



Take charge—without taking over

Article at a glance

New leaders often find winning support from existing management teams to be a difficult proposition. Frequently, they approach the challenge head-on, barreling through resistance and squandering early opportunities to win support.

Leaders should instead try to draw underlying resistance out into the open, by giving team members an opportunity to voice their concerns and taking that time to listen. New leaders are then better equipped to identify negative energy and redirect it into positive channels.

Once new, more positive behaviors are in place, leaders must sustain the change by applying a range of management practices, such as setting expectations for collaboration and being clear about consequences.

To win the support of a new team, leaders must listen to members' concerns and then redirect resistance, rather than trying to counter it head-on.

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New leaders often find it difficult to drive change in the public sector, where influence depends as much on being able to navigate a complex network of relationships and informal understandings as on expertise and position. The most common mistake is to proceed without securing the support of the teams they inherit. Such support is not easy to earn: these teams have often heard calls for change from appointees whose political lives prove much shorter than their own. If a new leader doesn't win over the team, the team can simply wait that leader out.

But there is a brief opportunity early on to gain the team's respect and support. Too often, new leaders squander this opportunity, barreling through team members' reservations by "taking charge"—meeting challenges head-on, combating inaction with action, filling silences with speeches, and answering argument with counterargument. As one senior government executive told us, the "worst thing" a political appointee can do is to "come in and give a series of directives as if you were a one-man band. One, you may not know the consequences of what you are asking. Two, unless you've got a lot of prior government experience, you're going to alienate people. If they don't like what you're talking about, they will find a zillion ways to meet technical compliance, without ever coming close to achieving your objectives."

Instead, new leaders should seek to understand anything resembling resistance by genuinely listening to what the team is saying, and then turning the energy inherent in that resistance to their advantage.

The need to address a team's resistance comes with the territory for new leaders in the public sector. The leadership structure in many agencies creates incentives for career civil servants to ensure that new initiatives do not distract the agency from its core responsibilities. Civil servants also often have more influence than their private-sector counterparts to determine the pace of organizational change, for example, by virtue of their budgetary control. So our approach is broadly applicable, as even those political appointees with the best intentions and clearest mandates for change must persuade team members that their initiatives are in the best interest of the agency.

Start by listening

To enlist a team's support, a new leader must understand what drives its members. Because resistance rarely comes out into the open, a leader's first task is to give team members an opportunity to talk—and to take that same opportunity to listen. Most government agencies already have regularly scheduled weekly or semimonthly team meetings. These can serve as excellent venues for drawing people out. New leaders should allow the meetings to continue on their existing model for several meetings, typically for four to six weeks, and encourage people to voice their concerns. They should resist the temptation to cancel these meetings or change the attendee list right away. Before putting in place a new meeting structure with a new “kitchen cabinet,” they must be certain they understand why this group meets (for example, as a result of influence or relationships) and show respect for the traditional approach.

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Lucky new leaders may discover that their teams are broadly supportive and likely to function quite well. At the other end of the spectrum, a leader may quickly detect power struggles or competition for resources, with discussions degenerating into arguments or members declining to share their opinions in any meaningful way. In such situations, it is critical to refrain from negative statements, such as “We really need to cut the infighting” or “I've never seen a team behave like this.” This kind of response will send the bad behavior underground, creating a situation in which, as one chief of staff noted, “It will be difficult to disarm any disruptive patterns, because you need them out in the open to do that.” Unfortunately, underground resistance is an extremely common phenomenon. Often it takes the form of identifying many minor obstacles to a proposal or responding with a “pocket veto,” in which a team does not fully implement an agreed-upon plan.

When leaders encounter this kind of resistance, they should avoid punishing uncollaborative behavior, both openly—for example, by making disparaging remarks about a team member—or more subtly, such as by limiting a team member's access or raising questions about his performance. Instead, leaders should actively create opportunities for their staff to reveal their motivations and voice their concerns, and then they should reward those who do. Many of the leaders we interviewed created potentially anonymous communication channels similar to those used in the private sector, such as suggestion boxes or online suggestion boards. Whenever these leaders receive a signed comment, they



make a point of publicly thanking the relevant team member and of acknowledging the remark without criticizing it. Some leaders also give out small but visible prizes, such as mugs, for team members who come forward with comments. Doing so may seem kitschy, but it works. “Soon everyone [will have] a mug,” one CEO remarked.

In short, the new leader should continue to listen, steadily enhancing his understanding of the dynamics of the team. As he does so, he should supplement what he is hearing by gathering outside perspectives. Leaders should solicit viewpoints far beyond those expressed by their team in order to develop a comprehensive understanding of what team members really believe, what they are most excited about, and what they are most frightened by. That means walking the halls and holding one-on-one discussions with lower-level managers and employees, as well as direct reports. Such interactions are critical for learning about concerns, establishing credibility, and identifying sources of influence deep within the organization. A leader should also reach out to oversight committees and other stakeholders inside and outside the agency. Besides acquiring valuable information, the new leader will also begin to build the relationships necessary to pursue his agenda. As one senior official at the US Treasury Department put it, “Don’t define your universe too small.”

After a month or two, new leaders should understand the challenge they face in molding coherent teams that will enthusiastically endorse their leadership. Does the resistance stem from one or two people, or is it general? Is it individual or collective? Does it seem to be dissipating of its own accord? If so, time can be allowed to pass and the situation reevaluated later. If resistance is coming from a couple of people, the leader can make those people responsible to the whole team for a particular task, creating a situation in which team members who are not actively cooperating must make a choice between joining the collective effort and resisting outright. They are likely to make the first choice.

More often, the situation is subtler. Consider, for example, what one government leader recently faced when he inherited an executive team that showed little evidence of being

able to work together. The tone in meetings was profoundly negative, and no one on the team seemed able to get along. But there was one way in which team members acted as a team: in relation to their new leader. Any time he announced a new initiative, they would assess it relative to some experience they had shared in the past and find a reason not to fully support it. Any time he spoke negatively of the team's work, they would rise to one another's defense. The leader quickly found that he would only intensify the team's resistance by asserting his leadership head-on and instead sought a way to redirect it to his advantage.

Redirect negative energy

Cases of this kind, in which a leader inherits a team that fully unites only in resistance, are common. The most effective response is to select one or two members of the team and ask them to lead the change of a business process that affects everyone on the team. Drawing on what the leader has learned during the listening phase, he should select team members who are respected and represent a broad enough constituency on the team to have credibility (for example, because of length of service or union leadership). The process selected should be routine, so that it will be easy for the team to recognize and acknowledge the improvement when things start to change. But it should be sufficiently challenging, so that the improvement is significant.

Suppose, for example, that no decisions are made at team meetings. To address this process challenge, leaders can work with the insiders to clarify decision rights, identify needed facts, establish procedures for bringing those facts (not just opinions) into the room and ensuring that they provide the basis for decisions, and design and set standardized agendas that can be modestly tailored to each meeting. Alternatively, if the process challenge is that there never seems to be any follow-through on decisions, the insiders can design management dashboards, post people's commitments in the meeting room itself, and collect feedback from everyone on progress. As far as possible, leaders should limit their own visible involvement to setting out what they want the leaders of the change to do, making it clear to everyone that they have assigned this task to the chosen change leaders, and responding to appropriate requests for guidance. Leaders need to work actively behind the scenes, however, meeting regularly with the change leaders, creating incentives for their performance, and continuing the effort to listen to what all team members are saying.

This approach disrupts the negative team dynamic, provides one or two influential members with a powerful incentive to take direction from the new team leader, and makes any individual lack of collaboration clearly visible—and so less likely.

During the period when the team is re-forming around a new leader, the leader should keep all messages explicitly positive, or at least neutral, and defer all penalties until it is clear that positive behavior will not emerge without them. Allowing team members to voice concerns on an ongoing basis is essential when seeking to redirect the team's energy. The leader should also always bear in mind that the more an existing team believes that its change in behavior is self-generated ("We did change, but it

wasn't up to him—it was up to us”), the likelier it is that its energy will be channeled into active support for continued change.

We recently used this approach—understanding the team dynamics and using a team-led initiative to channel the team's energy in positive ways—in an effort to help the leader of a US government agency improve the decision making of an executive team whose meetings were notable for a nearly complete absence of communication. We began by surveying team members to assess how well they judged their effectiveness as a team and found poor results in virtually every dimension. For example, team members acknowledged that they failed to map the operational implications of their strategic choices, align the resources required for achieving goals, or spend enough time drawing upon team members' perspectives when problem solving.

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We chose the two team members with the most negative views and focused our efforts on understanding the basis for their concerns. At our suggestion, the team leader appointed them to lead an initiative on improving team effectiveness, while appointing other team members to lead different initiatives. Through a series of workshops, we worked with the team to identify a focused set of priorities, develop meeting agendas and management dashboards, and record feedback from meetings. After several months, we performed another effectiveness survey and found a dramatic improvement: the team had set a manageable number of strategic priorities and made faster, fact-based decisions, and the level of trust among team members had improved. Importantly, team members felt that they were responsible for their improved performance.

Leaders often bring one or two of their own people with them to an agency, and they must also be sensitive to the challenge of integrating these new members with an existing team. In such situations, leaders may inadvertently encourage resistance from existing team members if they are perceived as creating an inner circle with privileged access. At one government agency, top-team activities nearly ground to a halt with the arrival of a new agency head and his chief of staff, as team members kept a wary eye on the new leader's door to see who was gaining access. During this critical early period, we worked with the new leader to ensure that no team member was perceived as having a privileged position. The equality of team members was emphasized in the way team meetings were scheduled and structured, all team members were given an opportunity to edit documents produced by the team, and accommodations at an off-site program were provided on an equal basis.

To build a fresh sense of common identity in a situation of this kind, the leader should select one important goal for the team and then give everyone a role in accomplishing



it. The goal should require staff to function as a team and should not be achievable through a series of independent actions. Creating a strategy for a new service or for new legislation is a good example.

Maintain momentum

Once new leaders begin turning a team's energy in their favor, they need to sustain the change by applying a range of traditional management practices: setting expectations for collaboration, balancing the breadth of goals with achievable milestones, maintaining focus, being smart about timing and sequencing, and being clear about consequences.

In setting expectations for collaboration, leaders should be careful not to signal negative consequences for taking risks or thinking independently, but they should be equally careful to establish explicit norms for how people should behave toward each other. They should also model these norms themselves; people will notice. Among other things, this means keeping a clear open-door policy, especially in the early days, to alleviate fear that access is being limited to the leader's "own people," and it means transparency in allocating financial resources and staff to avoid the perception that backroom deals are being made.

Balance is crucial when setting goals. Stretch goals, such as striving for improvements in core capabilities that will be favorably noted by the public or oversight committees, are valuable. But they must be balanced with more achievable ones—indeed, with goals set less broadly than the team intends to deliver on them. "You should shoot for the moon even if what you need most is focus," one executive told us. "Saying something big creates a discontinuity and galvanizes people into action. Of course, you can't do that with everything because you don't have the resources, won't be credible, and won't succeed. What you need is balance between those things you over- and underpromise."

Maintaining focus and managing the scope and pace of change are also critical. One government agency we worked with fell into the trap of "letting a thousand flowers bloom," promising its oversight committee that it would completely transform the way in which it operated. The effort stalled because of a lack of leadership capacity and the exhaustion of the department. We worked with the agency's head to narrow the scope of the proposed transformation to its field force, cutting or deferring 50 percent of the initiatives. The organization has rallied around the more limited program and, having successfully completed the first wave of initiatives, is making plans to launch the remaining ones.

Once new, more positive team behaviors are in place, leaders can reinforce them through implementation programs with relatively short cycle times. There is a particularly relevant lesson here from private-sector transformations. Organizational change projects, as typically scoped, often require sustained effort over a period of years. But, as one CEO noted, "Long-term projects fail more times than not—whether because of turnover, inconsistent executive attention, or inconsistent budget environments." To overcome this, we recommend choosing a few areas where previous improvements

can be leveraged and addressing them in sequence, building momentum for change through tangible improvements.

Finally, consequences do matter—both sticks and carrots. Even though bureaucratic facts and structures often impede the enforcement of negative consequences, when necessary, a solution must be found. Leaders can make personnel changes, even though many do not believe so; it simply takes more resourcefulness than in the private sector. As one agency leader explained, “I had to do some creative things, such as moving people to other positions, to send the signal that they were no longer part of the team. I had to use the HR systems, which may be cumbersome but do work. Performance scorecards go a long way in providing the transparency you need to make tough decisions.” As for carrots, recognition and reputation are enormously important in the public sector, and there are many ways to single out employees who have made a significant contribution. Recognizing accomplishments with a handwritten note, e-mail, or call from a senior leader is a quick, easy, and much appreciated approach. Individuals can also be rewarded with public commendations, increased responsibility, rapid promotions, and bonuses. Although these are not necessarily on the scale of the private sector, many agencies have some form of merit-based bonuses.

Alexander Hamilton famously wrote to George Washington, after Washington had delivered a speech that staved off a rebellion by army officers: “Your Excellency has, in my opinion, acted wisely. The best way is ever not to attempt to stem a torrent but to divert it.”¹ While public-sector leaders today face subtler and more complex forms of resistance, the core message holds true: the best way to take charge is to divert a team’s energy in the direction you favor, rather than confront it head-on. ●

¹Harold C. Syrett, ed., et al., *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1987, Volume 3, p. 291.

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