

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

State and Local Governments

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STATE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

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The beginning of a new administration is an exciting time. New actors and a new agenda meet complex challenges. Governing in the 21st century will require new skills and approaches to develop solutions to the world's most significant challenges and opportunities.

The public consistently tells pollsters that these are the five most important issues facing the nation (other than the war in Iraq):

- Jobs
- Health care
- Safety and security
- Education
- Environment

None of the issues can be addressed without a national strategy; however, that alone will not be sufficient. Each requires the federal government to engage a broad network of actors in order to produce the outcomes desired. That network must include both state and local governments to be effective. In fact, there will be few issues of national domestic policy in which state and local governments will not play the most important role.

When asked about the quality of the partnership between federal agencies and state and local governments, most state and local officials will grimace. They describe the level of interaction and engagement with federal agencies as:

- Paternal
- Directive
- Lack of shared goals and strategies
- Not a partnership
- One-way communication
- No organized effort for serious engagement

Given the importance of this relationship, what can you do to build a more effective partnership? We present three recommendations on how you can effectively work with one set of your stakeholders: state and local governments.

Recommendation One: Understand the landscape of the intergovernmental system.

State and local governments often do not always agree with one another, but they have a long history of working together to address priorities and to develop solutions to vexing problems.

The state of Florida's approach to emergency management issues is a good example of how state and local governments in Florida engage and cooperate. With its history of multiple hurricanes wreaking havoc on the state and its economy, there was no question about the importance of strengthening preparedness and response capabilities.

Local governments in Florida built strong mutual aid agreements with neighboring jurisdictions and sought to expand their regional approach so that one region could help a region in another part of the state in the event of a catastrophic event. Local leaders approached state leaders to discuss the idea and to seek financial support to build a statewide mutual aid system that can identify and organize resources for rapid deployment. The state agreed that it was a good strategy and became a fully engaged partner in developing a system. There has been an effective state-local dialogue, even though each level of government has a somewhat different perspective on tactics and approaches.

The relationship between state and local governments with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has been more strained. While FEMA received consistently high marks from state and local officials in the 1990s, those improvements faded away in the early years after DHS was created. FEMA is making efforts to reengage with state and local officials, but it will take time to reestablish the level of communication needed for an effective partnership.

The good news for federal agencies is that state and local governments generally want to be good partners. They recognize that federal government goals are important and want to do their part to help the nation move forward.

Recommendation Two: Design engagement strategies with state and local officials around core principles.

Your starting point is to engage state and local government leaders thoughtfully and to seek agreement on the outcomes that you want to achieve. Whether the goal is to address climate change or to improve health care outcomes, keep these principles in mind:

- Focus on “what you want to achieve,” not how.
- Develop strategies with as much flexibility as possible to accommodate local circumstances.
- Seek agreement on the metrics up front so everyone has the same vision of success.
- Leverage the resources of national public interest groups such as the National Governors Association, National League of Cities, National Conference of State Legislatures, National Association of Counties, Council of State Governments, International City/County Management Association, and the U.S. Conference of Mayors. These organizations have deep reach into the state and local government community and

can aggregate information, build awareness of the issues, and contribute to strategic discussions.

- Cultivate relationships. Your first call to a state or local government official should not be in the midst of a crisis.
- Recognize that meaningful engagement is a long-term strategy.
- Take advantage of new technologies for large-scale engagement whenever possible.
- Communicate. Two-way communication improves outcomes; while it requires an investment of time at first, it pays dividends over time.

These principles have been used effectively in the past, but often in a sporadic way. Look for ways to reinforce the value of intergovernmental engagement as a measure of success for your agency's leadership staff. Making it clear that collaboration with state and local governments is a core strategy is important. That message may need reinforcement in formal performance management processes, performance evaluations, and staff development activities as well.

Ask your colleagues in state and local governments to give you examples of what has worked well and what needs to change. They can tell you stories about how the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), for example, learned that consultation with local governments was essential to achieve results. A one-size-fits-all environmental standard cannot be expected to work well in a country with so many differences in climate, geography, and industries. Once EPA built relationships with local officials, they found partners who could help them develop the range of solutions that were needed to achieve environmental goals.

Likewise, state officials will be quick to compliment those occasions when the federal government has provided waivers to allow them to experiment with improvements in the welfare system or with Medicaid programs. However, these successes seem idiosyncratic and have seldom been sustained or shared broadly across the federal system.

Recommendation Three: Take advantage of the laboratories of democracy.

Creativity and innovation can be found at all levels of government. The unique advantage of this country's federal system is that it allows a great deal of experimentation. A good idea that starts in a federal agency may become a great solution when state and local governments see it as a springboard to make progress on a challenge they face.

Likewise, good ideas bubble up from those who work on the front lines of democracy. Local governments may be at the forefront of the movement to work across boundaries. They understand readily that one community alone cannot solve issues of water scarcity, air quality, crumbling infrastructure, housing, energy, or global economic pressures. States, too, are building

more network capacity to work on shared agendas, such as strengthening their Emergency Management Assistance Compact to share resources across state lines.

The nation has common goals. Too often in recent years, the federal government has looked to state and local governments as a source of revenue rather than talent. In times of scarcity, you can't afford not to tap all of your resources, including state and local governments. Call us.

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