

SUCCESSFULLY EXECUTING AMBITIOUS STRATEGIES IN GOVERNMENT:
AN EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

How are senior government executives who attempt to execute an ambitious vision requiring significant strategic change in their organizations able to succeed? How do they go about formulating a strategy in the first place? What managerial and leadership techniques do they use to execute their strategy?

In this paper, these questions are examined by comparing (so as to avoid the pitfalls of “best practices” research) management and leadership behaviors of a group of agency leaders from the two most recent presidential administrations (Clinton and Bush), identified by independent experts as having been successful at executing an ambitious strategy, with a control group consisting of those the experts identified as having tried but not succeed at such an effort, along with counterparts to the successes, who had the same position as they in a different administration.

We find a number of differentiators between successful agency leaders and the control group (such as using strategic planning, monitoring performance metrics, reorganizing, and having a smaller number of goals). Other techniques either were not commonly used or failed to differentiate because they were used by both successful and unsuccessful leaders alike (such as appeals to public service motivation). One important finding is that unsuccessful leaders seem to have used techniques recommended specifically for managing transformation or change just as frequently as successes did, so use of such techniques does not differentiate successes from unsuccessful leaders. However, unsuccessful leaders (and counterparts) used techniques associated with improving general organizational performance less than successes. Additionally, we find that agencies that the successes led had significantly lower percentages of political appointees than the average agency in the government.

Two of the most important ways “public management” as an intellectual tradition sought to differentiate itself from public administration have been its concern with the behavior of top executives rather than middle managers, and its interest in particular in proactive executive action on behalf of the executive’s goals, typically ambitious goals representing a departure from the agency status quo rather than simply stewardship of the enterprise (Rainey 1990; Lynn 2003). A central concept in this tradition is leader “strategy” (Moore 1995), imported from work in a business-school context on executive strategy in a firm (Porter 1998; 1996).

This paper seeks empirically to examine a central question for public management research: which management and leadership techniques are associated with a government executive’s successful execution of an ambitious strategy? We do so by comparing agency leaders from the Clinton and Bush administrations identified by experts as having been successful at executing an ambitious strategy with a control group of others identified as having tried but failed to do so, along with counterparts to the successes, who had the same position as they in a different administration.

We use the term “strategy” as used in Moore, to include both a set of goals (vision) for where an executive wishes to take an organization, and a plan for how to achieve those goals.¹ Such a plan involves both successfully receiving authorization and funds from the organization’s external political environment, and improving internal

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¹ This is somewhat different from the everyday-language use of the term, which typically involves only the plan one has to achieve one’s goals rather than the selection of goals as well, as in the phrase, “What’s your strategy for persuading the boss to give you a raise?”

operating capacity inside the organization. By “successful execution of a strategy,” we mean making significant progress on achieving the goals the executive sought.

The shorthand “success” will be used in this paper, but we refer to a certain kind of success – successful realization of ambitious goals, representing significant change from the agency’s situation before the executive’s arrival.. This focus reflects the strong interest inside the public management tradition for executives seeking significantly to improve an organization’s delivery of public value. However, some of the literature to be discussed in the hypotheses section below suggests relationships between use of various techniques and general managerial success. We return at the end to the extent to which techniques promoting success executing an ambitious strategy are likely to be applicable to organizational stewardship as well..

Systematic investigation of practices associated with successful goal attainment among government executives is very difficult. We do not believe we have developed perfect solutions to these problems, but we make a conscious effort to be more disciplined in our methods so as to advance the state of knowledge in this field. Like most existing literature, this study is based on a small number of cases, with significant information gathered about each, mostly through interviews with agency leaders. However, we use a systematic way to select which executives to study. To avoid the pitfalls of “best practices” research, we also create a control group, so we can compare behaviors of successes with those of others. And we develop a technique more objectively to compare responses so as to be able to draw more systematic conclusions.

HYPOTHESES

We test hypotheses involving management and leadership techniques or behaviors seen to be associated with success at strategy execution. They are taken from three literatures. The first is the public management literature on strategy. The second is the literature, predominantly from organization studies, general management, and public administration, on successful internal organizational management, referred to in public management strategy literature as creating “operating capacity.” The third is literature on change management, in particular on achieving employee support for change.²

Strategy Formulation

Strategy formulation may occur using a strategic planning process – here loosely defined as an effort to develop, or clarify, goals, and to prepare a plan of activities to realize those goals, in a comprehensive and prospective fashion (Ansoff, 1965; Mintzberg, 1994; Bryson, 1995). Strategic planning is comprehensive in the manner of normative decision theory (Keeney and Raiffa, 1976; Stokey and Zeckhauser, 1978: Ch. 12), where goals are laid out, information gathered on alternatives and consequences (often from an environmental assessment), and then activities chosen expected to maximize attainment of one’s goals. The process is prospective in that strategy formulation lays out in advance both goals and activities; execution follows.

Different authors emphasize different features of strategic planning. Some (e.g. Forbes 2007) emphasize a comprehensive environmental assessment that gives an organization information about alternative activities and their consequences. By contrast, Behn (1988) emphasizes advance planning about choice of activities to reach goals.

² The list of techniques for creating operating capacity could have been much longer; we have used our own judgment about some of the most-common one discussed in the literature.

Supporters of strategic planning argue it is associated with greater organizational success. The argument is the same as a general one for rationality. Planning, Bryson states, will improve decision making and, hence, performance. Priorities identified in strategic plans encourage an organization to focus on what is most important.

However, others have argued strategic planning is neither normatively nor descriptively associated with successful goal attainment. In a public-sector context, Lindblom's classic critique (1959; see also Wildavsky, 1974; Quinn, 1980) argued that rather than trying to make decisions about either goals or activities in a comprehensive fashion, people should "muddle through" – start with current goals and approaches as a baseline and consider only limited alternatives, seeing if the alternative appears better. Behn argues that managers should have a clear idea of goals they seek but should not have an advance plan for how to achieve the goals. A good manager (p. 645) "knows where is trying to go but is not sure how to get there." Instead, the manager "gropes along," trying different ways of achieving the goal.

One meta-analysis of studies on the relationship between use of strategic planning – here meant in the sense of comprehensive environmental assessment and careful goal selection – and financial performance of firms (Boyd 1991) found a positive relationship, though the underlying studies, almost all cross-sectional, are marred by endogeneity issues. Two studies using public-sector innovations that tested whether successful innovations had included advance planning of activities to be undertaken to realize the innovation's goal reached different results. Golden (1990) concluded that the time between idea development and first implementation of Ford Foundation award-winning innovations averaged about a year, suggesting to her that little implementation planning had taken place and that program methods had changed considerably during

implementation. However, Borins' (1998) categorization of a larger group of winners showed different findings. 59% of innovations, once the decision to proceed was made, were preceded by a "comprehensive plan or analysis," while only 30% "groped along."

Strategic planning is mostly discussed in the literature as a general management tool; however, Fernandez and Rainey's review (2006) of literature on organizational change identifies transforming "the new idea or vision...into a course of action..., with goals and a plan for achieving it" as one determinant of success.

H1a: Successful agency heads are more likely than others to engage in a strategic planning process for strategy formulation.

H1b: The planning processes of successful agency heads emphasize environmental assessment and goal selection.

H1c: The planning processes of successful agency heads include development of implementation plans of activities to be undertaken in pursuit of the leader's goals.

Number of Goals

The strategy literature (e.g. Porter 1996) often argues that one purpose of a strategy is to help managers focus on a small number of priorities, rather than diluting attention across a large number of goals. As Porter writes (p. 77), "Strategy renders choices about what not to do as important as choices about what to do." The idea is that one is more likely to be successful at whatever one does if one concentrates effort.

Operationally, this would be expected to translate into a small number of important goals.

H2: Successful agency heads have a smaller number of goals than other leaders.

Alignment of Capacity to Goals

Research on strategy (Powell 1992; Floyd and Lane 2000; Kaplan and Norton 2006) emphasizes a need to create "alignment" among elements of a strategy, so internal

capacity matches overall goals. If the various elements of a strategy are in alignment, it is argued the strategy stands a greater chance of success; Powell (1992) finds empirical support for this in a sample of business firms. Applied here, creating alignment would mean a leader made other changes to the organization that were consistent with the leader's goals. Examples might include adjusting budgets, employee job descriptions, or types of employees recruited.

H3: Successful agency heads pay significant attention to creating alignment between their goals and their agency's internal capacity , more than other leaders.

Gaining Support from the Political Environment

Perhaps the most-prominent argument for the view that successful strategy execution requires significant attention to gaining support from the organization's political environment – the legislature, political superiors in the executive branch, organized groups, and the media – appears in Moore (1995; see also Heymann 1987). Herman and Heimovics (1994) found that successful nonprofit executives were considerably more likely to use a “political frame” in thinking about their jobs – assuming conflict in the political environment and the need to build alliances to gain support – than the comparison executives they studied. Gaining support in the political environment – through advocacy and informal relationship building-- is particularly important for change efforts because these require new political authorization more than does stewarding unchanging goals.

H4: Successful agency heads pay significant attention to gaining support from their external political environment, more than other leaders.

Improving Internal Operating Capacity

Some observers have suggested that agencies are often not managed successfully because leaders attend insufficiently to creation of internal operating capacity. Cohen (1998: 475, 378, emphasis in original) states:

Many appointees are captivated by the glamour of their positions and ignore the fundamentals. They lavish their attention on travel opportunities, public appearances and speeches, press interviews, top-level policy meetings, and White House contacts, but they have little patience for the critical spade work that makes programs and organizations function effectively. They devote little or no time to working out key regulatory provisions, making budget allocations, building and nurturing the organization, determining critical personnel assignments, or translating policy concepts into operational reality. ...
[W]hat's the harm of letting political appointees play the amateur government game? Isn't it a small price to pay? It is not such a small price, and it does a lot of harm."

We mention here, and formulate as hypotheses, a number of techniques predominantly discussed in general literature on good management, though also mentioned in literature on executing change. Since this list may not be inclusive, we include a general hypothesis about attention to other internal management techniques.

Classic organization theory (e.g. Gulick and Urwick, editors, 1937; see also Behn, 2001: Ch. 1, 3) emphasizes clear chains of commands, with responsibility established for organizational activity, and clear accountability – reward or punishment -- for performance. Executives are responsible for dividing the work, for receiving reports from those with responsibility for each given area, and for rewarding or punishing subordinates. Though predominantly discussed as a general management technique, some (e.g. Hammer and Stanton, 1995; Kotter, 1996) argue that accountability systems are particularly important when executing change, since one can expect resistance, and therefore management must be vigilant about accountability.

H5: Successful agency heads establish clear accountability systems, more than other leaders.

In recent years, increasing attention has been paid to performance measurement as a tool to improve organizational performance (Hatry 1999; Behn 2003; Moynihan, 2008), although there is an undertone of skepticism in the literature about its pitfalls (e.g. Bevan and Hood 2006; Radin 2006; McLean, Haubrich, and Gutierrez-Romero 2007).

Performance measurement can improve performance by focusing organizational members on goals the measures embody, increase motivation to achieve goals, and facilitate learning through feedback and benchmarking.

Most attention regarding performance measurement has discussed its role in improving general performance (e.g. Rainey and Steinbauer, 1999), though it has been suggested (e.g. Kaplan 2001: Ch. 1, 12) that if leaders seek to change the organization's goals, one way to encourage this is to change measures to ones reflecting the new goals.

H6: Successful agency heads use performance measures, more than other leaders.

Between the 1930's and the 1950's (in documents such as the Brownlow Commission report or the Hoover Commission studies) reformers often proposed reorganizing agencies (Fesler 1987). Reformers sought two goals – to save money by reducing “duplication” and “overlap,” and to improve hierarchical control by placing subordinates in clearer chains of command (Thomas 1993). In the 1970's and 1980's, by contrast, a conventional wisdom emerged that reorganizations were worthless enterprises consuming much energy while accomplishing little. Wilson (1989: 264; see also Seidman 1970) observed that “presidents have taken to reorganizations the way overweight people take to fad diets – and with about the same results.” March and Olsen (1983: 282) noted that “(t)he history of administrative reorganization...is a history of rhetoric.” In the wake

of September 11, there grew a new interest in reorganization as a technique to improve communication across stovepipes (Kelman 2006). Nonetheless, skepticism remains about the benefits of reorganization as a tool for organizational improvement.

Interestingly, the change management literature does not appear to address reorganization as a technique, perhaps out of a view that it may distract leaders from spending time on change-promoting techniques seen as more beneficial.

H7: Reorganization is not used by successful agency heads, compared with other leaders.

Other techniques have received significant discussion both in literature on general good management and on gaining employee support for change:

Communicating freely with employees about issues facing the organization, and involving them in decisions through a participatory or collaborative management style, has been widely recommended as a technique for improving general organizational performance (McGregor, 1960; Likert, 1961; but see Vroom and Jago, 1988; Yukl, 2001: 212-16 for suggestions any benefits are situationally contingent). Separately, there is a common view in literature on change management -- growing out of Lewin's experiments during World War II on individual change (1947; 1958; see also Coch and French 1948) —that the best way to persuade reluctant employees of the value of change is to discuss the reasons for change with them and to allow them to participate in decisions about how the change is to be executed.

H8: Successful agency heads use a collaborative, participatory management style, more than other leaders.

A growing literature has developed in recent years (Perry and Wise 1990; Horton 2008; Perry and Hondeghem 2008a; Perry and Hondeghem 2008b) on “public service motivation,” defined (Perry and Hondeghem 2008a: 3-4) as involving motives for

behavior “that are largely...altruistic and are grounded in public institutions.” Especially given absence of extrinsic incentives available in government, public service motivation may be seen as a driver of good performance. Some limited empirical evidence (Brewer 2008) relates higher public service motivation to improved individual performance.

Discussions of differences between “management” and “leadership” (Kotter, 1990), where “leadership” is associated with change as opposed to stewardship, argue that appealing to an attractive vision – in government, public service motivation – is a crucial leadership technique. There is some discussion in the literature (Bardach 1998; Kelman 2005) of public service motivation as a change management technique.

H9: Successful agency heads pay significant attention to cultivating public service motivation among employees, more than other leaders.

Finally, a number of techniques have been discussed exclusively in the context of change management:

A common proposition in pop-management literature (e.g. Kotter 1996; Hammer and Stanton 1995) is that successful change occurs only in response to crisis. Since change is painful, employees must understand there is no alternative. As often put in consultant slideshows, getting people to accept change requires a “burning platform.”³ Two other similar ideas are that change leaders should seek to generate “quick” (Kotter 1996) or “small” (Weick 1984) wins early in the process, and that they use pilots to get started. These seek to generate momentum behind change (Kotter 1996: 123).

H10: Successful agency heads use techniques such as a “burning platform” or quick wins as methods to initiate change and persuade skeptical organization members to join a

³ This is a reference to what it takes to rouse drilling workers on oil rigs from complacency.

change effort, more than other leaders, and compared with those who seek major change but are unsuccessful in achieving it.

We will look in our data for information about use of these specific techniques for improving internal operating capacity, as well as any other such techniques that appear in the data. We suggest the following overall hypothesis:

H11: Successful agency heads pay significant attention to improving internal operating capacity, more than other leaders.

Relative Attention to the Political Environment and Operating Capacity

Moore regards the idea that successful engagement of the political environment is crucial for strategy success as perhaps his key intellectual contribution: he contrasts (probably unfairly; see Kelman 2007) this conception with the one he argues was traditionally prevalent in public administration, which he sees as emphasizing management of internal capacity so as simply efficiently to deliver services whose content is defined by the political system and not influenced by the leader.

By contrast, accounts as early as Bernstein (1958: 30-33) reported that some executives themselves complain that the time they feel they must spend engaging the political environment detracts from their ability effectively to manage their organizations; “as a business executive,” Bernstein quoted one agency head, “I would never have dreamed of spending as much as one third of my time with my board of directors.”

Blumenthal (1983: 25-26), reflecting on his experience as a business executive turned Treasury Secretary, reported:

(A)s in any organization, you have to decide where to put your energies. You learn very quickly that you do not go down in history as a good or a bad Secretary in terms of how well you ran the place, whether you’re a good administrator or not. You’re perceived to be a good Secretary in terms of whether the policies for which you are responsible are adjudged

successful or not. ...But that's not true in a company. In a company, it's how well you run the place.

These approaches suggest two hypotheses, only one of which can be true:

H12a: Successful agency heads prioritize gaining support from their external political environment over improving internal operating capacity, more than other leaders.

H12b: Successful agency heads prioritize improving internal operating capacity over gaining support from their political environment, more than other leaders.

Agency Politicization and Expertise

Although there are only 3000 political appointees in a civilian federal workforce of 1.8 million,⁴ there are more political appointees in the U.S. compared to most other democracies. This has been defended (Nathan 1983; Moe 1985; Muranto 2005) as a way to bring democratic responsiveness, along with fresh ideas, to government. It has also been criticized (Light 1995) for distancing expert civil servants from participation in decision making through excessive “layering” between careerists and appointees, and for demoralizing civil servants and hence reducing their diligence. More broadly, reliance on political appointees may downgrade value given substantive expertise in an agency.

Two recent empirical studies (Gilmour and Lewis 2006; Lewis 2008), using different methodologies, both concluded a lower percentage of political appointees was associated with higher agency performance.⁵ However, no empirical studies examine whether this finding applies to success at executing a strategy involving significant change.⁶ If the argument for political appointments based on responsiveness and fresh

⁴ Excluding the U.S. Postal Service

⁵ There might well, of course, be a tradeoff between responsiveness and competent performance (Miller 2005).

⁶ However, Borins (1998) did find that, for one-off innovations selected as semi-finalists in the Ford Foundation/Kennedy School awards program, almost half originated with career civil servants, more than

ideas is correct, one might argue that fewer political appointees might be good for general performance, but make change more difficult.

H13: Successful agency heads tend to come from agencies with relatively more political appointees as a percentage of agency employees, compared to the average agency.

Length of Tenure

Agency heads tend to serve for a shorter time than corporate CEO's. Although average CEO tenure is declining, it still averages seven years (Kaplan and Minton 2006). A recent study (Dull and Roberts 2008) of Senate-confirmed appointees found that on average during the first Bush and Clinton administrations, cabinet secretaries served 3.3 years and appointees one level below the cabinet on average 2.5 years.

One study (Jarymiszynx et al 1986) found a positive relationship between length of tenure as CEO and firm performance. Later studies (e.g. Kesner and Sabora 1994; see also Rainey and Steinbauer 1999 in a public-sector context) have found a curvilinear relationship, where performance first rises with tenure, but later falls as the organization becomes too set in its ways, though the inflection point is far longer than typical agency heads serve. Long tenure increases a leader's substantive expertise, which may aid performance. It may be especially helpful for leaders trying to execute change, following Kelman's argument (2005: Ch. 7-8) there are positive feedback effects promoting successful change occurring with passage of time and persistence in a change effort.

H14: Successful agency heads serve longer on average than other leaders.

DATA AND METHODS

twice as many as originated with the agency head, a finding that does not support the view associating innovation with political appointees.

Systematic investigation of practices producing successful goal attainment by government executives is difficult. For starters, defining success is more difficult than in firms, where measures such as relative share price, market share, or changes in profitability are available. This difficulty exists even when we can specify the executive's goals and where there are ways to measure success in achieving each one. Take veterans' hospitals. An executive might seek both to reduce emergency room heart attack death rates and average post-operative length of stay for hip surgery. However, even in this situation, one cannot create a scalar variable measuring success, analogous to stock price for firms, without subjective judgments about relative weights to give the different goals. This becomes even more difficult, and subjective, in cases involving more than one agency, where creating a scalar variable would require subjective judgments comparing the value of the goal of reducing length of stay at a veterans hospital with the goal, say, of achieving outstanding customer service on a Medicare help line. Absent ability to develop a scalar variable analogous to stock price, one is reduced to a dichotomous judgment of "successful" or "unsuccessful." This requires additional subjective judgments about how much improvement, on how many or which goals, is necessary to count as success. In addition to their subjective nature, judgments about success using goals and changes in performance measures are resource-intensive, eating up much of the resources available to the researcher just to choose observations for study.

Gathering systematic data about practices associated with successful goal attainment is also very challenging. Such data do not exist in available datasets of the kind economists typically use. It is difficult to induce executives to respond to surveys. A common view among public management scholars (Moore 1986) is that contextual and

interaction effects are so important that sample sizes must become prohibitively large to do rigorous analysis.

Faced with these difficulties, much of the best-known research in this area has, essentially, declared methodological defeat. Probably the two most influential works on practices associated with successful executive goal attainment in government are Moore's Creating Public Value (1995) and Doig and Hargrove's Leadership and Innovation (1990). Moore discusses a number of cases, but provides no account of how these executives were chosen or the basis, beyond the author's judgment, for declaring them to have been successful. Doig and Hargrove also discuss a number of cases, and note (p. 5) that "(we) did not make our selections in any rigorous way," using their own judgments combined with those of an informal "advisory group" of 11 other scholars. These books present detailed qualitative accounts of executive behavior, including its contextual background, which brings the virtues of richness and is helpful for hypothesis generation, but any conclusions drawn from the individual stories would appear to be a leap of faith.

Furthermore, much existing work is so-called "best practices" research that draws conclusions based only on successful cases – as in the Doig and Hargrove collection. Borins (1998) undertakes a systematic analysis of a number of factors associated with successful government innovations, but his sample is limited to innovations successful enough to have achieved at least semi-finalist status in the Ford Foundation/Kennedy School Innovations in American Government awards program (see also Golden 1990). However, this creates the problem of selection on the dependent variable (Lynn 1996). If one chooses only successes and finds they did A, B, and C, one really cannot conclude from this that A, B, and C caused success, because others who were not successful (about whom one has no information) may also have done A, B, and C.

To choose executives, we undertook a two-stage process. In the first stage, nominations were solicited from two groups of independent experts: (1) fellows of the National Academy of Public Administration, a congressionally chartered honorary association for distinguished practitioners and scholars. (N=410) and (2) principals of the Council for Excellence in Government, a private non-profit organization open to people who have previously served in senior government positions but not currently serving (N=450). We recognize that such a “reputational” approach is not perfect (see e.g. Wolfinger 1960 for a critique of its issue in community power studies), though we would defend it against feasible alternatives and in comparison with currently available studies. If there were a better, objective way, there would be no controversy as to which agencies and managers are most effective, just as there is little controversy over which corporations have the most revenue or greatest profitability.

These experts received the following email, signed by the lead author:

I am writing to you as a colleague and [NAPA fellow/principal of the Council for Excellence in Government] to request your help in guiding a research project I am starting. The purpose of the research is to study what it takes to get an overall organizational strategy implemented in the US federal public sector.

I ask you to think about leaders (at the subcabinet or perhaps cabinet level) during the last 15 years 1) with a clear, ambitious vision of what they wanted to accomplish during their tenure at their agency and 2) where executing the vision required some significant changes in the agency's traditional behavior. Please limit your nominations to executives and strategies that have been or were pursued long enough to give it a chance to succeed or run into problems

Please nominate up to four executives and associated strategies – up to two where, in your view, the executives were relatively successful in executing the strategy, and up to two where, in your view, the executives ran into significant difficulties.

The reasons for relative success or for problems may have been beyond the executives' control – that is something I want to examine in this

research. Also, it goes without saying that you may personally like or dislike the executive's vision and the strategy – but you should nominate people based on the criteria above, not on whether you personally find their vision sympathetic or less-sympathetic.

Two follow-up emails were sent to non-respondents. In all, 111 responses were received, a response rate of 13%. Responses generated a total of 93 individuals nominated as successful or unsuccessful. To be a potential candidate for inclusion in the research, we required a person to have received at least three nominations.⁷

This procedure generated seven successes. One individual received 15 nominations (all as a success), a second received 14 (12 as a success, two as mixed), and two received eight each (all as successes).⁸ Nominations were heavily skewed towards successes rather than others (“unsuccessful” for short, though this is not how our request was phrased). One person received 11 nominations, five as “unsuccessful,” three as mixed (and three as a success); however, this person declined to participate in the research.⁹ Another received three nominations, one as unsuccessful and two as mixed. One received one nomination, as unsuccessful.¹⁰ In addition, judgments on two people were on the borderline. One received five nominations, one as a success, two as mixed, two as unsuccessful; another, one nomination each as a success, unsuccessful, and mixed.

To provide a validity check on nominations (and also to make classifications on the two borderline cases), in the second stage we asked a group of insiders

⁷ Some exceptions are discussed below.

⁸ One person received four nominations as a success, but had died before the research was conducted. . Another person was included in the group of successes having received only two nominations, both as a success, to achieve better balance between Clinton and Bush appointees.

⁹ One person received four nominations, all as a failure, but the judgment was made that this was due to a simple perception of the individual’s poor performance on the job and that the individual had not attempted to execute any major strategic vision. Another person received two nominations, one as unsuccessful and one as mixed, but when the research was conducted, the person was serving as an elected official, so the judgment was made he was very unlikely to agree to participate.

¹⁰ We included this individual because of the small number of failure nominations.

knowledgeable specifically about a nominee's performance¹¹ to rate the nominee's success, on a 1-10 scale, in achieving his or her goals. Results of this process closely mirrored the initial nominations, giving us greater confidence in the internal validity of the first-stage nomination process: success nominees received high ratings (means between 8.4 to 9.5¹²) from insiders, while the two unsuccessful nominations, got mean ratings of 4.6 and 4.1. The two in the middle received scores in-between – one 7.6, the other 5.9.

Of the borderline cases, the decision was made to classify the first as a success, the second as not, since the average insiders' score for the first was much closer to those for success nominees than to unsuccessful ones, while for the second, the average was closer to the unsuccessful leaders.¹³ This gave us eight successes and three unsuccessful leaders. Virtually all were sub-cabinet agency heads, except for one unsuccessful leader who was a cabinet secretary and two successes who ran independent agencies.

Since so few leaders were classified as unsuccessful, an additional source of comparisons was added. These were the counterparts to the successes – those in the same positions, appointed at the same time in the lifecycle of an administration, in the administration other than the one of the success. So if the success was Bush's first appointee, the counterpart would be Clinton's first appointee to the position. The idea was to control for as much as possible, to make comparisons as free from noise as

¹¹ This included various senior managers (the organization's deputy plus several career managers), along with outsiders (such as congressional, White House, and OMB staff who dealt with the individual).

¹² One individual with three nominations as a success had a somewhat lower average rating of 7.2.

¹³ Additionally, the 5.9 rating is too high. No ratings were obtained from external sources for this nominee; and therefore the rating reflects only internal sources. For every other nominee, for whom ratings from external sources were obtained, the average rating of the external sources was lower than for internal sources. Furthermore, the borderline nominee included as a success received a slightly higher average score from the insiders than did one other success nominee (7.5 vs. 7.2).

possible.¹⁴ As can be seen, the criterion for selecting the counterparts was a negative one: they were not nominated through our procedure as people who had tried to execute a strong, transformational vision.¹⁵ Some, however, may have been successful by other criteria, such as enterprise stewardship. One counterpart refused to participate. Thus, three unsuccessful leaders and six counterparts constitute our control group.¹⁶ (Two unsuccessful leaders came from one agency.) To the extent the counterparts represent a less dramatic contrast to the successes than do the unsuccessful leaders – and perhaps succeeded at their more limited agendas -- this is likely to bias relationships towards zero and means any results we nonetheless observe of differences between successes and the entire control group are conservative.¹⁷

Data for this study come from the following sources:

¹⁴ It was felt that position in an administration's lifecycle should be controlled for because first appointees might bring the energy and freshness of a new administration. It should be noted that one of the successful agency heads had been Clinton's second appointee, but the counterpart chosen was Bush's first appointee, because at the time of the interviews, Bush's second appointee to that position had just started his job. One counterpart had received a single nomination as a failure (none as a success or mixed); however, his average knowledgeable insider rating was 7.0, which was moderately high, so we retained him as a counterpart. One counterpart had received one nomination as a success, not enough to qualify as a success based on our criteria, but because of this nomination we felt it was not appropriate to classify him as a counterpart, so he was left out. Finally, one of the successes was technically his administration's second appointee, because his predecessor was allowed to stay on his job about 18 months into the new administration. However, because the administration's intention was eventually to nominate a new person, we felt that in reality the nominee should be regarded as the first appointee. The designated counterpart (other administration's first appointee) declined to participate in the research, so we used the other administration's second appointee as the counterpart instead.

¹⁵ This procedure is similar to that used in Herman and Heimovics' (1994) study of executive leadership in nonprofit organizations. It may be noted that one counterpart had received a single nomination as a failure from the NAPA/CEG process. However, the person's average score from the knowledgeable insiders was 7.0, closer to the average score of successful nominees than failure nominees, so the person was retained in the counterpart category.

¹⁶ One of the counterparts had received one nomination from our process, as a failure. We considered this person for inclusion as a failure, given that we had included another person as a failure with only one nomination, as a failure. However, that individual had an average insiders rating of 4.6, while the individual we classify as a counterpart had an average rating of 7.5, closer to (though generally lower than) successes in our group.

¹⁷ This would not be true if techniques associated with success at achieving an ambitious agenda were unrelated to those producing success at achieving a more-limited one.

(1) Our major data source was an interview, either in person or over the phone, with each respondent, conducted by both authors. Each interview began with a general question where the respondent was asked to list major goals and to discuss his or her plan for how to achieve them. Respondents were then encouraged to walk through what they did to achieve their goals, with little direction from the interviewers, for as long as they wished. We also asked other questions, such as about the respondent's time allocation. Interviewees were promised anonymity as individuals and for their agencies.¹⁸

(2) Various publicly available information was gathered on successes and controls, as well as their agencies (including nominated individuals not included for various reasons among interviewees -- we will call this the "broader group."¹⁹ This included how long they served in their positions and the percentage of political appointees in the agency.

(3) Stephen Barr, a Washington Post reporter who during this period was the paper's senior correspondent following the executive branch, first from the newspaper's "Federal Page" and then as author of the column "Federal Diary," was asked to rate (blind to the reasons for their inclusion) the media skills of each executive.

All interviews were transcribed and entered into ATLAS.ti for qualitative analysis. The authors jointly developed coding categories (including hypotheses discussed above), though sometimes based on what we had heard during interviews (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Transcripts were coded for mention of the technique in the part of the interview where the respondent was asked to present a spontaneous account of

¹⁸ Further to anonymize respondents, all will be referred to as "he," regardless of gender.

¹⁹ This is the two individuals who refused to be interviewed, plus the three not included in our group despite nominations (see footnotes 5 and 6 above), excluding the person we judged had been nominated as a failure because of perceived general poor performance.

activities. The senior author did the coding, though, as a consistency check, the two authors independently coded one interview before other coding began. Coding, because it involved mention or non-mention of a technique, was straightforward.

The responses successes gave to the question asking them to list goals showed some sought changed goals – usually adding a new mission – while others sought dramatic performance improvements achieving existing goals. Some sought both. Our subjective judgment is that goals varied in how ambitious or difficult-to-achieve they were, though they were noticeably more ambitious than those of the counterparts.

Our basic measure will be the number of successes and controls who spontaneously mentioned using a technique. The idea is that such mentions reflect approaches most-central to the respondent. The reason we choose to use numbers of mentions as our basic measure, rather than evaluating the quality or depth/duration of mentions (one sentence, for this purpose, counts as much as a 15-minute discussion), is that this technique is more objective and allows for more straightforward comparisons. The method is very similar to one commonly used in organizational behavior research involving corporate CEO's (e.g. Abrahamson and Park, 1994; Wade, Porac, and Pollack, 1997; Kaplan, 2008) that looks at mentions of issues in company annual reports. However, to make better use of the richness of the interviews, we will provide representative quotations illustrating how respondents used techniques.

This technique is of course imperfect. A respondent's spontaneous mention does not necessarily fully reflect the most-important parts of the respondent's repertoire; in some cases, a failure to mention a technique may be due to chance. Furthermore, for our counts, a sentence equals a disquisition. However, there is no reason to assume there should be systematic differences between successes and controls in these sources of error.

The expectation therefore is that this method produces noise, not bias. Thus, results showing differences between successes and controls, despite noise, should be seen as conservative. (In the few situations where there were systematic differences in the detail with which successes and controls discussed a technique, we will note this.)

A second issue is that by looking only at mentions, we ignore variation in how leaders used a technique – leaders pay attention to performance measures, or exhibit a collaborative/participatory style, in many different ways, and with different levels of skill. This is similar to a problem in evaluation research – that using exposure to a broadly defined “treatment” such as participation in Head Start to examine its relationship with an outcome masks enormous differences in the content of Head Start programs (Light, Singer, and Willett, 1990: 96-97). We ignore as well contextual factors (such as agency culture, degree of internal opposition to the executive’s goals, or whether the strategy involved changing goals versus dramatically improving performance on existing goals) or the role of luck, including external events, that may make executing an ambitious strategy harder or easier. We simply don’t have enough observations to introduce these as control or interaction variables. However, here as well all these problems introduce noise: we cannot distinguish based on mentions whether a technique was used well, and skillful use is presumably more related to success, and luck or contextual factors for which we don’t account make it harder to find effects, making any results conservative.²⁰

We will present two sorts of comparisons, between:

²⁰ . Variables such as luck, or agency context create a problem only if they are correlated with both the dependent variable (success or failure) and with the decision to use a certain management technique, in which case there would be omitted variable bias.

- (1) the extent to which successes and controls used a given technique, to see which ones successes undertook more commonly than controls;
- (2) the extent to which successes, compared to each other, undertook a given technique compared to other techniques, to see which techniques were most common among successes.

The small numbers make it unlikely statistical tests would yield significant results (although, in informal testing, actually some differences were significant at the .1 or .05 levels). We present only frequency distributions . Our groups represent (almost)²¹ the universe of those meeting our selection criteria, not a sample; therefore statistical tests are inappropriate.²² One could argue that for our results to have external validity, they must be argued to represent a larger group from other than these administrations, so in this sense our groups are samples of a larger universe. However, they are not random samples of that universe, again making statistical tests inappropriate.

RESULTS

Overall, ten hypotheses were supported, six not (Tables One and Two).

[INSERT TABLE ONE AND TABLE TWO HERE]

Table Three compares relative use of techniques by successes and controls, in descending order of the ratio of their use comparing successes with controls. Table Four presents a list of the techniques most-frequently cited by successes, in descending order, presenting all techniques at least two successes mentioned. Together, these tables allow us to differentiate between successes and controls regarding techniques used.

²¹ One person refused to participate in the research, and two others were excluded for other reasons (see footnote 8 above).

²² We are grateful for discussions with the lead author's colleague ANONYMIZED on this issue.

[INSERT TABLE THREE AND TABLE FOUR HERE]

Strategy Formulation

There was a dramatic difference between successes and controls in the extent they used strategic planning to help establish goals. Six of eight successes, compared with only one of nine controls (none of three unsuccessful leaders), did so. Thus, hypothesis H1a is supported.

Most of those discussing a formal planning process presented using it to help establish goals. H1b is supported. One respondent stated:

I mean you've got to have a strategic plan. If you don't have a strategic plan all you can do is pray. You need a plan to figure out what's your mission, what's your vision, what are your goals, what are your objectives, how to measure success. You know you need to have that in order to guide the organization, and to help maximize value and mitigate risk. So we developed a plan.

...One of the things we did in the first strategic plan was that we had certain themes. They were trends – demographics, fiscal, rapidly evolving technology, increased globalization. They were strategic things that didn't have geo-political boundaries externally and they didn't have organizational boundaries internally. For the idea that you want to try to get people that when you're doing your work, whatever issue it is, think about these things, think about how they relate to what you're doing in order to try to provide more contextual sophistication.

Several respondents stated specifically they waited to finalize goals until after a planning process. One stated he regarded his activities on arriving at the agency as “short-term stuff,” adding he told staff afterwards, “Now let's convert this more into a strategic plan as to what we want to do in terms of substantive changes.” Another noted:

[We] initiated an effort to try to understand where we were and where we were going. So the first phase of all of this was basically the input phase and really trying to get as much understanding and awareness of what our employees thought and what the people that we were supposed to be serving thought that we should prioritize and put at the front of our burner. We spent about a year fact-finding.

Only one control discussed having a strategic planning process, while another (one of the unsuccessful leaders) specifically noted that “one of the things that we didn't have was a very concrete strategic plan about what we were going to do.”

However, only two of eight successes mentioned using planning to select implementation activities. The evidence thus seems consistent with Behn's suggestions that successful executives do, or should, think about their goals in advance, but not so much about paths to reach them. One of the successes actually sounded like Behn: “There was an awful lot of, ‘I have a general idea where I want to go but then you have to take advantage of the opportunities.’” H1c is not supported.

One unexpected finding²³ was that on average the time between nomination and confirmation was longer for successes than for controls – the average for successes was 2.8 months, compared with 1.9 months for controls.²⁴ (The association between a longer nomination-confirmation gap and success may be understated because a long gap suggests controversy over appointment, which would tend to make it harder to succeed.)

This finding contradicts the conventional wisdom (e.g. Light 2008: Ch. 2-3) that confirmation delays compromise the ability of agency leaders to do a good job by shortening tenure and leaving agencies leaderless longer. The explanation seems to be that nominees are able to use a long confirmation wait – during which they can learn

²³ There had been no plan to look at this question until, during the interviews, a number of the successes spoke about their long nomination-confirmation gaps, and how they used these to prepare for their jobs, while one of the failures noted he was able (for a reason not mentioned here because it might compromise anonymity) to start working on the job immediately.

²⁴ These figures come from public records (such as biographies or Wikipedia entries); in a few cases, it was impossible to obtain confirmation dates, so swearing-in dates (which follow closely on confirmation) were used instead. Each individual nomination-confirmation gap was rounded to the nearest month. The agency heads in two of the organizations were not subject to Senate confirmation, and they are not included in these calculations. These figures are for the broader group. Three in the broader control group were cabinet secretaries, who are generally confirmed more quickly than others; if these individuals are excluded, the average gap becomes 2.1 months, still shorter than for the successes.

about the agency's problems, get to know people in and around the agency, and think about strategy – as an apprenticeship period to learn their job...

Four successes (compared with only two controls) mentioned using the period between nomination and confirmation to think about goals and gather information about their organization. Stated one:

I spent as much time as I could getting up to speed, learning. And I did that by reading. And there was a huge amount of work that had been done. There had been studies internally; we had studies galore. I was a little restricted because you couldn't talk to people outside the agency for the most part, but I could talk to a lot of people inside the agency. This is where in this particular case the lag before you get confirmed actually was helpful.

Another success also talked with outsiders:

I set out to do an assessment. I did a complete assessment of where [the agency] was. I talked with experts – you talk to people, it's amazing what they tell you. All you got to do is take some people to dinner or invite them to a room and chit chat, close the door and make it anonymous. And they open up.

On average, successes gave a somewhat smaller number of goals than controls – 2.3 versus 3.0 (unsuccessful leaders had an average of 3.7).²⁵ This suggests the successes were somewhat more focused than controls. H2 is supported.

Few leaders mentioned efforts to align various parts of the organization to their goals. Only two of eight successes (the same as the number of controls) reported seeking changes in relative budget allocations to align budgets with goals they had adopted. Only one success (no controls) mentioned aligning job descriptions or recruitment to the new goals, or examining the organization's business processes for alignment. None mentioned changing employee incentives or promotion paths. H3 is not supported.

Gaining Support from the Political Environment

²⁵ In addition, one of the eight respondents in controls stated he had no goals when starting.

Overall, H4 is supported. Judged by the number of mentions, there were differences, but only modest ones, between mentions by successes and controls of working proactively to persuade Congress to support their goals. Six of eight successes mentioned this,²⁶ compared with five of nine controls (two of three unsuccessful leaders).

However, qualitative differences in what executives said about Congress were larger. Most successes discussed their interactions extensively. One recounted that, as part of developing his initial goals, he spoke with 25 members of Congress.

When you have to make major change, if you don't have the support, in a democracy, in Congress and in the White House, you can't do it. I decided that that's where I wanted my support. ... Within two years of taking office, I touched every member of Congress. Every member, not just my committee. There are 535 members of Congress, and I saw 250 a year.

A second discussed how he sold change he sought to a skeptical committee member:

He's a good old boy from Wyoming. He's into law and order, so I went back taking a law and order approach. I went to his office and spent two hours, basically going over how I can't hold anybody accountable. So, we had a very good conversation, which I characterize as basically law and order conversation. He had some follow-up a few days later. Two weeks later, he removed his opposition. ... The whole strategy was repackaging it in a way he could understand it and relate to it, and convince them that he needed to rethink this view as well.

Only two of the five controls who discussed working proactively with Congress sounded like most of the successes (i.e., enthusiastic and proactive). The other three mentioned this technique more perfunctorily than any successes did. And three of the four controls who did not mention dealing with Congress did mention Congress, but either in reactive or negative terms. The only statement about Congress one of them made was, "You know, one of the first lessons inside the Beltway is you need to heed what your oversight committee says." Another counterpart referred to Congress twice, both

²⁶ The goals of one of the two successes who did not mention this technique mostly, though not exclusively, involved implementing a law Congress had past; one might therefore argue that it was unlikely that this person's goals called for proactive work to persuade Congress.

negatively. Discussing with whom he spoke in setting goals, he stated, “Then of course you get the ever-present whether-you-like-it-or-not Congress that wants to tell you all about their view, you know whether you need it or not.” A third respondent stated:

You go to the hearings, and, you know, some of those things, it’s like going to the dentist. ...It is non-stop, I mean with Congress, it is non-stop. That’s the way you should be doing it, but it has the potential to divert you from your knitting. At home, you’ve got knitting that you’ve got to be doing, running and managing your organization. ... [But] you’ve got to do what you’ve got to do.

As for the White House/OMB, three of seven successes,²⁷ compared with only one of nine controls (one of three unsuccessful leaders), discussed working proactively to gain support there. One included Office of Management and Budget representatives on a committee to determine the agency’s future budgetary needs, hoping to use this to gain eventual support for his major goal, which required a large budget increase. He also placed employees in White House details. A second contacted White House staff to hear ideas for goals he ought to pursue. A third noted that “what was incredibly important in making these changes was that the employees within [the agency] knew how close I was to the President. ...And they knew that the President supported these efforts.”

Dealing with the White House proactively to gain support was hardly mentioned by controls.²⁸ Furthermore, one of the three unsuccessful leaders expressed negative feelings about interactions with the White House:

There was a point in time where there was what I considered to be somewhat unnecessary engagement by the White House, where the President assigned a guy [to give us suggestions and advice]. ...We got a series of [White House staffers assigned to our agency], some of which we

²⁷ For one success, gaining White House support was not something this agency would ever have sought, given its mission and organization.

²⁸ One might argue that, given limitations on White House staff time, it would be implausible to believe that the counterparts, most of whom had more modest agendas than the successes, could have gotten active White House support even if they had sought it.

got imposed on us without much consultation or collaboration. ... You don't do anything in this town that's major without White House approval; and sometimes you have to get the approval of people who may not have the depth of knowledge or the appreciation for why you want to effect the change, but that's just the way it is.

Two other external constituencies – interest groups and the media – featured, though peripherally, far more in the accounts from successes than from controls. Five successes, but only one control, mentioned cultivating interest groups, though mentions were brief (except, actually, for the one counterpart mentioning this, who discussed at some length organizing business leaders to support gaining budget money for the agency's expansion plans). One counterpart discussed being forced to deal with interest groups as a negative feature of his job. Cultivating the media was mentioned by three successes, again only briefly (by no controls). Finally, two successes (no controls) briefly discussed dealing with employee unions to gain support for their goals.²⁹

Although only a modest number of successes mentioned the media, evaluation of leader media skills by the Washington Post reporter showed large differences. The mean score (broader group) for successes was 8.1, for controls 6.0 – for unsuccessful leaders 5.8, for counterparts 6.2.³⁰

More broadly, four successes, compared with two controls (no unsuccessful leaders) mentioned relationship-building and personal ties to gain support for their goals.

²⁹ Employee unions are not mainly an external constituency (although union locals in an agency are part of a national union organization); this behavior is classified as external because it involves the same political skills as dealing with traditional external constituencies.

³⁰ We discuss the question of the possible endogeneity of these results at the end of this paper. These differences are understated, because they do not include executives for whom the reporter could not provide a judgment, reflecting insufficient familiarity with their media interactions and thus suggesting poor media skills; the reporter was unable to rate only one of ten successes but four of 14 controls. Additionally, one of the counterparts refused to meet with the media, which would suggest poor media skills. However, Barr chose to rate this individual as “unable to judge” rather than giving him a low score. In the case of the counterpart where there was a difference between the person initially identified and finally interviewed, Barr gave an “unable to judge” rating to both.

Two mentioned this primarily regarding external constituencies, the other two more generally. Stated one, “Relationship building was fundamental to anything we did.”

Another of the successes discussed this issue at length:

It occurred to me that if I was to, if I look forward down the road to needing the support of A, B, C, D, and E, and the first time I ever met them was when I needed their support badly that was not a good thing.

The middle of a crisis is a bad time exchange business cards.

If you have not gone to through the trouble of making those investments up front, when it comes crisis time or budget time or review time or whatever, if you can’t look around the table at who[m]ever is assembled and know most of them and have exchanged coffee with them, played tennis with them, you’re in trouble. I’m not a golfer. I’m not quite old enough for that yet. But I methodically went about the business of trying to play tennis with as many players as I could that knew to play tennis. ... When push comes to shove maybe the ball will tilt in your direction because you made that investment. ...

I took inventory of the members of the [congressional] committees.

...And I methodically went about getting on their calendar to meet them and then as was necessary, successively thereafter meeting them time and time again. You know, whether it was a social opportunity or a professional opportunity that brought us together. I built relationships with those people. ...

[We looked for] opportunities to take the member when he was on at home in his district to visit [one of our installations] in the district. ...But there was nothing like actually going to the scene of the crime so to speak to learn the lessons vividly [about what we needed so they would] become a supporter at the other end of the day. But that just didn’t happen. It took a thought pattern. ...There are maybe five members of the Congress who [had served in our agency earlier in their career]. And I can tell you who they are and where they live and what they drink and what they breathe and whatever.

A third stated he visited 20-30 districts a year.

I had town hall meetings – come in the night before, spend the whole day with the members of Congress from that area, we’d go to schools, factories, radio, talk radio. And I got a real feel for the texture of what was important to them.

Improving Internal Operating Capacity

We discuss techniques in order of the frequency of their mention by successes.

(1) Seven of eight successes mentioned adopting a collaborative, participative management style as a technique to gain support for their agenda. This was the single most-mentioned technique the successes used. By comparison, four of nine in controls mentioned using this technique, so differences between the two groups were moderately large, although not as large as for some other techniques. Two of three unsuccessful leaders reported using this technique, so, although the numbers are very small, it is harder to conclude that using this technique distinguishes successful from unsuccessful. Thus, H8 is partly supported. Examples of a collaborative style by successes were:

I said we have some issues we've got to deal with, and I want to work these out together. Here's what the issues are, and in three days we're going to have a brainstorming session. People didn't know what a brainstorming session was. ... Very early on one of the things I found is that whenever the [head of the organization] said something, people just implemented it. What they weren't used to with me is that I'll talk about things and say, "Look, I got an idea here. Here's something I'm thinking about. You know we need to talk about it."

I said [to my career chief of staff], "I want you to pick six people, six career employees that you know are very talented, and I want you to head the team to work with us on the reorganization of the agency. Not political. ... Then we gave them the new organizational structure. We gave them the priorities and goals that we had established for the first year. And I said, "Here's what I want you to accomplish in these three days. I want you to divide up in teams. Half career, half political. I want you to look at the goals and priorities that we've come up with for the first year. You can add to or take away whichever you choose. I want you to come up with a new mission statement based on the new organization, and based on the priorities and goals. And I'm going to come back at the end of the three days and expect you have it accomplished. ... And what was amazing when I came back at the end of those three days was that the reorganization, and the priorities and goals, and the new mission statement were theirs. Not mine. They had bought into this. ... they had to be part of the change. The change would never have happened without them being part of it.

However, a number of controls (the first quote from an unsuccessful leader, the second from a counterpart) sounded similar:

We spent a day, had people brainstorm ideas, and I literally sat in the front of the room after the group reported back, "Yeah, let's do that," "No, we won't do that." But it was I think pretty classic, "I'm here to change things. I want your ideas. We're going to do that idea, let's run with it." ... The commitment I made is that we put a working group together, and they could rewrite [an important set of agency procedures], and that when they came up with it, I would implement it. And that was a really important initiative.

Well, I'm a consensus builder, I'm a facilitator. ... I wanted to build collaboration, consensus, and loyalty towards the departmental goals, not loyalty to self but loyalty toward the goals, through a more collaborative senior management process. So, specifically the [regional managers] comprised an executive leadership council, and I really saw that as a pivotal way to move the strategic initiative forward. If you will, building towards consensus management or participatory management.

(2) Six of eight successes (three of nine controls)³¹ mentioned they had reorganized. This difference is even more dramatic because controls discussing reorganization did so far more perfunctorily than successes. Hypothesis H7, framed that successes would fail to reorganize, is not supported.

In terms of reasons successes gave for reorganizing, none mentioned either saving money from eliminating duplication or establishing a clearer command structure. Five of six stated the major reason was to reduce stovepipes.

The [new] structure brought together parts of [the agency] that had been highly separated and segregated into a common operating platform where there would be opportunities for enhancing synergies by using the structure as well as the other good intentions and management practices.

The sixth discussed reorganization as a way "to get people's attention to set the stage for the change function."

Although six reorganized, three said they did so despite a bias against it:

All reorganizations basically are an indirect way of getting at something. I mean directly reorganizing doesn't do anything for a customer, right? ...In

³¹ One of three failures reorganized. However, some special features of two of the three failure cases (that cannot be specified without compromising anonymity) make it less likely these leaders would pursue reorganization, although actually one of those two did discuss doing so.

theory you can do anything without reorganizing if you wanted. It's just that it's a means to an end. People are very, very skeptical, and justly so, of reorganizations because by themselves they cost a lot, they're risky, and by themselves they don't change the experience. What they do is enable change.

My bias is to never reorganize. Because I don't think the structure is the determining step, nor can you solve leadership problems by restructuring. But I listened to the people who were working on this, and when the proposal came forward that our structure really wasn't going to support integrated effort, then we needed to really think through that.

(3) Six of eight successes mentioned using performance measures to move their agenda, compared with three of nine in controls (one of three unsuccessful leaders). H6 is supported. One of the successes who raised this issue (however, along with the one unsuccessful leader who did so) also spoke about performance measurement as part of a change process in the organization, stating he regarded changing the agency's metrics as a key long term element of his change effort.

(4) One of the most common techniques successes used (mentioned by five of eight) was to connect their agenda to public-service motivation. However, this was mentioned about equally frequently by controls (five of nine, including two of three unsuccessful leaders). Such an appeal thus did not differentiate. H9 is not supported.

Some successes who discussed this technique stated:

[You want to relate] what you're trying to accomplish with something that they can really believe in and want to be a part of. ... You know, it's easier to work hard when you know that that work is amounting to something and it's for a goal that you believe in. so we spent a good deal of time...hit[ting] on the major themes of what the agency's trying to do and how the different pieces of the agency all fit into that.

To energize and to stimulate and to inspire are good things for one as a leader to take on. And if you failed to do that, regardless of how brilliant your bureaucratic package might be it, you know, it's probably not going to get much traction. But if you have energized and inspired your people to the direction that you want to go, they will follow. You know, it's an extraordinary thing but it actually works.

And I told them, I said, “Look, I know change is difficult,” but I said, “Work with me on this. Let’s build [this agency] to make it something that you can be proud of, that you can be proud of coming to work, that the American people can be proud of. ... At every opportunity, we would sit down, talk to people, and reinforce the difference this is going to make for them and their job and their career. But the most important thing is how we will want to help the American people when we needed to.

However, unsuccessful leaders (first quote) and counterparts (second) sounded similar:

Part of the key to this was capturing that sense of mission with initiatives. And the more results show that things were getting better, and that they had a chance to have an impact, the more support came along.

[Our employees] knew that that was very damaging to our agency, and to taxpayers and beneficiaries, that money was being wasted [due to a problem the agency had that was this leader was trying to deal with as a priority goal]. It undermines faith in government. It undermines faith in what they were they were to do. And they all were drawn in government for the right reason. So I was really gratified and honored to work with those career civil servants because they did every thing they could to make me successful in achieving that goal.

(5) A number of other techniques to create internal capacity, not among our hypotheses, were discussed. Five of eight successes (two of three unsuccessful leaders, but no counterparts) discussed developing slogans related to their agenda. One stated that “the question always had to be, ‘Are we providing equal and better value than the private sector?’”³² Another discussed searching for metaphors and “catch words” that would make his goals easier to understand and support. A third noted that a slogan came from staff working on the changes. “I think they felt they needed an identity. And they were trying to find a way to make a buzz.” Since developing slogans might not be necessary for counterparts with a less-ambitious agenda, and since two of three unsuccessful leaders also used slogans, we are unsure whether use of slogans differentiates successes.

³² Most of the slogans cannot be presented here, because they would reveal agency identities.

(6) Working more generally to communicate the leader's agenda to employees was discussed by only four of eight successes, and an equal number of controls (including two of three unsuccessful leaders). The tone of comments was also similar. A success noted that when he started as agency head he "went over to [the organization], and I gave a speech, and I outlined exactly what I wanted." Another noted:

Take for example the [annual address the head of the organization gives about the state of the organization]. Those were extraordinary opportunities to say what it is that you had to say. My belief in [our agency] as an extraordinary organization had to find itself way into the speeches. ... And they all had to be short enough that people would also actually still be awake. I worked very hard [preparing them] and probably had a dozen iterations of those speeches.

At the same time, one unsuccessful leader stated: "I think it was very important, for any organization that's going to effect substantial change, is to create as many means of communication, information sharing interaction as possible. Website, newsletter, meetings." A counterpart stated:

We needed to communicate and keep folks up-to-date on what's going on in throughout the organization. So they knew, so they understood why change was happening. The worst thing I think you can do is you do some change and the people in the trenches don't...understand the context in which things are happening. So the communication strategy that I came up with was let's communicate what we're doing, why we're doing it, what the timelines are, what the expectations are, what this means to the individual in [the organization], how you can contribute to the effort, and why it's important to the nation, and to him or her.

(7) Four of eight successes (two of nine controls) spoke about having a formal accountability system for individual managers with lead responsibility for goals. Two of the eight successes noted that steps were taken to deal with non-performing managers; no controls discussed this. One of the successes noted that "people left their jobs"; when the interviewer asked whether this was involuntarily, the respondent answered,

“Involuntarily if they didn’t meet their metrics.” Another discussed accountability at some length. Before coming to the organization, he stated,

There wasn’t the proper level of accountability that went with responsibility, in my mind. And I wanted to assure that. ...In a ten minute period, I reassigned eight or nine of the top administration. Out of 20. I reassigned them. I didn’t fire them, I reassigned them.

In managing the changes he sought, the leader stated, “You need to have appropriate responsibility assigned.” He added that metrics “were measurable, and people had to perform. I expected performance.”

Two counterparts discussed this issue as well. One unsuccessful leader stated:

We set up a matrix of goals, a timetable to meet the goals, identify individuals accountable, and a periodic review to see how far we got. ...I would meet with them once a week, talk about policy, general performance, problems we had to deal with during the week, and [my deputy] would meet with them once a week to talk about performance, talk about moving the matrix forward, talk about timetables and goals. ...Individual accountability and weekly meetings became part of the routine, the rhythm of the [organization].

A counterpart noted that he picked “point people from among the career staff at the agency who would handle each one of [my] initiatives. I would then put it on my schedule at least a weekly if not more frequent meeting with the person about that issue.”

Thus, establishment of accountability systems was discussed by a moderate number of successes, although only two at any length, and by some unsuccessful leaders. We would regard H5 as weakly supported.

(8) For the change management techniques “burning platform,” “quick wins,” and pilots, mentions by successes and unsuccessful leaders were compared. These techniques were rarely mentioned, and their use was actually mentioned by unsuccessful leaders proportionately more than by successes. H10 is not supported.

Only one of eight successes discussed using the “burning platform” the way the idea is classically discussed, as a method to overcome resistance to change (and one of the three unsuccessful leaders used the technique this way as well). When the government shut down in 1995, one respondent pointed to this as an example that no organization was sacred any longer, even an organization like the leader’s own, which had a powerful political constituency. “Hey, look around, guys. The world has changed. It’s very different. You cannot assume that what you took for granted yesterday is still true. ...Internally, that was useful for selling the idea that we really had to change.”³³ Two respondents stated they announced a policy there would be no layoffs at their agency in the wake of changes being implemented, a policy passing up on one occasion to create a burning platform. Only one success discussed seeking quick wins.

(9) We looked at mentions of the various techniques for creating internal capacity discussed above to see whether successes paid more attention to creating operating capacity than controls. They clearly did. H11 is supported.

Relative Attention Paid to the Political Environment and Internal Capacity

Four of five differentiators scoring high on both absolute number of mentions, and on the ratio between mentions by successes and by controls, involved creation of internal capacity. Additionally, respondents were asked how they divided their time between internal activities (time with staff in their own organization) and external ones (with outside constituencies, including government constituencies such as the White

³³ In addition, three successes mentioned a realization on their own parts that their organization was faced by crisis (some actually used the expression “burning platform”) as something that helped them recognize the necessity of major changes in how their organizations behaved, but made no reference to using this as an argument to persuade others within the organization. (For example: “The agency had been down sized 40% in the five years before I came for a variety of reasons. ... And it was exposed to another round of cuts. I received as part of my due diligence access to a [survey of stakeholders of the agency] that nobody else in this agency has ever seen. ...And basically it showed you know why [we] had been downsized. And it also demonstrated that it still was at risk. And so I was informed by that to try to help analyze... what I thought need to be done for us to mitigate the risk of there being another round of downsizing.”)

House). Both successes and controls reported spending a somewhat larger proportion of time externally than internally. There were only small differences between successes and controls, but successes did spend a somewhat larger proportion of time internally: on average 54% externally, controls on average 59% – and the three unsuccessful leaders 73%.³⁴ Furthermore, outreach to two of four constituencies (White House/OMB and employee unions) was mentioned infrequently by successes; and while successes mentioned dealing proactively with Congress very often, differences were not as dramatic as for the five techniques that were the biggest differentiators. Dealing proactively with the media was mentioned relatively rarely, in contrast to the popular image that government leaders regard media relations as the most-important feature of the job. Taken together, these results are more consistent with H12b than with H12a.

Politicization and Expertise

Table Five displays the percentage of political employees as a percentage of the total number of agency managers for the agencies of the successes (broader group), along with the average percentage for all civilian agencies.³⁵ For all but two, the percentage was lower – indeed, dramatically lower, by factors of ten or even a hundred -- than for civilian agencies as a whole.³⁶ H13 is not supported. Instead, results are the opposite, consistent with those regarding general agency performance.

³⁴ We cannot exclude that these results are endogenous – that failures spent more time externally because they needed to defend themselves with external constituencies because they were failing.

³⁵ Data was generously provided by David Lewis, and expands on material presented in Lewis (2008). His definitions for “managers” and “political appointees” are used. All our success cases were civilian agencies.

³⁶ For the (only) two failure agencies, percentages hovered close to the average for all civilian agencies – 1.7% for one, close to 1% (actually, 0.9498%) for the other; the government average is 1.5%.

Most of these leaders, both successes and controls, had significant expertise in their agency's substantive area before taking the jobs. However, there were some differences between the two groups. All ten successes had significant background in their substantive area. For controls, ten did but two (or three) didn't, and an additional person was classified as intermediate, having been a former elected official with some experience in the substantive area, but not a professional background in it.³⁷

There is an additional dramatic finding. Leaders of half the successful agencies (broader group) served in positions with fixed terms, rather than at the pleasure of political superiors, and thus in less-politicized situations; no unsuccessful leader served in a position with a fixed term. This finding is especially dramatic given how rare fixed terms are in the federal government.

Length of Tenure

Successes served in their positions on average 5.6 years, compared with an average of 2.6 years for all Senate-confirmed appointees in the Dull and Roberts (2008) study.³⁸ (This still puts them below the length of service where performance starts to fall in studies showing a curvilinear relationship.) By contrast, unsuccessful leaders served on average 3.2 years, close to the average for Senate-confirmed appointees.³⁹ These results support H14. However, this could be partly or fully endogenous – individuals may stay longer because they were successful. However, counterparts⁴⁰ served on average only 2.7 years, lower than unsuccessful leaders, a result not consistent with an endogeneity story.

³⁷ The broader group was used here. For one counterpart (see footnote 10 above), we ended up interviewing a different person from the one originally identified. If we use the person actually interviewed for the rest of the research as the counterpart, the number of non-experts in controls is two (plus the intermediate case); if the originally identified counterpart is used instead, the number is three.

³⁸ These calculations are also based on publicly available data and include the broader group. If one excludes individuals serving fixed terms of office, average tenure for the successes was 5.8 years.

³⁹ It may also be noted in this regard that fixed terms (discussed above) are also relatively long terms.

⁴⁰ Excluding those serving fixed terms

Additionally, fixed terms are an exogenous source of lengthy tenure, and, as we have seen, successes dramatically came from agencies whose heads have fixed terms.⁴¹

How Much Effort Agency Leaders Put Into Their Jobs

We asked respondents the length of their average workweek. There were not large differences between the two groups, although the small differences pointed towards successes having somewhat shorter workweeks than controls. The mean workweek of successes was 66 hours, for unsuccessful leaders 77 hours, for counterparts 72 hours. The range for successes was 50 to 85 hours, for controls 60 to 90 (for unsuccessful leaders, 70 to 85). For all six cases where data are available both for a success and a counterpart, the counterpart reported working the same number or more hours than the success.⁴²

These results suggest successes did a better job allocating time proactively – and perhaps efficiently – rather than that success was due to greater effort. In the interviews, controls spent more time giving an account of the substantive content and progress of their initiatives, rather than discussing interventions to increase chances of success.

DISCUSSION AND LIMITATIONS

We find evidence here that success at executing an ambitious strategy in government is not merely a matter of luck, or skills born rather than made. A number of management and leadership techniques that are clearly within an executive's control, and that would appear eminently "learnable," differentiated successes from controls.

⁴¹ We are grateful to David Lewis for making this point to us.

⁴² Reported hours for successes and counterparts were remarkably similar, suggesting either common norms or common features within a given organization driving workweeks. In two of the six, responses were identical. For the other three cases, reports were 55 for the success and 70 for the counterpart, 60 and 70, 85 and 90, and 50 and 62.5. This within-agency consistency also supports the validity of these workweek estimates, which might be considered to be so contaminated by recall bias that the result that there were only small differences between the two groups might be seen as reflecting only noise.

Five techniques were both mentioned by five or more successes, and also more than twice as often by successes as controls. These differentiators were: (1) strategic planning, (2) using performance measures, (3) reorganization, (4) proactively working with interest groups, and (5) using slogans.⁴³ Several hypotheses were not supported. These results illustrate the importance of having a comparison group.

A second finding is that our small group of unsuccessful leaders – as distinguished from the entire control group -- seems to have used techniques specifically for managing change as frequently as successes did, so use of such techniques does not differentiate successful from unsuccessful leaders. Instead, what seems to differentiate the two groups is that the unsuccessful were less likely to use techniques associated with general good management (performance measures, strategic planning, reorganization, few goals). Almost all techniques especially recommended for leading change do not differentiate between successes and controls. Despite the argument that engaging the political environment is particularly important for successfully instituting change, unsuccessful leaders actually spent a larger proportion of time doing so than did successes. Finally, while it is sometimes argued that political appointees are helpful for achieving change but less so for producing good performance on stable goals, our results are that successes were likely to come from agencies less-politicized than average.

While most differentiators we discovered were under an executive's control, two are less so: agency politicization and the executive's length of tenure. To some extent, in fact, these factors can be influenced by executives. Congressionally mandated political positions constitute a minority of political appointees; most are Schedule C personnel

⁴³ As noted, discussions of working with interest groups were brief, and reorganization and use of slogans may not differentiate successes from failures (though numbers are very small).

placed there by political executives. And, although executives obviously can't give themselves a fixed term, they can (unless dismissed or forced out) choose to stay on longer than political executives typically have done. Having said that, these two findings suggest implications for system design as much as for individual executive behavior – that prospects for executive success, and hence governmental success, will increase if we can find ways to reduce politicization and increase tenure in office. .

Like any research, this study has limitations. One is the small number of observations. This reflects the modest number of executives with ambitious strategies. Given the terms of our letter and the number answering, we could have received 444 nominations. In fact we received 93 out of the several thousand Senate-confirmed appointees over the timeframe. Even if the group chosen is a universe of those meeting our selection criteria, the danger exists our findings are influenced by real randomness (as opposed to sampling error). Our number of unsuccessful leaders is very small, only three.

If we had more observations, we would have liked to examine interaction effects based on contingent ways of using a technique, or seeing if one technique is more effective in conjunction with another. However, we do believe our findings presenting main effects make a contribution by themselves.

A second limitation is that these results might be explained by the articulateness and conceptualization skills of successes compared to controls, rather than by use of techniques respondents discussed. Such differences are noticeable in the interview transcripts, also, the Washington Post reporter rated successes on average as better at effectively communicating their message than controls. In the most dramatic version of this limitation, articulateness and conceptualization skills (the independent variables) are

correlated with mention of a technique but not actual use, and nomination into our group (the dependent variable) is correlated with such skills as well, rather than actual success.

A number of considerations work against this account, however. On the x side, we performed several hundred additional interviews of knowledgeable insiders about techniques successful and unsuccessful leaders used. We do not report results from these interviews here, both because evaluating them, within constraints of resources available to us, was more subjective than the method we have used in this paper, and because (again because of resource constraints) we do not have data for counterparts. However, these interviews⁴⁴ almost always are consistent with the executive's reports regarding techniques used or not used. Also, we are inclined to think that skills noted verbally as articulateness and conceptualization were translated substantively into realization of the importance of consciously using certain management techniques. On the y side, it is possible that the outside experts, who were not substantive experts on all the agencies from which they nominated candidates, may have nominated based on public relations skills rather than achievements. However, the second stage of the nomination process, involving knowledgeable insiders far less likely to be swayed by media accounts, guards against the worry that leaders succeeded or failed only media relations.

A third possible explanation for differences found here is that they reflect only that successes did "more of everything" because their agenda was larger or more difficult. However, controls did not report working fewer hours than the successes.

A final limitation is that we needed, due to a paucity of nominations of unsuccessful leaders, to resort to counterparts to create our control group. Thus, our results partly compare those successful at executing an ambitious strategy with others

⁴⁴ Information available on request from the authors.

whose agenda was more modest. To the extent a technique would be unnecessary for executing a less-ambitious agenda, failure to observe the technique's use by counterparts would not provide meaningful evidence about differentiators of successes' behaviors.

This raises the broader issue of whether it is possible to extend the reach of our results to conclusions about techniques associated with success at promoting good organization performance in general. There are research traditions emphasizing differences between “managers” administering continuity and “leaders” achieving transformation (Kotter 1990); or tensions between “exploitative” and “exploratory” organizational learning (March 1999) and difficulties of organizational “ambidexterity” for successfully fielding both existing and new products (Tushman and O'Reilly 2002). However, our results showed that what distinguished successes from others was mostly their use of general good management techniques – the kinds of techniques that would presumably be relevant for counterparts. In fact, counterparts (and unsuccessful leaders) used a number of general good management techniques far less than successes. This is suggestive that findings here about what differentiates successes from others applies not just to executives with an ambitious agenda but to executives in general.

Despite these limitations, we believe these findings add to existing literature and provide helpful advice to practitioners. While the observation that senior executives generally pay attention to interacting with Congress by itself simply reaffirms earlier studies of how executives spend their time, we believe it is interesting, and not self-evident, empirically to discover there were differences between how successes and controls engaged Congress. Our findings about use of strategic planning, reorganization, and performance measures add evidence on issues about which there has been controversy both in the literature and among practitioners. The role attention to creation

of internal operating capacity by successful executives, even for ones with an ambitious strategy going beyond stewardship, is noteworthy, and ties to a debate among practitioners. Finally, we find it noteworthy that techniques associated with success apply across agencies with a wide variety of missions -- the different missions do not seem to require different techniques to achieve success.

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TABLE ONE
SUPPORTED HYPOTHESES

- H1a Successful agency heads *are* more likely than others to engage in a strategic planning process for strategy formulation.
- H1b: The planning processes of successful agency heads *do* include environmental assessment and goal selection.
- H2: Successful agency heads *do* have a smaller number of goals than other leaders.
- H4: Successful agency heads *do* pay significant attention to gaining support from their external political environment, more than other leaders.
- H5: Successful agency heads *sometimes* establish clear accountability systems, and do so *somewhat more often* than other leaders. (weakly supported)
- H6: Successful agency heads *do* use performance measures, more than other leaders.
- H8: Successful agency heads *do* use a collaborative, participatory management style
- H11: Successful agency heads *do* pay significant attention to improving internal operating capacity, more than other leaders.
- H12b: Successful agency heads *do* prioritize improving internal operating capacity over gaining support from their political environment, more than other leaders.
- H14: Successful agency heads *do* serve longer on average than other leaders.

TABLE TWO
SUMMARY OF HYPOTHESES **NOT** SUPPORTED

- H1c: The planning processes of successful agency heads ***do not*** include development of implementation plans of activities to be undertaken in pursuit of the leader's goals.
- H3: Successful agency heads ***do not*** pay significant attention to creating alignment between their goals and their agency's internal capacity, more than other leaders..
- H7: Reorganization ***is*** a technique that is frequently used by successful agency heads, compared with other leaders.
- H9: Successful agency heads ***do not*** pay attention to cultivating public service motivation among employees more than other leaders.
- H10: Successful agency heads ***do not*** use techniques such as the "burning platform" or quick wins as methods to initiate change and persuade skeptical organization members to join a change effort more than other leaders.
- H13: Successful agency heads ***do not*** tend to come from agencies with relatively more political appointees as a percentage of agency employees, compared to the average agency.

TABLE THREE:
TECHNIQUES USED BY SUCCESSES COMPARED WITH CONTROL GROUP, IN
ORDER OF DIFFERENCE IN USE

	<u>Successes</u>	<u>Controls</u>
Working with employee unions to gain support for goals	2	0
Strategic planning	6	1
Proactively working with interest groups	5	1
Proactively working with the White House/OMB	3	1
Proactively working with the media	3	1
Developing slogans reflecting goals	5	2
Using performance measures	6	3
Establishing an accountability system	4	2
Relationship building with external constituencies and/or employees	4	2
Using period between nomination and confirmation to think about goals/gather information	4	2
Collaborative/participatory management style with employees	7	4
Proactively working with Congress	6	5
Establishing an accountability system	4	2
Establishing an accountability system	4	2
Changes in budget allocations to reflect goals	2	2
Working to communicate goals to employees	4	4

NB: There were eight successes and nine in the control group.

TABLE FOUR:
MOST-FREQUENTLY MENTIONED TECHNIQUES THAT SUCCESSFUL
AGENCY LEADERS DISCUSSED (N=8)

7 mentions

Collaborative/participatory management style with employees

6 mentions

Strategic planning

Proactively working with Congress

Using performance measures

Reorganization

5 mentions

Proactively working with interest groups

Appealing to public service motivation

Developing slogans reflecting goals

4 mentions

Relationship building with external constituencies and/or employees

Using period between nomination and confirmation to think about goals/gather information

Establishing an accountability system

Working to communicate goals to employees

3 mentions

Proactively working with the White House/OMB (**)

Proactively working with media

2 mentions

Changes in budget allocations to reflect goals

Working with employee unions to gain support for goals

(**) Based on 7 possible mentions, rather than 8 (see text for explanation)

TABLE FIVE:
POLITICAL APPOINTEES AS A PERCENTAGE OF ALL MANAGERS IN
AGENCIES WITH SUCCESSFUL LEADERS

Agency A	0.00%
Agency B	0.01%
Agency C	0.02%
Agency D	0.09%
Agency E	0.2%
Agency F	0.2%
Agency G	0.2%
GOVERNMENT AVERAGE	
(Civilian Agencies)	1.5%
Agency H	2.6%
Agency I	3.2%.

Source: Lewis (2008), supplemented by agency-provided data. This is the broader group of agencies; see footnote 10. Data is for the year following the leader's assumption of office