



What is a delivery unit?

This article is the second in a multi-part series describing how an innovative government management approach can help translate the promises of impact into reality for citizens.

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What do the governments of the U.S. state of Maryland, the United Kingdom, Pakistan's Punjab province, and Malaysia have in common? They all saw an improvement in project outcomes when they chose to put delivery at the center of their work.

An increasingly common way to achieve this focus is to set up a "delivery unit" —a small group of highly-skilled people working at the center of government who help line ministries achieve outcomes for a

number of initiatives that leadership deems "mission critical," or top priority. They can operate at the state, local, or national level and address a range of issues, including large capital projects, election promises, popular citizen concerns, and classic objectives such as improved educational outcomes.

Delivery units are an innovation with both technical and cultural components. They bring a new set of technical approaches to untangling

the barriers to getting results. They help instill a culture of data-led decision making. And they support government in keeping its focus on its top priorities.

What makes delivery units special?

Delivery units use frequent data to drive improvement cycles that lead to better results more quickly. Because senior leadership typically sponsors and oversees their operations, delivery units have the authority to

overcome barriers that delay progress, connect people and resources, and mitigate risks. They help break down common obstacles such as siloed departments, insufficient project management expertise, and plans containing unclear targets or objectives.

Delivery unit team members proactively engage both those responsible for results and those managing day-to-day implementation. Simple but targeted questions can help officials refocus on the issues that most contribute to a project's success. Most importantly, these questions help determine whether the operational plan continues to guide implementers to the desired outcome(s) in the most efficient way possible.

To do this work, delivery units develop "delivery plans" that feature operational routines along with designated opportunities for real-time feedback. The plans commonly assign owners to specific tasks, establish data collection processes, and identify relevant benchmarks, targets, and trajectories.



Critical elements

The performance of delivery units around the world demonstrates that to be successful delivery units should consider incorporating a number of features.

A new culture in government

Perhaps most fundamental to a delivery unit's success is its mindset and culture. Below are a number of qualities that should be essential for delivery units. Even if a formal unit is not created, these qualities are assets for any government entity that focuses on delivery.

Rigor

Delivery units often solve problems in a dedicated and focused way. They use their knowledge of data analysis and management to produce insights that inform a project's continuously evolving strategy.

Trustworthiness

Delivery unit members should gain the trust of their leaders and the officials implementing the work. Officials have to feel comfortable being transparent about their greatest challenges with delivery unit members. At the same time, leaders need to know that they are receiving an honest picture of what's happening "on the frontline" from the delivery unit.

Partnership

Delivery units are an active partner to other units of government, not an overseer or disciplinarian. They facilitate, problem solve, and clear obstacles so that project implementers can succeed and receive positive recognition.

What types of questions delivery units ask?

Delivery units can help mentally reset project leadership and staff with a number of simple but fundamental questions throughout the planning and implementation process?

- What exactly are we trying to achieve?
 - Where are we now?
- What actions are we going to take to accomplish this?
 - Why do we think this will work?
 - How will we measure if it is working?
- What progress has been made?
 - What is getting in the way?
 - What support do we need?
 - What needs to change in order to succeed?

Communication

Delivery unit members should be able to listen well and ask thoughtful questions that inspire implementing officials to develop solutions to their problems. They should be diplomatic and communicate helpfulness, rather than order things be done. They also should be able to summarize their analysis and observations succinctly for the most senior government leaders.

What to delivery units need?

- 1. Clarity of mission:** The specific role of the delivery unit should be clear. The mission should be reflected in the number and types of initiatives it measures, its operational design, its staff, and the tools it uses.
- 2. Limited number of priorities:** A delivery unit should have a focused number of priority initiatives for which it provides constant implementation support (fewer than 15 is recommended). While there can be low-effort monitoring of a larger number of government initiatives, delivery units likely will not succeed when their resources are burdened with extensive tracking.
- 3. Influential and dedicated leadership:** The sponsor and the operational head of the delivery should be fully committed to the mission. The operational head should also have the respect of officials across government as some initiatives may be cross-cutting.
- 4. Institutional independence:** The delivery unit should sit in the center of government to maintain objectivity and serve the task of delivery, rather than a particular division or department.
- 5. Talented and motivated staff:** Staff should be high-performing with a range of competencies including critical thinking, data analysis, and relationship management.
- 6. Oriented to the frontline:** The delivery unit should be connected to the work happening on the ground on a day-to-day basis.
- 7. Compact size:** The delivery unit should be a permanent office, but it does not need to be large—a small office and agile team is preferable. However, a “representative” model can be created in which each sub-unit (or ministry) has a designated contact point who is trained in delivery unit methodologies.



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