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David S. Broder: Best leaders get results by good management

By David S. Broder -

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The drama of this winter's presidential campaign obscures the fact that for most of us, the government services that most directly impact our lives are delivered from state capitols or city halls.

That's why, at the first break in many months on the primary calendar, I went to a briefing last week at the Ronald Reagan Building in Washington, D.C., on the 2008 Government Performance Project, a joint venture of the Pew Center on the States and Governing magazine.

For months, teams of journalists and academic researchers dug into the workings of all 50 states and graded them, from A to F, on detailed score sheets. The national average was B-minus, the same as in the previous study in 2005, but as the Pew people told me, "the expectations were higher across the board this year, so it took more to get the same grade." Combining the grades for managing employees, budgets, information systems and infrastructure planning – the four areas of focus – three states were at the top, with A-minus ratings: Utah, Virginia and Washington. At the bottom were Rhode Island and New Hampshire, scored C-minus and D-plus, respectively. (California earned a C. The full results are available in the March issue of Governing magazine and pewcenteronthestates.org/gpp.) At the briefing, Neal Johnson, the director of the project, remarked that "a new generation of governors is focusing on management," in part because citizens are so skeptical of government, but also because tough economic times demand it and because their own backgrounds point them in that direction.

The first two governors he mentioned were Indiana Republican Mitch Daniels, the former head of the federal Office of Management and Budget, and New Jersey Democrat Jon Corzine, the former director of a giant Wall Street investment bank. Both are accustomed to measuring by results.

Two governor-managers were present for the briefing. Michigan Democrat Jennifer Granholm said she begins each workday in Lansing with reports from "my team" on the status of the benchmark goals they have set out to accomplish that week.

Georgia Republican Sonny Perdue recounted how, upon taking office in 2003, he recruited teams of businessmen to evaluate state agencies, telling them he wanted not voluminous reports but "actionable, 90-day steps" to improve services. So far, he said, they have produced 80 suggestions, among them systems that Perdue said

have yielded \$100 million a year in procurement savings and have cut the wait time for obtaining a driver's license to 10 minutes.

The full report is loaded with other examples of innovations – along with citations of conspicuous failures. "New Hampshire," it says, "has such weak data-sharing systems that it doesn't know how much it spends each month," while Wyoming's transportation department has information tools that can tell it "with exact specificity how money is being spent, down to the cost of the salt used between each mile marker on the state's snowy roads."

As a sign of the progress states have made, where only half of them in 2005 had strategic planning capacity, now only nine lack in that ability. Performance auditing, which was rare three years ago, is now routine in four-fifths of the states.

The report, as Pew officials emphasized, is the beginning, not the end of the process, serving as a guidebook to state officials in the market for "best practices." Governors borrow readily from one another, Granholm said, noting that despite hard times and tight budgets in her state, she had taken a cue from former Virginia Gov. Mark Warner and brought her constituents into the budget-making process through local town meetings and a prize-winning Web site.

Both governors acknowledged that it often has been difficult to stir much enthusiasm in their legislatures for managerial initiatives. "They yawn," Perdue said, "and often it's a struggle to keep them up to speed" on the changes he's trying to make in the executive agencies. "But they like to campaign on the results." Granholm agreed, but said that her Legislature has recently decided to create a joint, bipartisan committee on management.

As Perdue said, managing government "is not a sexy issue." But after months of listening to 17 or 18 presidential candidates offer rhetorical salve for the widespread distrust of government, it was refreshing to learn from this report and briefing what some practitioners are actually doing to improve its performance.
