Sharing Power to Amplify Influence and Results

Joe C. Magee and Clifford W. Frasier have written a thoughtful and instructive article on the use of status and power.

I have always believed that the good you do gives you the only real power that is obtainable. Sharing that power and creating a sense of shared purpose among peers and colleagues amplifies influence and drives results. Learning how to share power toward a common purpose is particularly critical to exerting influence across fractured government agencies whose formal organizational structures do not neatly align with crosscutting policy priorities.

For example, the White House Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) sits within the Executive Office of the President and has statutory responsibility for implementing the National Environmental Policy Act as well as responsibilities for coordinating environmental policy across the federal agencies. The CEQ has fewer than 20 full-time employees, compared with the approximately 1.8 million civilian employees and 1.5 million men and women in military service employed within the rest of the government. Within the CEQ is the Office of the Federal Environmental Executive, a three-person team I led for two years that is responsible for driving organizational sustainability for a 3.2-million-person institution: even with plenty of status and power, it is an absurd proposition. And yet, it can work when the influence of the office is used to engage, involve, and share power with men and women across the federal government who may have no formal reporting responsibilities to the office but who are aligned with its purpose.

One way that using influence to share power and amplify results was implemented in practice was through the GreenGov Challenge. Announced by President Barack Obama, the challenge invited all federal employees and men and women in military service to share and vote on the best ideas for achieving the administration’s policy objectives for greening the government. Thousands of individuals participated and shared hundreds of ideas, many of which were adopted through formal policy-making processes within agencies. Moreover, many individuals who were identified through the challenge became part of volunteer “green teams” at the facility level or within agencies, augmenting the formal coordinating committee at the headquarters level and vastly expanding the modest team at the CEQ charged with implementation.

What were the results? The GreenGov effort, which is defined by Executive Order 13514, doubled the federal hybrid fleet, is on track to cut greenhouse gas pollution from federal operations by 28 percent by 2020, and promises to cut the government utility bill by as much as $11 billion. (Full results can be found at http://sustainability.performance.gov/.)

Not only does this approach expand results, but also the influence conveyed by status and power can be fundamentally limited unless it is leveraged to create informal, power-sharing teams that cut across formal organizational silos.

The federal regulatory process for large infrastructure projects such as bridges and ports underscores this point. Multibillion-dollar infrastructure projects such as the Tappan Zee Bridge or the Port of Charleston are essential for their regions’ economic competitiveness and for local jobs, but no one entity is in charge of the many federal permits that may be required by environmental and other regulations that originate in statute. The result can be bureaucratic gridlock and years of economically damaging delays. Power, status, and the resulting influence cannot resolve these problems. The Secretary of Transportation himself could not force a local wildlife biologist at another agency to make a decision any faster.

If influence, however, is used to create power-sharing teams that cut across agencies, multiple permits can
be coordinated through a concurrent schedule. For two years, I led an interagency Steering Committee charged with cutting timelines for major infrastructure projects. Identifying and involving the individuals within each agency with permitting responsibilities, using the status of the Steering Committee to coordinate schedules, and empowering crosscutting project teams with technology were essential for achieving time savings. For example, more than three years were cut from permitting timelines for the Tappan Zee Bridge. More than 50 other projects whose timelines benefited from the same power-sharing approach can be found at http://permits.performance.gov.

Making policy decisions, implementing programs, and getting results often call on public managers to pave over the cracks of government agencies whose organizational silos do not align with crosscutting goals. Magee and Frasier share useful insights for building power and status toward expanding individual influence. Leveraging that influence to share power will help public managers get the best results.

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