



Insights for Strong Partnerships Among Agency Executives

The Importance of Sharing Best Practices Among Federal Executives

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A strong partnership among the Chief Financial Officer (CFO), Chief Information Officer (CIO), and other chief executives in a federal agency is a key indicator that the agency has a foundation in place for effective management of technology, people, and process assets. AGA and CGI Federal invited federal executives to share insights on viable collaborations, based on their experience. This report summarizes their comments at a December 2022 roundtable.

Prioritize Mission

The agency's mission aligns everyone in the C-Suite. Every analysis and decision made by the chief executives must support what is needed to accomplish the mission. For example, one agency utilizes a review and scoring system to rank projects and the associated budget requests according to answers to these questions:

- Is the project related to the mission?
- Does this project supersede another project?
- How much time is needed?
- Are the required resources available?
- How does this project rank against other priorities?
- What is the risk of not completing the project?

This review method provides a consistent, repeatable process to enable mission success. While a denied budget request is disappointing to the project team, most executives understand the reason for rejection is mission value: the proposal did not appear to be of greater value than other proposed projects. Executives consider the method fair, as well as one that boosts transparency in the review process. One CFO noted that it provides insights into capacity and availability of resources that are essential to gauging the probability of project success.





Curate Credibility

Establishing and gaining credibility is essential for each member of the C-Suite. Leaders deemed credible are viewed as trustworthy and authentic. When a leader is credible, the team trust in his or her skills will increase along with the ability to get the job done.

One CFO said working on the mission side of the agency gave him much needed “street cred.” The experience can also bolster an executive’s understanding of the employees’ day-to-day tasks and challenges. Another executive said he established credibility by citing similar challenges at other agencies and successful solutions to address them. A third executive noted that a chorus of employees repeating the same thing is more compelling than a few people or a single voice in the push for a new initiative.

Build Trust

When executives establish credibility, they can progress to establishing trusted relationships. Trust facilitates open discussion and candid dialogue among the C-Suite executives and the entire team. One agency CFO said the established relationship with his agency’s CIO before the pandemic led to smooth agency operations in the rapid onset of the crisis and during the long period when staff and contractors worked exclusively from home.

Another agency executive relied on her group of trusted advisors that included contractors, federal employees, and other affinity group members. The advisors played various roles and positions throughout her career, offering a diverse and broad base of knowledge and

experience to tap. The informal advisory group served as a source of inspiration, knowledge and validation, as well as a much-needed sounding board. Many of the relationships had formed from networking at AGA events. One federal CFO gave this simple piece of advice, “Build trust before you need it.”

Collaborate

Teams must collaborate and find the right balance to meet mandates yet cover broader department and enterprise issues. Collaboration across the C-Suite develops unity that empowers team members to make decisions, address the agency mission and remain a cohesive team.

One agency implemented a new enterprise system that launched according to design. Later, the agency determined that the design had not captured numerous nuances in the various processes. The enterprise architecture was lost, and roll-out of the new system quickly turned into an overwhelming challenge. One federal executive highlighted the importance of sharing with staff why the project failed. He said, “Don’t let a crisis go to waste. Tell the story and learn from it.” Sharing challenges and failures also helps employees at all levels view problems as opportunities for future success, find inspiration to fix them and go beyond the status quo.

Collaboration is not just about teamwork; it is about understanding the roles and responsibilities of every team member. “Every cog in a wheel needs to have purpose, and leaders must understand the purpose of every other cog in the wheel. In order to be effective in my job, I need to understand the responsibilities



of, and pressures on, other C-Suite executives in my organization,” said one federal CPO.

Fostering understanding of the duties of every team member enables the building of a more effective team. The key, several executives noted, is to develop understanding before an urgent issue arises. Learning everyone’s responsibilities and strengths in the moment is too late. One CFO added that weekly agency meetings with all departments helped everyone get in sync with issues and ideas for sharper focus on the agency’s mission.

C-Suite members are not alone in driving the mission forward. Everyone must work together to propel the mission while the C-Suite maintains the big picture view and appreciates individual roles and responsibilities. While teamwork and collaboration are needed throughout the organization for success, consistent C-Suite collaboration is also necessary. Likewise, it is important to understand the priorities and the decision-making processes in different departments and organizational levels. Communication cannot stop at the C-Suite — it needs to flow down to the next tier to enable development of the next generation of leaders. Collaboration in the C-Suite needs to happen within an agency, across agencies, and with other political and career program leads.

Communicate

Effective communication from an executive sets the tone for the work environment. C-Suite members are empowered to take responsibility for the team and can encourage the team through clear and frequent messaging. When COVID-19 forced employees to leave

the office and work from home, many behind-the-scenes decisions had to be made that affected every employee. One CFO worked with the agency’s COO of facilities, a relationship key to managing health and safety rules and best practices to keep people working and engaged with the agency mission. He met with the COO daily at the beginning of the pandemic and noted he found zero risk in over-communicating. He said people want information, and it is best to communicate what you are thinking, what you know, when you know it, adding, “Sometimes you want to wait for the perfect answer, but that is a mistake. Don’t let perfect be the enemy of good.”

In the early days of the pandemic, the CFO said disagreements erupted over paying employees and contractors. It became clear the operations department was making decisions without the involvement of support staff, so they needed frequent, informed communication to build trust, transparency and teamwork. The C-Suite was able to piece everything together and then tell the story so employees could benefit from the lessons learned.

Conclusion

An agency’s mission provides a shared goal for all members of the C-Suite. This mutual priority, stimulated by established credibility, can build relationships based upon trust, which are essential to clear communication and effective collaboration. While the discussion with federal executives did not explore the impact of the expanding size of the C-Suite and work locations, the executives who participated agreed that sharing best practices on C-Suite collaboration should become a regular activity.



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