



TALENT MANAGEMENT

Managing in a Fishbowl: Closing Federal Leadership Gaps

By Ellen Van Velsor and Clemson Turregano

A new CCL study offers insight into the leadership development needs of government leaders and offers some on-the-job solutions to help enhance the skills of current leaders and create leaders for tomorrow.

Do you put your staff at ease or do you push them a bit, leading them to greatness? According to a new survey from the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL), if you're a public manager, keeping your diverse team cool under pressure may be your greatest strength. But knowing how to move them over the goal line will make you a winning leader.

Those who live the life know that government leaders live in a fishbowl, as if whatever they do could be broadcast around the world. National service requires a level of openness unheard of by leaders in for-profit organizations and even nonprofit enterprises. Social networks and media demand a new level of transparency. Generational shifts, technological advancement, revenue shortfalls, and political changes are just a few of the key shifts occurring at all levels of government. This new complexity demands versatile leaders with the vision needed to effectively manage it.

The question is how do leaders in government maintain and sharpen the edge needed to lead effectively in an era of declining budgets?

What Skills Do Government Leaders Need to Lead?

CCL, a nonprofit institute headquartered in North Carolina that provides research and training to managers worldwide, recently completed a study that addressed two important questions about leadership in government:

- 1| What leadership competencies are seen by government leaders and employees as most important for success in government organizations?
- 2| How well do government sector leaders perform in the competency areas seen as most critical to success?

Researchers drew a government sample from CCL's 360-Degree Benchmarks® leadership assessment, which provides self, boss, and co-worker ratings on 16 key leadership skills and perspectives, as well as five derailment characteristics. The sample for this study consisted of 160,752 ratings of more than 16,000 managers working in the government sector who attended CCL leadership development programs.

Respondents were asked to rank the competencies most important for success in their organization and how target managers perform on all 16 competencies. The results were both unexpected and revealing about the perception of government leadership.

CCL found that government leaders are seen by their co-workers as having important strengths. The competency most highly rated by co-workers was the ability to put people at ease. "Sensitivity" to issues related to race, gender, and ethnic diversity was also a strength. Government leaders in our study were seen as "resourceful," and as "quick studies" able to acquire new knowledge as needed. Finally, they appear willing to "do whatever it takes" to achieve the agreed upon goals of their agencies and work groups.

Current Effectiveness Does Not Equal Long-Term Success

The survey revealed a mismatch. The most highly rated competencies among government leaders are not in line with those seen by their bosses and co-workers as most important for success.

Competencies for Effective Leadership

Benchmarks® Competencies	Rank	Average Rating
Putting people at ease	1	4.28
Differences matter	2	4.23
Being a quick study	3	4.17
Resourcefulness	4	4.13
Doing whatever it takes	5	4.08
Straightforwardness and composure	6	4.07
Decisiveness	7	4.03
Building and mending relationships	8	4.01
Participative management	9	3.99
Compassion and sensitivity	10	3.96
Change management	11	3.95
Balance between personal life and work	12	3.94
Self-awareness	13	3.89
Career management	14	3.87
Leading employees	15	3.86
Confronting problem employees	16	3.55

Sample Size = 160,752

Source: Center for Creative Leadership

Competencies for Performance Success

Benchmarks® Competencies	Rank	Percent Important
Leading employees	1	86
Resourcefulness	2	81
Straightforwardness and composure	3	68
Building and mending relationships	4	67
Participative management	5	66
Decisiveness	6	58
Change management	7	57
Doing whatever it takes	8	51
Being a quick study	9	44
Balance between personal life and work	10	39
Self-awareness	11	35
Confronting problem employees	12	34
Compassion and sensitivity	13	33
Putting people at ease	14	26
Differences matter	15	25
Career management	16	19

Sample Size = 160,752

Source: Center for Creative Leadership

Government Leadership Gaps Matrix

CCL research goes far toward breaking open the stereotype of bureaucrats as stolid performers who care more for rules than real people. It reflects a cadre of leaders who care deeply about their colleagues and who are seen as effective in many ways in their service to the government mission.

The leadership skills ranked **most important for success** by people in government organizations:

Leading employees
Resourcefulness
Straightforwardness and composure
Building and mending relationships
Participative management

The leadership skills ranked **least important for success** by people in government organizations:

Confronting problem employees
Compassion and sensitivity
Putting people at ease
Differences matter
Career management

Government leaders were rated **most effective** in the following categories:

Putting people at ease
Differences matter
Being a quick study
Resourcefulness
Doing whatever it takes

Government leaders were rated **least effective** in the following categories:

Balance between personal life and work
Self-awareness
Career management
Leading employees
Confronting problem employees

Source: Center for Creative Leadership

When these same individuals were asked to rate the leadership skills most important to success in their organizations, the competency seen as most important was “leading employees,” which was rated 15th of the 16 competencies in terms of current leader effectiveness. “Change management” and “participative management” also were rated among the top priorities for government leaders, but appeared in the bottom-half of competencies in terms of present effectiveness.

So, while government leaders are seen as highly effective in some areas, the areas rated as most important for success in the government sector tend to be areas of relative weakness for these leaders. This mismatch between skills seen as important for success and ratings of current competencies could lead some government managers to lose effectiveness when they are promoted to higher levels of responsibility, or to derail and be sidetracked from further promotion.

The Benchmarks® assessment also focuses on five possible derailment factors:

- too narrow functional orientation
- difficulty changing or adapting
- failure to meet business objectives
- difficulty building and leading a team
- problems with interpersonal relationships.

When CCL analyzed ratings on these derailment factors among government leaders, the highest mean score for the group was for “too narrow a functional orientation.” This means people are most likely to be seen as in danger of derailing when they are perceived by others as oriented more toward functional or departmental issues and less able or willing to take a broad, enterprise perspective.

Running the government requires technicians, analysts, accountants, engineers, and the like, and schools around the nation produce graduates with the technical mastery needed for government to be effective. However leading in government requires a different skill set. Those managers who fail to effectively learn this new skill set

tend to lean heavily on their past technical abilities, setting themselves up for career derailment.

Of course, the ability to take a broad perspective comes, over time, from having a wide range of experiences and is more difficult to develop if one has spent most of a career in one functional area, one department, or one agency.

The second most highly rated derailment factor is “difficulty changing or adapting,” and may be related to the relatively lower scores received by government leaders on the “change management” competency. Given the degree of change that government leaders face, it may not be a dearth of experience with change that is at the root of this perceived weakness, but rather the degree of change itself outpacing individual abilities to adapt and manage it.

CCL’s study demonstrates a leadership skills gap in government. Leaders in government need to be more than technicians; they must develop skills that allow them to be able leaders—leveraging their proven technical ability and developing an enterprise level view—to help their organizations to change and adapt as needs require. This requires developing new levels and types of skills—skills that leverage leaders’ strengths, such as interpersonal savvy, mission orientation, and technical ability, while infusing leadership behaviors and enterprise perspectives to enable versatility.

Maximizing Learning from Experience: Addressing Mastery and Versatility

Ongoing effectiveness requires, over the course of one’s career, both mastery of a number of skill sets (depth of learning) and the development of versatility through exposure to a variety of experiences (breadth of learning). Mastery builds one’s ability within a skill set, and can be thought of as having a number of levels:

- critical awareness
- actionable knowledge
- guided practice
- independent application
- skilled performance.

Mastery involves gaining additional expertise in a skill; for example, learning that managing is different from technical work and learning how to motivate and develop others. Enhancing versatility means broaden-

Danger: Leadership Derailment Rankings

Derailment Scales	Rank	Ave. Rating
Too narrow functional orientation	1	1.60
Difficulty changing or adapting	2	1.54
Failure to meet business objectives	3	1.50
Difficulty building and leading a team	4	1.49
Problems with interpersonal relationships	5	1.37

Note: Derailment scales are reversed: 1 = good, 5 = poor.

Sample Size = 160,752

Source: Center for Creative Leadership

ing a leader’s capacity for adaptability to new situations or changed circumstances; for example, learning to lead managers across functions, departments, or regions).

Meanwhile, broadening a competency involves gaining experience across levels of the organization, taking opportunities to work horizontally, or engaging a skill with people outside of the organization or across boundaries of technology, geography, demography, or culture. However, budgets are tight. Can we develop both mastery and versatility in leaders and not break the bank?

Development Lessons Abound

The good news is development lessons abound through direct experiences at work and in one’s personal life. Research over the years at CCL has shown that on-the-job assignments are one of the most powerful ways people learn leadership. Assignments managers find particularly developmental include

- increase in scope (first supervision, first senior management job)
- creating change (as part of a task force, new initiative, turnaround of failing organization)
- job rotation or transition to different department or function
- stakeholder engagements
- work in a different culture (international assignment).

We know that on-the-job developmental relationships are also important, given the lessons people learn

Three Recommendations to Close the Skills Gap

To close the skills gap in government, CCL presents three groups of recommendations for making the most of work-based development opportunities for current and future leaders.

1| Sequence development experiences to enhance mastery

- Gradual increases in scope and scale of management responsibility
- Small-scale international exposure prior to large-scale assignments
- Membership on taskforce charged with creating change prior to responsibility for major reorganizations or “turnaround” assignments

2| Diversify experiences (crossing boundaries) to enhance versatility

- Manage direct reports within one’s area of technical expertise, outside of one’s area of expertise, across functions or departments, outside of one’s own culture

- Engage with department stakeholders, engage with stakeholders external to the enterprise, engage with stakeholders nationally or globally
- Manage within headquarters operations, manage in the field nationally, manage in the field internationally

3| Integrate experiences to enhance transfer

- Developmental assignments supported by coaching or mentoring
- Classroom leadership development followed up with assignment designed to develop needed skills
- Coaching and mentoring following classroom leadership development experiences

from role modeling, mentoring, and being coached by their own manager or by others. Developmental relationships often cited as rich sources of learning include

- + constructive bosses (role models, mentors, coaches)
- + difficult people (ineffective bosses, problem subordinates, conflictual relations with peers)
- + family members who provide support and feedback.

It is important, in thinking about how to provide the best development plans for leaders, to incorporate numerous experiences that address both mastery of specific skills and the development of versatility over time.

Adverse situations can be rich sources of learning, as well, particularly when a manager receives adequate support for the learning and time to reflect on what was learned. Developmental events in this category include

- + crises (financial, organizational, national security, health)
- + mistakes with personal or organizational impact
- + career setbacks (being fired or demoted, missing promotions)
- + ethical dilemmas.

Any single leadership development experience can deepen a worker’s skills (mastery). But having different kinds of experiences can provide versatility, from the time an employee starts her career (building awareness and actionable knowledge by observing an effective leader’s interaction with direct reports), to her first supervisory experience (enabling guided practice and independent application), to increasing one’s versatility in leading others through promotions to different levels or assignments in different regions of the world (reaching a level of skilled performance).

It is important, in thinking about how to provide the best development plans for leaders, to incorporate numerous experiences that address both mastery of specific skills and the development of versatility over time.

For example, one government leader demonstrated both mastery and versatility as he developed and implemented an action learning program with CCL. Interestingly, he is an Army general who adopted a very

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non-military perspective to his leadership challenges. First, both he and his junior leaders attended a program designed to help them become more self-aware as leaders. From this they shared a mastery of leadership language. Then, breaking into small groups, they were assigned to projects focused on a strategic challenge facing the organization.

The demands of working these challenges insured that each team had exposure to different areas within the organization. The leader worked with each group, demonstrating his versatility, not only with technical application, but also in applying different leadership concepts each small group tackled their assignment. Each team was also assigned a coach to improve the teamwork and to enhance and connect self-learning to the real world work of the action learning project.

Active Learners Lead Best

The best, most versatile leaders are those who are active learners, creating knowledge out of their experiences. While schools around the nation produce graduates with technical mastery in accounting, analytics, engineering, and the like—all of which are needed for government to be effective—leading in government requires a different skill set.

Managers who lean heavily on past experience, technical abilities, and interpersonal strengths, yet fail to attend to day-to-day details of leading employees set themselves up for career derailment. To be successful they must develop skills to lead beyond the usual boundaries. Career development lessons abound if you are an agile learner. Applying them to work at your agency will benefit your career, the organization and the public you serve.

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SUGGESTED READINGS

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