Making Citizen Task Forces Work

Eight Strategies To Consider

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Grand juries, budget review committees, and citizen task forces have become permanent fixtures in our political landscape. During the last few years of governmental belt-tightening, oversight committees charged with reforming, watchdogging, or otherwise cutting costs in government have gained substantial visibility and stature. These committees are distinguished from planning commissions, zoning boards, and other semipermanent groups by their focus on auditing and improving government operations. While loaded with bright people and good intentions, however, these committees often fail in their efforts to bring about broad organizational reform.

These failures are predictable. Citizen task forces are typically doomed because they are charged with generating ideas for governmental reform but have little or no leverage to implement the reforms they suggest. This lack of power to effect change, while often intentional, is exacerbated by three common characteristics of citizen task forces: (1) the temporary, "walk-away" nature of volunteer committees; (2) their often adversarial character; and (3) their general ineffectiveness at generating broad agreement from top government managers. This article suggests that, to be effective, citizen task forces must shepherd their ideas more effectively down the path to implementation. To this end, it offers eight strategies for doing so.

Sample Track Records

Examples of volunteer oversight committees exist at virtually every level of government; few have proven effective at bringing about change. At the federal level, for example, the vaunted Grace Commission, with its powerful group of 2,000 business leaders, issued a highly publicized set of findings and recommendations for improving government in 1983– 1984. The group worked for two years, ultimately publishing 12,000 pages filled with 2,478 recommendations on 784 issues.[1] To date, according to Ted Gaebler, coauthor of *Reinventing Government,* fewer than 2 percent of its recommendations for government reform have been implemented.[2]

At the municipal level, 73 private-sector executives recently served for over a year on the San Francisco Mayor's Fiscal Advisory Committee. Their mission was to review financial systems and controls, planning, productivity, and personnel management. In 1992, the group issued its *Executive Summary of the Task Force on Long-Term Cost and Revenue Trends,* which presented over 50 policy options for reforming the city's systems. Now, a year later, according to Theresa Sarotta, the mayor's director of finance, only 20 to 30 percent of the recommendations have been implemented, either partially or fully. Said Sarotta, "Not all of the recommendations are feasible or rational."

In Contra Costa County, California, a volunteer Grand Jury with a rotating membership has convened annually for over 30 years to analyze local government programs, to draft reformist schemes, and to issue often-blistering reports on government productivity. The findings, while always interesting, often have met with skepticism by various government staffs. As a result, the 1992–1993 Contra Costa Grand Jury's forewoman, Annemarie Goldstein, recently lamented to the *San Francisco Chronicle* that she fears that most Grand Jury reports are filed away and that real changes do not result from the Grand Jury system. "We're afraid that they get pushed up on a bookshelf," Goldstein said.[3]

The Critical Path from Idea To Implementation

All proposals for policy changes in government organizations (or almost any kind of organization, for that matter) must follow a critical, four-step path from idea to implementation. If any of the interdependent steps listed in Figure 1 are avoided or ignored, the policy idea is almost certain to fail.

Citizen task forces are ordinarily good at the first step: generating ideas for reforms and new policies. But that also is where they usually stop, altogether ignoring the knee-bone-connected-to-the-thigh-bone nature of the implementation process. After they issue their final reports, members of task forces often stand united but alone, while elected officials, managers, and employees continue to perform business as usual inside the big house.

Other Structural Problems

Several other factors also weigh in against citizen task forces. First is the fact that citizen task forces often have a temporary, finite mission or are otherwise made up of folks who serve only for a short period. The walk-away nature of these volunteer committees leaves no established mechanism for follow-up on the implementation of their proposals.

A second limiting factor involves the adversarial, us-versus-them (or, in some cases, good-versus-evil) character that many oversight committees adopt. Some grand juries are even adversarial by charter. A group that simply rails against the government organization that it hopes to change, however, should not expect to receive support from government managers and staff when the reforms move through to refinement and implementation (steps 3 and 4, as shown in Figure 1).

Third, oversight committees are often established as independent "auditors" of the organization. As such, task force members only infrequently seek input from or build consensus with top government managers. Their recommendations typically are stillborn because it is these managers who ultimately are responsible for implementing the changes.

Figure 1
Ideas, Direction Setting, And Implementation in Government Organizations

1. Generate policy idea.
2. Gain approval from board of overseers.
3. Win acceptance by top managers.
4. Ensure aggressive implementation by staff.

Strategies for Making Task Forces Work

Before any task force recommendation can be implemented, it must be embraced by four key groups of stakeholders: the task force, elected officials, government managers, and government employees. If all four groups do not buy into the reform, any one group can scuttle the plan. Each of the groups has a virtual veto on any or all of the reforms.

For this reason, task forces that are serious about governmental reform must broaden their horizons. Instead of simply generating a laundry list of reforms, they must become involved in the implementation process and critically consider how their plans will be received by the decisionmakers, the managers, and the implementors. When imagining a dream house, the plans are easy to design, but the construction of the building requires time, care, patience, and energy.

Task forces are likelier to see their recommendations implemented if they follow some simple, though time-intensive, rules:

Define a clear mission for the task force, and seek ratification of this

mission from the elected board of overseers before starting the task.
Taking this step assures some minimal level of acceptance from the elected officials when the task force reports its findings. Elected officials generally do not like surprises. They are likelier to embrace criticism and reform of their organizations if they feel responsible for or if they otherwise catalyzed the audit.

Establish a fact-based foundation first; generate recommendations second.
It is critical that task force members share a common understanding of key financial and operational problems and issues. This broad, shared understanding, while time-consuming to accumulate, ultimately serves as the foundation for high-quality recommendations.

Based on his experience as chair of the finance committee in Lafayette, California, Paul Jansen noted, "We were more persuasive and ultimately more powerful when we had a set of independent facts" to support task force conclusions. Jansen has suggested that task forces begin with a "situation diagnostic" by examining five-year forecasts of revenues and expenditures, five- and ten-year capital improvement programs, and other plans and forecasts which describe long-term, systematic, and endemic issues facing the agency.

Meet with top managers to understand their visions for the organization. Work within these visions, or otherwise clearly communicate your case for change.
Ultimately, a task force whose recommendations are at odds with, for example, the county manager's vision should not reasonably expect him or her to cheerfully implement the changes. Be open to the possibilities of working within the system.

Look to, but do not be limited by, the organization's employees' ideas for reforms and recommendations.
"Homegrown" recommendations can be accurate, effective, and more readily implemented than those conceived off-site. While a task force might spend a day or two observing an operation, employees spend years. Naturally, they will have good suggestions for change. Employees "own" their recommendations and are likelier to ensure their implementation than if they did not.

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Look also to other governmental organizations for examples of successful reform.
States, cities, counties, and school districts are turning themselves inside out looking for ways to improve efficiency. The "best demonstrated practices" of other government agencies should not go unnoticed by task forces. Says Lafayette's Paul Jansen, "The private sector is the environment with which most task force members are familiar and where they will naturally draw most of their examples. But, in our effort, we found that there are equally important lessons to be drawn from public agencies."

Communicate interim progress made by the task force to the board, to managers, and to employees; establish a dialogue with these stakeholders.
Publish preliminary findings, ask for feedback, and be open-minded to modification where appropriate. With a communication-intensive strategy, the task force can test its findings and recommendations for reasonableness, can reaffirm its goals, and can prepare important decisionmakers for implementation. Springing a critical final report on an organization raises defenses and diminishes the likelihood that the recommendations will be implemented.

Do not skimp on efforts to ensure that the stakeholders understand the final report.
After the final report is issued, schedule meetings with elected officials and top and middle managers to reinforce the task force's agenda and to set clear expectations for the organization. Disseminate task force ideas and visions to those who ultimately will implement them.

Meet with government officials periodically for two to five years after the report is completed, to ensure that the task force is reinforced and thsat implementation is under way.
Establish a system of limited but clear goals, milestones, and timetables by which progress toward full implementation of reform can be measured. PM

[1]Charles T. Goodsell, "The Grace Commission: Seeking Efficiency for the Whole People?" *Public Administration Review* (May/June 1984): 196-204.
[2]From remarks by Ted Gaebler to the California Contract Cities Association, May 22, 1993.
[3]Erin Hallissy, "East Bay Grand Jury's Lament," *San Francisco Chronicle*, (July 8, 1993): A13.

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