
The Federal Management Playbook
Ira Goldstein
(Georgetown University Press, 336 pp, \$19.95)

by Megan Mattson

Admittedly, writing a gripping book on public administration can be difficult. A book on the bureaucracy can bore even bureaucrats themselves; few Americans discuss how the nuances of administration should be conducted in the federal context over dinner. Practitioners care deeply about the topic, yet rarely take the time to sit and ponder administrative theory due to their busy schedules. These difficulties make it all the more impressive that Ira Goldstein managed to write a readily accessible book on modern public administration: *The Federal Management Playbook*.

Filled with easily applicable insights, *The Federal Management Playbook* is an important guideline for modern day public administration. Speaking from his experience as US Assistant Comptroller General and Chief Operating Officer of the US Government Accountability Office, Goldstein offers practical advice for success. Each chapter of the book covers a different administrative topic that every federal administrator encounters. Some topics are broad, such as managing personnel or designing

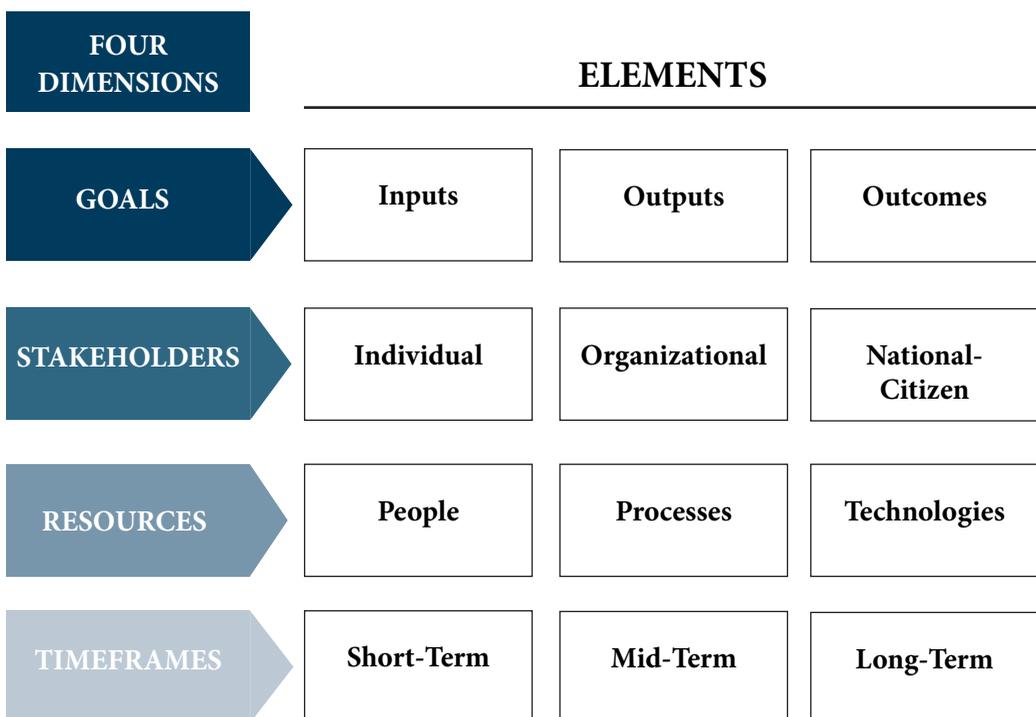
an organization, while others get into the weeds of government functions, such as hiring contractors or using risk-based decision making frameworks. Topics are capped off with a bullet list of key takeaways. True to its name, the piece is a practical guidebook for all government workers. Anyone seeking to excel in their role would do well to read it.

While this book is certainly helpful for public administrators, it is not an academic public administration text. Goldstein does not offer new, groundbreaking public administration theory; however, this book is more digestible and readily applicable than most administrative texts. Practitioners can readily use this book, making it potentially more impactful than other public administration pieces in the long run.

Goldstein uses two frameworks to guide each discussion. The first is “Create your Offense, Execute Effectively, and Play a Smart Defense.” For example, when coaching employees through technology implementations, Goldstein says to first create an offense by gaining leadership support. To execute effectively, pivots should be built in, meaning there should be benchmarks to see if goals and timelines should be changed. Lastly, a smart defense of independent verification and validation is necessary (296). Similar lessons for each chapter are summarized in an appendix at the end of the book.

Goldstein calls the second framework the “Four Dimensions of Success.” The four dimensions are goal clarity and alignment; stakeholder communications and impact; the right resources and tools; and attending to critical timeframes (9). The breakdown of elements in each dimension is included below. Goldstein uses the example of the Y2K response as a program that effectively used the four dimensions of success. First,

Figure 1. The Four Dimensions of Success



Source: Goldstein 2016.

the government's response to the Y2K panic had a clear goal to maintain continuity in computer systems worldwide. Second, federal agencies worked with their stakeholders, including other governments, nonprofits, commercial companies, and consumers. Third, the program asked for the necessary people, processes, and technology. Fourth, the program established several different timeframes including "Y2K Action Weeks," which concentrated on small business systems, and "100 Days to Y2K" to help last-minute outliers who had not updated their systems (20). Although most American citizens did not recognize the vast effort put in by the program because in the end it achieved its goal of continuity, the program was a success because it effectively followed each step.

A key point Goldstein makes is that public managers must be clear about their goals and what success looks like to them and their organization (3). The two frameworks offer a variety of factors to consider when attempting to make those goals a reality. In addition to the frameworks, the book also makes ample use of bolding, bullets, and headers. All of this makes for crystal clear reading.

As a current public administration student, I can attest the book is a useful tool for newcomers to the federal sphere. Still, I believe it is equally useful for seasoned practitioners. The book condenses information about the federal system's inner workings to make it accessible to the readers with less federal experience. While it is impossible to condense the entire federal system into 316 pages, an entrant's questions will be much more informed after reading this book. Goldstein offers insider knowledge that top managers did not know when they first started, including the types of contracts and oversight organizations in the government. The reader becomes knowledgeable before they become a manager, which helps them tailor their work and suggest successful administrative policies to their superiors. The author offers concrete advice tailored to the reader's current career point. Early career government workers are encouraged to develop technical skills, whereas leadership skills are emphasized for seasoned workers (47).

Beyond the workplace advice, the book's contents pair well with studying administrative theory. Goldstein references prominent public administration theories including Charles Lindblom's "The Science of Muddling Through" (36). Lindblom's theory encourages streamlined processes to make decisions in the federal system. Knowing different theories on the proper conduct of public administration is useful for a federal manager, and dropping hints of theory in the book shows Goldstein is an informed source of public administration. He also lists relevant government reports for each section, such as the GAO's High Risk List, which highlights problems and vulnerabilities in federal agencies (228). With these references, someone just starting their career can understand the major federal public administration conversations.

For more advanced practitioners, the book offers clear advice for navigating federal issues. His writings help managers not only stay competent at their current level, but make strides so they can strengthen their professional skills and move up in the federal system. Leadership tips say to use the public service mission to rally personnel behind the cause, and to ask millennials, "How do you think we can achieve better results?"

(58). Much of the book directly addresses government leaders and is refreshingly candid, speaking to difficulties and areas for growth. For example, the book lists the types of risk a program faces, yet emphasizes it is federal leaders' duty to take risks to make their departments work as efficiently as possible for the American people. Each section features interviews with top officials, which gives a snapshot of what other leaders believe. Charts and graphics are another tool for gathering ideas, such as a chart on when to use an established or an emerging technology for a traditional or new business problem (86). The tools provided are useful for senior officials to brainstorm solutions if a problem arises.

Goldstein's book provides specific chapters with tips for political appointees, civil servants working with political appointees, and consultants. Furthermore, those outside of government who work with federal agencies can read the book to help them understand the unique issues government projects face and how to approach them. Real-life examples make *The Federal Management Playbook* helpful for anyone seeking to be a leader in the federal sector, in any agency. Goldstein contrasts the success of the Census Bureau's decision not to use new technology in 2010 with the failure of the Affordable Care Act website launch in 2013 (76). To succeed, a government employee must understand their role in the context of the system they operate in, seeing both the minutia and the big picture. This book will help you do that.

With all this said, in no way does the book make managing in the federal sector look easy. Goldstein is honest and upfront about the challenges of a career in public service. His tone is blunt, and he tells it like it is. When discussing communications, Goldstein says the media will take what you say and spin it (140). Among their challenges, federal agencies face many rules, regulations, and standards; the duty to uphold the Constitution; an astounding size and reach; and short term political cycles (6). Goldstein is honest about challenges but does not make them appear daunting.

No single short playbook can offer all the advice a practitioner needs in their career to tackle all challenges. Writing a complete manual in a system as complex as the federal government is impossible. A criticism in the most flattering sense, this book leaves the reader wanting more. For instance, when discussing implementing new technologies, a more thorough discussion of how to navigate security concerns for agencies handling classified information would be useful. I also wanted more information on working with and responding to the White House directly. Goldstein gives a good starting ground, but his words are a guide for further discussion within one's agency, not the end-all-be-all.

By the conclusion, Goldstein's lessons feel like a mantra. Focus on the outcomes you want, consider your stakeholders, and manage your resources all become familiar lessons that should be featured in everyday federal practice. These concise lessons make the book effective. Goldstein makes designing an internal organization, managing new technology, and deciding whether to use a contractor seem like puzzles rather than problems. His advice leaves the reader feeling they can take on administrative queries even if they have never encountered them before. My copy is already well-worn with coffee stains from spills on the D.C. metro, and it will only become more worn as my career progresses.



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