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## Commentary: Next administration should let agencies lead reform

By PAUL R. LAWRENCE

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We now have 16 years of management reform to reflect on as Washington gets ready for a new administration. During the Clinton years, Vice President Al Gore led the National Performance Review, which deployed a predominantly bottom-up approach in which front-line workers developed management improvement solutions. The Bush administration pursued a predominantly top-down approach for its president's management agenda, in which the Office of Management and Budget led specific governmentwide management initiatives.

There is another approach that the new administration should consider: an agency-specific approach in which agencies take the lead in assessing what reforms are needed within their own organizations. While the White House and government's central management agencies — OMB, Office of Personnel Management, General Services Administration — receive much attention in Washington, the ability of government to effectively deliver services to the American people basically resides in the specific capabilities of individual agencies. The Clinton administration recognized this during its second term when the newly renamed National Partnership for Reinventing Government focused on 32 "high impact" agencies — those agencies directly delivering services that matter to citizens. The high-impact list included agencies such as the Census Bureau, Patent and Trademark Office, National Park Service, National Weather Service and Veterans Health Administration.

Instead of the traditional focus on governmentwide management reforms, the next administration should consider an agency focus. The new administration should hold each agency head responsible for determining the "state of the agency" and proposing specific changes needed for that organization to more effectively accomplish its mission.

These plans might also include the development of a new business model for the organization. The plan would use information from ongoing work-force planning initiatives to better understand the skills needed in the future. In addition, the plan would engage those on the agency's front lines. Many leaders in the public and private sector have argued that those on the front lines best understand the work of their organizations and how it can be improved.

In selecting agency heads, the Presidential Personnel Office should emphasize management capability and management experience. When interviewing

prospective agency heads, White House vetters should probe candidates for their ideas on improving the agency that they are being considered to lead. During these interviews, candidates should be told that a management plan will be expected from them and they will be held accountable for effectively executing the plan.

These management improvement plans, to be completed 90 days after a new agency head takes office, would be reviewed by a task force of representatives from the department in which the agency is located, OMB and OPM. The task force would examine the plan to assess what support is needed from OMB or OPM and whether legislative action is required.

The key to the success of this approach would be to create a collaborative working relationship, rather than the traditional adversarial one, among agencies, departments, OMB and OPM, in which they agree to work together on a mutually agreed-upon agenda to improve the performance of agency programs.

The plans would focus on the delivery of services to the American public. One lesson from the past eight years is that failure to deliver services can become a political liability to an administration. One need only recall the failure of the Federal Emergency Management Agency during Hurricane Katrina and the problematic delivery of health services to veterans by both the Defense Department and the Veterans Health Administration to understand the consequences of poor service delivery.

Under the leadership of a new agency head who can ask probing questions and bring a fresh, outside perspective on the work of an agency, an agency-specific approach might have a high payoff for the new administration.

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