This chapter is about accomplishing what you set your mind to do. It concerns how to translate your big policy ideas and campaign promises into successful results because, at the end of the day, results are all that really matters.

Tolstoy once observed that every happy family is happy in the same way, while each unhappy family is unhappy in its own particular way. So it is with public undertakings. We studied more than 75 major initiatives since World War II, including more than two-dozen large state initiatives. While these undertakings vary in specifics, nearly all of them follow a predictable path from idea to results. There are lots of ways a given state initiative can end in disaster, but to have a happy ending, several things must occur:

- The undertaking must start with a good idea.
- The idea must be given specifics, often in the form of legislation, that become an implementable design.
- The design must win approval, as when a bill becomes a law, signaling a moment of democratic commitment, or what we call “Stargate” because it instantly takes the process from the political universe to the bureaucratic universe.
- There must be competent implementation.
- The initiative must generate the desired results.

In addition, to be successful in the long run, a major state initiative large public undertaking requires one more step:

- Over time, the results and the methods of the initiative must be re-evaluated.

Nearly all public undertakings follow this predictable path. The State Journey to Success map helps to visualize the journey from idea to results as a continuous process.
from big ideas to big results

THE STATE JOURNEY TO SUCCESS

IDEA

DESIGN

STARGATE

Source: Deloitte Research
THE STATE JOURNEY TO SUCCESS

DESIGN-FREE

PROBE for DESIGN WEAKNESSES

RIVER of FAILURE

BEWARE of IDEA DISTORTION

OVER CONFIDENCE

MANAGE RISK

TAKE FAILURE SERIOUSLY

RESULT

RE-EVALUATION

THIS WAY TO

COMPLACENCY TRAP

SISYPHUS TRAP

REALM OF BUREAUCRACY

1. The journey to locally sustainable government:
   - Generating jobs
   - Investing in technology and innovation
   - 21st-century education
   - Closing state infrastructure gaps
   - Responding to health care reform
   - Improving human services
   - Technology reboot
   - Innovation state
   - From big ideas to big results

2. The state journey to fiscally sustainable government:
   - Generating jobs
   - Investing in technology and innovation
   - 21st-century education
   - Closing state infrastructure gaps
   - Responding to health care reform
   - Improving human services
   - Technology reboot
   - Innovation state
   - From big ideas to big results

3. The state journey to fiscally sustainable government:
   - Generating jobs
   - Investing in technology and innovation
   - 21st-century education
   - Closing state infrastructure gaps
   - Responding to health care reform
   - Improving human services
   - Technology reboot
   - Innovation state
   - From big ideas to big results

4. The state journey to fiscally sustainable government:
   - Generating jobs
   - Investing in technology and innovation
   - 21st-century education
   - Closing state infrastructure gaps
   - Responding to health care reform
   - Improving human services
   - Technology reboot
   - Innovation state
   - From big ideas to big results

5. The state journey to fiscally sustainable government:
   - Generating jobs
   - Investing in technology and innovation
   - 21st-century education
   - Closing state infrastructure gaps
   - Responding to health care reform
   - Improving human services
   - Technology reboot
   - Innovation state
   - From big ideas to big results

6. The state journey to fiscally sustainable government:
   - Generating jobs
   - Investing in technology and innovation
   - 21st-century education
   - Closing state infrastructure gaps
   - Responding to health care reform
   - Improving human services
   - Technology reboot
   - Innovation state
   - From big ideas to big results

7. The state journey to fiscally sustainable government:
   - Generating jobs
   - Investing in technology and innovation
   - 21st-century education
   - Closing state infrastructure gaps
   - Responding to health care reform
   - Improving human services
   - Technology reboot
   - Innovation state
   - From big ideas to big results

8. The state journey to fiscally sustainable government:
   - Generating jobs
   - Investing in technology and innovation
   - 21st-century education
   - Closing state infrastructure gaps
   - Responding to health care reform
   - Improving human services
   - Technology reboot
   - Innovation state
   - From big ideas to big results

9. The state journey to fiscally sustainable government:
   - Generating jobs
   - Investing in technology and innovation
   - 21st-century education
   - Closing state infrastructure gaps
   - Responding to health care reform
   - Improving human services
   - Technology reboot
   - Innovation state
   - From big ideas to big results
Having a map of a public undertaking won’t ensure success any more than having a map of Mount Everest will ensure you’ll make it to the top. A map can help, but every step along the way requires skill. What the map does is provide a framing tool for visualizing the journey from idea to results, enabling those engaged in state initiatives to prepare for the rigors of the journey.

The potential for failure lurks at every phase along the journey to success. Any one of several recurring pitfalls can bedevil significant change efforts in state government. Time and time again, state policymakers fall into the same traps, a set of snares that doom their well-meaning initiatives to failure. Unfortunately, these traps do not announce themselves with trumpets blaring. The most dangerous aspects of the journey come from the hidden snares embedded in the public sector’s taxing terrain.

Creating meaningful results will happen when initiatives stop falling prey to the same old traps.

The sections that follow are intended to augment your understanding of how to translate big policy ideas into results and bring these hidden traps to the forefront. Don’t expect miracles. There are no guarantees, no magic formulas and no sure-fire recipes for success. Major state government initiatives are hard, and a healthy respect for the challenges along the road is essential.
Opening up the ideation process

Breaking free of bias and inviting in new voices

Ideas are the first phase in the public policy process. You can’t have a successful result if you begin with a flawed idea. In many state capitals, when people think about ideas, they generally focus on ideology and fight over whose world view is right or whose ideas manifest the purest intentions.

Bad ideas generally become reality when they aren’t exposed to external criticism. This phenomenon is called the Tolstoy Syndrome, and it’s the biggest trap in the idea phase. It occurs when people or groups shut off the voices of critics. We ignore evidence that doesn’t fit our preconceived notions about the world and cast aside inconvenient facts that challenge existing beliefs.

Overcoming the Tolstoy Syndrome is all about listening and confronting information that makes you uncomfortable. If we think we know the answer, we close off avenues of exploration, and fail to invite people with different skill sets to apply their unique combination of knowledge, wisdom and experience to work with us. Beating the Tolstoy Syndrome means breaking across all kinds of professional, psychological and organizational boundaries. It means letting your customers design your products, letting frontline workers set your policies and letting the private sector help solve public problems.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR STATE LEADERS

Fight confirmation bias

Embrace the ethos of the scientific method. Don’t ignore data that contradict your preconceived notions. Actively test your idea with skeptics. Be data-driven, and eschew policymaking by ideology.

Find the right, diverse people

Look to other fields and disciplines. Subject matter experts should be joined up with systems thinkers and other smart people with diverse interests. If your problem is in transportation, ask: how can I involve non-transportation people in my problem? An interdisciplinary team might include management consultants, investment bankers and anthropologists.
Deepen the idea pool

The technologies of Web 2.0 make it easier than ever to tap into the potential of large numbers of "experts" — the customers and workers closest to the problem.

Reach across boundaries

There are no such things as Republican ideas or Democratic ideas. An idea doesn’t care if it came from an economist, a public manager or a politician.

Find areas of agreement

Can’t agree on a solution? Bring opponents together to agree on data. Make sure you understand the concerns of others. Listen. Role-play and articulate the opponents views until they know you understand their position. Shift from position bargaining to interest bargaining. Have stakeholders illustrate their view of what stands in the way of the solution. This will help to surface some of the assumptions and preconceptions people bring with them.

The simplest thing cannot be made clear to the most intelligent man if he is firmly persuaded that he knows already, without a shadow of a doubt, what is laid before him.

~ Leo Tolstoy

Tolstoy Syndrome (also known as confirmation bias)

It was Leo Tolstoy who popularized the notion that we see only what we are looking for, often while staying blind to what is really in front of us. Our preexisting mental maps prompt us all — liberals and conservatives, businessmen and bureaucrats — to discover in the world exactly what we expect to find. The Tolstoy syndrome causes enormous problems in execution.
TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES

Turn data into information
Find skilled professionals who know how to move up the cognitive food chain — from data to information, from information to knowledge, from knowledge to wisdom.

Construct an idea-generating environment
Create opportunities to encourage wild ideas, sketches and wild scenarios. An approach such as Deloitte’s “Deep Dive,” for example, combines brainstorming, prototyping and role playing to help teams generate solutions for specific challenges.

Translate the problem into a design challenge
Doing so helps articulate the problem you are trying to solve and the constraints that must be taken into consideration in the ideation process.

Look for the opposite of an idea
Find someone getting the results you want, and then work backwards. Prototype and let “end users” surprise you.

Get ideas from partners
Give the problem to someone else to solve. Let your network of partners, both governmental and non-governmental, help to develop new solutions to old problems. NASA posts some of its biggest challenges online for a network of more than 180,000 self-enlisted solvers to tackle.

Get out of your office
Change the physical space. Talk to users. If you’re working on recycling policy, go visit a smelter. Talk to the truck driver who delivers scrap metal.

Use mashups
Combine ideas from unrelated fields to create new solutions — free market environmentalism, for example, to promote acid rain reduction. Another mashup is Virtual Alabama, which merged Google Earth 3-D visualization tools with emergency response data to create a state-of-the-art disaster response system (www.virtual.alabama.gov).92

Web 2.0
Seek ideas from customers, staff and citizens using Web 2.0 technologies. Let the best ideas rise to the top through organization-wide voting, and then have leadership select the best of the lot. Use the wisdom of the crowds as a way of testing your predispositions.

Source: Deloitte Research
Developing state policy that works in the real world

Treat policy design as a process that brings lawmakers together with implementers

Many large public failures are rooted in a failure of policy design. The Design-Free Design Trap occurs because the work of drafting a bill that launches a major initiative isn’t generally treated like the design process it truly is. Instead of a sound, executable design, the goal of the legislative process is often to produce a passable bill that can be sold to constituents back home. Laws often aren’t subject to the sort of exacting scrutiny they deserve.

Too frequently, the result is legislation that shows fundamental flaws in the real world. The bill gets passed, but the design is unworkable. A bad design will always undermine a good idea. The design flaws may not make themselves known until the policy is implemented; nonetheless, the failure is rooted in the design.

In the private sector, the design process is an area of expertise in and of itself. Rather than relying on the aesthetic sensibilities and whims of a designer, designs are tested and retested to see how real people react to them. The political process generally lacks this sort of scrutiny. Just as a building department reviews the design of a house before deciding whether to issue a permit, state lawmakers might uncover at least some of the design flaws if they had to submit large and complex initiatives to the scrutiny of a feasibility analysis conducted by implementation-savvy experts.

The Design-Free Design Trap

Many legislators and other public officials don’t see the legislative process as a design process. Most policy ideas go straight from the idea stage to legislation drafting without ever going through the exacting design process that occurs for nearly every good or service launched in the private sector. Overcoming this trap requires a fundamentally different mindset, one based on designing policy for implementation first and foremost and passage through the legislature second.
GUIDING PRINCIPLES
FOR STATE LEADERS

Think design, not legislation

Too often, those drafting a bill are only thinking about what they can get passed. Lawmakers should also think about implementation and recognize that a "bill" is really a blueprint for a bureaucracy.

Involve implementers

Good implementation cannot save a poor design. Policy implementers who faithfully execute on a flawed design cannot create success. By the time a bill is passed, the bureaucrats who will have to actually implement your bill should be your new best friends.

Don’t confuse good intentions with good design

No one cares about how high-minded your design is if it doesn’t work in the real world. No Child Left Behind sounds nice, but it failed to produce the anticipated results. Use a variety of design techniques to obtain information about how your idea will work in the real world.

Probe for design weaknesses

Assign someone to shoot holes in the design at an early stage. If someone isn’t looking for the weaknesses during the design phase, rest assured that people will be finding weaknesses in your policy after it is launched — with far more serious consequences. (Think Enron.) Design review makes sense at the building department, and it makes sense at the legislature.

Design-free design and California’s electricity deregulation

One of the biggest policy fiascos in recent times was California’s electricity deregulation. In 1996, Democrats and Republicans in the California legislature worked together to pass a major redesign of the state’s electricity markets. The reforms were intended to introduce competition, spur innovation and reduce the cost of electricity.

That was the intent, anyway. But by 2000, California’s electricity system was in shambles. The new law caused soaring prices, rolling blackouts and the recall of Governor Gray Davis. A government reform launched with high hopes turned into a total disaster. What went wrong?

The problem had its origins in the design. Some energy companies such as Enron exploited design flaws in the legislation, racking up profits and ripping off consumers. What looked good on paper turned into a fiasco when it was actually implemented.
TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES

Use Failure Modes and Effects Analysis (FMEA)
Charge a team with answering the question: "How is this going to fail?" Have someone other than the designers search for flaws.

Prototype, if possible
Fail fast, and fail small. Test and retest your design through multiple small-scale trials with real users. Use real-world, unanticipated feedback from prototyping to adjust your design in real time.

Put on your scammer hat
Role play how those affected by your new system might exploit potential design flaws to their benefit. Scammers can come from anywhere. New rules will generate new behaviors. Try to imagine how certain unscrupulous individuals within the affected population might try to exploit the new system for their benefit. Offer a modest prize for whoever can game your design.

Make a business case
Formal articulation of the intended goals, intended benefits and expected costs of any state initiative can help focus the design process and bill drafting. It also helps stifle scope creep.

Do some “pre-engineering”
Show how the new system you have designed will work — or not work — in the real world, through flow charting. Use process mapping to uncover duplication, overlap and needless complexity in design. (It’s just like reengineering, except it’s done during the design phase.)

Change the psychic terrain
If you do all of your designing within the political stew of a state legislature — with the associated lobbyists, partisan politics and horse trading — your design is likely to reflect political imperatives, not design imperatives.
Critical questions to ask of your initiative during the Design Phase

- Why is this the right approach?
- Is this an efficient use of government funds?
- Why will the program work?
- Why do you understand the ways in which your program could fail?
- How will the program be implemented?
- How will you monitor success and rethink the approach down the line?
Getting through the political stargate

The democratic commitment point separates the political universe of policy development from the bureaucratic universe of implementation.

In the journey from idea to results, there is a moment at which the democratic process commits to an action, transforming the possible into the real. The book *If We Can Put a Man on the Moon...* refers to this moment of democratic commitment as the “Stargate.”

*Stargate* is the name of a sci-fi movie and long-running television series. The Stargate is the show’s main prop, a big circular ring that creates a wormhole in space such that when you walk through it, you instantly travel from one part of the universe to another. By taking a single step, you wind up in a strange new world, where the people are different, the customs are different, and a new set of bad guys is waiting to mess with you. Walking through the Stargate represents a serious commitment, because you can’t just turn around and walk back. Getting through isn’t easy since the Stargate may be guarded by unsavory aliens, or it may be closed altogether.

**the trap**

The *Stargate Trap* isn’t something you avoid; it’s something you get through. The most unpredictable phase in the journey, the challenge is to get through with your integrity intact, your idea recognizable and a design that can be actually implemented. The biggest dangers are the distorting, and sometimes lethal, effects of the dangerous political terrain of the Stargate itself.

**GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR STATE LEADERS**

**Hold on to your integrity**

The Stargate is the essence of democracy — both good and bad. The best and worst of democracy are right in front of the Stargate. It is where the statesmen prevent bad ideas from going through but also where all the unsavory characters hang out: the special interests, the log rollers, the horse traders. Avoid the temptation to sacrifice your principles to get something through.
Maintain the integrity of your idea
There is a temptation to water down an idea to get it through Stargate, but what is gained?

Be ready to champion change
Democracy is designed to limit big change. Work through all the things that could go wrong during the legislative process. Develop strategies to counteract each scenario and be prepared to make a public case.

Take it to the people
The Stargate is heavily guarded. Those in power are often beneficiaries of the status quo who will resist change. If you can win the hearts and minds of the people, legislators will take heed, and change will follow.

Don’t rush or force an idea through Stargate before you’ve achieved consensus
If you force something through by executive order, it can often be harder to execute because if things get tough, you might be abandoned.

Don’t stifle debate
See the Stargate not just as a barrier on the way to getting something done but as a part of the democratic process. In the long run, the civil debate that takes place is critical to being able to achieve what you really want done. It is much more difficult to execute on an unpopular exercise when there hasn’t been a true democratic commitment.

TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES

Articulate your deal breakers
Every dog has fleas, and every law has flaws. What principles are essential? What aspects of reform are negotiable? What are the non-negotiables that will cause you to walk away from your own bill?

Get “sticky”
Those opposed to the 2005 comprehensive immigration bill had a short, simple message that resonated with voters: we don’t reward lawbreakers in America. Proponents had position papers and economic statistics. Guess who won?

Public debate
From the Lincoln-Douglas debates to the less grand exchange between Al Gore and Ross Perot on Larry King Live, public discourse is the lifeblood of democracy.

Workability assessment
Require an “implementability” assessment before a bill passes out of the political world to the bureaucratic world. Are the timelines realistic? Is the funding sufficient? In Canada, departments coming forward to the Cabinet with new program proposals are required to detail the implementation implications of their proposals (as opposed to simply coming forward with a new program proposal — and funding request — with only a broad implementation plan).

The challenge is to get your idea through the state legislature with your integrity intact, your idea recognizable and an implementable design.
Policy implementation

Making desired results happen — on time and on budget

Confident, bold and optimistic. These are the traits that voters look for in a governor. They are wonderful characteristics. Then again, so are their complements. But who wants to vote for someone who is humble, cautious and realistic?

Voters tend to prefer leaders who exhibit self-confidence that borders on narcissism. Politicians give it to them. Unfortunately, sometimes the self-assured, successful men and women in position of public leadership devote insufficient attention to the details of implementation. Too often, champions underestimate the risks that accompany a new initiative. We call this the Overconfidence Trap. When they’re overconfident, leaders sometimes don’t take the sort of prudent steps they should to ensure successful execution.

Herein lies the paradox of political confidence. Governors and other state leaders have to be confident enough to take on big challenges, while at the same time being cognizant of the very real possibility of failure. Somewhere between timidity and foolhardiness exists a sweet spot of self-confidence that recognizes both the possibility and the peril of tackling a big challenge. A smart mountaineer is confident he can reach the summit, but he respects the hazards of the journey.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR STATE LEADERS

Establish clear ownership
Who is the high-level political sponsor?
Who is the day-to-day manager?

Make a great first impression
You only get one chance.

Be realistic
Don’t downplay the resources, time and costs needed to execute the initiative. Fight the political pressure to produce unrealistically rosy projects and timelines. Assign a dedicated team. It is unrealistic to ask individuals who are already overwhelmed to do it.

Manage expectations
Set low expectations, and avoid making overly optimistic pronouncements.

Embrace the risk of failure
Understand that your initiative may fail, and take steps to avoid it.

Bring a design perspective to program design
To some extent, implementation requires a certain amount of discretion with respect to building a program based on a legislative blueprint.
Make sure to introduce a design perspective when making implementation choices.

**TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES**

**Embrace the project management mindset**

Gantt charts, Microsoft Project, task lists — you need people with the skills to use the tools that manage implementation. Effective project management hinges on several key activities.

- **Task and milestone management**: Set your goals, timelines, key milestones/achievements.
- **Stakeholder management**: Accurately identify stakeholders and their needs. Set expectations appropriately.

- **Change management**: Develop transition strategy and change management to increase program support and adoption.
- **Technical management**: Almost all implementations involve technology. Use what you need, but avoid “gee-whiz” and “bleeding edge” technologies.
- **Risk mapping**: This is a tool used to identify, evaluate and prioritize a group of risks that could significantly influence the ability to successfully achieve a given initiative. By plotting the significance and likelihood of the risk occurring, the map allows you to visualize risks in relation to each other, gauge their extent, and plan what type of controls should be implemented to mitigate the risks.
Set up a war room
Take a cue from many successful state initiatives and set up a war room to manage your implementation. Avoid the box-checking tendency of many project management organizations (PMOs).

Scenario plan
Don’t just plan, scenario plan. Expect the unexpected.

Use the crowd to detect potential failure
Catch risks before they doom a project. Use social media to take the pulse of an organization — to surface issues, doubts and problems in order to identify risks before they become obvious to leadership.

Segment your customers
Break up the universe of potential customers into manageable segments with similar characteristics. Done correctly, segmentation involves data-driven analysis that’s based on surveys, focus groups and test marketing that cover almost all aspects of an initiative.

Chunk your projects
Government projects are often huge — much larger and more complex than their private sector equivalents. Chunking state initiatives and projects into bite-sized pieces that can deliver incremental, stand-alone value reduces risk by making projects smaller and less complex. It also encourages organizational learning because later chunks can learn from the earlier ones.

The Overconfidence Trap
Despite what you may hear from some politicians, failure is always an option. Those who fall into The Overconfidence Trap dismiss those who advise caution, consider only the best-case scenario, and plan with unrealistic budgets and impossible time lines. It can occur anywhere, but most often it arises during the implementation phase. The best way to avoid the overconfidence trap is to take the possibility of failure seriously — and take precautions to avoid it.
When the Greek gods decided to punish Sisyphus for his trickery, they assigned him the task of rolling a huge boulder up a really steep hill. Each time, before he could reach the top of the hill, the rock would roll back down again, forcing Sisyphus to repeat this fruitless task throughout eternity. Those who work in the public sector often feel like Sisyphus rolling and rerolling a rock up a hill.

The Sisyphus Trap is the unique set of challenges in the public sector facing the person rolling the rock up the hill. State leaders fall into The Sisyphus Trap when they fail to comprehend the special challenges of the public sector terrain. Too often, state policymakers believe that they can achieve results simply by devising the right strategy or passing the right law. They miss a critical ingredient for success because the problem of getting big things done in government isn’t merely a systems problem. It isn’t merely a policy problem. It’s also a human problem.

One thing is abundantly clear: nothing is as vital to success as the attitude of the living, breathing human beings charged with getting the rock up the hill. Remember that even as Sisyphus is pushing on the rock, the rock is pushing back on Sisyphus. To make a difference in state government means operating within a rule-laden bureaucracy — some rules are sensible, many of them are not. It means working in an environment where the incentives are all wrong. It means swimming in the sometimes unsavory stew of politics. To succeed in large state undertakings, it is necessary to deeply understand the terrain that state government executives, managers, and frontline employees must contend with every day — the forces that make it so hard to push the rock up that hill.

**GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR STATE LEADERS**

**Understand the terrain**

The public sector hill is steeper than its private sector counterpart. Making a difference in state government means operating within a bureaucratic system that’s rife with rules that represent varying levels of sensibility.

**Focus on the mission**

Having an inspiring mission may be the most important competitive advantage in state government. Emphasize the importance of what you are doing. People want to make a difference. An undertaking of any significance requires an organization that’s aligned to the mission.
Incentives matter
Self-interest is part of human nature. Performance incentives, award ceremonies, recognition — they make a difference. The lack of built-in incentives and feedback, however, makes results in government harder to come by.

Be cognizant of culture
Think twice before asking a state agency to work outside its cultural comfort zone. One mismatch, for example, is when social workers are asked to be “enforcers,” in essence, turning in their clients.

Bridge the political-bureaucratic divide
This requires a leader who can act as an interface between distinctly different worlds — the rare person who can translate bureaucratic language to politicians and tell the political masters when they are off-course.

TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES

Know the people doing the work
Data are important, but getting to know the people in the trenches will foster a different understanding of the challenge ahead. Get out of the office and work the phones, work the line, work something. Attitude is everything.

Invest in your people, develop your people
Government is notorious for under-investing in the productive capacity of its workers. Training in the tools of process management and change management is a good start. Programs aimed at developing a deep competency can help groom the “bridgers” needed to bridge the political and bureaucratic realms over time. One example: the British Civil Service’s Fast Stream program where the best and brightest are exposed to a series of intensive job placements designed to prepare them for senior management positions.

Cultural transformation toolkit
Systems you use to manage your state workforce have a huge influence on attitudes of employees. Civil service, union rules and retirement structures have a huge impact on the state workforce and on getting big things done. Several tools can help to transform an organization’s culture.

- Cultural assessment: Survey an organization to identify its core beliefs and values — both those that are currently present and those that are desired.
- Change readiness assessment: Quickly assess organizational strengths and challenges to change with respect to leadership, workforce, structure and process.
- Flexible retirement approaches: Greater flexibility in retirement packages allows for workers to choose the point in time when it makes sense for them to stay or move on, and it helps organizations to attract young talent.
- Project-based, flexible staffing: Skills repositories provide information on the skills and capabilities of employees. These can help managers match skills to employees and manage project performance.

The Sisyphus Trap
The Sisyphus trap is the distinctive interaction between the uniquely challenging public sector operating system and the people who work in government. Though understanding the systems of government is critical to success, we also need to understand the people rolling the boulder up the hill, particularly how their behaviors are shaped by the culture in which they toil. The Sisyphus trap can arise anywhere, but problems most commonly arise at the results phase.
Overcoming the Sisyphus Trap: Lessons from Wisconsin’s welfare reform

Wisconsin is widely considered the father of welfare reform. The state reduced its welfare rolls by an astounding 82 percent in six years. Wisconsin overcame the Sisyphus Trap by changing the incentives (both for recipients and for providers), getting the culture right and closing the political-bureaucratic divide.

First, Wisconsin achieved bipartisan consensus about the goal of welfare reform. In fact, it was Democrats in the legislature who first proposed abolishing Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) and replacing it with another model by 1999. The shared commitment to the main goals of welfare reform removed what turned out to be a major stumbling block in other states: achieving goal alignment.

Second, the state built on earlier experiments and successes at the local level in counties like Kenosha. Rather than simply impose an untested, top-down solution, policy designers took their cue from implementers, and this eliminated much of the friction that typically exists between levels of government.

Third, Wisconsin got both the incentives and the cultural issues right. It did so by introducing a novel system of competition. It put the administration of the welfare to work programs out for bid, allowing public, private and nonprofit organizations to submit proposals for running the program in all ninety-two counties. This forced many of the organizations that would be delivering on the reforms — organizations with very different cultures that might previously have operated at cross-purposes — to team up and coordinate their efforts.

Last, the state agency in charge of implementing welfare reform was more than up to the task. Larry Mead, the author of Government Matters, an acclaimed book on Wisconsin’s welfare reform, argues that “bureaucratic statecraft,” the development of a strong, efficient and engaged administrative structure was — more than anything else — responsible for Wisconsin’s success. Wisconsin’s welfare reformers skillfully navigated the interplay of people and systems.

Management guru Peter Drucker contends that successful business executives periodically reexamine the nature and purpose of everything their corporation does by asking two questions: “If we were not already doing this, would we now go into it?” If the answer is yes, they ask the follow-up question: “If we were to start doing this today, how would we do it?” Drucker’s questions get at a simple but profound truth: in some cases, what is being done no longer makes sense. In other cases, how it is being done no longer makes sense. In either case, change is called for.

Drucker referred to this as “sloughing off yesterday” and “purposeful abandonment.” Innovation brings change, and while it introduces new and improved ways of creating wealth, it also means that old structures become obsolete. Economists sometimes refer to this as the process of “creative destruction,” the removal of what exists to make room for what might be — the organizational equivalent of pruning a bush. Drucker notes that successful businesses tend to be fanatical at such pruning. This is not because businesspeople are so smart; it’s because businesses that don’t do this don’t stay in business.

Not surprisingly, states typically haven’t done a good job of “sloughing off yesterday.” Most state governments lack the painful feedback mechanism of the market that drives this sort of change. Companies evolve or disappear, but all too often, government programs simply endure, operating as they have for decades with only incremental changes. One of the biggest challenges in government is that, unlike a business, no one “owns” that part of the journey. While the executive branch owns the launch of a program, in many cases, no one owns the task of reevaluation.

The trap

The Complacency Trap

In our modern world, conditions change fast, but democracy changes slowly. The result is that state programs and agencies need regular reevaluation. The Complacency Trap occurs when the status quo blocks our vision of what could be. Beating The Complacency Trap means embracing deep, systemic change to both the “what” and the “how” of state government.
GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR STATE LEADERS

Don’t let “what is” prevent you from trying “things that never were.” What exists today can be both a political and psychological barrier to what could be.

**Improve your focus — do less, better**

Constantly reevaluating what government does and pruning nonessential activities is essential to improving how government operates.

**Change the default status**

By changing the default from keep to eliminate, the sunset process provides an ongoing mechanism for government to rethink how agencies can best fulfill their obligations.

**Wonder “what if?”**

When things are going well, the tendency is to assume that they will continue to go well. To counter this tendency, you need a process and a team that actively creates “what if” scenarios. Such teams should produce a range of possible disaster scenarios. Don’t wait for a tragedy to address risk.
Critical questions to ask during the reevaluation phase

- What is the goal of the state program? Is it still critical to the organization’s mission?
- Are these goals being realized? How has actual overall performance differed from the original goals?
- What would you do with a clean slate?
- Would the state program look the same if you built it today? What are the alternatives?
- Have technological developments rendered any of the programs obsolete or less effective than they could be?
- Do stakeholders have the ability to “weigh-in” on the reevaluation process?

TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES

Idealized design
Try to imagine the ideal way to accomplish your policy goals, irrespective of how you do things today. Then, consider where you are today, and identify the obstacles to getting to your ideal state.

Sunset review
Establish an action-forcing mechanism to encourage elimination, reform and merger.

BRAC model
A variant of the sunset review, the Base Realignment and Closure model used an independent commission to recommend military base closures. Congress had to vote up or down on a package of proposals within 45 days. This process helped to overcome parochial political interests in Congress. Similar thinking could be applied to state government.

Look out for the black swans
Periodic risk analyses can help guard against complacency by identifying big consequences and rare or unforeseen events. Monitoring metrics for unexplained changes can help to uncover such “black swans” and other hidden risks.

Strategic options analysis
This tool identifies various strategies across a range of potential futures for the organization.

Texas Performance Review
When Texas was facing a massive state budget deficit in the early 1990s, then-governor Ann Richards, Comptroller John Sharp and the state legislature assembled over 100 of the best budget analysts, auditors and number crunchers in Texas government and gave them a single mission: Get us out of this budget crunch. In a few short months, the team came up with over 1,000 recommendations and identified over $2.4 billion in budget savings, ending the budget crisis and averting the need to impose a state income tax. The success of the review gave rise to the Texas Performance Review, a biennial evaluation of Texas government that has resulted in more than $15 billion in savings and gains to state funds since it was launched in 1991.
This chapter was adapted from material in *If We Can Put a Man on the Moon: Getting Big Things Done in Government* (Harvard Business Press, 2009) by William D. Eggers and John O’Leary.
Q: You compare the human mind to an elephant and a rider, two forces within ourselves that either obstruct change or make it happen. Can you describe that analogy?

It’s not right to say that people “resist change.” Typically, part of us embraces change, and part doesn’t. One part of us wants a better beach body come summer. But another part wants that Oreo cookie. For years, psychologists have talked about the difference between the analytical brain that plans for a change and thinks through it, and the emotional side that’s attracted to the Oreo cookie — to the comfort of the existing routine.

I love the analogy by Jonathan Haidt at the University of Virginia. He imagines the analytical side of the brain that decides we want to change something as a tiny human rider riding on top of a big, emotional elephant. I love this metaphor because it gets the relative weight classes right. If you think you’re going to think your way into change, that’s the tiny human rider on the big emotional elephant. In any direct contest of wills, the elephant is going to win. It’s got a six-ton weight advantage.

Q: Change can’t really happen until we’re hungry for it. How can we foster the requisite appetite for change?

In this battle between the rider and the elephant, we typically approach change situations almost exclusively talking to the rider. Think about public health in the United States. We have warnings on cigarette packs saying “cigarette smoke contains carbon monoxide.” Who is this appealing to in this battle between the rider and the elephant? It sounds like a purely logical appeal to the rider.

But Canada slaps a photo on the cigarette pack that takes up half the pack with a very vivid image of yellow teeth and says “smoking makes your teeth yellow.” What’s going to work better to change the behavior of a sixteen-year-old thinking of taking up the smoking?

Too often, we start off our change efforts with the thirty-five page Power Point deck filled with graphs and statistics. That’s a great appeal to that analytical rider side of our brains. But it’s not particularly effective at providing that motivation for change for the elephant, the emotional side.
Q...Is it always necessary to appeal to both the elephant and the rider, or can a sufficiently strong appeal to one overcome the barriers placed by the other?

You’ve got to do a little bit for both sides of the brain. Analytical appeals alone don’t work without some emotion. But pure emotional appeals don’t work either. A lot of the political discourse in this country is about anger, a feeling that we’re going down the wrong path. But if there’s not a clear direction for the analytical side of our brains, for that rider side, then you end up spinning your wheels and getting frustrated. Bad things happen when emotions are heightened but you don’t have a clear path in front of you.

Q...You write “We seem wired to focus on the negative.” How does this hamper our attempts to change something? Doesn’t change begin with the identification of a problem?

There’s a natural tendency in the analytical side of our brains to focus on problems. One of the points we make is, why don’t we use the analytical side of our brains to focus on what’s going right? Suppose a married couple shows up in a therapist’s office. The classic therapy would be problem-focused. We go back into your childhood and figure out the source of the problems you’re having in your relationship. The problem with that is a year into the analysis the couple says, now we understand why we’re fighting, but how do we stop? Solutions-focused therapy says, “Let’s think about the last time you as a couple had a discussion about a controversial issue and didn’t devolve into an argument.” The couple says, “Last Tuesday we talked for thirty minutes about finances without fighting.” So the therapist will say, “Next week, get up in the morning, pour yourself a cup of coffee, and talk about child-rearing for thirty minutes. Can you use that success story to extrapolate for the future?” That’s the goal of solutions-focused therapy.

We call this tendency to look for positive examples “looking for the bright spots.” By focusing on the bright spots we can say, “What have you done successfully in the past, and can you do more of it the future?” Especially in the economic downturn we just lived through, there are lots of negative things to pay attention to, but often, we wind ourselves up spinning our minds in unproductive directions.

Q...What makes this focus on bright spots so effective?

You’re aligning both sides of the brain there. For the analytical rider side, you’re providing a clear direction, at least in the short term. This is not a long distance plan; we’re not trying to account for every possible contingency; we’re just trying to do one thing to move us a step in the right direction. The second thing you’re doing is evoking that emotional elephant side because change is paralyzing when we think it’s too big and pervasive. No one goes straight from the first date to marriage. It’s a progression of first steps and you gradually experiment your way into that relationship. And yet, when we try to do public or corporate changes, we try to come up with the whole plan at once. That’s paralyzing and scary to the elephant. And yet, by shrinking down that change and talking about the critical moves, you’re providing direction to the rider analytically and motivation to that elephant.

In our book, my brother and I put it this way: “Trying to fight inertia with analytical arguments is like tossing a fire extinguisher to someone who’s drowning. The solution doesn’t match the problem.”

Q...Along with the elephant and the rider, the framework in your book has a third component — the world outside the conflict in our brains. You call it the path.

One of my favorite examples is the one-click button on the Amazon site. What most people don’t know is that Amazon has the patent on one-click ordering. That’s a remarkable statement. You don’t get patents if anyone else in the history of the universe has ever considered what you’re trying to patent. But of all the firms doing e-commerce, only Amazon took the time to take away this obstacle. We spend a third of the book talking about techniques for shaping the path. The simpler the solution, and the more it’s been prototyped and workshopped, the more likely you are to have taken away the bumps in the road that prevent change from happening, even for a motivated elephant or a directed rider.