

COORDINATION CONCEPTS

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Over the years I have had a number of assignments from different presidents that involved extensive coordination within the federal government and often with state and local agencies. I have been asked to list several concepts that have been especially useful to me in the course of these experiences:

1. Joint Efforts Where Possible. We often discuss "top-down" versus "bottom-up or roll-up" approaches, and both have their place. However, I found it very important to address domestic problems on a joint or team basis to the extent possible. In Alaska, for example, there were no separate federal plans, no separate state plans, and no separate local government plans. Officials at all three levels literally sat around a large table, generally in a high school gym, and agreed on a plan that would be called a Kodiak Plan, a Seward Plan, an Anchorage Plan, etc. Obviously, this is easier in emergency situations, and in low population areas. Nevertheless, we were fortunate in extending the "team" concept to a surprising extent throughout the nation in the first three years of the New Federalism. Later, this concept stayed in the rhetoric, but faded in reality as OMB lost its management leadership capacity and federal field career leaders were replaced with political appointees.
2. Preserve Accountability. Too often the team concept results in a loss of accountability and the capacity to act, two concepts I regard as linked. Coordinating bodies such as the Regional Councils mentioned above, can be very useful for exchanging information, facilitating planning, and coordinating action. But they generally become counter-productive if they are given authority. This too often results in their becoming just another layer that further complicates the system. Instead, I have found it more useful to rely upon the authority of the individual members that comes from their agency role. As parts of a coordinating body they can exercise their individual agency authorities in concert, and they are more likely to supplement each other rather than compete or leave unintended gaps. Decision-making can be considerably expedited, whereas networking groups that grow into formal bodies that have to take action before participating federal agencies can act, thereby becoming bottlenecks.
3. Openness a Virtue. Despite the fact that I spent twelve years in the secretive Atomic Energy Commission, I quickly found it very useful to run non-defense operations as open as one possibly can. In Alaska I never once had a closed meeting except in discussing personnel issues. The media were always there, and the public was not only invited, but permitted to speak (briefly), even though this meant at times finishing after sunrise. The Alaskan attorney general was given an office next to mine in Washington. He and the state disaster coordinator participated in my Washington staff meetings to which key Hill staff were invited. My weekly reports were designed for internal operations, but Johnson ordered

them released to the press even though I was quite candid about the relative performance of federal and state agencies. The combination of participation and open meetings eliminated all of the typical suspicion and questions of hidden motives in a fast moving operation. More important, opposition to adverse decisions was greatly reduced in intensity, and the debates focused on substantive issues.

As every city manager knows, open, participatory, operations require an ability to move forward and not get bogged down. It also requires the confidence to meet opposition face to face, and the courage to act when consensus is not attainable.

Contrary to the thinking of some, I found the time invested in broad participation and open operations saved time in the end. In Alaska, for example, I told the agencies that we did not have time for the formal public hearing procedures embedded in a number of our programs, especially urban renewal. We had not one complaint, because our open approach provided them with an even greater chance to keep informed and to voice their views as the planning and execution moved forward. In view of the much larger populations involved, and the absence of an emergency environment, we could not accommodate the open participatory process as much in the New Federalism, but we did provide far more than had been the prior practice.

4. Value of Streamlined Management. Minimize the formal processes as much as possible, a concept that is much easier to apply in emergencies than continuing operations, but essential in both cases. Some will remember the A-95 circular the Bureau of the Budget (BOB, the predecessor organization to the Office of Management and Budget) issued in 1969 that stimulated considerable cooperation among local governments and triggered much of the birth of councils of government (COGs) across the nation. I would not permit more than one third of one staff person's time to be devoted to central management of the circular and a severe limit to the length of this highly successful circular. Later, when the procedures grew significantly and several people were added to central direction, its usefulness declined and eventually disappeared.

Despite the complexity of the operation, I established only one procedure in leading the rebuilding of Alaska, that of a system of reporting direct to me from the Alaskan field offices concurrently with their reports to their agency leadership. I, and all levels of the agencies, including members of the cabinet, received the field information at the same time without the time required for sequential forwarding up through the ranks. The reports to me and the agencies were identical, except that additional detail was added to their agency reports.

With this one exception, we relied upon existing process to the extent they were retained. Many were not. I received tacit approval from both the President and the Congressional leadership to authorize all the departments to waive any existing procedure (but not laws) that got in their way of meeting our program

objectives. In the case of the New Federalism, we did some waiving of procedures, but the bulk of our effort was directed toward a radical elimination and streamlining of processes that had smothered programs of assistance to state and local governments. (One problem we never solved satisfactorily was the tendency of some states to substitute state requirements for those we eliminated at the Federal level. Another was our inability to prevent new red tape and unfounded mandates from evolving in subsequent years.)

5. Necessity of Institutional Support. Presidential support that I had from Johnson in Alaska and Nixon in the New Federalism clearly made my job easier. What may be less obvious is the key role played by BOB and OMB management staff in every interagency or intergovernmental task I was assigned. In some aspects of this work, there was useful cooperation with the budget staff, but the independence of the management staff enabled it to provide the president with the management leadership on his behalf to ensure that the federal agencies would work together, especially in the field, and that the three levels of government could function in concert on implementing national policies. OMB is now essentially a budget organization with only a limited management shell still in existence, and there is nothing in the federal government to replace the OMB management staff, making coordination far more difficult today.