



ACTION INSIGHTS


Tackling Big, Thorny Problems

Building the Capabilities
Your Organization Needs

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RESEARCH FINDINGS FOR CITY LEADERS



Bringing partners together around complex social issues and sustaining a joint effort demands capabilities that are often underdeveloped in public organizations. A study supported by the Bloomberg Harvard City Leadership Initiative outlines how investing in collaborative, analytical, and reflective capabilities can help governments solve problems more effectively.

Government responses to the COVID-19 pandemic provide painful examples of how difficult it is for public organizations to tackle complex problems. Early reports point to organizational inertia, information hoarding, and a lack of leadership as some of the main causes for governments' sluggish reactions and early missteps. A few countries, however, were able to mount an effective response. South Korea, for example, quickly "flattened the curve" of infections without shutting down the country.

According to a recent study, one reason South Korea was able to successfully manage the first COVID-19 outbreak was its prior investment in the capabilities to become a more effective problem-solver. After the 2015 MERS-CoV outbreak, the government created several task forces and cross-sector groups to carry out testing, drills, and joint response measures. The government also established a legal framework and infrastructure to streamline contact tracing and sharing patient data. It was this combination of convening the right partners, sharing the right data, and drawing the right lessons from the past that helped South Korea respond so effectively to the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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A more responsive government

For centuries, public organizations have been designed to perform specific functions: the tax office collects taxes; the police enforce laws; and public schools provide an education. But, as our societies evolve, new challenges emerge, requiring us to reinvent how governments function. For example, organized crime forces the police to work with the tax office (and many other public bodies) as well as the private sector, while racial disparities in educational outcomes for children require schools to look beyond the classroom for partnerships and solutions that support students as well as their families and community. And climate change, with the threats it poses to life on our planet, cuts across virtually every traditional divide within and between the public and private sectors.

While the kinds of problems we face change constantly, government structures and organizations were built to last. This relative inertia is by design: after all, governments are expected to provide stability and continuity. The question is, how can public officials get better at tackling problems without having to redesign their organizational charts for every new challenge?

Three core capabilities

In recent decades, academic scholarship has examined how the practice of “problem-oriented governance,” that is, governance that is more responsive to today’s most pressing problems, has emerged and evolved and how organizations have advanced this kind of work. However, existing research offers little guidance on how to build the necessary skills, knowledge, working practices, and behaviors—or what the necessary capabilities are—that enable and ensure that a government can mount a more tailored response to complicated problems and unpredicted crises.

Our academic article, [State Capabilities for Problem-Oriented Governance](#), aims to fill this gap. It provides three essential capabilities for any public organization to be more responsive to big, thorny problems:

1 Collaborative capability

Collaborative capability allows organizations to create and benefit from relationships within and across organizational boundaries. Getting the breadth and depth of these relationships right is key to integrating multiple perspectives and responding to the needs of different constituencies. It’s the ability to find the right partners and work well together.

2 Data-analytic capability

Data-analytic capability is the ability to collect, process, analyze, and ultimately learn from varied forms of information, including both the implicit and explicit knowledge that allows an organization to interact with others and engage the community most productively. It’s the ability to generate the right data and information and put them to use.

3 Reflective-improvement capability

Reflective-improvement capability is the ability to truly reflect on a problem’s complexity in order to generate a sound action plan and to continuously adapt the course of action based on what’s working and what’s being learned. It’s the ability to ask the right questions at the right time and take the answers to heart.

In practice, these capabilities are inter-related and work together, like the cogs of a machine, to propel effective problem solving. When they are “well-greased” and synchronized, they help an organization move faster and more efficiently. When one is weak, it erodes the contribution of the others. For example, an organization needs sufficient collaborative and data-analytic capabilities to integrate perspectives and information in order to reflect, learn from its actions, and adapt. Moreover, without collaborating and analyzing data well, the organization’s reflection process will be clouded, causing it to misjudge or miss opportunities to invest in collaboration and data analysis skills, severely hampering the organization’s performance in a vicious cycle.

Figure 1: The Framework

| Capability | Examples of how you know it’s present in organizations |
|--|---|
| Collaborative Capability | Organizations share work processes and routines, pool resources, share information, have depersonalized collaboration arrangements, and collaboratives have autonomous decision-making abilities. |
| Data-Analytic Capability | Organizations use hardware, software, and skills to collect, store, process, analyze, and publish data. Data are used regularly and interpreted in meetings at all levels. |
| Reflective-Improvement Capability | Organizations have an explicit theory of change, processes to discuss changes and adaptations, and incentives and accountability structures. |

Applying the framework to your organization

The above framework can help public managers think about how to be more intentional in designing and managing an effective way to problem solve that incorporates continuous learning and collaboration. Instead of solving problems through a siloed approach, put the problem front and center—whether it's organized crime, educational outcomes, climate change, or another thorny problem. Then assess not only your current collaborative, data-analytical, and reflective-improvement capabilities, but also the capability gaps and areas of growth that are hindering your organization's ability to make progress. Like our opening example of South Korea's investment in a pandemic response, developing these three capabilities will undoubtedly pay dividends not only in the short-term, but into the future.

There's no denying that new approaches to intractable problems can be difficult to implement. Still, in order to diagnose and remedy these problems, public organizations can avoid cramming a square peg into a round hole. Instead, they can routinely exercise their knack to adapt their working practices around the problems they are trying to tackle. Much like committing to a fitness routine, building the "muscles" and "connective tissue" to be able to function flexibly, reliably, and repeatedly, is what problem-oriented governance is all about.

Action Insights summarize findings from academic research. They offer management and leadership guidance you can put to use in your work, and they link to the underlying studies.

The Bloomberg Harvard City Leadership Initiative, located at the Bloomberg Center for Cities at Harvard University, is a collaboration between Harvard Kennedy School, Harvard Business School, and Bloomberg Philanthropies to equip mayors and senior city officials to tackle complex challenges in their cities and improve the quality of life of their residents.

Launched in 2017, the Initiative has worked with 465 mayors and 2271 senior city officials in 524 cities worldwide. The Initiative advances research and develops new curriculum and teaching tools to help city leaders solve real-world problems. By engaging Harvard graduate students in research and field work, the Initiative supports current city leaders while investing in future generations. The Initiative also advances the field of city leadership through teaching, research, and new curricular materials that help city leaders drive government performance and address pressing social problems.



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