POINT OF VIEW

Making the most of what you have

In this challenging economic climate, government agencies, like private-sector organizations, need to make tough choices between "must have" projects. Applying a few key principles can help leaders make choices that optimize time, budget and resources.

Identify and define criteria for prioritization

Establish a basic framework to evaluate your options is the first step in making tough choices. This means that before you decide what's most important, you should first determine the criteria you need to use – for example: scope or type of impact (e.g., process, people/organization, IT). Other criteria worth considering, depending on the context, might be level of effort, interdependency with external factors, likelihood of achieving measurable success or appeal to key stakeholders.

Criteria for judging importance should be defined according to the organization's overarching strategy and goals. For example, if cost-cutting is a goal, then the number of resources needed for an initiative would be an important consideration.

Once you've decided on the criteria you'll be using, you can start rating projects or options. For instance, if process efficiency is a near-term objective, then projects aligned with that goal might be worth more investment than projects that impact people or technology.

Consider tradeoffs

Think about the implications of moving forward today versus tomorrow. Though complex and costly, opportunities to proactively prepare for new legislation, congressional mandates, or GAO and Inspector General reports may prove more effective than accelerated, reactive efforts six months from now. Given limited resources, an organization's leaders must challenge themselves to focus not only on what is critical today, but what will be critical in the future.

Engage stakeholders

Government decisions by nature involve impact on many stakeholders, from the public to industry to Congress and other government entities. Moreover, few government agencies create strategy without considerable discussion and input from other agencies. Successful and active engagement with all of these groups is critical.

Involving the people impacted by key choices, even if their interests are not met, can only help the organization to be better prepared in the future.

By getting feedback and input about upcoming choices, government leaders can anticipate who will support or resist a particular decision and can respond accordingly.

Gauge current best practices

Learn what your peers are doing: Are they investing in new IT or focusing on improving existing internal competencies? Have they succeeded in their efforts? How have their decisions been perceived by external stakeholders like the public, industry and Congress? In this time of short news cycles and web-based media, trends can gain momentum or lose traction very quickly depending on how it is presented to the public. Staying informed of these trends, and who is leading them, is critical.

Be ready to demonstrate results at a moment's notice

Prepare to show and report results in a way that's meaningful to stakeholders. When limited resources are available for competing government projects within and between agencies, every project pursued must be able to create meaningful and measureable impact. Target performance measurements need to be identified early to establish baseline results against which improvements can be compared.