



Can We Still Accomplish Big Things?

By Shayne C. Kavanagh



If We Can Put a Plan
on the Moon:
Getting Big Things
Done in Government

By William D. Eggers
and John O'Leary

Harvard Business Press
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The authors set out to show that government can indeed accomplish big things. Taking their inspiration from NASA's moon landing and other successful government initiatives, the authors' premise is that a successful government undertaking is a system and journey, with the following steps:

1. **Idea.** The undertaking must start with a good idea.
2. **Design.** The idea is turned into a design by assigning specifics that can be implemented. This often happens in the form of legislation.
3. **Stargate.** Design must win approval, signaling a moment of democratic commitment, such as when a bill becomes law.
4. **Implementation.** There must be competent implementation.
5. **Results.** The initiative must generate the desired results.

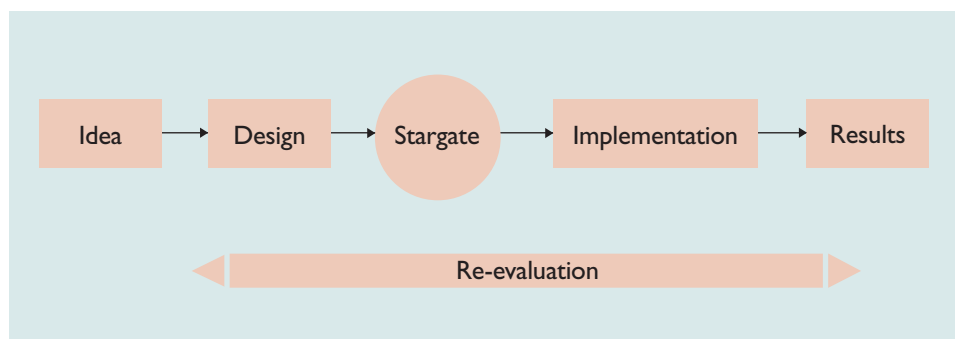
Additionally, to be successful in the long run, a large public undertaking

must be periodically reevaluated with respect to *what* is being done and *how* it is being done. The authors emphasize that these steps constitute a systematic journey and that focusing on any one step to the exclusion of the others is a key impediment to achieving big things.

HOW THE SYSTEM WORKS

Eggers and O'Leary describe each component of their system, including traps to watch out for and tools to make use of.

Idea Phase. The challenge of the idea phase is to break free of bias and invite new voices into the idea generation and selection process. This is because the biggest danger of the idea phase is confirmation bias — looking only at evidence that confirms your view of the world. Hence, counteracting confirmation bias is a major focus of the idea phase. The authors recommend gathering data to analyze the problem and developing and testing



ideas, all while being careful not to ignore data that contradicts preconceived notions. The authors also advise seeking input from a diverse range of people, including people who are not within your field or discipline — subject matter experts and systems thinkers, customers of the program or service in question, and skeptics. Finally, during the idea phase, it is important to recognize that there will be opposition. Make sure you understand the concerns of others and that others know you understand their positions. Look for solutions that meet the interests of the involved parties, rather than focusing on bargaining positions.

Design for Execution Phase. The challenge in the design stage is to treat it as a process for designing a solution that will work when it comes to implementation on the ground, rather than becoming preoccupied with drafting enabling legislation. It is difficult, but work to bring designers (who are often in the legislative realm) and implementers (in the administrative realm) together in the design phase.

The authors emphasize that the biggest danger of this phase is when bill drafting is substituted for designing a solution that will work in reality. When this occurs, policy ideas go straight from the idea stage through the legislature, without being subject to the exacting design process that occurs in the private sector. Too often, those drafting a bill are thinking only about what they can get passed. Designers should also be thinking about implementation and recognize that the bill is really a blueprint for the implementation. Hence, designers should involve the imple-

menters in this phase, obtain information about how the design will work in practice, and dedicate attention to actively looking for design weaknesses (lest they be found later, with more serious consequences).

The Stargate Phase. The authors named this phase after the science fiction television show *Stargate*, where the protagonists pass through a stargate to travel to other universes. In the context of getting big things done in government, the Stargate phase is where the idea and design are subjected to the democratic scrutiny. This is the most unpredictable phase of the five steps.

Democracy is not designed to create big changes, and society and those guarding the stargate often have a vested interest in the status quo.

The challenge is to get through it with integrity intact, the idea still recognizable, and a design that can be actually implemented. Integrity is key because if too many or the wrong compromises are made, the idea and design can come through so mangled as to be unworkable when it meets reality.

Democracy is not designed to create big changes, and society and those guarding the stargate often have a vested interest in the status quo. Hence, getting through the stargate usually requires a strong effort from the idea's

champions. For example, they may need to rally popular support for the idea to get elected officials on board. However, a strong effort does not include forcing an idea through — by executive fiat, for example. A forced or rushed journey through the gate means the idea will have thin or no support — a real risk to ultimate success when challenges arise in the implementation phase (which they almost invariably will) and no supporters can be found. Engaging participants in a constructive debate about the idea will build true democratic commitment to the idea.

Implementation Phase. The challenge at the implementation phase is to make it happen on time and on budget, and produce desired results. Embrace the possibility of failure so you can take steps to reduce its likelihood. Some of the authors' many insights for a successful implementation are:

- **Establish Clear Ownership.** Who is the high-level political sponsor? Who is the day-to-day manager?
- **Make a Great First Impression.** Make sure what happens early in the implementation is positive.
- **Be Realistic.** Take a hard look at the resources, time, and costs needed to execute the initiative.
- **Manage Expectations.** Set reasonable or low expectations so you can exceed them.

Results Phase. The authors believe that the underappreciated ingredient for getting results is the role of people in government — real people are being asked to do difficult things in a challenging environment. Results are a con-

sequence of the systems of government and the interaction of the people in government with those systems. Human factors — attitude, effort, desire — can make or break an initiative. The authors recommend developing an inspiring mission to get people motivated, developing incentives (to the extent that this is possible), and remaining cognizant of organizational culture (is the organization being asked to do more than its culture allows?). Lastly, find someone who can communicate equally well with politicians and bureaucracy. Keeping communications open and flowing will be an indispensable skill.

Reevaluation Phase. Government should continually evaluate what it

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does and how it does it. Otherwise, it might try to do too much, while at the same time failing to respond to the changing reality of its external environment. Hence, constantly reevaluating what government does and pruning nonessential activities is how government needs to operate. In particular, the authors recommend regular scenario planning to ask what if conditions change and what that would mean for

the continued viability of the program, and making greater use of sunset (expiration) provisions for programs to force regular re-evaluation.

CONCLUSIONS

If We Can Put a Plan on the Moon provides an inspirational and highly practical look at the good government can do if policy entrepreneurs put their mind to it and engage others in the journey. ■

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