



How to Empower Bureaucrats for Better Government Performance

Dan Honig, Georgetown University

Bureaucrats are powerful forces for change – or they can be. In my work with the U.S. Government and far beyond I've seen firsthand how management can bring out the best in the many mission-driven public servants who are drawn to serve – or not. Poor management can demotivate and repel mission driven individuals, resulting in Government agencies delivering less than their full potential to the public. In *Mission Driven Bureaucrats* I study this systematically, drawing on my own research in the U.S. and in countries around the world, as well as a comprehensive analysis of over 4 million individual observations and data from more than 2,000 government agencies.

Government management systems often prioritize strict compliance, focusing on ensuring that rules are followed to the letter. While this might prevent misconduct, it can also create an environment where bureaucrats feel constrained and unable to innovate or take initiative. The data show a clear pattern: when bureaucrats are managed with a heavy emphasis on compliance, their motivation and job satisfaction plummet, leading to suboptimal performance. We can make the public service better by trusting and empowering public servants, who often share our goal of doing their jobs effectively and helping citizens thrive."

Mission-Driven Bureaucrats Are an Untapped Resource

Across different settings—from the bustling offices of the South African Revenue Service to the remote outposts of Brazil's Chico Mendes Institute for Biodiversity Conservation—many bureaucrats are deeply committed to their work. However, when their work is reduced to checking boxes, their potential remains untapped. By aligning management practices with the intrinsic motivations of these public servants, governments can unlock a wealth of talent and dedication. The data confirms that mission-driven bureaucrats are present in nearly every government agency, but their impact is muted in environments that prioritize compliance over empowerment.

Empowerment Drives Performance

When public servants are empowered with management practices that allow autonomy, cultivate competence, and create connection to peers and purpose, they perform better. Public servants are not fixed types; the same person can be motivated or demotivated, dedicated or slack off. In this sense, bureaucrats are just like most of us. When a public servant sees the impact of their work and feels that what they do matters to clients and teammates, they generally work harder and better.

If You Build It, They Will Come, and If You Don't, They'll Go

Compliance often deters those who are mission-driven. For example, in Detroit, Child Protective Services officers who are passionate about helping children and who have been carefully selected for their dedication often leave public service more quickly. When the job mainly involves filling out paperwork with little opportunity to use their judgment, individuals who are driven by making a meaningful impact are more likely to leave. But the opposite is true, too; people who want to make a difference are attracted to, and more likely to remain at jobs where they can have the impact they seek. Management style and quality are crucial—either positively or negatively—for those who care the most about serving the mission.

So What Can We Do?

There are a great many ways that personnel can be empowered. Sometimes empowerment requires changing the rules and formal structures, but often there is much to be done within existing rules. Turning “up” empowerment does not mean that a risk-averse agency need turn “down” compliance (even where that would likely be a good idea, too). Connecting peers to each other to discuss the common mission, encouraging greater collaboration, empowering staff and teams to make more decisions, and many, many more organizational practices can move towards greater empowerment. (If I or my colleagues at Georgetown's Better Government Lab can be helpful in that effort, don't hesitate to reach out via email or form [here](#)).

The culture of compliance has become so entrenched that it often seems the only thing bureaucrats can or will respond to is more top-down accountability. Some approaches to empowerment will require rethinking this approach. Systems can be built that encourage accountability to peers, or directly to citizens, that is broader and deeper than the thin, incomplete metrics that can often be collected and reported up the hierarchy.

Governments are full of pilots, but rarely is the subject of the pilot the managerial system itself. There is very strong evidence that performance can be improved by changing practices, and no reason not to try altering the 'software' of Government itself to increase the public sector's ability to serve citizens.

The evidence is clear: from Detroit to Dhaka and far beyond, vastly too many agencies are stuck 'managing for compliance.' Significant performance gains can be achieved through an approach that empowers public servants and nurtures their mission-driven motivation, leading to more effective and responsive governance.

There are plenty of strategies that can create a more empowered, motivated, and effective public sector that better serves the needs of all citizens. Another way is not only possible, it's already happening in certain areas. Let's expand these pockets of excellence into a widespread practice, creating a world where management that attracts, cultivates, and empowers mission-driven bureaucrats is the norm, not the exception.