



TOOLS AT THE CENTRE OF GOVERNMENT

Research and Practitioners' Insight

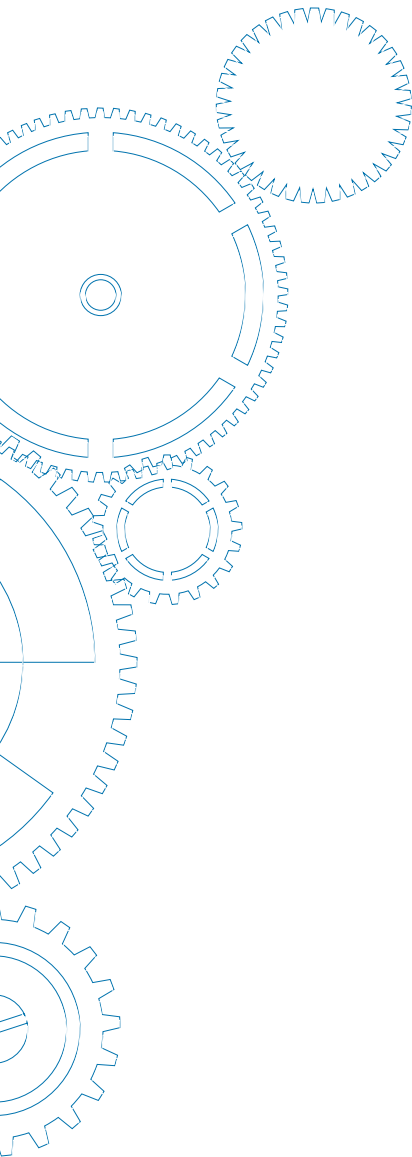
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TOOLS AT THE CENTRE OF GOVERNMENT



How can you add value from the centre, when the expertise, resources, and responsibilities to make change sit in a number of government agencies and ministries?

What tools do you have?
And when should they be used?

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* The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the United States government, the Executive Office of the President, or the Office of Management and Budget.

Tools at the centre of government ¹

Imagine you are a policy official and receive a call from the President's (or Prime Minister's) Chief of Staff: *The President wants to reduce the time it takes to obtain approvals or permits for major infrastructure projects to create jobs and spur economic growth.* The Chief of Staff has tasked you with figuring out how to move this forward. Success requires collaboration across numerous organisations and navigating a complex set of laws, regulations, cultures and, yes, personalities. The President has made it clear that she wants to see real changes on the ground quickly, which will require a focused effort across government. Where do you begin?

- What resources are available to you?
- What internal and external stakeholders are impacted?
- How do you define success that meets the President's near-term expectations while also gaining buy-in from line ministries?

The specific topic may be different, but the scenario is familiar. Whether handed down as a special assignment by a political leader or self-driven as part of your role, staff in the centre of government (COG) are responsible for driving forward progress on the government's top priorities. These challenges often require concerted action both horizontally across government organisations, and vertically from senior leadership to the front lines. Importantly, they will also likely involve organisations outside government who represent various stakeholders, delivery partners, or other government jurisdictions.

¹ The authors would like to thank Kevin Donahue, Sara Fyson, Klas Klaas, Mariano LaFuente, Edwin Lau, Adam Ostry, Dan Tangherlini, Andrea Uhrhammer and Ray Shostak for their review and input into this piece.

In sum, how can you add value from the centre, when the expertise, resources and responsibilities to make change sit in a number of government agencies and ministries? What tools do you have? And when should they be used?

often includes the president's or prime minister's offices as well as Cabinet, budget offices etc.² Rarely do they have the power or budget to run large and complex change programmes, and they often find that line ministries (the term we will use for other departments or agencies in government)³ can be resistant to change and prefer to stick with their traditional approaches (sometimes for good reasons!). Conversely, line ministries can feel the centre of government officials are naive – lacking depth of knowledge of the legal, institutional and stakeholder complexities associated with their requests or overly focused on ever-changing priorities of current political leaders. That being said, COGs play a critical role in translating the will of the people expressed through campaign commitments and elections into action. The role of the COG will also become increasingly critical as the problems that government is expected to solve increasingly require coordination across multiple ministries, and the COG is one of the only institutions that is empowered to convene across ministries and programmes.

The urgency and timeliness of this focus on the centre of government can be explained by a simple truism that we must face across the globe: the centre of government has an increasingly important role because the problems governments need to solve are increasingly complex and horizontal, yet government is organised by vertical institutions and hierarchies.

With easy access to senior government leaders but relatively small budgets and staff, the centre of government has a very different set of tools than other agencies. We define the centre of government as the people and organisations that support the head of government as the 'guardians of overall strategic direction of government', which

Readers need to look no further than the 2020–21 COVID-19 pandemic as evidence for the critical role not just of "government" generally but in particular the essential role the centre of government must play to coordinate, communicate with the public, and navigate new problems that no longer respect the organisational boundaries we have created over time.

² In this article, we think of the "centre of government" as those government agencies or ministries that support the head of government and cabinet as the 'guardians of overall strategic direction of government'. This would often include President's or Prime Minister's offices as well as Cabinet, budget offices etc, and are not typically agencies with service delivery responsibilities and have relatively modest budget allocations. This follows the definition deployed by the OECD at: OECD (2014). *Centre Stage: Driving Better Policies from the Centre of Government*. OECD.

³ In this piece, we use the term "line ministries" to mean those Government departments, ministries or agencies that are not part of the centre of government – such as those responsible for education, housing, defence, home affairs etc.

In this article, we present **ten tools** across four clusters that centres of governments can deploy.

Centre of government tools overview

Cluster 1 tools

Planning from the centre: *defining success and setting up agencies to improve*

- 1 Stakeholder engagement and problem identification to set the stage
- 2 Priority setting with clear measures of success
- 3 Reviews of ministry commitment and capabilities to identify gaps

Cluster 2 tools

Governing from the centre: *creating structures to drive improvements*

- 4 Cross-agency governance systems to drive decision-making across organisations
- 5 Central delivery units to drive progress on top priorities
- 6 Centres of technical expertise to spread adoption of leading practices

Cluster 3 tools

Improving implementation from the centre: *creating routines and driving change*

- 7 Data-driven review meetings to engage leaders in implementation
- 8 Employee recognition programmes to recognise employees and model behaviours
- 9 Collaboration platforms for creating communities of practice

Cluster 4 tools

Improving service delivery from the centre: *supporting and offering provision of cross-cutting services*

- 10 Service delivery improvements from the centre to drive transformation by integrating policy and implementation

Collectively, these tools are aimed at transforming the centre of government from an institution that is often associated with generating top-down requirements that can drive compliance, into a problem-solving organisation that takes on the most pressing challenges. In our experience, when the centre of government applies the right set of approaches or tools, it can drive progress towards achieving some of the most complex challenges governments take on. The COG has an opportunity to move beyond its traditional approaches of developing budget, policy or communications and instead embrace a new strategic orientation that shifts its focus to the outcomes that matter to citizens rather than organising around the inputs of government. As Richard Rumelt argues in his definition of an effective strategy, the COG has an opportunity to develop a coherent set of policies, actions and new strengths by shifting its viewpoint (eg to reflect what it looks like to navigate government from a citizen's perspective).⁴

4 Rumelt, Richard P. *Good Strategy, Bad Strategy: The Difference and Why It Matters*. New York: Crown Business, 2011.

To be truly effective, the centre of government needs to be guided by some simple but powerful truths that are often overlooked in the way it operates:

- 1 Policy, budget, legislation and communications are *means*. Results and outcomes are the *ends* of government.
- 2 Frontline services are delivered by the front lines, not headquarters or the COG.
- 3 Decentralisation and empowerment can be much more effective at driving sustained change than centralisation and compliance requirements.
- 4 The benefits of new policy requirements should be closely scrutinised against the costs (...and government employee time is a cost!).
- 5 Trust in government institutions matters, and the COG should be responsible for improving it.

We encourage centre of government officials to be deliberate in their choice of tools based on the specific problem they are solving while avoiding unintended (but often predictable) consequences. As such, we have identified main use cases for each tool to help officials navigate and select the right tools for the right problems, while noting the potential risks and unintended consequences to consider.

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The timing for a renewed focus on the role of the COG could not be more critical as leaders look for ways to improve trust in government. The concept of the centre of government has been carefully researched by OECD and the InterAmerican Development Bank. Both organisations have identified a number of key roles and functions

of the centre of government.⁵ This work seeks to build on their work by examining specific tools the centre of government uses to drive change and offers advice on when they should be applied and risks to consider.

The concept of tools for government draws on Lester Salamon's *The Tools of Government: A Guide to New Governance*. In this 2002 book, Salamon lists 14 tools available to government to achieve policy goals. These include social regulation and tax expenditure. He defines the tools of public action as the "instruments or means used to address social problems".⁶ Salamon argues that efficacy and efficiency of government action is dependent upon the tools a governmental body chooses to apply. In order to have the greatest impact, government should carefully consider which tools are likely to be most effective for each specific instance. While his work focuses on tools for government as a whole, we have drawn on his concepts in developing specific tools that can be deployed by the centre of government.

5 OECD, "Network of Senior Officials from Centres of Government (COG)," Directorate for Public Governance (last accessed 12/7/2020) <https://www.oecd.org/gov/cog.htm>; Martin Alessandro, Mariano Lafuente, Carlos Santiso. (2013) The Role of the centre of government: A literature Review. Inter-American Development Bank.

6 Salamon, L. M. (2002). The New Governance and the Tools of Public Action: An Introduction. In L. M. Salamon (Ed.), *The Tools of Government* (p. 1). Oxford University Press.

Our tools are organised in four distinct clusters:

- 1 Planning from the centre:** setting priorities and aligning agencies around a clear plan of action
- 2 Governing from the centre:** creating structures to drive priorities
- 3 Improving implementation from the centre:** spreading and modelling behaviours using evidence and data
- 4 Impacting service provision from the centre:** offering or supporting the provision of services with COG resources.

Our tools focus on specific actions that the centre of government can take to drive a priority area for a leader. They go beyond the traditional areas of responsibility that are more well known that inherently sit with the centre of government where much more has already been written such as:

- **Coordinating cross-governmental decision-making through Cabinet, Cabinet Committees and other similar means:** Centres of government are typically responsible for the processes that allow for collective decision-making including setting an agenda, priorities and actions. They ensure that key decisions and announcements by government have been cleared by other relevant governmental actors. Institutions such as the Cabinet Office in the United Kingdom, the General Secretary in France, and Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet in Australia, or the Policy Councils in the United States serve these roles.
- **Building a whole-of-government budget:** While there are significant differences between nations in terms of the balance of power between the legislative and executive branches on budget setting, responsibility for budget setting and oversight within the executive branch is an inherent function for the centre of government. In the United States, for example, this function is played by the Office of Management and Budget which compiles the President's Budget (although the budget is often just a starting point for Congressional appropriators who make significant changes to spending priorities before finalising line ministry appropriations). In the United Kingdom, the Treasury draws up line ministry budgets – and while Parliament does have the ultimate say, in reality it exercises little discretion because there is a much weaker separation of powers between the executive and legislative branch.
- **Providing policy guidelines on mission support functions such as pay policy, financial reporting, IT, HR etc:** While the details vary significantly between countries, the centre normally has some responsibility for a number of cross-government functions where consistency across line ministries is important. For example, civil service pay and pension policy is normally the responsibility of the centre of government. Similarly, centres of government are often responsible for managing the government's accounts – from setting accounting and reporting standards to presenting information on revenue and expenditures in a consistent way. Other areas include overall standards for information technology (such as cyber security) and policies that govern civil servants. In each of these areas, the role of the centre of government is focused on setting standards and driving consistency, with line ministries taking on the bulk of the work.

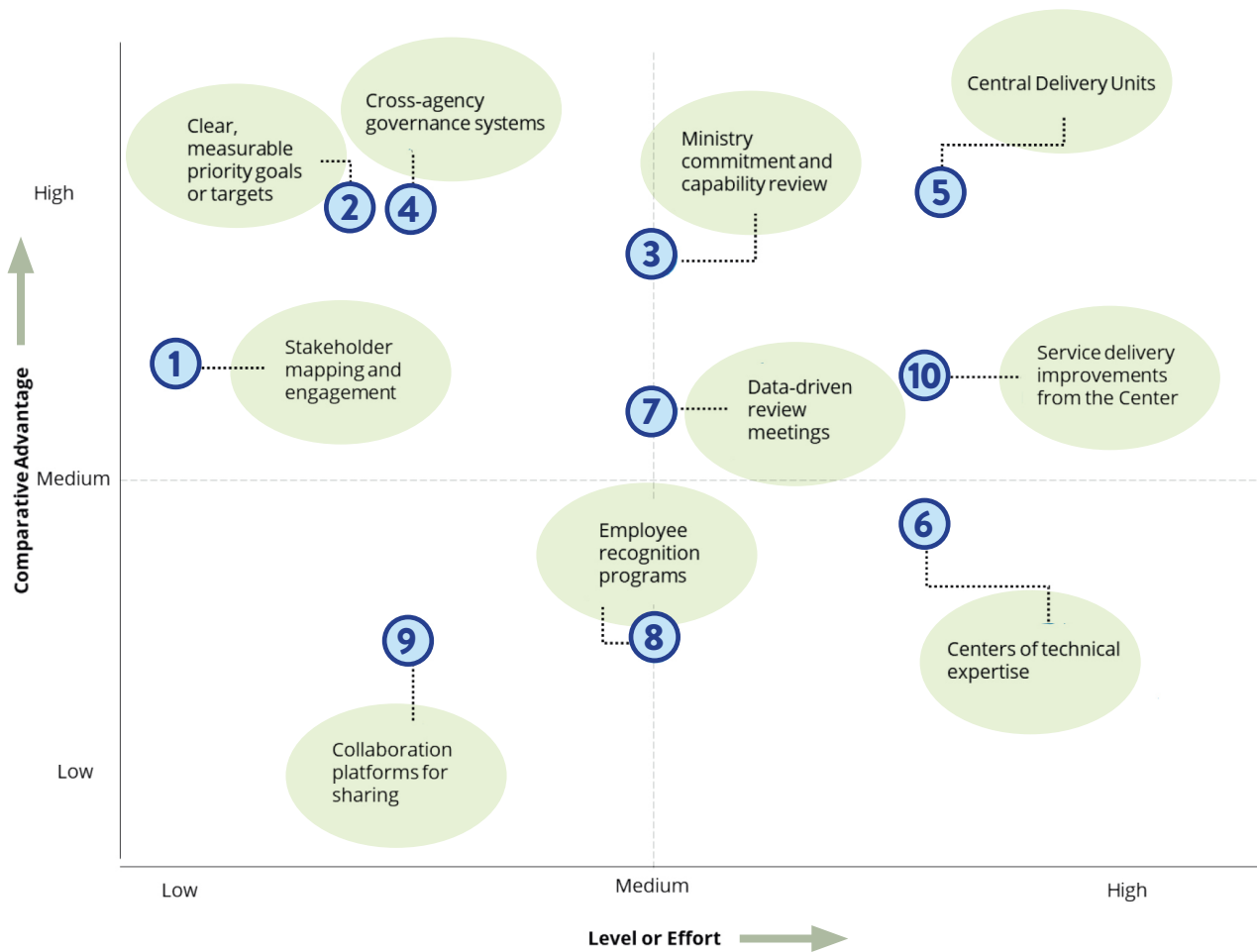
- **Strategic communications:** The centre plays a key role in government communications (internal and external) that often sets the national agenda as well as the orientation of line ministries and external partners. Coordination of communications, including a spokesperson responsible for articulating messages from the president or prime ministers, and, in some countries, standards for government websites or even interactions identifying mechanisms for engagement with civil society is an increasingly critical function. This role has been an area of increasing focus in an era of misinformation that is threatening government's ability to deliver information to its citizens in trusted ways.

Our tools build on the more traditional areas of responsibility to identify new techniques centres of government *could* use to overcome identified challenges. Our assumption is that governments would combine the traditional tools described above in combination with the ones discussed in this article. For example, if the objective is to reduce time for infrastructure permitting, the centre of government should examine the funding levels for agencies that have responsibilities for reviewing and approving permits for infrastructure projects, and it can also communicate the importance of the issue both internally and externally through the government's spokesperson. But governments should also be looking at new interventions such as regularly reviewing and using data, or new central units to unblock coordination challenges.

The rest of this article presents more detail on the tools of the centre of government. Each tool can be used individually or combined with others to amplify impact. As illustrated in the diagram, we have mapped these tools on two dimensions – the *effort* involved in setting up and deploying the tool (this captures the time involved, the technical expertise or skill needed and costs) and the *comparative advantage* of central deployment (the extent to which the tool naturally lends itself to use by the centre rather than by line ministries).

If these tools can successfully achieve the necessary impact, they will be the most efficient way forward (not only are these tools easier to deploy by the centre, but they are also ones which naturally lend themselves to action by the centre). Sometimes it is clear from the outset that the most efficient tools will not create sufficient impact and in these cases, it is worth considering the tools that are *higher potential effort* and *lower comparative advantage*, bearing in mind that they will take more time to demonstrate impact and will be harder to set up. Sometimes, the best way forward might be to try the *lowest effort* tools first to demonstrate quick (though potentially small impact) results and then graduate to other tools if necessary. Obviously, there are infinite considerations that must be taken into account given the unique political, cultural, historical and governance characteristics of each society and government that will factor the impact one might expect from the use of these tools.

Some tools require considerable, sustained effort (over many months or even years) – while these tools have definite merit and can be worth the effort in the right circumstances, we would recommend these tools be deployed sparingly. Importantly, the centre should establish clearly that other tools are unlikely to be effective, and there is leadership commitment and resources to successfully deploy the more complex tools. Note, there is not a methodology that led to these assessments; however, it is based on the authors’ and our colleagues’ experiences working with several governments over the years – and intended to be a way to start a conversation with leadership and other partners.





Planning from the centre: *defining success and setting up agencies to improve*

Government-wide policy formulation and cross-agency coordination are roles that centres of government are designed to play. The tools outlined in this cluster help centres of government step into these roles through planning efforts that are designed to break out of the traps governments often fall into by: proactively engaging within and outside government, being extremely clear about success, defining priorities in a way that forces real choices, and setting up the conditions for improvement.

① Stakeholder engagement and problem identification to set the stage

The centre of government has the broadest perspective on the stakeholders on any given issue. Stakeholders play a critical role in whether reform initiatives succeed in the public sector. Deliberately mapping and engaging external stakeholders will often mean the difference between success and failure. Common mapping dimensions include the extent to which a stakeholder may influence the creation or implementation of a policy and the extent to which a stakeholder will be impacted by the policy. Based on this alignment, the COG can prioritise stakeholder outreach and engagement.

Not only does the COG have the broadest perspective on who stakeholders are, but it also has the strongest power to convene them. Leaders that are willing to use the power of convening embedded within the COG to bring different perspectives together for honest debate are able to achieve one of the most mature (and least utilised) functions of the COG: after considering a range of options, making a decision on a path forward among actors with different perspectives. Governments can often persuade external actors to undertake voluntary actions that assist with achieving priorities – for example, standard-setting efforts, or cooperation across or between civil society, the private sector and government. To make this happen, sometimes all that is needed is for a senior leader from the centre of government to send the invite and attend. For example, many business and civil society leaders will accept an invite to any meeting convened by a president or prime minister's office – especially if the meeting includes some face time with the senior-most political leaders.

Though these convenings are sometimes merely used to drive media attention for political ends, they can be much more powerful when there is a legitimate policy or implementation question that needs to be resolved. They can be organised at different stages of action – early on to generate ideas, or further down the road to lift up promising practices.

Perhaps most important to successful use of this tool is engagement with a wide variety of internal actors that are critical to the delivery of programmes – from leadership to front lines to end users. A clear definition of the problem informed by multiple perspectives is a critical step that is often overlooked. For example, the US Digital Services performs a 2–3 week “Discovery Sprint” to quickly build a common understanding of the status of a complex organisation, system, or service (sprint.usds.gov).

There are several advantages to deploying engagement with internal and external stakeholders as a tool:

- It leverages an informal power of the COG as a national leader that can help bridge divisions within a country.
- Convening external actors allows government leaders to access a wider set of ideas and thinking that may uncover innovative solutions to longstanding challenges.
- Engaging a broad set of stakeholders early and/or frequently can help others feel ownership over the development of a plan and demonstrate its robustness, which may convince others to follow the plan once implemented.
- Open government and radical transparency are important ways to gain confidence and engage broad parts of civil society.

There are also considerations to be aware of:

- Events can become one-off convenings that take considerable resources for small teams to plan and execute well, with relatively few new insights generated or follow-up actions.
- The COG can sometimes shoulder the blame if the effort fails to deliver a consensus recommendation that is adopted.
- There is a risk that commitments made at the convening will be overtaken by other priorities or lack resources to follow through.
- Success will depend on a significant number of resources dedicated to checking that any commitments that are made result in action.
- Transparency requirements may require all meetings to be part of the public record, making honest discussions difficult.

Main use case

This tool can be used to uncover new perspectives and/or to promote consensus amongst stakeholders. It can be used frequently and easily but should be tied to a specific question or challenge to be most effective.

② Priority setting with clear measures of success

Centres of government can work with ministries and agencies to define a limited number of results-oriented goals that focus on problems to be solved that leaders are committed to fixing. Many sets of “priorities” are established in a government including legislative priorities, communications priorities, political priorities, policy actions, budget priorities, foreign policy priorities etc. However, much less frequently do we see a set of priorities that articulate an outcome (or even an output) that are framed in a way that explains to the public the specific problem or challenge that will be solved and how it will impact their life. And yet, when citizens were asked in a 2010 survey in the United States what governments could do that would improve their confidence, the number one response was to set clear goals that were measured by real-world results that matter to citizens.⁷

AAs Jim Collins would argue, each organisation needs a limited number of BHAGs – Big Hairy Audacious Goals – that are clear and compelling and serve as a unifying focal point of effort.⁸ Goals can address mission outcomes that require cross-governmental action such as addressing climate change, increasing employment or addressing the impacts of migration. Cross-agency goals can also be focused on mission support functions such as improving employee engagement levels, reducing costs of common goods and services, or retiring legacy IT systems. They can also relate to issues that fall more clearly within the responsibility of a single agency such as improving the care of veterans or transitioning from paper-based to digital services.

Being clear about what success looks like in government is challenging. By defining clear goals and a targeted level of improvement over a given timeframe, governments can focus energy in agencies. For example, in the United States, there are a defined set of Agency and Cross-Agency Priority (CAP) goals (see graphic below). These goals are negotiated between the centre and agencies, and progress is carefully tracked. Internally, agency leaders are required to use data to review progress at least once per quarter (with many agencies reviewing monthly). Externally, progress is reported publicly on a central site: www.performance.gov. For each priority, the name and photo of the goal leaders is posted online in order to clarify who is accountable for the goal, regardless of organisational boundaries.

⁷ Guy Molyneux and Ruy Teixeira, with John Whaley. (July 2010). *Better, Not Smaller: What Americans Want from their Federal Government*. Centre for American Progress.

⁸ Collins, J. C. 1., & Porras, J. I. (2002). *Built to last: successful habits of visionary companies*. New York: HarperBusiness Essentials. Collins, James C.

Agency and Cross-Agency Priority Goal Overview



There are several advantages to deploying measurable priority goals for agencies as a tool:

- Setting priorities is a well-recognised leading practice of successful leaders in public and private sector organisations to drive changes in particular areas that are critical for the organisation's success. Goals can be focused on outcomes or be designed to be outcome-oriented (where evidence shows the link between outputs and outcomes).
- With a focus on the goal, agencies are incentivised to develop, deploy and adjust detailed plans with specific milestones/actions and metrics to track progress frequently.
- For goals that cut across different agencies, there is an increased need for senior officials to be engaged to use their convening power to enable officials to work together from different organisations.
- Leaders are incentivised to develop organisational routines using data to accelerate progress, which is a positive not just for the leader but the organisational culture. For example, in the US, a survey found that managers that were exposed to performance routines were more likely to use performance information in decision-making.⁹

⁹ Donald P. Moynihan and Alexander Kroll. "Performance Management Routines that Work? An Early Assessment of the GPRA Modernization Act." *Public Administration Review*. (314-323, Volume 76, Issue 2) (2016) <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/puar.12434>

There are also considerations to be aware of:

- Political and career leaders will struggle developing a list of priorities that by definition excludes some areas. But these goals only work if they are genuinely focused on a set of priorities that represent real choices.
- It's important to pick the right metrics, and ideally ones that are outcomes or where there is clear evidence that they lead to outcomes. In choosing metrics, it's important to think about the potential to incentivise unintended negative consequences and the cost versus benefits of getting accurate, timely data to inform decision-makers at all levels of the organisation.
- Goals are often accompanied by data-driven review meetings (see tool 9 below) and sometimes also by setting up central delivery units (see tool 5 below).
- Fear of failing to meet targets may lead to metrics that are easier to control rather than truly impactful, or conservative targets that fail to incentivise programme changes. A general rule of thumb used in the private sector is you should achieve about 70% of your targets and there should not be penalties for missing targets but to learn why and do something about it.
- Setting the right level of stretch for a goal is important. Impactful goals achieve outcomes that would not just happen anyway. One way to set goals is to model performance without added focus, and then add a stretch element.

Main use case

Priority goals should be set in instances where there are priorities that can be tracked through measurable goals within a specific period of time, often when you have a proven intervention that is ready to be scaled across organisations.

3 Reviews of ministry commitment and capabilities to identify gaps

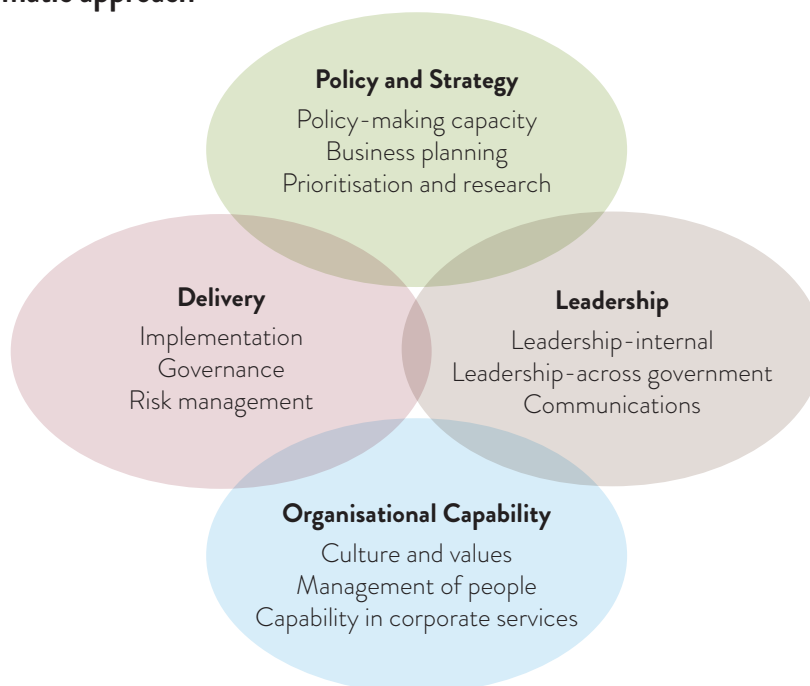
Large scale change programmes often require culture change across government. For example, if the COG is interested in driving a greater focus on customer engagement across government, it will only succeed if line ministries are committed to a culture of customer-centricity and their staff have the necessary skills to successfully implement change. One approach that the centre can adopt to ensure commitment to change efforts is to clearly define the parameters of culture change that are needed and then to review each ministry to assess the extent to which they are meeting the mark.

Governments adopt this approach of external assessment of capability and commitment in many ways in their relationship with bodies that they fund. For example, a number of countries assess public services such as schools, hospitals, housing providers etc. Similarly, government agencies also carry out inspections of regulated private sector entities to establish compliance with regulations (for example, organisations as diverse as food premises to banks are subject to regulatory inspections). In addition, international bodies such as the OECD and IMF often conduct peer assessments of different nations' capacity in various policy areas. For example, the Financial Action Task Force carries out assessments of countries' compliance with international standards to combat money laundering and terrorist financing. They publish reports based on peer review – where expert government officials visit other nations to conduct an assessment of other nations' performance and publish reports.¹⁰ In each instance where this approach is used, there is a framework that defines standards, often supported by a maturity model that describes different levels of performance.

This concept of external assessment can also be used to drive change that is initiated by a review from the centre of government. For example, a number of countries including Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and Ireland have adopted capability reviews of line ministries. These focus on assessing overall organisational capability of a ministry. For example, Ireland's review process assesses policy and strategy, delivery, leadership and organisational capability (see graphic overleaf).

¹⁰ For more information on Financial Action Task Force's peer reviews, visit <http://www.fatf-gafi.org/publications/mutualevaluations>

Ireland's thematic approach¹¹



Each ministry review team is comprised of senior leaders external to the ministry being assessed – drawn from other ministries or outside government – and publishes a report that describes areas of strength and potential improvement. Some countries have also begun to use enterprise risk management frameworks as a mechanism to examine a wide range of organisational risks, including using employee survey data to conduct organisational health scans.

While most capability reviews focus on overall organisational capacity, it is also possible to focus on a specific policy area. For example, the United Kingdom conducted reviews of ministries and regulators to establish their capacity for driving regulatory reform.

Rather than an external assessment, it is also possible to perform capability reviews using maturity models with self-assessment mechanisms to identify gaps and steps to close them. The United States, for instance, has each of its 25 high-impact service providers complete a public self-assessment of its customer experience programmes based on a government-wide maturity model which is updated each quarter. This method is also a more effective way to get buy-in from line ministries than having an external party perform the assessment.

There are several advantages to reviewing ministry capabilities and risks:

- By establishing a clear framework of “what good looks like”, the centre is able to drive culture change across government.
- Reviews are often led by “peer” reviewers – senior leaders from other ministries. Not only does this establish credibility for the process but it also serves as a form of training because reviewers gain exposure to different ways of working across government.

¹¹ Ireland DBEI. Capability Review: Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation. December 6, 2018. <https://enterprise.gov.ie/en/Publications/Publication-files/Capability-Review-DBEI.pdf>

- Review reports can provide detailed information on relative strengths and potential areas of improvement that are very valuable to ministry leaders along with practical recommendations on how to improve.
- Ministry officials who are responsible for championing the specific focus of the review (such as customer focus) sometimes welcome external reviews as they communicate to leaders that their work is seen as a priority by the centre of government.

There are also considerations to be aware of:

- Reviews need to be structured so they are not punitive – if line ministries perceive the reviews as an exercise focused on identifying weaknesses, then they will get defensive.
- While most reviews are published, sometimes this can make it harder to provide honest assessments as ministries may not want their weaknesses to be widely visible. They may be more comfortable with a private report that helps them understand potential areas of focus. Some information may not even be shared with the COG to encourage candour.
- Review processes are time-intensive and require sustained commitment – there must be a clear action that will be taken to avoid the costs outweighing the benefits.
- Line ministries need to buy into review conclusions and peer review processes with a mechanism to ensure consistency to help to gain ministry buy-in. Maturity models can be an effective way to get buy-in from ministries.

Main use case

There are two main use cases associated with capability reviews: 1) when there is a need to understand performance outliers and identify mitigating actions (a scan across organisations which benefits from using a high-value data); and 2) when a change management effort is being implemented and organisational capabilities are an important factor in overall success.



Governing from the centre: *creating structures to drive improvements*

The tools outlined in this cluster help centres of government create the structures needed to organise and drive change across agencies. This is a function that centres of government are well equipped to fulfill, as they have the needed authority to define roles and responsibilities for line ministries. They clarify authority and accountability while providing formal mechanisms to solicit new views and expertise. These tools can be used to varying degrees, based on need and the availability of desired skillsets.

4 Cross-agency governance systems to drive decision-making across organisations

Countries face horizontal problems but are organised by vertical ministries, agencies, programmes and activities. The COG has the unique ability to create governance systems that can overcome this fundamental challenge to meaningfully address issues that cannot be solved by a single ministry/agency. Presidential executive orders, decrees and memoranda can be used to establish or even create new governance structures that are responsible for developing and implementing new policies or programmes to address a cross-cutting issue.

Governments have developed detailed decision-making processes based on clear hierarchies over decades, if not centuries. However, none of this is useful – and may even be counterproductive – when issues require multiple agencies to work together. Cross-agency governance systems – which can be defined through written documents such as charters, MOUs or mandates signed by a lead COG office – will often outline a clear scope for the problem, roles and responsibilities of leaders, and meeting cadence. Sometimes these arrangements can be led by a line ministry official who is either seconded to the COG or takes on leadership responsibilities in addition to their day-to-day role. To be effective, they need to be supported with dedicated staff whose functions may range from secretariat roles to complex policy development (requiring subject matter expertise and an ability to

effectively work across the inter-agency to drive change). These systems are more than inter-agency committees, however, because they have their own policymaking staff who can analyse data, formulate policy options, inform decision-making and hold agencies accountable. They can be temporary to address a specific issue, or potentially take on a longer-term role.

For example, many countries including Singapore and New Zealand set up cross-agency governance systems to address the coronavirus pandemic. While the details of these systems vary between nations, they were all designed to coordinate policy and implementation across a number of government ministries. These time-limited structures can quickly analyse data to drive policy formulation and follow up. They are supported by staff and sometimes have direct access to resources.

Another example is the Performance Accountability Council in the United States that was set up to lead reforms of the process for granting security clearances to federal employees and contractors. Not only did it bring together accountable officials across government, but it also had full-time staff dedicated to supporting inter-agency reform efforts. Ultimately, if successful, these governance systems will change agency official behaviours to have a responsibility to the broader government-wide objectives rather than just the more narrow interests of their individual programme. Some cross-agency systems can be temporary, while others are permanent.

There are several advantages to deploying the cross-agency governance systems as a tool:

- They can be highly responsive to emerging priorities and rapidly focus attention and energy on defining policy and driving progress.
- They bring together key officials from across government to work together on cross-cutting issues. As such, they encourage thinking and establish decision-making systems across organisational boundaries.
- It is easier to implement a new governance system than a proposal to reorganise existing agencies.
- Systems have minimal costs since they often leverage existing officials, though assembling resources in the centre is critical for long-term success and is never easy (may require creative solutions).
- Relatively small teams (perhaps as few as 3–4 officials) can make a significant impact.

There are also considerations to be aware of:

- Simply naming a Senior Responsible/Accountable Official or even standing up an inter-agency council may feel responsive, but that alone is rarely sufficient to address an issue if existing officials are not able (or willing) to pursue progress.
- The centre often lacks the expertise to formulate detailed, complex policy options in areas that have typically been the focus of line ministries. One way to mitigate that risk can be to provide these governance committees with full-time dedicated staff that can be innovative and work with line ministries (perhaps individuals seconded from ministries with subject matter expertise).
- Sometimes the centre can think of solutions in overly theoretical ways. Few in the centre have deep experience of programme implementation or day-to-day stakeholder

management and so can be attracted to policies that “look good on paper”, but may not work in practice. One way to mitigate that is to make a concerted effort to listen to the views of the front line, for example by including frontline workers who would be responsible for implementation in the group, or alternatively having a separate frontline sounding board.

- Clear decision-making processes – including regular check-ins with the COG – are needed to escalate and resolve differences between agencies or a loss of momentum, which may be challenging given individuals’ orientation to vertical accountability structures.
- Councils or committees run the risk of devolving into unaccountable working groups that continue forever without a clear purpose or deliverable. Regular renewal of mandates, charters and MOUs with clear COG support to make use of agency officials’ time should be required to avoid this, as well as using time-limited task forces that have a deliverable and then are sunset.

Main use case

Cross-agency governance systems can be a powerful tool for the COG to establish decision-making structures for issues that require coordination from multiple agencies. However, for it to be successful, it should be primarily used when existing officials have sufficient expertise, authority and bandwidth to tackle the challenge and there is dedicated staff to support decision-making processes.

5 Central delivery units to drive progress on top priorities

While the major centre of government responsibilities traditionally focus on policy, budget, communications and parliamentary relationships, over the last two decades, governments have been experimenting with standing up new teams to oversee and support progress towards a select number of priority goals. These central delivery units can be formed of a small group of highly skilled people who help line ministries achieve outcomes for a number of initiatives that leadership deems “mission critical” or top priority (as such they are normally deployed to focus on clear, measurable priority goals as described above in tool 2).

More than 25 countries including the United Kingdom, Malaysia and Rwanda have set up delivery units to focus on driving top government priorities.¹² Many units focus on critical priority goals such as improving school attainment (see tool 10), while others are focused on goals such as making sure major infrastructure projects remain on track. While line ministries remain accountable for driving implementation, these units help them achieve their goals. Their role cannot be to supplant line ministries, but to assist them – and to succeed they should be seen as collaborators.

There are several advantages to deploying a central unit as a tool:

- They focus attention on the priority goals that are most important to leaders in the centre of government.
- The most effective delivery units focus on a simple but consistent set of questions, such as whether the pace of improvement is sufficient to achieve priority goals, whether the planned programmes and initiatives are on track to close any gaps in achieving the goals, whether stakeholders at all levels are aligned etc. These non-policy questions can help to shift culture in government, with a significantly heightened focus on implementation to drive real-world change, rather than the traditional tools of policy announcements.
- A central unit, with additional capacity and different skillset than what is traditionally available for line ministries, can bring new and innovative perspectives to difficult challenges.
- A dedicated team focused on a particular implementation-oriented strategy can ensure that coordination, collaboration and other implementation-focused responsibilities are not overtaken by other more urgent policy, budget and communications duties.
- Because senior leadership typically sponsors and oversees their operations, central delivery units can have the authority to overcome barriers that delay progress, connect people and resources, and mitigate risks.

¹² Jen Gold. “Tracking delivery: Global trends and warning signs in delivery units.” Institute for Government (2017), <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/Global%20Delivery%20report.pdf>; LaFuente, Mariano and Gonzalez, Sebastian. “Do Delivery Units Deliver?: Assessing Government Innovations (2018), <https://publications.iadb.org/en/do-delivery-units-deliver-assessing-government-innovations>

There are also considerations to be aware of:

- Delivery units require visible support and sponsorship from senior political leaders (often the president or prime minister or their deputy) and can be closely identified with that leader. This can be a significant weakness if senior political leaders change (many delivery units struggle with efficacy after their sponsors move on).
- There must be a clear focus on mission results and comparative advantage for a new unit with a well-defined operating model on what issues to engage with and why, otherwise it won't be able to win the necessary "buy-in."
- These units require staff who are able to look at complex issues from a "whole of government" lens and help to unblock barriers within and outside government. Some unit staff may be on secondment to the centre from line ministries or frontline delivery organisations.
- Clarity between the central unit's role and that of line ministries is critical and there must be a concerted effort to build a collaborative relationship that line ministries see as a value-add. The best central delivery units view their roles as "servant leaders" and always give credit to line ministries. Relevant actors must be engaged in defining the scope and roles/responsibilities. While units can help to facilitate and support implementation, it is important that responsibility for detailed implementation and the credit that flows from success should continue to sit with line ministries.
- Units need to work closely with budget offices – sometimes successfully achieving priorities requires funding.
- Sometimes offices can outlast their usefulness. Often set up because they focus on the priorities of the president or prime minister, as those priorities change, the units can lose their influence and importance. In such cases, it's important to either sunset the unit, or move its responsibilities to the relevant line ministries.

Main use case

Heads of governments may find delivery units appealing as a way to exert more influence over line ministries and focus them on their top priorities. However, they may not be sustained across administrations given the connection to the head of government and may prioritise short-term wins over systemic changes needed.

6 Centres of technical expertise to spread adoption of leading practices

Government lags the private sector on satisfaction with services. The public is increasingly used to rapid innovation in their interactions with private sector organisations, but often see government as less customer-centred and slower to adopt leading techniques. In part, this is because most government agencies do not have access to experts on leading-edge, innovative approaches, and the effort to hire these people into smaller agencies can be too great. To change this paradigm, the centre of government is well positioned to build centres of technical expertise that act as hubs to help spread the adoption of leading techniques across ministries that can be identified from bottom-up experimentation. COG officials should be unapologetic about deploying this tool, even if most of the people in the COG are more focused on policy, communications or budget.

Some governments – including the United States and Denmark – have set up centres of excellence focused on building capacity across government in tools such as human-centred design and digital technology adoption. Others have focused on technological innovation, such as the adoption of artificial intelligence or improving digital services. For example, several countries have established digital services teams that attract top talent into the COG to focus on high-profile projects. Often, these units are able to recruit talent that goes beyond what individual ministries can attract by promising them access to leadership and an ability to work on the most challenging and impactful projects. The US, UK and other countries have established these digital services units which produce some of the highest return on investments anywhere in government and bring a different type of professional into the COG with a more implementation-focused mindset that can ideally inform policy. Some countries have built units focused on specific techniques such as behavioural insights.¹³ Sometimes these units can be “incubated” in the COG with a view to them being placed in a line ministry over time or they can be jointly owned by the COG and a line ministry with reporting lines to political leaders in the centre as well as a line ministry.

These organisations play an active role in providing technical assistance to line ministries to help them deploy innovative techniques.

There are several advantages to deploying centres of technical expertise as a tool:

- Builds cross-government capacity on innovative, emerging techniques for achieving a specific outcome.
- A cross-government approach can help to attract talent because roles in the COG supporting numerous line ministries may be more attractive to experts in a specific field.
- Agencies are able to access leading-edge expertise at low cost.
- Centres of excellence can help with the dissemination of success stories between agencies, helping to accelerate adoption.
- Reduces duplication of efforts and supports the development of common tools and approaches.

¹³ For more information, visit the OECD’s Behavioural Insights webpage: <https://www.oecd.org/gov/regulatory-policy/behavioural-insights.htm>

There are also considerations to be aware of:

- The COG should not own delivery. It can be a catalyst for change by providing expertise, support and guidance. For example, it may create guidance, provide training, or offer support on a project basis. But ultimate responsibility for decision-making and implementation should sit with line ministries.
- The COG should never take credit for improvement that belongs to the line ministries and frontline employees.

Main use case

Centres of technical innovation are excellent tools if the COG wants to foster innovation, spread new behaviours across agencies and attract new talent. It is most appropriate when the COG is interested in creating communities of practice that can share lessons learned and innovative tools in areas that are common across agencies, rather than supporting direct delivery.



3

CLUSTER TOOLS

Improving implementation from the centre: *creating routines and driving change*

7 Data-driven review meetings to engage leaders in implementation

Countries face challenges turning policy intentions into actual results, and often government leaders are frustrated by the lack of progress on the ground. With most of the energy in the centre of government dedicated to policy matters, the centre has typically played a limited role once the implementation phase commences.

One important tool that has been widely deployed is for the centre to convene “stock-take” or “data-driven review” meetings which bring leaders from across government together to assess data on progress, typically against priority goals (see tool 2 above). This concept is relatively straightforward and has been widely implemented across COGs at both national and sub-national level. Effective data-driven review meetings focus on three questions: “What progress are we making towards our goal?” “Why?” and “What adjustments should we make to increase the chances of achieving the goal?”.

Perhaps most powerful is leveraging disaggregated data to understand who is at the bottom and top, and, most importantly, truly understanding why. The data should begin a conversation rather than provide a final answer. In particular, this more granular data can be used to involve frontline workers and/or customers, so that decisions are rooted in the reality of their experience. For example, in the US, the PMA set a goal to improve the employee engagement levels of the least engaged 20% of work units in the federal government by 20% by 2020.

For example, Canada has convened regular data-driven reviews of progress on priority goals between the COG and line ministries which are formalised in mandate letters between the prime minister and ministers and are tracked publicly.¹⁴ Colombia has also implemented results-priorities with the president engaging directly with line ministries on progress. The

¹⁴ Privy Council Office, “Mandate Letter Tracking: Delivering Results for Canadians,” Government of Canada, Last updated June 20, 2019, <https://www.canada.ca/en/privy-council/campaigns/mandate-tracker-results-canadians.html>

approach has been successfully used in many city and state governments too – for example, to accelerate crime reduction efforts.

There are several advantages to deploying data-driven reviews as a tool:

- Using data to regularly track progress allows for a continued focus on priorities that persists for long after major policy announcements.
- Bringing together leaders across agencies can help unblock issues that are cross-cutting.
- Establishes routines that focus leadership attention-based data from customers or frontline employees versus political or communications priorities (eg STAT reviews).
- Creates a learning culture that seeks to improve knowledge of what works within different contexts and how to improve implementation of programmes.

There are also considerations to be aware of:

- Successful data-driven reviews require clearly defined priority goals (see tool 2) and a clear focus on progress towards the goals in the meetings.
- Data-driven reviews require data – not just to give insights into overall progress but also to dig deeper into bright spots, identify areas where progress has been insufficient and adjust plans for the future.
- There are significant limits of availability, access, sharing and quality of data across governments that must be considered. Working across statistical, evaluation, universities and other offices to identify the range of existing data that could be leveraged without creating new burden is critical.
- Many in line ministries are not used to scrutiny from the centre on implementation. To succeed, the centre needs to persuade line ministries that its intentions are to assist with better implementation rather than just creating stronger forms of accountability.
- Data-driven reviews are unlikely to be effective if their focus is merely on checking whether planned actions are undertaken on schedule. Success requires using data to understand what is (and isn't) working and a willingness to change the intervention mix regularly. This nimbleness can feel uncomfortable for some. The approach requires timely, insightful data, as well as sophisticated analytical and decision-structuring skills to interpret data and present options for adjusting the approach.
- Leadership has to demonstrate continued commitment, engagement and presence in the process.
- Data-driven reviews require some dedicated staff with the necessary skills to create materials to allow for high-quality discussion.

Main use case

Data-driven reviews can be effective at driving progress on leadership's priorities. They will require time from leadership and staff with the skills needed to analyse and visualise data, and, importantly, available data that can be gathered frequently to gain actionable insights.

8 Employee recognition programmes to recognise employees and model behaviours

To establish a culture that is truly focused on people – more than process, politics or policy – the centre of government has an important role to recognise government’s successes, while being honest about its failures. One of the least costly but very under-utilised actions COGs can take is to sponsor their own award programme to recognise civil servants and their programme improvements. Establishing a recognition/awards programme provides the COG with a tangible way to reinforce priorities and create incentive for others to adopt. It both accelerates and makes change management objectives more “sticky” and will likely improve engagement of the workforce that is critical to successful delivery.

For example, the United States Office of Management and Budget has established a “Gears of Government” Award programme that includes dozens of awardees at the agency level and then a limited number that receive the President’s Award. Similarly, in Peru, an external thinktank (Ciudadanos al Dia) has worked with the government to administer a programme for more than 15 years.

There are several advantages to deploying non-financial recognition programmes as a tool:

- It helps counter negative press coverage of government initiatives.
- It can help highlight and model the behaviours the COG is trying to spread.
- It reinforces the COG as a strategic partner (versus solely an issuer of mandates).

There are also considerations to be aware of:

- The workload associated with this type of programme should not be underestimated; it can have considerable administrative burden.
- Asking for nominations directly to the COG from frontline employees can be overwhelming on the limited capacity of the COG. Be sure to engage line ministries in review/assessment to get their buy-in, as well as to manage workload.
- Sometimes, programmes led by external organisations can be more powerful – especially in highly politicised environments.

Main use case

While some investment in time and resources by COG staff is required, there is a clear upside to establishing recognition programmes that become institutionalised over time. Ideally, these create a culture within the COG that develops partnerships with agencies and recognises government’s most important asset: its civil servants. This tool should be used frequently and requires relatively little capacity for the benefits it provides.

9 Collaboration platforms for creating communities of practice

Rigid one-size-fits-all policies are too often designed to work for exactly the number of people that the name suggests: one. While there are definite advantages to government-wide frameworks and policies, there is a need to ensure flexibility in implementation within ministries and programmes. Line ministries can be the drivers of innovation, and their real-world experience on “what works” is important to help others. The centre of government is uniquely positioned to facilitate the exchange of information across agencies to improve the ability of professionals to make a difference.

COGs have a number of “soft” tools that enable them to showcase the behaviours they want others to adopt. Practitioners in the centre may not realise it but collaboration platforms and other tools to drive collaboration and adoption of leading practices include organising events, developing toolkits, building websites for exchange of information, training etc. While the centre may facilitate cross-agency knowledge exchange, it is rarely the source of leading practices. It should be responsible for identifying those individuals with the greatest success with implementation and leverage their strategies, practices, tools etc to facilitate adoption by others.

For example, early in the implementation of data driven reviews in the United States, the Office of Management and Budget established a data-driven review working group of agency officials responsible for supporting their leadership’s monthly/quarterly data-driven reviews of priority goals. Importantly, the centre of government was not a participant in review meetings. It instead created templates for how to set up, execute and follow up on the reviews to help ease the adoption of the data-driven review practice. Some ministries even began allowing other agencies to observe each other’s reviews, which was a more powerful way to drive authentic change than even having something established in law.

There are several advantages to deploying collaboration platforms as a tool:

- Ability to scan across ministries to find leaders that can help others.
- The COG has natural authority to act as a convener.
- Greater consistency in implementation can be promoted by sharing practices. It is important, though, to stay very practical on areas where there is likely to be the most common interest (eg how to tell a story with data, how to develop a clear milestone) to ensure agencies get sufficient information to mirror implementation practices
- Limited burden on COG, as other entities will be responsible for developing the practices or completing the templates.

There are also considerations to be aware of:

- COG engagement in groups established to exchange leading practices may steer the discussion back to policy questions rather than focusing on implementation.
- Building a repository of tips, tools and templates that can be accessed only works if enough people use the tools and they are easy to find. There needs to be as great a focus on dissemination and curation as there is on creation.

Main use case

Identifying and facilitating the exchange of practices, tools and templates is a role that the COG is well positioned to do given its ability to work across all agencies; therefore, this tool can be used frequently. However, the process of doing so can be administratively burdensome if not prioritised. Materials can also be difficult to keep updated and, if not done well, can result in “shelf ware”.



Improving service delivery from the centre: *supporting and offering provision of cross-cutting services*

Supporting direct service delivery is an approach that centres of government can deploy to ensure that complex challenges are appropriately prioritised and resourced. Service delivery requires the allocation of significant resources from the COG – including time, money, and staff to operate on the ground – and faces a number of unique challenges due to its position outside of a line ministry. This tool, while incredibly useful in raising the profile of an issue and enabling high levels of oversight on execution, should be limited in use for only the most pressing of priorities. These can begin in the COG but may migrate to a line ministry over time.

10 Service delivery improvements from the centre to drive transformation by integrating policy and implementation

Normally, the COG avoids directly supporting programme delivery, focusing efforts instead on priority setting and coordination between ministries. Sometimes, however, for issues that are high priority for the head of government or for the nation as a whole, there is a case for the COG taking on a deeper role in policymaking, coordination, and sometimes even directly supporting delivery.

For instance, in New Zealand, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern saw child poverty as a priority but recognised that it was an incredibly complex and entrenched issue that a number of different departments had tried to address over the years. To more effectively combat it, the Prime Minister created a new role of Minister for Child Poverty Reduction and decided to hold the role herself. Housed in the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, this new role is supported by the newly established Child Wellbeing and Poverty Reduction Group. It is not only responsible for developing policy, but also leading implementation across government.

Normally, responsibility for a policy area such as child welfare might sit with an education, social welfare or health ministry – but if it is a priority for a government leader who wants to make rapid progress then there is an argument for creating a special unit responsible for it in the centre of government. The programme delivery unit, with its high levels of influence, will be able to secure sufficient resources and support to accelerate progress on a given issues. However, once the programme delivery unit is matured, it may make sense to move the unit out of the centre of government to a line ministry. Otherwise, the COG could end up with a large number of such units.

Remembering back to our opening permitting example, which was based on a real experience in the United States, in that instance initial efforts focused on speeding up a limited number of priority projects. There was a realisation that ministries would shift resources to those projects rather than fixing the system. The executive and legislative branches reached agreement to establish a new Federal Permitting Improvement Steering Council that would be staffed by a central team that would be responsible for overcoming obstacles on specific projects where multiple agencies had to coordinate. After five years, it reduced environmental review times for covered projects by an average of 1.5 years – representing \$12.7 billion in economic investment – and supported the creation of more than 127,000 temporary construction jobs and over 3,000 permanent jobs across the country. Since its inception, the Permitting Council's efforts have resulted in over \$1 billion in cost savings through avoided permitting delays, as reported by project sponsors.

In some respects, this approach is similar to the delivery unit concept. However, instead of applying the delivery tools across a number of priorities identified by the president/prime minister, it can create a central team (eg programme management office) dedicated to leading a transformation of a specific outcome. One advantage of this approach over a delivery unit is that it can be customised to meet the needs of that mission, gaining trust by focusing primarily on assisting the individuals working to execute their mission, rather than running the risk of being seen as primarily a top-down compliance exercise.

There are several advantages to supporting programme delivery with central capabilities:

- Increases focus on priority issue and may be able to quickly secure resourcing for an issue.
- Can attract strong policy minds to assess complex issues and devise effective policy approaches.
- Can improve coordination across agencies – more so than under normal circumstances.
- Can provide greater oversight of implementation to help ensure continued progress.

There are also considerations to be aware of:

- This tool can be adopted in different ways. The New Zealand example of standing up and operation of a new unit can be highly resource intensive. The US example is less intensive as the smaller secretariat-like organisation sitting in the centre of government is sufficient to drive change and accountability.
- Once the leader changes, units or teams focused on the priority area of the former leader may not appear appropriate and may be dissolved.

- The COG does not typically have experience in true service delivery and may face challenges in:
 - Building relationships necessary for successful and rapid delivery.
 - Providing expertise on specific topics.
 - Avoiding redundant actions or duplication of activities that may already have been attempted by line ministries.

Main use case

Supporting programme delivery with central teams should be used as a tool to support particularly entrenched and high-priority challenges that will require collaboration across ministries to achieve a transformation. It should be used rarely and only in instances where it does not duplicate activities undertaken by line ministries, where there are sufficient resources to staff the unit, and where existing relationships can be leveraged to support rapid delivery.

