Health Administration: The Revitalization of VHA," by Gary J. Young. IBM Center for The Business of Government, June, 2000.

3.  From "Reversing Reinvention," by James Thompson. *Government Executive*, June 2003, p. 50.

4.  To read the full report, go to www.onenasa.nasa. gov/About_OneNASA/Implementation_process.htm.

5.  The classic study of groupthink was written by Irving Janis: *Groupthink: Psychological Studies of Policy Decisions and Fiascoes, 2nd Edition* (Houghton Mifflin Company, 1982). Janis looks at such events as the attack on Pearl Harbor and the Bay of Pigs invasion to understand how smart people could make stupid (and avoidable) blunders.

6.  Report of the U.S. Intelligence Community's Prewar Intelligence Assessments on Iraq, by the Select Committee on Intelligence, United States Senate, July 7, 2004.

7.  For more on groupthink's impact on the *Columbia* shuttle disaster, see *The Wisdom of Crowds*, by James Surowiecki. New York: Doubleday, 2004, pp. 173–184.

8.  For more on the pros and cons of standardization and customization, see "How Process Enterprises *Really* Work," by Michael Hammer and Steven Stanton. *Harvard Business Review*, Nov.–Dec., 1999, pp. 108–118.

9.  From "The CEO As Coach: An Interview with AlliedSignal's Lawrence A. Bossidy," by Noel M. Tichy, and Ram Charan. *Harvard Business Review*, March–April, 1995, pp. 69–78.

10.  The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) is, perhaps, the ultimate example of fragmented congressional oversight. By one count, 88 congressional committees and subcommittees have some authority over parts of DHS. No fewer than 412 House members and all 100 senators sit on subcommittees with some form of jurisdiction over DHS.

The department's leaders have a full-time job simply communicating with their congressional overseers (and their staff members). The September 11 Commission described this as "perhaps the single largest obstacle impeding the department's successful development." This issue of reporting to myriad congressional committees is very difficult for executive branch organizations to address, and few congressional leaders seem interested or able to reduce the oversight fragmentation (committee and subcommittee chairs love having oversight and budgetary authority). To be sure, DHS and its 180,000 employees have many other serious organizational problems to work out, but dealing with 88 congressional entities makes their enormous task far more difficult.

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**Russ Linden** is a management educator and author who specializes in organizational change methods. Since 1980, he has helped government, nonprofit, and private-sector organizations develop leadership, foster innovation, and improve organizational performance. He is an adjunct faculty member at the University of Virginia and the Federal Executive Institute. He writes a column on management innovations for *The Virginia Review*, and has produced national videoconferences and webcasts on collaboration in government, re-engineering, and the human side of change. He was the Williams Distinguished Visiting Scholar for 2003 at the State University of New York (Fredonia) School of Business.
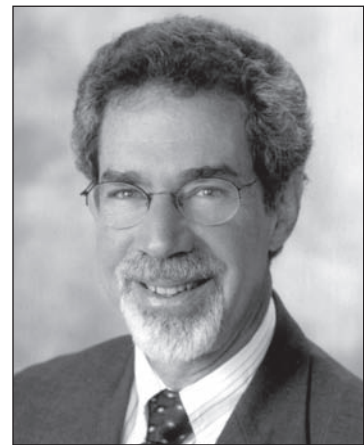
Dr. Linden has studied innovative organizations in Japan and the U.S. His current teaching and consulting interests include collaborating across organizational boundaries, learning organization principles, fostering customer-focused organizations, and developing constituencies in political environments.

He has published numerous articles and four books. His book *Seamless Government: A Practical Guide to Re-engineering in the Public Sector* (Jossey-Bass, 1994) was excerpted in the May 1995 issue of *Governing Magazine*, and has been translated into Chinese. It was the first book written on re-engineering in government, and is considered the primary source on that topic by many. His most recent book is *Working Across Boundaries: Making Collaboration Work in Government and Nonprofit Organizations* (Jossey-Bass, 2002). It was a finalist for the best book on nonprofit management in 2002 (awarded by the Alliance for Nonprofit Management).

His clients have included the National Geographic Society; several military and intelligence agencies; the Archdiocese of Washington, D.C.; U.S. Customs Service; a partnership of the Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management; Government of the Cayman Islands; Drug Enforcement Agency; National Parks Service; U.S. Departments of State, Treasury, Interior, and Education; two state attorneys general; and over four dozen state and local government agencies. He's also worked with several nonprofit agencies in the U.S. and Israel.

Before beginning his full-time practice, Dr. Linden was a senior faculty member at the Federal Executive Institute. He served as the director of Executive Programs at the University of Virginia's Center for Public Service, taught at the UVa McIntire School of Commerce, and worked in the human services field for 10 years.

Dr. Linden's volunteer commitments include scholarship programs that help low-income youth afford college. His bachelor's and master's degrees are from the University of Michigan, and his Ph.D. is from the University of Virginia.

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