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By Brian Friel

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Collaboration-minded feds discover that getting agencies to work together is easier said than done.

Earlier this year, a human resources specialist at a federal agency put out a call to her comrades at other agencies: Could someone share a competency model—a list of expected skills and abilities—for staff attorneys? Such lists are pro forma HR documents, used to evaluate candidates for jobs and to develop training programs that help employees gain required skills. Not exactly classified material.

A manager at another department wrote back to say he saw no reason not to share his department's skills list for attorneys with her. But another official at the department overruled him, saying the list was for internal use only. The manager could tell the HR specialist how the department developed its list, but couldn't share the list itself.

In other words, one federal agency told another to go reinvent the wheel.

The encounter illustrates the frustrating bureaucratic obstacles standing in the way of rank-and-file employees and managers who see interagency collaboration as a key way to making government work better. When they reach out their hands to like-minded people at other agencies, they discover those hands often are slapped. That can be because agencies are loath to share information with each other, their bosses want to stay focused on their own offices' issues, or officials at different agencies don't trust one another. "Traditionally, we've been dominated by our stovepiped departments and agencies," says James Locher, president and chief executive officer of the Project on National Security Reform, a Washington-based nonprofit that promotes interagency collaboration in defense, diplomacy and homeland security. "

There are probably hundreds of thousands of people at the GS-14 and GS-15 levels who are out there trying to make interagency collaboration work. They're doing it despite the system and often at some risk to themselves."

Across government, savvy civil servants are building bridges between departments and agencies. Faced with challenges that require cooperation, front-line and mid-level managers are finding ways to cut through red tape and bypass their bosses' myopic mind-sets to connect with people in other agencies who have the know-how to get things done. The professionals tackling the massive Gulf of Mexico oil spill this year prepared for the event using one model for interagency collaboration. Special operations forces tracking terrorists in Iraq used another, while child welfare officials have experimented with other approaches. In every case, the bridge builders created relationships that previously didn't exist and helped overcome cultural differences that kept agencies from working together.

"Building trust is key to coordination," says John Gustafson, a retired Environmental Protection Agency manager who spent a decade strengthening the interagency group that prepares for hazardous incidents like the Gulf oil spill.

Hurricanes and Oil Spills

Five years ago, in the wake of Hurricane Katrina and the flooding of New Orleans, trust was hard to find among the federal agencies responding to the disaster. Officials at the new Homeland Security Department, created to improve coordination between federal, state and local agencies dealing with major domestic catastrophes, had made a critical error. They did not have an operational plan in place designating each agency's duties in a response effort. With no such plan, things fell apart.

Then-Federal Emergency Management Agency Director Michael Brown, who was vilified in the local and national press for failing to manage the disaster, told Government Executive a few months later that an effort to draft a plan for interagency collaboration—a massive National Response Plan—had itself become a victim of interagency fighting. "One of the items that bothered me most during my tenure at FEMA was the [Homeland Security] department's insistence on taking the development of the NRP away from FEMA," he said in December 2005, after leaving government. According to Brown, department officials first put the Transportation Security Administration in charge of the plan's development, then a department-level organization called the Incident Management Group. Brown said an old coordination plan used for disasters ranging from the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks to the Columbia space shuttle explosion was tossed aside in the process. "The NRP, in my opinion, was never vetted through the numerous state and local entities which had a vested interest in not only formulating a new operational plan, but in making certain that the coordination developed under the old [plan] was not lost," he said.

Disasters like Katrina require interagency collaboration because no single agency is capable of handling all the consequences. FEMA, the U.S. Coast Guard, Army Corps of Engineers, National Guard, Federal Aviation Administration, and Housing and Urban Development Department were among the agencies called to action to help the millions of people affected by the hurricane—especially the 800,000 who were displaced from their homes.

The headline-grabbing oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico after the Deepwater Horizon oil rig exploded in April required a similar array of agencies to gear up response efforts. The federal government has a long-standing interagency system for dealing with hazardous chemical leaks, toxic incidents and major oil spills. An on-scene coordinator, in this case a Coast Guard official, manages federal efforts in the aftermath of such accidents, drawing on the expertise of scientific and technical professionals from 16 agencies organized into rapid response teams.

To make sure the government is ready for such incidents, those 16 agencies participate in a coordinating body called the National Response Team. NRT took on its modern form in 1995, when Gustafson became its first executive director. The team had been around since an oil spill off the coast of Santa Barbara, Calif., in the late 1960s made federal policymakers realize that responding to such disasters required more interagency teamwork. A veteran of state and federal government, Gustafson had plenty of experience getting agencies to work together in crises by the time he got the NRT assignment. At EPA in the late 1970s, he participated in the agency's response to the Love Canal toxic waste disaster in 1978 and to the Exxon Valdez oil spill 11 years later.

NRT brings together GS-15-level experts from its member agencies—including EPA, Coast Guard, and the Energy, Labor, Transportation and Agriculture departments—for regular meetings to plan and prepare for incidents. EPA and the Coast Guard lead the group. NRT officials realized they needed an executive director to give the team more stability, manage support contracts, organize special meetings and work out issues that cropped up for participating members. "The executive director is like a coach and a

team builder who manages the process to get things done," Gustafson says. "Much of the job is being of service to the agencies, understanding their issues and trying to help resolve them."

Gustafson introduced a management-by-objectives system to discipline the team and keep it focused on taking actions that would better prepare the government for future disasters. Many interagency groups that meet regularly have secretaries who take down meeting minutes that become, by default, the documents guiding the groups' actions. Instead of taking this approach, he encouraged NRT members to develop discrete action proposals that everyone could agree on. Then he assigned those proposals to committees and set timelines for implementation. "I consciously tried to have NRT committee meetings get away from doing voluminous meeting minutes and focus energy on developing and implementing action proposals," Gustafson says.

The stability of an executive director and the focus of a results-oriented management system put NRT on a path of continuous improvement. The team could learn lessons from hazardous incidents and incorporate them into its plans.

Gustafson, who retired five years ago, says one key for successful interagency collaboration at NRT is the fact that its members are GS-15 career professionals. "They know how their agency works and have access to their agency's resources and their agency's people," he says. "Regular communication builds the understanding and teamwork necessary to prepare contingency plans and help ensure effective incident response."

NRT members have learned the group is a great way to run the traps on their own agencies' work to make sure other agencies' concerns don't trip them up. Members can submit their agencies' ideas and plans for interagency review at NRT. The response team's endorsement is something of a Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval that all the other agencies have signed off on an idea. "The NRT process also helps identify interagency misunderstandings that could frustrate an incident response so that they can be worked out early," Gustafson says.

Horizontal Thinking

A basic tenet of NRT is that professionals within each agency who have the expertise need to know each other and work together without having to go up and down their agencies' respective chains of command. To feds who obsess over interagency collaboration, that's called horizontal thinking. Vertical just doesn't work in a disaster. When time is of the essence, you have to slice off the top five layers of the organizational chart, get the best technical and professional GS-15s in a room, and let them come up with solutions.

Many interagency collaborators go a step further. They say the professionals from different agencies need to work together day in, day out to deliver integrated services. Take the challenge of helping at-risk children. Social welfare professionals have realized that kids with a variety of problems—substance abuse, mental health issues, disabilities, unstable homes—often need the services many separate agencies offer to meet their educational, familial, health, behavioral and material needs. But the parents-or foster parents-frequently become frustrated by the multiple levels of bureaucracy.

So for the past 25 years, reformers have been experimenting with a form of interagency collaboration called systems of care. It's a loosely defined term, but the basic idea is one professional—a social services caseworker, for example—takes charge of a child's interactions with government and coordinates all the different agency professionals who provide services to that child and the child's family.

Ideally, that would mean bringing together at one table the child's parents, the caseworker, a teacher, a nurse, a counselor and other professionals to create and carry out a plan to improve the child's life. Mary Armstrong, an expert in child services, mental health and systems of care at the University of South Florida, says families often struggle to figure out which agencies will help subsidize services. Federally supported Medicaid might cover some services, while the local school system or a state program is responsible for others. The caseworker who serves as team leader also can act as a conduit, pulling together the money from different funding streams to make sure a child gets all the subsidies for which he or she qualifies. Creating a horizontal structure centered on the caseworker allows families to focus on their children rather than on mastering the varied procedures and rules required to deal with the government vertically—agency by agency. "When services are stovepiped and no one knows what others are doing, a lot of money gets wasted," Armstrong says. "If there are three case managers, then what's going on is a lot of duplication."

Collaborate or Integrate?

Even worse than duplication is when agencies get in each other's way. Law enforcement agencies that don't coordinate often have learned that the hard way. The FBI, Drug Enforcement Administration and local law enforcement agencies often have realized they were conducting overlapping or duplicative investigations.

In the course of the Iraq war, the military services' elite special forces squads found themselves at cross-purposes. In hunting down terrorist targets, they were getting in each other's way. Rather than fight each other, the various services' commanders on the ground decided to take matters into their own hands. Given their mission, they decided not simply to collaborate, but to integrate. The highly trained professional troops from the different services started working together regularly to catch terrorists.

They formed what became known as high-value terrorist targeting teams, leading to the demise of many dangerous enemies who would have killed Iraqi civilians and American forces if the targeting teams hadn't gotten to them first.

"It's in that direction our government needs to move," Locher says.

Not every interagency collaboration is such a high-stakes endeavor. Some just involve sharing competency models so agencies can better train their attorneys. But teamwork at any level promises better results and lower costs to taxpayers, who think of civil servants not as employees of their respective agencies, but as the professionals who carry out the missions of the United States of America.

Brian Friel covered management and human resources at Government Executive for six years.

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