



How Trump Can Make DOGE Work

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Efforts to reform the federal government since earliest times have been akin to Sisyphus trying to push a huge boulder up a hill. Most recently, in its quest to institute sweeping changes—rooting out fraud, corruption, waste and inefficiency--the Trump administration created DOGE, the Department of Government Efficiency. From fraud alone, the government loses over half a billion dollars annually.

Although worthy and timely DOGE may be, the roll-out looks as if it were outsourced to Franz Kafka, Friedrich Nietzsche and Woody Allen. To achieve lasting success, sound planning and implementation are everything--witness the military campaigns of Gallipoli, Dien Bien Phu and the product launches of New Coke and Sony Betamax.

Recognizably, the two principal levers of governmental reform are budget and personnel. And while the federal government can fold an agency into another department (USAID into State) or create a separate department (the doomed Department of Education from the Department of Health, Education and Welfare in 1979), rearranging the bureaucratic pieces on an organizational chessboard does very little to improve program efficiency and effectiveness.

For DOGE to work effectively, the administration needs to focus on programs, not departments. One must note, however, that programs have longevity due to congressional support, constituencies and lobbyists. They are like unremovable tattoos.

Having served as a special assistant to three cabinet secretaries, in the areas of planning and evaluation, I had the privilege of working with a team that focused exclusively on *management-oriented evaluations* also known as *evaluability assessments (EA)*. Developed by the late Joseph Wholey and his colleagues at the Urban Institute in the late 1970s, the premise of EA is that program evaluations are useless if they are not management-oriented, with all pre-requisites for assessment in place beforehand.

The analogy would be a runner seeking to compete in the Boston Marathon. To perform his or her best, this athlete would need to eat properly, hydrate frequently, lose weight if necessary, increase cardio workouts, get plenty of sleep, and perhaps practice yoga and/or meditate.

The framework for an EA of a program is designed to answer the most important questions: Are there realistic, measurable objectives? Plausible, testable assumptions? A valid and reliable measurement protocol? A sound monitoring system? A feedback loop to institute needed corrections? And above all—is there buy-in from senior management to work with the EA team and, regardless of the findings, to undertake the changes necessary to improve program performance?.

Unfortunately, most government programs are not ready for evaluation in accordance along the lines mentioned above. Moreover, what are called “evaluations” are far too often useless, social science essays, biased and based on false premises, incomplete information, and devoid of implications for management improvement.

EA is a tool, not a magic bullet. It cannot insulate the evaluation process from politics in many instances. For example, when my team and I conducted our evaluation of bilingual education, we visited science classes in the New York’s South Bronx, a Puerto Rican and Dominican neighborhood. What we found was that the bilingual classes were actually monolingual—Spanish only--taught by unqualified substitute teachers. As my Mexican-American team mate concluded: “This is a jobs program for Hispanic parents to get them to vote Democrat”. (Had we monitored biology classes in conservative parts of the country, such as the prairie states, we most likely would have found cases where teachers had suppressed or even deleted covering sex education.)

Government reform, be it departments, agencies, or programs, can be undertaken with a sledgehammer, a scalpel or something in between. Management-oriented evaluations like EA fall into the “somewhere in between” category.

In essence, evaluability assessment is an ideal reform tool for DOGE, since it requires transparency, accountability, vigilance during and after the EA and a singular focus on efficiency and effectiveness. Regardless of one’s political affiliation or inclinations, now is the time to institutionalize sweeping changes in public management. Applying EAs is where to begin, program by program. The public deserves nothing less.

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