

11-2007

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### Repository Citation

Springer, C. G. (2007). Managing through strategic agendas. *PA Times*, 30(11), The American Society for Public Administration.

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# Managing Through Strategic Agendas

By Christine G. Springer

While we as public administrators like to think that government solves social and economic ills left unaddressed by others, we also are aware that government solutions sometimes follow predictable formulas: elected officials formulate long-term plans which too often are agendas laid out during a campaign, legislators then authorize the budgets and public administrators are tasked with implementing the programs which are often underfunded.

The good news is that new mechanisms have begun to surface which adapt result-oriented practices from business to public administration through the development of initially tools like the Balanced Scorecard and now through strategic agendas. These agendas identify a societal vision and a corresponding set of long-term objectives, targets and actions in a plan that can either be created within government or outside of it by a coalition of stakeholders. When developed within a governmental entity, a strategic agenda involves a broad cross-section of leaders who address economic and social issues from the top down as comprehensively as possible including an alignment to important goals. When initiated outside of government, the strategic agenda usually involves diverse stakeholders including business leaders, community activists, politicians, educators, multiple jurisdictions and levels of government. It's not easy but it has been deemed to be worth the effort.

Some recent strategic agendas have been developed in emerging nations in Latin America, Africa and Asia perhaps, due to the crises that they face in terms of failing economies, rampant inflation, lack of the rule of law, medical epidemics and corruption. As an example, in 2004 the Brazilian Industry Confederation clarified its views as well as specific goals for Brazil's sustainable development by establishing targets for the federal government to achieve which have since been adopted by several state governments and administrative departments in Brazil, including the State of Rio Grande do sul as well as extra-governmental entities such as Todos pela EducaçãO which is a broad public-education initiative led by a non-profit and includes academics, business people and other citizen groups.\* In 2006, Rio Grande do sul had gone from one of Brazil's richest states to near-bankruptcy. A number of attempted government reforms had also consistently failed. Some 950 civic leaders convened that year to formulate a vision for the state as well as objectives, targets and initiatives. The stated vision became – *the best state in which to live and work in 2020*. Participants also developed a governance model, a plan for communicating the agenda to the public and a strategic management process. By October, 2006, the strategic agenda was presented to the two state government candidates both of whom committed to it in front of more than 1,000 people and the media.

There are usually four reasons why organizations or countries choose to establish strategic agendas and all of them have to do with seeking greater governmental accountability and a recognition that effective outcomes can only be achieved in an interdependent world.

First, agendas help develop a vision along with objectives, targets and initiatives so that the organization is able to stay focused on strategic priorities that have been established by key

stakeholders. These agendas have the capacity to bring a long term perspective to economic and social programs while at the same time reducing the likelihood of discontinuity from one administration to the next. When developed in an open process, these agendas can provide a platform for politicians as well as a community consensus about what challenges and goals need to be addressed through recommended actions. Secondly, agendas serve as a framework for monitoring government and non-profit performance as well as a vehicle for aligning public and private initiatives to a common purpose and common objectives so that divergent types of initiatives can be tracked with eye toward overall success. New agencies or organizations need not necessarily be created, just a common focus and purpose. Metrics at the national level often include things like the UNV Human Development Index, the Gini Indicator (a measure of income inequality) and Gross Domestic Product (GDP) Growth.

Thirdly, agendas help create a democratic means of developing a common political platform that can be incorporated into campaign platforms and proposed governmental programs and/or reform by elected officials and by public administrators. Since the process is transparent and if done correctly, represents the interests of all stakeholders, it creates a ready-made platform for politicians. As an example, in 2004 the Republic of Botswana created its National Strategic Agenda for achieving Vision 2016. That vision was literally converted into a map designating how to enhance a greater quality of life, maintain national stability and achieve a vibrant, competitive Nation of opportunity. Through rigorous, phased implementation, officials defined objectives, identified measures and prioritized national programs associated with outcomes. They developed 26 ministry-level maps and identified their vertical linkages to the national strategy. They even created a strategy governance process that is now developing a National Office of Strategy Management. In order to stay aligned and to maintain its commitment to transparency and accountability, each ministry publishes its strategy map annually as well as its commitment to national programs in the major media. Senior ministry officials are also regularly interviewed on television and radio shows. In addition, this past Spring, the Ministry of Education developed a series of pamphlets to communicate the national vision to all school children.

And finally, agendas provide a mechanism for aligning different stakeholders, building political consensus and coordinating lobbying activities through the addressing of constituents' disparate interests over time. It certainly can take time to reach consensus on complex issues and to formulate solutions through law, public policy and program implementation. Increasingly, this requires leadership forums, strategic committees and advisory councils whose mission is to drive economic and social change. Agendas help political groups to organize through a common foundation of objectives, targets and initiatives. They also empower and enable the monitoring and measuring of political group performance and effectiveness so that a governmental assessment does not occur in isolation and so that the stakeholders remain equally accountable for results. Agendas also demonstrate to elected leaders that the community of stakeholders share their priorities and are willing to step up to assist in meeting strategic targets.

Declining trust in government here and abroad accentuates the challenges embedded in public administration. Citizens seem to increasingly question the ability of public officials in America and in countries around the world to implement and manage complex social and economic solutions. [\\*\\*](#) These difficulties are often due to a lack of transparency, accountability for results

and political discontinuity. Even when progress seems to be occurring, an election can potentially undo the agenda and direct resources and attention to other priorities. That is why the establishment of an agenda that is long-term in nature and that has been developed by diverse stakeholders through a community engagement process is critical to success not just in developing countries that need to deal with complex economic, infrastructure, health, education and regulatory issues but also in a country like the United States where those issues are all the more complex due to the federal system of government within which we operate.

\* L.K. Johnson, "Brazilian Industry Association Shapes National Agenda-With the BSC," Balanced Scorecard Report, (Harvard Business School Publishing) July-August 2006.

\*\* According to the *World Economic Forum Annual Report 2005/06*.