ACTION INSIGHTS

All Minds on Deck!

Engaging Employees in Strategic Work

By Jorrit de Jong, Maurits Waardenburg,
Bertine Steenbergen, Nicholas Vachon, Lisa Cox

FEBRUARY 19, 2024

Who "strategizes" in your organization? In a networked world, employees at every level of the organization are needed to navigate complex issues and act strategically—not only the top layer. A **study** supported by the Bloomberg Harvard City Leadership Initiative explores what leadership and human resources might do to engage and support employees.

Sander, an employee of a government agency in the Netherlands, was confused. He had been asked to manage a digital initiative to provide citizens with one email inbox for all government correspondence. While his department felt responsible for ensuring the new tool was user-friendly, secure, and widely adopted, other agencies involved in the initiative had invested more resources and had more influence. As a result, he felt he had no real mandate to engage in the design process. However, as a member of the multi-agency working group, he regularly saw opportunities to nudge the group towards a user-friendly and secure solution. He hesitated: was this his role to play?

Strategic Work in a Networked World

No single entity holds the answers to our society's most pressing problems. Organizations of all stripes—from the private and non-profit sectors to government entities and beyond—must work together to make headway on thorny social issues. Governmental organizations at all levels are increasingly collaborating with outside partners to design and deliver solutions, in what is called a networked governance approach. This approach recognizes government must constantly reorient itself and collaborate to make progress on social goals. According to our **study** in the *Review of Public Personnel Administration*, networked governance requires strategic thinking and action at all levels of the organization. In other words, public sector organizations need "all minds on deck."

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Strategic capacity in the public sector is the ability to align resources and support with public goals; put simply, it is using what you have to get what you need to accomplish what you want in the best interest of the public.[1] *Distributed strategic capacity* is a concept referring to mid-level and front-line employees' contributions to strategic action, particularly through their coordination and communication with external partners. However, even for an organization whose leaders promote the idea that employees play a role in strategic work, the organization may not be structured to truly support having "all minds on deck" in practice.

We find that traditional tools are necessary but not sufficient to promote employee participation in strategic decision-making. For example, while strong mission statements help align everyone's work under one purpose, organizational charts map where certain strengths lie, and human resource practices can both clarify employee expectations and incentivize strategic action, none of that is sufficient to engage employees in strategic work. Two additional things, our study finds, are critical in enabling distributed strategic capacity. Namely, making space for strategic reflection amidst employees' daily demands and addressing the fact that employees are being pulled in two seemingly opposite directions: serving politicians and serving the public.

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Making Space for Strategic Reflection amidst Daily Demands

In the study, we examined a 110-employee government department in the Netherlands. Though leadership had stressed the importance of mid-level and frontline employees accomplishing strategic work, it was clear that barriers existed. To surface these, we developed four case studies replicating real-life instances of employees facing strategic opportunities (e.g., the story in this article's introduction). Employees were asked to read the case studies and discuss the dilemmas of the strategic work. In post-discussion surveys, many of the 50 respondents shared one barrier was that management prioritized fulfilling daily tasks, and amidst a flood of political demands, there was no time to think about how an employee could most effectively pursue the organization's mission. In other words, strategic work, as we observed, "was seen as yet another task added on top of an already long 'to-do' list." Amidst these tensions, one employee wondered, "Will strategizing ever make sense given the fact that we will always have insufficient authority, time, and resources to do what we need or want to do? Will it make sense to do it if the top is not visibly doing anything different themselves?"

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Reconciling Directives from the Top vs. Expectations of the Public

Another barrier to employees' strategic work was the tension between "serving political demands or serving society." While the employees surveyed often felt their ultimate goal was to serve the public, their daily tasks of fulfilling superiors' demands overtook abstract, strategic goals, such as serving society. In fact, we found that without leadership providing clearer guidance around strategic behavior, "employees were not likely to engage." While the department performed its short-term, technical tasks well, it could not meet its expectations for long-term goals without working strategically with other stakeholders on every level (including the employee level).

Assessing Employees' Strategic Capacity

In addition to supporting employees' strategic capacity, the study highlighted the importance of employee assessment. The case study discussions revealed that the employees' responses to different strategic opportunities varied widely. The variation in answers led us to conclude that while leadership and human resources might be aware of an employee's traditional role and expertise, they were less adept at developing and assessing an employee's softer skills that would contribute to strategic work. For example, an employee's ability to collaborate, think in the abstract, be open to new perspectives, analyze and diagnose a problem, and think innovatively were not skills the organization was prioritizing.

Take-Aways for Your Work

For networked governance to function effectively, organizations need dynamic people who will not just wait for orders but who will chart a course of action themselves, endeavor to align their work with the overarching goals of the organization, and adjust when new opportunities and challenges arise. To help employees feel supported in their strategic work in a networked governance environment, leadership and human resources can consider the following:

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Routinize strategic thinking

When strategic work is a priority for employees, consider how to encourage and incentivize them to do it regularly. For example, put reoccurring time on the department-wide calendar for strategic thinking when employees can drop what they're doing, take a step back, and reflect on how their projects can serve the organization's purpose more effectively. Encourage employees to spend this time how they feel most productive—either independently, in groups, or a mix of both.

Incentivize strategic work

If employees are told strategic work is important, but they are only evaluated on whether or not they accomplished their daily outputs, they will be discouraged from participating in strategic work. Verbal encouragement by leadership is not enough; human resources management needs to ensure that systems are in place to encourage and support employees in accomplishing their strategic work goals.

Assess and develop strategic capabilities:

Some employees who have deep expertise in their daily tasks may not be strong strategic actors. To assess and develop strategic thinking, consider using "case studies" or stories that are based on real-life dilemmas to illustrate moments when employees have an opportunity to engage in strategic work. Then hold sessions for employees to discuss how they would act in the same situation, recognizing that there is more than one "right" answer. Not only can these case sessions be an important tool for leadership to assess and train employees—it can be invaluable for leadership in understanding where employees need more support or where work needs to be redistributed based on employee strengths.

The world of networked governance can be messy, ambiguous, and volatile. To make sense of it all, leaders need input and feedback from their mid-level and frontline employees. They also need them to act and think strategically on behalf of the organization and to make judgment calls to advance the mission. In doing so, employees may find themselves managing up, down, and sideways. This is a challenging task for anyone. However, with the right support, many public sector employees can be empowered to make progress on strategic work for the organization as a whole, bringing it closer to its goals at a faster pace—all while including more people and more perspectives along the way.

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Further Reading

"All Minds on Deck? Assessing Distributed Strategic Capacity in Public-Sector Organizations"
Review of Public Personnel Administration

"Making Sense of It All: Using Analytical Tools in Everyday Work"
Bloomberg Harvard City Leadership Initiative

Public Value Toolkit
Bloomberg Harvard City Leadership Initiative

Endnotes

[1] This definition is based on work developed by Marshall Ganz, see: "Resources and Resourcefulness: Strategic Capacity in the Unionization of California Agriculture, 1959-1966," *American Journal of Sociology*, Volume 105, Number 4, Jan., 2000, **https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/abs/10.1086/210398?casa_token=rWqj_PYcuwUAAAAA:QWnr7VEzM4vEEEEEQpwEF_81e0_hi4iMb4WwHviwn_wepVCvPwKdTjAtC8-wXy_SGXGrgtmICnIK,** accessed December 2021.

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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Revised 02/2024

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