

Arizona Daily Star

Opinion: Government must be more efficient

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By Max Stier

During all three presidential debates, the candidates faced a question about how the rapidly growing budget deficit would impact their tax policies and spending plans. The moderators were right to inquire about the rising deficit, but they were asking the wrong question.

When it comes to our long-term budgetary outlook, the most immediate and important concern our next president will face is not deciding which campaign promises to put on hold, it's figuring out to make our government run more efficiently so that it can do the work of the people with increasingly limited means.

In this regard, our next president has his work cut out for him. The federal bureaucracy he will inherit is not even close to operating on all cylinders. It's struggling to keep pace in an a complicated world. Our failure to adequately regulate new financial products like derivatives and credit default swaps contributed to our current economic crisis. We import more and more products from abroad, but struggle to keep toxic toys and tainted food out of U.S. homes.

Many of government's operational problems come from a tendency of federal leaders to talk policy and forget operations. The emphasis on policy is understandable, but it is also a recipe for failure.

There are two fundamental reasons why operational issues are prone to be overlooked: First, it's hard to change what you don't measure, and our government operates in an environment with very few meaningful measurements for performance and operational health. Second, and perhaps more significantly, it is run by short-term political leadership that has little incentive to focus on long-term issues.

Here are six things our next president should do as a starting point to improve government effectiveness:

- Get the people piece right. Congress usually tries to fix government by reshuffling the organizational charts. As the Sept. 11 Commission said, "The quality of the people is more important than the quality of the wiring diagrams."

The president should focus on getting the right talent into government both in our civil service and in the 4,000 political appointments he will make. The key to an engaged work force is strong leadership, and he should invest in training and developing the managerial skills of senior government leaders.

- Pick professionals, not politicians. Some of the most important posts the president will fill are senior management posts such as chief financial officers, chief information officers and chief human capital officers.

These are non-ideological positions that should be filled with management experts, and to be effective, they'll need to be a core part of the president's leadership team.

- Engage the civilian work force early. The 1.9 million members of our civil service will be the president's greatest asset. He needs to use them. That starts with having the president's appointed leaders reach out immediately to career employees to let them know that they are integral to achieving his plans.
- Don't throw the baby out with bath water. It's become standard operating procedure for every president to propose his own, new and improved government reform plan. Nothing ever really gets fixed, because it's also common practice to wipe out all the work the previous guy did. As a result of starting over from scratch every four or eight years, everyone involved has change fatigue and grows skeptical. The next president's early wins should come from an assessment of what is working, and building and improving on those efforts.
- Develop measurements to promote accountability. To be effective, our next president must develop meaningful metrics to identify what's working and what isn't. Best practices can be replicated across government, and exposed trouble spots can be confronted before they become public problems of Katrina proportions.
- Take ownership of the management issue. Federal managers will not see government reform as a priority unless it is a priority for the president. The next president must make it clear to political appointees and civil servants that management issues are integral to achieving his goals.

Rather than worrying about how to keep a particular campaign promise that requires spending increases, our next president should be focusing on his broader and more important commitment to revitalize our federal government. Improving the way our government functions won't be easy and it isn't likely to grab headlines, but it is essential to achieving the goals of the next administration.

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