

The MITRE logo is displayed in a bold, white, sans-serif font. The background of the entire page is a deep blue, featuring a complex network of white and light blue lines and dots, resembling a data network or a molecular structure. On the right side, there is a faint, vertical image of classical columns, possibly from a government building, which adds a sense of institutional authority and history to the modern, tech-oriented design.

Center for
Data-Driven Policy

MANAGING STRATEGICALLY: A THOUGHT PROCESS FOR FEDERAL MANAGERS

by Donald “Donnie” Matlock and Amy Squires

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Introduction

Federal managers at every level are expected to advance measurable progress against competing demands, including:

- Multiple strategic plans (e.g., business strategies, information technology strategies, human capital strategies);
- Unfunded requirements from the executive branch, whether Executive Orders, the President's Management Agenda, or various policy choices;
- Legislative changes from Congress; and
- Improvement recommendations from the Government Accountability Office (GAO).

Making sense of these competing demands can be confusing and overwhelming.¹

Emergent demands require managers at all levels to continuously adjust priorities. In many cases, managers at the highest levels of the federal government are thinking about whole-of-nation challenges, inherently larger than any one Cabinet department and requiring more than a government-only solution. Managers in this situation are often considering with whom to partner (public federal/state/local/Tribal/territorial, private, and non-profit sectors) and what these organizations can collectively do to achieve results. Meanwhile, managers at the lowest levels of the federal government are seeking to align and optimize their resources in accordance with their agency's strategic direction.

Directives from the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and guidance from GAO attempt to help federal managers with these competing demands through annual processes.² However, the management of results, budgets, and people in the

federal government does not conform to an annual cycle. Rather, it requires a set of daily practices made up of behaviors and often difficult choices that managers at every level use to advance the impact of their organization's mission for the American people.

As part of its ongoing effort to promote good management practices and evidence-based decision making, The MITRE Corporation embarked on a study to examine how managers can make daily decisions that accommodate these emergent demands and then determine whether those decisions are making a difference for the people they serve.

In addition to an exhaustive literature review, MITRE's study included dozens of interviews with current and former government officials and leading public administration subject matter experts. It revealed that managers at all levels of the federal government would benefit from a defined thought process that could be used throughout their day to perceive, interpret, and address emergent demands strategically, consistently, and continuously. The thought process could also be used to help managers establish and address competing priorities.

Whether managers choose to walk through a lengthy process with multiple stakeholders or simply take twenty seconds before the start of each meeting, going through the thought process can help them to build intention and align their organization's activities with the organization's strategic ends for the country.

Below, we highlight this thought process and describe how to get started applying it.

Making sense of the unexpected

The study’s results (from both the interviews and the literature review) showed that questions were best used to drive the thought process because they afford managers the opportunity to deliberate, pausing to consider and address each question for themselves.³ By asking intentional questions, managers are better positioned to adopt promising practices: using evidence to inform options, engaging in shared decision making, considering impacts and risks of choices, and managing for progress and results.⁴ Being intentional also allows managers to check their thinking by considering how an answer to one question may drive or constrain answers to another.

The diagram below identifies the recommended driving questions and clarifying questions that make up the thought process. The driving questions on the left serve as a reminder of the three main components of the thought process while the clarifying questions on the right help managers unpack those three components in more

detail. Though depicted primarily in a linear flow, the sequence of questions should be approached in an iterative and interrelated fashion.

Question #1:
What is the desired change in condition we hope our organization can effect for those we serve?

When faced with changing demands, federal managers are better able to contextualize and prioritize activities if they have already articulated a measurable change in condition the organization hopes to effect for the country. By considering who the organization serves and how those customers would recognize success, federal managers can think more expansively than the current constraints of what the organization currently does or is capable of doing as defined by its authorities and legacy appropriations.

Consider an example of a federal agency that provides healthcare. A common approach might be to focus on “improving access to health

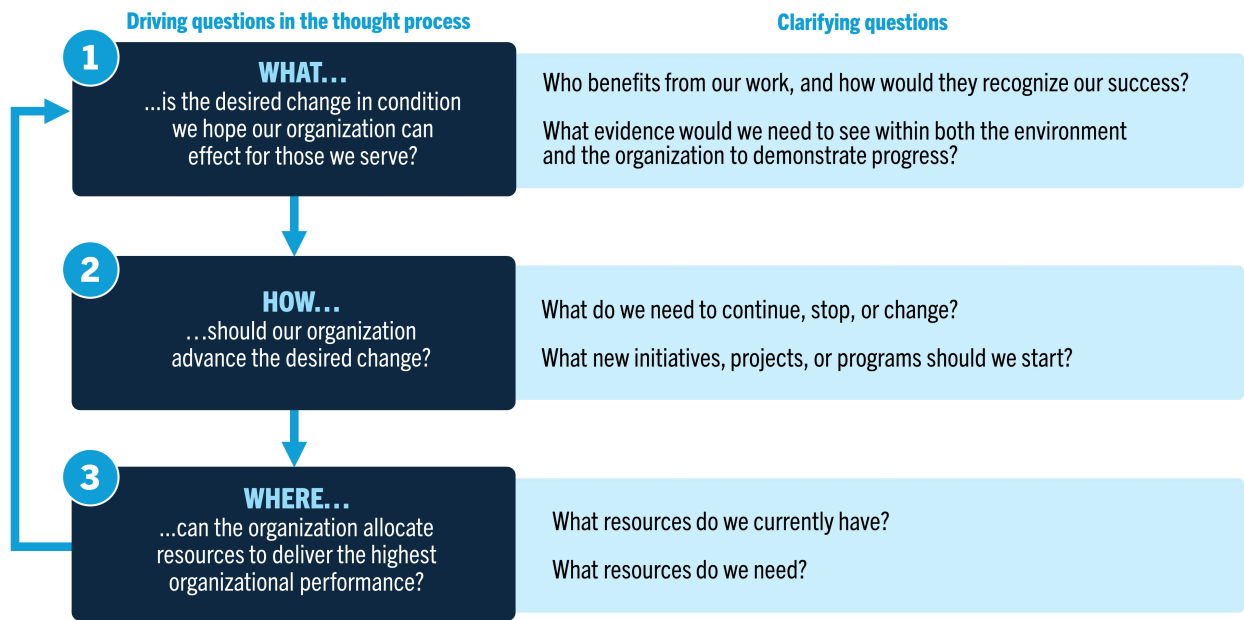


Figure 1. A strategic management thought process

services.” However, this focus is only a means to an end. Clarifying the ends—for example, improved patient well-being—and defining the indicators that would provide evidence for meeting those ends, would open options for how managers should best proceed. These options could include different programs than those traditionally used, new partnerships and alliances, and/or different resources and authorities required to advance the desired end. Considering the question of evidence would also help managers understand which emerging demands best support the patient directly, informing the organization’s new priorities and its budget requests and operational plans.⁵

Sometimes, it can be difficult to describe or consider this change in condition in a *measurable* way. In these situations, it is important to identify the different kinds of things one would wish to measure and to start somewhere with those *qualitative* ideas. This helps the organization articulate what evidence it would like to have to understand progress within and outside the organization. Like a hypothesis to be tested, as managers get more data or guidance from within the organization and externally, the program’s approach and the relevant indicators of progress should be adjusted over time.

Ongoing sensing (noticing that something has changed) and interpreting (understanding what the change means for the organization) can help the organization optimize its resources and results in changing circumstances, in order to continue to advance its mission.⁶ Sensing and interpreting draws on an understanding of:

- Environmental factors,
- Gaps between the current and desired state of the environment, and
- The relationship of the organization’s mission to its partners in the external environment.⁷

Question #2: **How should our organization advance the desired change?**

By knowing the desired change in condition for the nation, managers can look at the constant stream of information they receive to recognize and take advantage of opportunities in the environment. This includes making choices about the organizational system, such as how the organization works with others as allies or partners; what the organization should continue, stop, or change in its work; what new initiatives, projects, and/or programs it should undertake; how it executes those; and what is needed in terms of new people, processes, technologies, and data.⁸

Managers are and should be constantly adjusting to shifting demands—as discussed above, conditions in the environment change, political priorities shift, new legislation is passed that drives new requirements and timelines, and oversight issues need to be addressed. Managers have to optimize the organization’s work amid that dynamic list of priorities and the overall desired results for the mission.

Optimization requires choice-making: managers can engage their direct reports and employees in that process, to define and choose among the competing demands and the organization’s results. This process can build the organization’s commitment to change over time, to have a greater effect for the mission.⁹

In that process, leaders can use these promising practices:

- Engaging in a discussion with the staff about the environment and the rationale for the organization's efforts,
- Collaborating with the staff to clarify intended outcomes that their work strives to achieve, and
- Using available data and qualitative discussion to interpret changes in organizational performance and guide adjustments of activity accordingly.

An additional list of promising practices can be found in the Appendix: Promising Practices for Managers. These leadership behaviors enable managers to juggle competing demands and drive results more effectively for the organization.

Question #3: **Where can the organization allocate resources to deliver the greatest organizational performance?**

This question is one of whether the organization can make a difference through the priorities that managers (and others) have designated, and how best to do so. Ongoing resource allocation is about optimization, using the organization's resources to the fullest advantage to effect the desired change in condition. It requires both understanding what resources the organization currently has and assessing practically if there is a resource gap that keeps the organization from what it aspires to do.

In managing strategically, organizations should continually monitor their execution, and sense and respond to the broader environment. In so doing, they can learn from their efforts and adjust accordingly over time to greatest effect. This learning is reflected in the figure as the feedback arrow that goes from question #3 back to question #1.

A quick-start guide

The research yielded three key recommendations for federal managers employing the thought process in their ongoing management practice. These recommendations are highlighted below.

1 Identify who benefits from the organization's work, what success looks like from their perspective, and the evidence needed to demonstrate progress within and outside the organization.

The experts we interviewed emphasized that it is critical to be specific and to discretely describe what is different (e.g., what changes in condition for the Veteran are intended with individual programs?). Real mission results (e.g., patient well-being) can be hard to quantify, and whole-of-nation challenges even more so; therefore, managers should identify multiple indicators to help themselves and partners/allies "triangulate" on progress and results. The choice of measurable indicators might change over time as uncertainty about the end state is addressed.

2 Communicate the intended results as widely as possible.

Day-to-day execution tends to dominate most management and staff discussions, and the most effective managers have learned to continually reinforce to their staff the desired change in condition for those the organization serves. These managers also communicate progress toward that end, as a reminder of why focus is needed and choices are being made. The same approach to communication applies for partners and allies in whole-of-nation problems.

3 Use the evidence of progress to test your hypothesis about how to effect the desired change in condition and adjust the approach as appropriate over time.

As managers develop or gather evidence relating to desired results, they should query it to test whether the organization is making expected progress. Particularly with quantitative data, managers should ask questions and challenge assumptions about the evidence to interpret performance and changing conditions within and outside the organization.

About the Authors

Donald “Donnie” Matlock has over a decade of experience in driving enterprise transformation for mission-driven organizations across private, public, and non-profit sectors. Currently, Donnie is Principal Business and Technology Strategist for MITRE, where he advises federal leaders on strategy and performance, culture change, and technological modernization.

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About the Center for Data-Driven Policy

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Endnotes

- ¹ Behn (2014); Bitko (2022); Breul (2007); Breul et al. (2008); Breul (2010); Brown et al. (2021); Dube et al. (2020); Feldman et al. (2021); GAO (2017); GAO (2023); Heckman (Jan. 8, 2021); Heckman (Jan. 25, 2021); Joyce (2011); Kelman et al. (2009); Kettl et al. (2007); Kettl (2017); Lowery (2008); Metzenbaum (2021); Metzenbaum et al. (2016); Meyers et al. (2011); Moynihan et al. (2016); NAPA (2017); Pfiffner (2007); Redburn et al. (2015); Riccucci et al. (2008); Stanton (2008); Yao (2000)
- ² This refers to the GPRA Modernization Act of 2010 as translated through Circular No. A-11 guidance on annual strategic planning processes, annual federal budgeting processes, annual performance planning, and annual performance reporting.
- ³ Anderson (2011); Roam (2009); Roam (2011); Runco et al. (2019); Sullivan et al. (2017); Thaler et al. (2009); Ware (2008); Weinschenk (2011)
- ⁴ Amone et al. (2010); Anderson (2011); Association for Strategic Planning (2015); Barr (2017); Behn (2014); Bennis (2007); Breul (2007); Brown et al. (2021); Bryson (2018); Carter et al. (2001); Chermack (2011); Edmondson (2017); George (2003); James et al. (2020)
- ⁵ Ad hoc Task Force on Assessing Management Quality (2021); Association for Strategic Planning (2015); Barr (2014); Barr (2017); Behn (2014); Bryson (2018); Chermack (2011); Dube (2020); Dube et al. (2020); George (2019); George (2003); GAO (2017); Heckman et al. (Jan. 8, 2021); Joyce (2011); Kaplan et al. (2016); Kelman et al. (2009); Kettl et al. (2007); Kettl (2017); Knowlton et al. (2013); Metzenbaum (2021); Metzenbaum et al. (2016); Morrison et al. (2019); Moynihan et al. (2016); NAPA (2018); NAPA (2019); Sparrow (2000); Spitzer (2007); Thompson et al. (2020); Van Dooren et al. (2015); Wade (2012); Wauters (2019); Weill et al. (2004); Zubac et al. (2021)
- ⁶ Miller et al. (2021)
- ⁷ Amone et al. (2010); Barr (2014); Barr (2017); Behn (2014); Breul et al. (2008); Bryson (2018); Collins (2001); Dube (2020); Dube et al. (2020); George (2019); Hubbard (2010); James et al. (2020); Kaplan et al. (2016); Kelman et al. (2009); Kettl et al. (2007); Kettl (2017); Knowlton et al. (2013); Kotter (1996); Kroll et al. (2020); McChesney et al. (2012); McGrath et al. (2000); Metzenbaum (2021); Metzenbaum et al. (2016); Miller et al. (2021); Mintzberg et al. (2005); Mootee (2013); NAPA (2016); O'Reilly et al. (2016); Sparrow (2000); Spitzer (2007); Wauters (2019)
- ⁸ Ad hoc Task Force on Assessing Management Quality (2021); Amone et al. (2010); Association for Strategic Planning (2015); Barr (2014); Barr (2017); Behn (2014); Bryson (2018); Bryson et al. (2021); Chermack (2011); Collins (2001); Eden et al. (2014); George (2019); Hubbard (2010); Kaplan et al. (2016); Knowlton et al. (2013); Kotter (1996); Loch et al. (2008); McChesney et al. (2012); Metzenbaum et al. (2016); W.K. Kellogg Foundation (2004)
- ⁹ Behn (2014); Brown (2019); Bryson (2018); Carter et al. (2001); Coyle (2018); Edmondson (2019); Finerty (2012); Galbraith (2002); Hamel et al. (2020); Huber et al. (1993); Kaplan et al. (2016); Kotter (1996); Lockwood et al. (2018); McGrath et al. (2000); O'Reilly et al. (2016); Schein (2010); Wenger et al. (2002)

Appendix: Promising Practices for Managers

Build a connection with the outside world	Promote the ability to adapt	Empower action within the organization	Advance commitment to the change
Use data about the environment to drive discussions about the desired change in condition.	Use performance data that reflects the desired change in condition throughout execution to make decisions about resource allocation.	Distill the desired change in condition into simple and measurable objectives that drive alignment within the organization and motivate staff.	Discuss performance data with the wider organization to develop insights, consider targets as appropriate, monitor progress, and recognize collective achievement.
Frame the desired change in condition to reflect what is new and different for the people the organization serves.	Identify activities and resources needed to achieve the desired change in condition while being open to emergent opportunities.	Communicate strategic priorities throughout the organization frequently and consistently, using methods that staff can relate to (e.g., slogans).	Use and promote collaborative or shared decision making.
Use multiple indicators and data sources to “triangulate” measurable success.	Demonstrate commitment to strategic priorities by allocating resources toward trials that advance the organization’s learning.	Reinforce the reasons for necessary course corrections.	Build and maintain a safe space for deep, focused conversation; encourage cross-understanding.
Challenge risk aversion in identifying both the desired change in condition and the strategies to achieve it.	Build and maintain awareness of risks to inform decision making.	Delegate responsibility for results to the appropriate extent possible, cultivating leaders at lower levels and providing freedom and authority to experiment and learn.	Protect managers who exercise justifiable discretion.
	Take a learning approach to performance management (e.g., using questions, root cause analysis, program evaluations, and performance data) with a focus on what worked/did not work, and how to make it better next time.		Recognize accomplishments (e.g., participation, creativity, change leadership, success stories, progress made) of individuals and of the organization frequently.

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