

## Obama Signals Shift in Governing Philosophy

By Max Stier  
Special to the Washington Post  
Monday, January 26, 2009; 8:06 AM

"The question we ask today is not whether government is too big or too small, but whether it works."

With this declaration from his inaugural address last week, President Barack Obama laid out a new governing philosophy, elevating the importance of basic government operations to rival political ideology and policy development. Although this shift may seem innocuous to some, it is potentially radical and could eventually make this line the defining passage of the president's historic speech and a hallmark of his administration.

To appreciate the significance of this statement, one needs to understand two things: the nature of government's operational challenges and Obama's actions that add considerable weight to these words.

The American people are looking to the new administration to rejuvenate our economy, resolve the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, revitalize our schools and repair our environment. On each count, even if Obama gets the policy right, the public's expectations will only be met if these policies are well executed. Without dramatic improvements in the way government does its work, they won't be.

There are some fundamental reasons why our federal government's operational health has been allowed to steadily deteriorate. It's hard to change what you don't measure, and our government operates in an environment with very few meaningful and useful measurements for performance. Perhaps more significantly, it is run by short-term political leadership that has little incentive to focus on long-term issues.

A typical presidential appointee stays in government for roughly two years and is rewarded for crisis management and scoring policy wins. These individuals are highly unlikely to spend significant energy on management issues, when the benefits of such an investment won't be seen until after they are long gone.

To be clear, previous administrations have launched serious efforts to improve government operations, leading to limited, but not insignificant, improvements. But Obama's approach appears to be significantly different. He is not just saying we need to improve government operations. He's saying we need to put this issue front and center. We need to commit as much energy to policy execution as we do to policy development. This interpretation is based not on wishful thinking, but on the president's actions.

Start with the transition. Despite criticism that it was presumptuous, the Obama team heeded the advice of experts and began planning the transition to power months in advance of the election. The result: it was able to fill key White House posts and identify Cabinet nominees faster than any administration in history.

Look at the people the president appointed and their confirmation hearings. Time and again, they were willing to get into the weeds and talk about the importance of management issues to agency success.

Hillary Clinton described the State Department's career employees as "unsung heroes," adding that "they need and deserve the resources, training and support to succeed."

Office of Management and Budget Director Peter Orszag said, "We need to make government work better and smarter; [that] means restoring the prestige and building the capability of the federal workforce."

Nobody captures the apparent management ethos of the Obama team better than Energy Secretary Steven Chu. "[M]y effort as secretary will be unified by a common goal: improving management and program implementation. Simply put, if the department is to meet the challenges ahead, we will have to run more efficiently and effectively," said Chu. "During my tenure as director of Lawrence Berkeley National Lab, although most people view me as a scientist, I spent probably three quarters of my time paying attention to the operation side of the house"

Moving beyond the Cabinet, President Obama broke new ground when he named Nancy Killefer as the nation's first chief performance officer, creating a new voice, who carries the weight of the White House, to hold agencies accountable for their management practices.

Less than 24 hours after being sworn in, President Obama issued his first two Executive Orders, both of which focused on government operations. One will make government more open and transparent, helping to improve public trust in government. The other raises the ethical and professional standards for those who will serve in his administration, assuring the public that those who work on their behalf will be highly qualified and committed to public service, not their private enrichment.

On day two, he traveled to Foggy Bottom to speak to career employees at the State Department, a powerful acknowledgment of perhaps the most fundamental tenet of effective federal organizations: good government starts with good people.

There is clearly a pattern developing, here.

Barack Obama didn't campaign the past two years to pass legislation. He did it to achieve a set of ambitious goals. That requires not only approving policies, but implementing them. All indications are that our new president understands the importance of government operations. But making government work won't be quick. It won't be easy. But it must be done. Nothing less than the president's pledge to bring real change to America is at stake.

*Max Stier is president and CEO of Partnership for Public Service, a group that seeks to revitalize the federal government.*