

Bouncing Back from Set-Backs

By Don Jacobson

Getting things done in government is hard. Really hard. Funding gets canceled. Executives do not welcome new ideas from subordinates. Excessively detailed bureaucratic rules limit our range of options. The need for inter-agency collaboration greatly increases the complexity of many tasks. It's difficult to fire ineffective employees. The list goes on and on.

To make matters worse, sequestration, wage freezes, and the government shutdown have left many public servants frustrated, bitter, and feeling unappreciated. Some government employees argue that there are so many factors making it difficult to achieve positive outcomes that those who really want to make a difference inevitably get jaded and cynical.

Despite all these negative factors, I refuse to believe that cynicism is inevitable for government employees and managers. And we all need to guard against it.

The Impact of Cynicism

Cynics often try to justify their negativity by claiming that they "used to care too much" but were disappointed too many times. They usually describe themselves as "realists," and some even wear their cynicism like a badge of honor. The problem is that once you decide that it is impossible to get anything meaningful done, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. As Henry Ford once said, "Whether you think you can or think you can't—you are right."

Who is going to put their heart into something big that they already "know" is going to fail? And who is going to follow a manager or executive who talks that way? Cynicism is a form of [learned helplessness](#) that keeps you down—and drags others down with you. And its impact is magnified greatly if the cynicism is coming from the boss.

So how *do* we guard against burning out or becoming jaded and cynical?

Cultivating Resilience

We have all experienced set-backs and disappointments. When it has happened to me, picking myself up, learning from the experience and then trying to find some new way forward has been absolutely critical. Is that difficult? Gosh yes. But I am unwilling to give up hope and I am unwilling to stop trying.

Set-backs are key turning points, and how we respond can determine whether we derail or grow and flourish as leaders. In his superb book [Leadership and the Art of](#)

Struggle, Steve Snyder describes the most common kinds of struggles and set-backs and provides examples of leaders who came through the experience stronger. He includes several reflective exercises to help leaders remain grounded and make adjustments as required.

Another excellent resource is the book *Resilience at Work: How to Succeed No Matter What Life Throws at You*, by Salvatore Maddi and Deborah Khoshaba. It includes a wealth of case studies and simple exercises that can help anyone learn the thought processes that foster resilience.

The recognition that it is frustrating and [difficult to get things done in government](#) was one of the things that prompted me to create GovLeaders.org in 2002. It is essential that government managers cultivate the patience, self-awareness, and perseverance required to weather the frustrations they will inevitably face. My favorite part of the site is the "Stories" section, which features many inspiring [stories of public sector leaders](#) who succeeded in bringing about positive change.

In "[Tips for Change Agents](#)," I discuss a variety of strategies for persevering over the long haul. Many of them are very helpful in developing resilience, such as:

- Being clear about your long-term objective;
- Taking ownership of the challenges your organization faces (i.e. choosing to lead);
- Developing a network;
- Finding opportunities for small wins;
- Keeping a fresh perspective so you never stop asking "Why?";
- Being creative about tactics when you hit an obstacle; and
- Maintaining your optimism.

We need leaders in government who have the resilience to bounce back—repeatedly—in the face of disappointments and set-backs. We must truly believe that our teams can make a difference. And we must create a positive work environment where our employees feel connected to the mission, are learning and growing, and believe that their ideas matter.

None of this is easy. But when we do these things we have a much greater chance of achieving positive outcomes for the American people.

Tips for Change Agents

By Don Jacobson

Many of us in government want to change the way our agencies work. These changes can take many forms. Some of us may want to fix a process or change/eliminate counterproductive rules. Others may wish to shoot for more ambitious goals that require a change of culture. The expanded use of collaboration tools like social media is one example of a big and important culture change. My personal focus has been on doing whatever I can to foster a culture of leadership—both in my own agency and throughout the government.

Effecting change in a large organization is difficult. Those difficulties can be magnified greatly in the public sector. Entrenched rules and structures pose many obstacles. Resource limitations often seem to be the things in greatest abundance. And the possibility of criticism from senior bosses, Congress and the media tends to make many managers risk averse.

So how does one overcome all these obstacles to bring about significant positive change? This article will outline 12 strategies, and practices that can be very helpful to the change agent in government.

Be Clear About Your Big Goal

What is it that you are really trying to accomplish? Do you have a vision of your end goal? Keeping the end goal in mind is critical to forward movement. You will experience many setbacks on the way as some of your tactics will fail. If you dwell on the latest setback it is easy to become frustrated. I find that a [Life Mission Statement](#) is a helpful tool that enables me to keep sight of my larger scale strategic objectives.

Choose to Lead

Leadership is a choice. If you see a problem, own it. And fix it. All too often, employees see problems but wait for someone else (e.g. the boss) to address them. It's important to remember that the boss might not even be aware that a given problem exists—and even if they do know about it they might not have the time or energy to do anything about it.

Look for Leverage Points

Leverage points are places where you can achieve a multiplier effect from focused efforts (i.e. you obtain a larger impact than you would normally get for the same amount of effort). For example, an HR employee or management analyst who provides support and guidance to managers across many parts of the organization can be a great leverage point for modeling or disseminating practices and ideas that you want to implement across the organization.

Plant Lots of Seeds...and Keep Watering

If you are looking to implement a major culture change, you will need to start planting seeds in various parts of the organization. Be on the constant lookout for 1) opportunities for small wins; 2) new allies; and 3) ways to change the language used to discuss your issue. The key is to take advantage of small opportunities when they present themselves—and to persist. If you have been tending to these things, your initiative can more quickly blossom when you do achieve high-level support for it.

Develop a Network

Networks are key enablers for the change agent. The network can be members of your own team, employees from other parts of the organization, or even contacts from other agencies. Members of a network can provide each other encouragement, ideas, and other support. They can also provide leverage by building support for change in diverse parts of the organization, replicating changes throughout the organization, and continually expanding each other's networks. Networks also reinforce the fact that you are not alone—a key factor in being able to persist.

Maintain Your Optimism

As Winston Churchill said, "The optimist sees opportunity in every difficulty." The change agent in government will encounter many difficulties. Optimism gives us the enduring belief that, working with and through others, we can make a difference. Optimism is also infectious.

Be Creative about Tactics

As discussed earlier, you will encounter many obstacles. Keep the end goal in mind while you look for tactics that will help you find ways to go over,

under, around, or through the obstacles. If one tactic doesn't work, try something else. If you don't have a knack for finding creative solutions, partner with colleagues who do.

Be Honest in Your Assessment of Potential Downsides

What would happen if your change initiative is implemented and then fails miserably? How would that impact your agency's ability to perform its mission? How much money and energy will have been wasted? Will it cause public embarrassment? What are the chances of failure? These are some of the things that decision-makers will worry about. The answers to these questions can help you identify ways to strengthen your proposal and mitigate the potential downsides. And let's face it: Ignoring the significant risks is simply irresponsible.

Cultivate Credibility

To be an effective change agent, you also need to take the time to cultivate your credibility in your organization. It's not uncommon for brand new employees to identify major problems with the organization (e.g. with the HR system), and then quickly get frustrated because the "system" won't fix all those problems that are so obvious. New employees have fresh eyes and good ideas and managers should listen carefully to their suggestions. However, new employees are well advised to focus primarily on mastering their jobs and learning the culture. Implementing some modest but innovative changes within their immediate sphere of influence can help them build credibility as an innovator and provide valuable learning about how to get things done in the organization. Another critical part of establishing credibility is cultivating a [constructive relationship with your boss](#) that involves a healthy mix of support, tact, and candor.

Keep Asking "Why?"

As noted above, new employees come in with new perspectives and ideas. Those who have been around for awhile may have become accustomed to (and accepting of) an absurd status quo. It's important to find ways to keep the fresh perspective of the newbie. Don't learn to accept bureaucratic stupidity if there might be ways to eliminate it. One of my favorite "demotivators" from Despair.com says, "[Tradition](#): Just because you've always done it that way doesn't mean it's not incredibly stupid."

Do Completed Staff Work

Change agents also need to be prepared to do a lot of the groundwork required to actually implement the changes. A lot of ideas go nowhere simply because the boss is already too busy to take on something new—no matter how creative and exciting it may be to the would-be change agent. If you take a great idea to your boss (or other decision maker) and show him/her that they won't have to do much more than say, "Yes," your chances of getting the idea approved will improve dramatically. (See "[The Doctrine of Completed Staff Work](#).") A willingness to do much of the leg work needed also shows that you are really committed to the idea and will do everything you can to make it work.

Remember that a “Yes” From the Top Means the Real Work is Just Beginning

If you are fortunate enough to have the big boss sign off on your major change initiative, remember that the decision point is only the beginning of the real work for implementing your initiative. Just because a change initiative is blessed by the leader(s) of the organization does not mean anything will actually happen. And even if the initiative is implemented, you cannot assume that the effort will continue or have the intended effect. As [Admiral Hyman Rickover](#) once said,

"Good ideas are not adopted automatically. They must be driven into practice with courageous impatience. Once implemented they can be easily overturned or subverted through apathy or lack of follow-up, so a continuous effort is required."

So, what do you think needs to be fixed? **...And what are you going to do about it?**

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