

May 22, 2008

Doing More With Less: How To Navigate Cutback Management

Panelists:

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| John H. Banks | Vice President of Government Relations, ConEdison |
| John J. Doherty | Commissioner, Department of Sanitation |
| Michael P. Jacobson | Director, Vera Institute of Justice |
| Jeffrey A. Kay | Director, Mayor's Office of Operations |
| Alair Townsend | Columnist, Crain's New York Business |

Moderator:

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| Charles M. Brecher | Professor, Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service, NYU |
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Supporting High Performance Government: Leading Large Scale Change

“Doing More With Less: How To Navigate Cutback Management”

May 22, 2008

Executive Summary

Introduction

Accenture and the Research Center for Leadership in Action of the Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service, New York University are co-hosting an Executive Briefing series for public sector managers to discuss the multiple managerial and leadership challenges of implementing large scale change. The series strives to:

- Encourage the exchange of ideas between senior managers of complex change programs and those emerging leaders charged with undertaking similar efforts.
- Support a cadre of new leaders interested in undertaking such challenges, providing them with the insights, learning and the collegial support that will help sustain their work over time.
- Promote further learning about how successful complex change initiatives are designed and managed, and capture this information in written reports.

Each session is organized around a central strategic and managerial question of particular relevance to large-scale change. The session held on May 22, 2008, “Doing More With Less: How To Navigate Cutback Management” focused on the leadership and management challenges that arise during periods of budget constraint.

Background and Context

Finding the resources necessary to support large scale change in government is challenging enough in times of expanding budgets, but managing transformations in periods of budget retrenchment is even more complex. The question is how to do more with less money. Veterans of periods of cutback management in the past discuss their experiences and give advice on how to maintain momentum.

The panel included:

- John H. Banks, Vice President of Government Relations, Con Edison, former Deputy Director, City Council Finance Division
- John J. Doherty, Commissioner, Department of Sanitation
- Michael P. Jacobson, Director, Vera Institute of Justice, former Corrections and Probation Commissioner and Deputy Budget Director
- Jeffrey A. Kay, Director, Mayor’s Office of Operations

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- Alair Townsend, Columnist, Crain's New York Business, former Budget Director and Deputy Mayor for Finance and Economic Development

Moderator: Professor Charles M. Brecher, Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service, NYU

The Pitfalls of Hard Times: Doing Less with Less

Charles Brecher begins the discussion reminding the audience of earlier times in New York City's history of economic recession and budget deficits. He recounts, "We have, in New York City through some of our lifetimes, been through this in three different episodes. In each of the three prior episodes," he soberly observes, "the City responded to the bleak fiscal outlook reactively and in a manner that can hardly be characterized as 'doing more with less,' but in fact, quite the opposite." Working backwards, Brecher recalls, "there was the period after 9/11 and the terrorist attacks, which were distinctive to New York, but we also were in the midst of a national recession, albeit a somewhat mild one, and we suffered some revenue hits." The City "dealt with [the period following 9/11]...through some PEGs [Programs to Eliminate the Gap], but principally through borrowing...and an eighteen percent tax increase, so it wasn't exactly doing more with less in that period."

Prior to that, "there was a national recession that was pretty severe, and pretty severely felt in New York City in the early 1990s, and we had a period of some cutbacks at the end of the Dinkins Administration...and the first two years of the Giuliani Administration." During this period as well, the City's response was essentially to do less with less. The recession of the 1990s was dealt with through "some modest absolute reduction of headcount, and spending in the City actually went down with some initiatives to control spending."

Both of these periods paled, Brecher notes, from the period in the City during the late 1970s, which "we call the fiscal crisis from early 1975 to 1980." He characterizes this period as "the scary time," and warns that the City's response to that crisis "is exactly what we don't want to be replicating." The result of the crisis was "20 percent of the workforce disappeared through a combination of layoffs and attrition, 1 out of ever 5 jobs in government disappeared. In a period when inflation...numbers were in the double digits, wage increases were renegotiated and there were some fringe benefit cuts. The capital budget, due to the capital markets, disappeared except for what was federally funded. The capital budget in 1980 was half of what it was in 1975. Social welfare spending including public assistance spending, mostly controlled at the State level, was frozen in this context of inflation. Medicaid rates to providers were also pretty much frozen."

Indeed, the City's natural reaction during times of fiscal crisis is to pursue cutbacks in services, in spending, and in the City's workforce. As Michael Jacobson explains, "It's obvious that OMB will always be able to cut budgets." Not all cuts made by City agencies and OMB, however, are the same: "Ideally, you want to do cuts in a way that you can do more or at least the same with less. Usually, you do less with less." These periods are useful

to recall, Brecher notes, as examples of “the kinds of things we want to avoid” in the currently bleak and worsening fiscal outlook for the City.

Effective Cutback Management: Doing More with Less

Amidst and in contrast with this backdrop of an overall strategy of “doing less with less,” several examples emerge of how leaders in City government have been able to do more with less. Referring to these examples as the “silver lining” or “bright side” of cutback management, Brecher asks the panel to share these stories of leveraging fiscal crises to create opportunities for innovation, increased productivity, and gain-sharing. The panelists raise two examples of successful cutback management experience where such innovation and gain-sharing was achieved, the first regarding the Department of Sanitation and the second, the Department of Probation.

John Doherty, Commissioner of the Department of Sanitation, provides the first example, recalling his experience in the early-1980s: “Five or six years before, in 1975, [the City’s workforce reduction] had a major impact on Sanitation as well as every other agency. The result was that it was chaotic in many ways.” These reductions in the City’s sanitation workforce inevitably led to reductions in City services, most notably, “the frequency of the collection of waste...[as well as] street cleaning.” This changed, however in 1981, with the launching of the “Productivity Program.” For the Department of Sanitation, the Productivity Program allowed the agency to do more with less, which entailed using information tools to better measure productivity and working with labor and the unions to seek ways to increase productivity. Referring to this program as the “bright side” of cutbacks, Doherty reflects, “It forced managers, particularly younger managers, to think, ‘how are we going to more work with less people and be innovative?’” The ultimately result of this was that “[T]he streets were getting cleaner...[and] there was a nicer environment in the City.”

The second example of effective cutback management comes from Michael Jacobson, former Commissioner of the New York City Departments of Probation and Correction and former Deputy Budget Director for the Mayor’s Office of Management and Budget (OMB). Jacobson explains that it was his transition from OMB to the Department of Probation that provides him with a unique vantage point regarding how the Department was able to effectively navigate cutbacks to not reduce productivity, but actually leverage cuts to achieve more gains. He recalls, “In the early 1990s, I went from OMB to Probation, and OMB was cutting Probation’s budget...It was a huge cut and would have driven caseloads, which were already too high, through the ceiling. We had a long discussion with OMB about what we could do to absorb those cuts...We decided to protect the agency for about a year from cuts, if we could have the agency redesign itself...in a way that kept caseloads rising from about 150 per officer to 300. Then I became Commissioner and I realized that a year is not enough time...I knew that I didn’t know probation intimately enough to redesign the agency, but the workforce did.”

Once recognizing the need to engage the workforce in the redesign process, Jacobson led the redesign and restructuring of the Department of Probation: “We envisioned what Probation could look like, and we came up with automated reporting kiosks, group-work for probationers instead of individual contacts, and a new case management structure. It involved Jim Hanley, the Commissioner of Labor Relations, and labor, because we wanted a gain-sharing agreement, which is when some of the savings from productivity gains are reinvested back into the workforce...And it was a good story.”

Jacobson’s recounting makes clear that such productivity-increasing innovations as allowing probationers to self-report in kiosks, and having probation officers work with groups of probationers, are only possible through a combination of hard work, commitment, and collaborative efforts with the labor force and budget officials. The redesign of Probation, like the Productivity Program at Sanitation, illustrates how budget cutbacks do not necessarily entail a reduction in services, but rather can inspire a new way of doing business. Indeed, the panel discussion is peppered with examples of how fiscal crisis can lead to better ways of doing business. Jim Hanley, the Commissioner of Labor Relations, for example, remarks how “the greatest change we achieved with labor relations was during a fiscal crisis.” Whether an agency does less or more with cutbacks, it seems, depends on how such cutbacks are managed and leveraged.

Getting Ahead of the Crisis to Do More with Less

The productivity gains achieved through agency redesign and restructuring at both Sanitation and Probation are just two examples of how City agencies have been able to do more with less in times of fiscal crisis. Reflecting on these and other stories, panelists present general strategies useful in leveraging cutbacks to achieve innovation, increase productivity, and improve the provision of City services. The first part of this discussion stresses the importance of anticipating and getting ahead of the crisis, including the importance of both “messaging”—effectively conveying that a crisis is indeed happening and that cutbacks are necessary—and instituting proactive, rather than reactive, management. Together, these two observations underscore the importance and challenge of timing, and an underlying “Catch-22” to cutback management: how can leaders create the sense of crisis and urgency needed to initiate proactive planning in the window of time before the crisis actually happens, after which little time is left to truly implement structural changes?

Messaging the Crisis

Perhaps the most significant challenge associated with leveraging cutbacks to do more with less is to convey that cutbacks are not simply probable, but in fact, inevitable. Indeed, when such a message is not clearly sent and received, the tendency among all stakeholders in government is to resist change and to approach cutback management reactively. Such reactive cutback management is precisely what leads to a reduction in services, that is, doing less with less. As Steve Levine, Budget Director at the Mayor’s Office of Management and Budget, comments: “One of the great challenges is how do you get the message out [that cuts are inevitable], and get everyone to believe the message.” This message, he explains further, must ultimately come from the chief executive, the Mayor, but also all senior

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officials, and must be delivered consistently and repeatedly: “The message from City Hall is critical. It has to be a continuing reinforcement of the message.” Doing so, Levine explains, helps create the feeling of urgency: “Sometimes it has to feel like a crisis.”

One panelist agrees that such a sense of crisis must be created among agencies, and that creating that sense of crisis begins with “[c]onvincing everyone that there is a problem and that the nature of the problem is not easy.” However, simply conveying a sense of crisis is only half the challenge. The other half involves convincing everyone to take their fair share of cuts, and that the process they will undertake will be fair: “The issue I think that is tough for OMB and agency managers is to convince people that someone is trying to be fair in setting priorities...Managers at OMB don’t want to be seen as unfair or super tough on their agencies. [The challenge is] how do they [convey] that somebody overall—the Budget Director, Deputy Mayor, and City Hall—are looking at proposals and making sure they are fair.”

Clear messaging regarding fiscal crises and the need for cutbacks is also important when working with the City Council. However, for the City Council, the challenge is less about convincing members of a crisis, but rather convincing them to accept that these cuts will impact their constituents’ services. John Banks, former Deputy Director of the City Council’s Finance Division, explains: “It’s not difficult to convince the legislature that there are problems. You see it around you and from your constituents. The difficulty is to convince [legislative members] that you have to cut their programs...It’s like herding cats. Everyone has interests that they need to protect.” Meeting the challenge of effectively messaging to the City Council may entail aiding legislative leaders, like the Council Speaker, with sending clear messages to other members, and in turn, give members the ability to explain the cutbacks to their constituency. As Banks explains, “[City Council Speaker] Quinn understands [the need for restraint in making new budget asks], but the membership does not.” Their attitude is, “My constituency wants something and if it’s not my constituency [who gains], it’s another.”

Proactive Planning and Management

Messaging that fiscal crisis is imminent, when executed effectively, should not lead to a sense of retraction or guardedness, but rather should inspire and initiate the kind of proactive planning needed to do more with less. Indeed, as the panel discussion makes clear, the second step to getting ahead of the crisis is to begin planning ahead. In other words, leaders must be proactive, rather than reactive, in their cutback management. Such proactive planning is precisely what allowed John Doherty and Michael Jacobson to achieve restructuring and productivity gains during a time of fiscal crisis. As early as possible once a crisis is foreseen, leaders in City government should engage in the difficult, but potentially rewarding endeavor of planning ahead for a new way of doing business.

Michael Jacobson notes how the present time, with a fiscal crisis on the horizon, is precisely the time to begin planning for the tough times ahead. This is due to two reasons. He explains that restructuring for productivity gains takes time to design and to secure support for politically from all sides: “In this environment, you don’t have the crisis, but you have the time to do this now. It’s about having some stability to do this work. It’s just tough

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slogging hard work that you need the support of the Mayor and Commissioners to achieve.” The second reason why timing is critical is that productivity gains and resource savings are never immediate, but require time to be realized: “Right now, [the Departments of] Correction and Probation are working with DHS and HRA Commissioners Hess and Doar, trying to prevent homelessness and recidivism. Ultimately, it will result in big savings, but it takes years. You don’t have a big idea and have savings in six months.” The key to successful restructuring is “to start the process now and look inside and across agencies. In two or three years from now, you will have productivity and savings.”

Ingredients for Doing More with Less

Once the need for proactive cutback management is recognized and a planning process commences, leaders in City government next face the challenge of actually designing and implementing strategies of doing more with less. The panelists suggest three critical ingredients or “watch words” for success in designing these strategies: commitment, collaboration, and (information) technology.

Commitment

The panelists discuss how successful efforts to do more with less require commitment. Two types of commitment are discussed in particular. First, the panelists discuss the need for agency leaders to remain committed to undertaking what can be a tedious and arduous process of organizational change and redesign of work processes. Michael Jacobson flatly states, “If you want to do more with less or even the same with less, it takes an incredible amount of commitment and effort.” The path towards successful restructuring is neither linear nor without obstacles. However, such commitment is not without rewards: “[Restructuring] is a big exhausting commitment, but usually has a huge payoff.” Second, doing more with less also requires commitment among political leaders to support agency leaders in their efforts, and to not back down from the prospect of a political battle. Commitment is needed most notably from the Mayor. Jacobson explains, “You have to get City Hall buy-in. You need the commitment from the Mayor to do this kind of stuff.” Jim Hanley agrees. The Office of Labor Relations had in past times undergone tremendous battles with civil service unions “at incredible political cost...and some Mayors have the desire” to undertake these fights. Such high-level political support and commitment can also come from other senior officials. Jacobson reflects that in his own efforts, such political commitment was available from Deputy Mayors: “We worked for strong Deputy Mayors. We went to them because we needed cover and support.”

Collaboration

The second critical ingredient to achieving new ways of doing business and ultimately productivity gains in times of budget cutbacks is collaboration. Whereas collaboration is important in any transformational efforts, agency transformation without collaboration is impossible in times of cutback management. Panelists discuss two sets of stakeholders with whom collaboration is essential in doing more with less. The first and perhaps most critical is the budget department, in this case, the Mayor’s Office of Management and Budget (OMB). The need for collaboration with OMB seems obvious. Budget departments like

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OMB are at the helm of any process of budget cutbacks. Decisions regarding cutting budget items will be made by budget departments regardless of whether or not an agency engages and works with them. By not collaborating with OMB, agency heads will be forced to accept cuts without having had any input into these decisions.

Despite this fact, agencies surprisingly do not always work as closely with OMB as perhaps is needed. One panelist reflects, “[T]here can be a lot more collaboration between agency commissioners and high-level people at OMB.” The degree of collaboration, the panelist explains, may be limited by the perception among some agency officials that there are disincentives for collaborating with OMB. Commissioners sometimes feel that OMB’s “reward for...stepping up and doing the right thing was to say, ‘Thank you very much,’ take the money and ‘Now, what else can you do for me?’” To this perception, Jacobson counters, “The budget analyst wants agencies to do well. They don’t want to destroy them with budget cuts...In general they want to be helpful.” His advice to current leaders in City government is, “The earlier you bring in the Budget office, the better...They will ask you a lot of questions. At the end of the process, you come up with an agreement. They want to do the right thing. I think it’s important to take advantage of that.” Jeffrey Kay agrees: “They actually do want to help agencies...Bringing [OMB] in on the front end of it...is really going to make a difference.” Successful collaboration with OMB, John Doherty explains, requires having in-house expertise and individuals who can speak the same language: “When you come to tough times, the key person in an agency is your budget director...When you realize that you have to [make cuts], you better call in your Budget Director.”

The second stakeholder group with which agency leaders need to engage and collaborate is labor and unions. Like with OMB, the rule is to collaborate early and consistently. As Jim Hanley explains, “Labor Relations is involved in all of the city’s [cutback management.] You have to try to collaborate from the beginning [with unions].” Doherty concurs: “In all uniform agencies, if you don’t have good relations with unions, no matter what you try, it’s going to be much more difficult.” Jacobson recalls how his redesign of Probation would have been impossible without collaborating with labor: “When I got to Probation...I knew that I couldn’t do it...I had this top-down perspective, but I didn’t know enough to know how to redesign Probation services. But the workforce does. They know, but they’re not telling you. They have no self-interest in this...And so we undertook a sort of redesign process where we worked with a number of outside people and what we were basically told was, ‘The way you should do this is to get buy-in from the workforce, and in this particular case, the workforce should be the ones to design what Probation should look like.’” In the end, he concludes, “The design that we came up with...was all designed by the workforce.” Working collaboratively rather than antagonistically with the workforce allowed Jacobson to “[do] stuff with labor relations outside of collective bargaining.”

While the process of engaging unions in discussion about cutbacks can seem tremendously contentious to many City leaders, Jim reminds the audience how the City has, in past times of fiscal crisis, been able to achieve remarkable outcomes: “My experience over the years has been that the greatest productivity initiatives that we’ve seen were borne from incredible fiscal crisis. In 1975, there were three major crises with cops...We got everyone to work ten more days, and have more radio cars...During a fiscal crisis, we changed the structure [of

the Fire Department] so that they couldn't call in sick for each other anymore...And so the greatest changes we achieved during fiscal crisis.”

Information Technology and Performance Measures

The third ingredient is that of information technology and performance measures. Panelists suggest that technology and improved measurement systems can enable City agencies to do more with less. Certainly both Doherty and Jacobson used information technology to bring about structural changes and achieve productivity gains within their agencies. In the case of Sanitation, this involved new measures of productivity. In the case of Probation, the adoption of reporting kiosks led to the reduction in officer caseloads.

Adding to these examples, the panel discusses the promise that information technology and the use of performance measures holds for enabling leaders in City government to do more with less resources. Jeff Kay describes how the Mayor's Office of Operations has recently transformed to focus on outcome measures and to improve the development of outcome measures. These measures, he contends, allow for a more systematic way to measure productivity and the provision of services: “[A]gencies are being asked to do more with less...The Mayor says, ‘Well, how do you know you are doing more?’...When agencies make budget decisions or when OMB works with agencies to make budget decisions, how do you know that they are doing more with less? Well, we were able to release the [Citywide Performance Report] with the electronic dashboard...It enabled us to transform, get more data out there...The more agencies look at the final outcome information, the better decisions they will be able to make over time.”

Paul Cosgrave, Commissioner of the Department of Information Technology and Telecommunications (DoITT), adds that it is more unequivocal about the role of technology: “[T]echnology allows you to do more with less” and increase productivity. To this, John Doherty provides a slightly more nuanced and skeptical assessment: “I don't necessarily agree that technology saves you more with personnel...[Technology] provides you with more information, but the problem is that you need more analysts, you need people to fix the equipment, you need more people to work on software and programs...At the end of the day, it doesn't necessarily, in my mind at least...save personnel.” On the other hand, he adds, “[Technology] allows you to manage better.” Specifically, information technology has allowed the Department of Sanitation to better measure the quality of its services: “We have a measurement system [for street cleaning] which is really good for the Department, for better or for worse. We get a score...You can decide now, if you cut Sanitation workers, they will cut the level of clean. The City can say, ‘Well, we're at a an 85 percent scorecard, maybe we can lose two or three hundred people, and we can satisfy ourselves with a scorecard of 70 or 78 or something like that.”

Michael Jacobson adds to this debate by arguing that technology can “be a linchpin of productivity,” but only if it is used wisely. In other words, technology cannot replace effective management. Effective use of technology to do more with less requires buy-in from the workforce—“You have to empower the workforce to use [technology]”—as well as ensure effective oversight by managers.

The discussion on measures concludes with an aspiration from a panelist: “It’s good that we have moved from inputs to outputs. It seems the next step is to focus on unit costs. Yes, if you spend more, you can get more output. The question that makes the public queasy is, ‘what does it cost?’ What does it cost to go from 75 to 80 percent clean streets?...How much does it cost, and does it make sense?”

Conclusion

In summary, the Executive Briefing panel discussion presents an optimistic view of what is typically thought of as a bleak set of circumstances. During times of economic downturn, the City is often forced to make tough decisions and cutbacks in services, resigning itself with the prospect of having to do less with less. In past times, the City’s workforce has been significantly reduced and the provision of public services decreased accordingly. Yet in a few instances, City leaders and managers have been able to engineer creative ideas and solutions to bring about unimaginable gains in productivity or service delivery during these times. Reflecting on these few but commendable examples, the panel suggests how in each instance, achieving these gains involved getting ahead of the problem. Panelists emphasize the importance of messaging—conveying to all stakeholders and the public that a crisis is indeed imminent or present and that cutbacks are inevitable. When these messages are clearly received, leaders have a narrow window of opportunity to proactively launch a planning and redesign process. Timing is critical; waiting too long leaves little time to create or adopt real innovations that can in fact allow the City to do more with less.

In implementing these productivity—or service-increasing innovations—City leaders should look to incorporate three ingredients suggested by panelists. The first is that of commitment. Leaders in City government should recognize that implementing these redesigns and solutions requires a tremendous amount of time, effort, and persistence. The road to success will inevitably be difficult, but leaders can look forward to huge payoffs. Moreover, the political commitment on the part of the Mayor, Deputy Mayors, and other high-level officials is needed to provide both support and cover against resistance. Second, panelists discuss the need to collaborate with budget departments like the Office of Management and Budget. Although budget departments are often viewed as the opponent in budgetary negotiations, agencies must recognize that collaboration with these control agencies is essential to implementing real solutions and effective cutback management. Avoiding such collaboration can only result in poor decisions. Collaboration with the workforce and with labor is equally critical, albeit intimidating. Acknowledging that the workforce—asked to bear the brunt of cutbacks—can be a source of tremendous resistance and opposition, panelists also believe that they can also be quite agreeable to transformation, and can actually be the source of productivity-increasing innovation. Finally, panelists suggest how information technology can provide the means to increase productivity or to measure whether or not agencies are actually doing more with less. Such information technology can make cutback management more successful, and can even be the “linchpin” of productivity. At the same time, technology itself must be managed, and will never be a replacement for the effective practice of management and leadership.

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