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Launch the Transparency Survey Results

President Obama wants to make government more transparent. He clearly said so in a [memo](#) released Jan. 21, one day after he took the oath of office.

"Transparency promotes accountability and provides information for citizens about what their government is doing," he wrote. "My administration will take appropriate action, consistent with law and policy, to disclose information rapidly in forms that the public can readily find and use."

But what, exactly, is transparency? What information should be released and in what form? Who is responsible for making sure it happens? *Government Executive* magazine attempts to answer those questions in its April cover story, "[Behind the Curtain](#)."

For federal managers, the more important question is: how do you define transparency? After all, the White House is asking federal executives to open their processes and records to the public.

To find out, Nextgov, working with its sister research organization the Government Business Council, surveyed 430 federal managers between Feb. 25 and March 2 about what they believed transparency to be and how well-positioned they were to carry it out.

What we found is a mixed message, according to government management specialists and transparency advocates who looked at the survey results. Government managers were open to Obama's call for transparency, an uncommon sentiment given that most federal middle managers (who were the majority of survey respondents) typically resist change. They wanted to post data, lots of it, which pleased open government groups like the Sunlight Foundation.

"Raw data collected by any agency ought to be available in a machine-readable format," said Ellen Miller, director of the Sunlight Foundation, a Washington-based group that promotes transparency in government.

But the survey pointed out some obstacles the Obama administration will have to overcome on its way to an open government. Most federal managers believed they already have made available the information the White House asked them to release to the public. They also said concerns about computer security, the loss of control over their agency's message and not enough resources to make data accessible could derail the president's plans.

Perhaps the biggest concern was federal managers did not view transparency as their responsibility. They said the president, Congress and top government executives needed to drive it. But that's only half the equation, Miller said. "My take on this is it's going to take strong leadership not only at the top of an agency but also at the lower levels," she said. "What does it mean for the agency to be transparent and what does that look like?"

Alan Blautis, director of Cisco Systems Inc.'s Internet Business Solutions Group who has held numerous government management positions in his 28 year government career, summed up managers' lack of interest in taking the responsibility for transparency this way: "There's a strong status quo mentality" among federal managers, he said. "So, here's the question: Who outside of the White House or the stimulus groupies, have you heard talk about transparency?"

The unspoken — yet understood answer — is not many. That's a red flag

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The unspoken -- yet understood answer -- is, not many. That's a red flag warning the Obama administration to just how much work it has in front of it to convince agencies to become more transparent.

[Click here to view the survey results.](#)

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Andy Blumenthal ★ 11/14/2009 06:40 PM

Delivering Obsolete and Broken IT Projects, No More

By Andy Blumenthal

NextGov reported on 9 Nov 2009, that the Government Accountability Office (GAO) released a report that “forecasts \$3 billion in cost overruns on 16 major projects.”

What’s so of baffling is that these overruns occurred despite the agency’s use of earned value management.

According to Dave Powner, director of IT management issues at GAO, “Every one of the agencies had major problems in determining earned value management...as a result the agencies were unable to accurately identify the progress contractors had made on IT projects.”

These finding are expected to drive the 2009 Information Technology Oversight and Waste Prevention Act to increase oversight of IT investments. This bill calls for “a Web site to publish information on the status of federal IT investments, similar to the Federal IT Dashboard,” but with more accurate data and with explanations on why projects are over budget.

Certainly, the use of measurements and dashboards to display and track these are helpful in understanding how we are doing in managing our IT investments—so they are on schedule, within budget, and to customer specification.

Clearly, we can only begin to better manage that which we measure and track. Our IT investments and their execution are no longer a black box or so it’s supposed to work. However, to make these metrics and dashboard effective to improve IT execution, there are a number of critical success factors:

1) Transparency—This is a concept that is in common use these days, and we need to continue to put it in action. All IT investments need to be measured, not just the “major” ones, and their success and failures need to be visible. The purpose must not to scrutinize or shame project managers, but to be able to genuinely guide projects to successful conclusions. This is what the control phase of capital planning and investment control is all about. We need to course correct projects early and often, if necessary, before they are billions of dollars out of control.

2) Honesty in Reporting—Projects need to be reported accurately—no gaming the system. If the facts are sugarcoated or whitewashed, then no dashboard in the world is going to catch the problems that are misreported to begin with. Unfortunately with project management, the elements are scope, schedule, and cost can be manipulated to make it seem as if a project is okay, when it isn’t. One example is de-scoping the project to enable a delivery on schedule and on cost, even though what’s being delivered is not what was asked for or agreed upon.

3) Skills Enhancement—With better measurement of IT investments, we need to provide more training to our project managers. We can’t just expect perfection day 1. We need to work with people and grow them to be better project managers. We can do this with training, mentoring, coaching, and so on. Remember

government best practices and industry solutions. [Click here to see archived Webinars.](#)

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Identity Management	

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do this with training, mentoring, coaching, and so on. Remember, it's generally the people that make the IT project a success or failure, not the technology—so let's invest in our people to make them better project managers.

4) Accountability—We shouldn't be looking to exact a pound of flesh for genuine human foibles—mistakes do happen. But at the same time, people must be held accountable for fraud, waste, and abuse. Sometimes, people get complacent and they need a reminder that there are real implications to an IT project's success or failure—mission and people are depending on you to do your job, so you had better do it responsibly and to the best of your ability.

5) Continuous Improvement—Ever since business school, I've always loved the Japanese management practice of Kaizen—continuous improvement. This concept is right on the mark with our IT investment and project execution. We are not going to magically put up a dashboard and whoola—better IT projects. It's going to be a process, a transformation over time. We need to incrementally improve our IT project success rate through learning measurement, and best practices implementation. Of course, time is money, and we need to move quickly, but we do not want to artificially create the appearance of short-term performance improvement at the expense of genuine long-term success.

All the power to IT performance measurement and dashboarding, but with the absolute commitment to not only track and measure, but also grow and improve our customer results. It's not a gotcha that we need, but a how can we help you succeed.

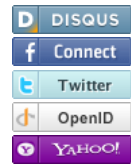
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