



# Teaching a Hippo to Dance

*The most brilliant policies will fail if government does not attract talented people and free them to do their best work.*

**BY AMY WILKINSON**

FOUR YEARS AGO, I LEFT SILICON VALLEY TO accept a presidential appointment as a White House fellow. After undergoing months of interviews and obtaining a top-secret security clearance, I moved to

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Washington, D.C., to join a class of 12 nonpartisan White House fellows and to work in the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative. After my fellowship ended I stayed on, caught up in the challenging work of improving the nation's trade policies. My old business-school friends and my colleagues at the consulting firm McKinsey &

Company were perplexed. Why would anyone want to serve in the federal government, the epitome of everything that is slow, bureaucratic, and opaque?

There, in a nutshell, is a major problem confronting American government in the 21st century: how to attract talented young people—not just to the prestigious jobs that bring you face to face with a cabinet secretary or the president but to the line jobs that exist across the civil service. It is not just a recruiting challenge. Government will only attract the people it needs when it refashions itself so that public servants can serve the public effectively.

The federal government deserves more credit than it gets, but it is still a slow-moving behemoth. To reinvig-

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orate our federal system and attract fresh talent, we must transform our aged, hierarchical institutions into modern networks of scale and impact. In effect, we must teach a hippopotamus to dance.

Like government, hippos are enormous, weighed down by a heavy mid section and designed with disproportionately big mouth and teeth. Stubby legs, a natural system of checks and balances, support their tremendous bulk. They are powerful, yet slow to change. When perturbed, hippos can move quickly—as the federal government did in passing the \$700 billion bailout in just two weeks. Yet usually they plod along, preferring to slumber in murky waters.

In today's networked world, our hippo must dance in sync with private-sector and nonprofit partners. Keeping pace will require a more engaged federal workforce, realignment of out-of-date incentives, and an ability to meet the expectations of modern workers. To succeed, government must get the people piece right.

There are some bright lights in government leadership, and some of the brightest are at the local level. In San Francisco, Mayor Gavin Newsom, a former wine and restaurant entrepreneur, has forged alliances with busi-

nesses in housing and other fields, established a 24-hour hotline to promote accountability in city services, and pushed forward on such controversial initiatives as universal health care. In Newark, New Jersey, Mayor Cory Booker has partnered with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and other foundations to jump-start the city's dysfunctional public school system with a \$19 million charter school initiative. He has embraced new technologies such as ShotSpotter, an acoustic surveillance system that detects gunshots in seconds, to control crime. "I always say that the biggest problem in America is not a problem of material poverty," Booker said in an interview. "It's a poverty of imagination. It's a poverty of innovation. It's a poverty of action."

Often, what many regard as the very nature of government—its notoriously multilayered bureaucracy—stifles needed innovation and initiative. The average memo originating in a State Depart-

ment bureau requires between two and 10 sign-offs and five to eight approvals through the chain of command before it reaches the secretary. Beyond whatever sense of public mission individuals bring to their work, there is often little incentive to excel. As one Foreign Service officer I spoke to joked, "At the end of the year I go to the GS schedule, reference my rank and years of service, and poof, there's my promotion cycle and salary."

The high-caliber employees that government does manage to attract are often driven out of public service. Many of the strongest junior people leave government frustrated by midlevel management that is ineffective but will never be fired. Retaining star talent requires replacing our current seniority-based system with merit-based promotions. A close colleague, who distinguished himself while working with Colin Powell, recently left the Foreign Service, discouraged by the bureaucratic mindset. When he was nominated for a fast-track promotion, human resources denied the advancement, stating that there were "already qualified people at that grade level." He is now a partner in an advisory firm.

Today's young professionals expect adaptable work schedules, state-of-the-art technology, and a measure of

autonomy. Most of all, we are looking for work that allows us to have an impact. Speed and flexibility define our lives. If we have a question, we Google it. We Skype friends in Poland and instant-message colleagues in Shanghai. These changes have their parallels in organizational life. In the private sector, “flash teams” assemble to tackle specific challenges, disband, and reconfigure as situations evolve. Large companies such as Best Buy allow people at all levels throughout the company to participate electronically and in person in efforts to solve problems. The symbolic apex of this new world may be the professional temp agencies that attract large numbers of workers in high-skills fields, from accounting to graphic design, because these people prefer short assignments and constant change.

In the search for people with talent and ideas, the new field of social entrepreneurship provides stiff competition for government. Rather than work their way up in government or large corporations, many civic-minded leaders in their twenties and thirties now launch nonprofit or business ventures to address social injustices, using business partnerships, grants, and donations.

“Our generation is saying we need private innovation and private initiative to solve big, public problems,” Jacqueline Novogratz explained when we met in her New York office. She is the founder and CEO of Acumen Fund, a nonprofit equivalent of a venture capital firm that backs private-sector and nonprofit enterprises that help the poor. “I think that it’s a parallel with when John F. Kennedy said we want the best and brightest in government. Today, we want the best and brightest in this field of social enterprise.” Bill Drayton, father of the social entrepreneurship movement and founder of a similar organization called Ashoka, told me, “We’re in the business of ‘everyone a change maker.’” Ashoka has supported some 2,000 social entrepreneurs around the world in launching social start-ups to address ills ranging from domestic violence to water pollution. Half of them, Drayton says, are able to bring about changes in national policy within five years.

The United States is the world’s most innovative nation, yet our government is out of sync with today’s realities. With more than 2.6 million employees, the federal government is the nation’s largest employer. As I can attest after seven years in the corporate world, business does not always escape the problems of bureaucracy. Just ask General Motors, Ford, and Chrysler. But big corporations learn to

be nimble in order to compete against agile, new entrants. Government is what is called, in the business world, an incumbent player; it is blind to competition. Change must come from within, beginning at the top. As New York mayor Michael Bloomberg explained, “Part of the government’s problem is that it never delegates. In the White House, for example, they control everything.”

The antiquated condition of our national government would have troubled the Founding Fathers, who were political entrepreneurs and the creators of revolutionary new public institutions. It is true that they did not design American government to be fast. Our system of checks and balances, along with the diffusion of power among local, state, and federal authorities, is designed to inhibit rapid change. Yet if the Founders were wary of overweening government, they hardly favored *ineffective* government.

**T**echnology offers one route to breaking down barriers and improving productivity. Before the development of Web 2.0 technologies, for example, it would have taken many months to gather information across stovepiped government agencies. Last year, when the Office of Management and Budget needed to compile a database of congressional budgetary earmarks, government personnel were able to bypass normal bureaucratic channels by using a wiki that allowed people from all over the government to report directly on a shared website. They did the job in just 10 weeks, turning up 13,496 earmarks.

Government is clearly in need of such new ideas, but the culture of public institutions is risk averse. Gilman Louie, former CEO of In-Q-Tel, a nonprofit corporation created by the Central Intelligence Agency to promote defense technologies, put the problem in graphic terms when I interviewed him: “The most surprising thing was that if terrorists rolled a hand grenade down the middle of a room, all our CIA employees would jump out of their seats and throw their bodies on it to protect everyone else. They would all give up their lives for one another and their country. However, if someone ran into the room and said, ‘I need someone to make a decision, but if it’s the wrong one it will be the end of your career, but I need an answer now,’ all of them would run toward the door.” The problem with public institutions is that the consequence of failure means that there is no reward for risk taking and thus no innovation. Government agencies must change to say that it is all right to fail, just not

catastrophically. To do this, they need to evaluate employees not on the success or failure of any particular decision, but on the overall outcome of their performance.

*United States Government Policy and Supporting Positions*, commonly known as the “Plum Book,” lists more than 7,000 available jobs in the new administration. Many of these positions are reserved for cabinet secretaries and other officials to hire their own personal staffs. Barack Obama will award about 3,000 positions, from White House chief of staff to principal deputy under secretary of defense for policy.

There is no shortage of job seekers, but the cumbersome appointment process deters many talented people, and the incoming administration has set up even more hurdles. Prospective Obama appointees are presented with a seven-page questionnaire about their personal and professional lives. They must append copies of all resumé and biographical statements from the past 10 years, list gifts worth more than \$50 that they and their spouse have received from anyone other than close friends or relatives, and divulge their and immediate family members’ affiliations with Fannie Mae, Freddie Mac, or any other institution receiving government bailout funds. Applicants are also expected to disclose their “Internet presence,” including e-mails, Facebook pages, blog posts, and aliases used to communicate online.

Once past the screening, these prospective federal appointees enter a labyrinth of forms, investigations, and intrusive personal and financial disclosures. The process is embarrassing and confusing, and often requires that they seek outside expert advice to process forms and financial information—which applicants pay for out of their own pockets. Senate confirmation proceedings for cabinet secretaries start in January, but subcabinet and Schedule C appointees, the folks who do the nuts-and-bolts work, can wait many months. Only 30 percent of George W. Bush’s national security appointees were in place on 9/11, eight months after he took office.

**T**he career civil service faces an even greater challenge. Last year, the Partnership for Public Service estimated that nearly 530,000 personnel—a third of the federal government’s workforce—will retire by 2012. “Help wanted” should become Washington’s byword if these jobs—many of them critical senior posi-

tions—are to be filled by first-rate people. Yet Donna Shalala, the former secretary of health and human services and current president of the University of Miami, said recently at the Woodrow Wilson Center that government recruiters don’t even come to her campus: “Kids in Miami are interested in government but have no information about how to apply.”

Indeed, a recent Gallup poll found that 60 percent of those under age 30 have never been asked to consider a job in government. Thirty-three percent would give such a request a great deal of consideration if asked by their parents, and 29 percent if asked by the newly elected president. The first challenge government must overcome is ignorance about government opportunities. The nonprofit Teach for America, by contrast, is beating out consulting firms and banks to recruit college graduates. Last year, 25,000 individuals applied to Teach for America and more than 3,700 started teaching in the nation’s toughest inner-city schools.

Government must get into the headhunting business. At business schools the pitch could be, *You want to manage complexity and lead a team? Great. We’ve got big budgets and complex problems. Which would you like to tackle first, health care or Social Security reform?* At law schools, recruiters could ask, *Are you good at negotiating contentious issues and analyzing contradictory information? Perfect. When can you start?* Let’s offer undergraduates career tracks that let them quickly rotate through assignments at State, Energy, Defense, and other agencies.

During the recent election campaign, President Obama vowed to “transform Washington” and “make government cool again.” And why not? Why shouldn’t public service be highly esteemed? Americans rally to support exceptional athletes who compete in the Olympic Games. We applaud extraordinary scientists who work to cure cancer and superior military forces that defend our homeland. We want the best Hollywood talent to entertain us and super computer geeks to invent the next Google. But when it comes to government service we set our sights low.

Last year’s election turned ordinary citizens into activists who not only donated money and canvassed door to door in unprecedented numbers but used new media to blog, organize campaign events, and form networks. The question now is how our 44th president will harness civic engagement to govern more effectively. Millions of Americans are waiting by their BlackBerries, iPhones, and laptops to find out. ■