

Department of Homeland Security produced more homeland security or just more layers of government? Has the Unfunded Mandates Act produced fewer mandates or just political cover for new unfunded mandates such as the No Child Left Behind Act?

Alas, the questions are impossible to answer systematically. Despite the “longest and best” rhetoric surrounding each reform campaign, legislation takes time to work its will, whether for good or ill, and is best seen as an expression of the conventional wisdom about making government work.

Moreover, all but four of the 177 major reforms in this analysis were implemented without a preliminary test somewhere in the executive branch. If a reform is good enough for one unit or agency, or so the history suggests, it must be good enough for the entire government.

### Perceptions of Improvement

There are plenty of opinions about whether reform actually works, not the least of which comes from the reformers themselves. Whether they are seen as victims or beneficiaries, however, federal employees may have the greatest insight into the sediment of past reforms. Asked in 2001 whether their organization had been reformed, reorganized, or reinvented in the past five years, 75 percent of a random sample of 1,051 federal employees said “yes” compared with 60 percent of a random sample of 1,140 nonprofit employees and 56 percent of a random sample of 1,005 private-sector employees.<sup>8</sup>

In turn, 50 percent of the federal employees said the reforms had made their jobs either somewhat or much more difficult, compared with 31 percent of nonprofit employees and 30 percent of private sector employees.<sup>9</sup> In turn, 80 percent of the federal employees said their organizations were basically sound or did not need much change at all, compared with 88 percent of nonprofit employees and 87 percent of private sector employees.<sup>10</sup>

Nevertheless, members of the Senior Executive Service were much more positive regarding the impact of past reforms on their jobs. For example, 60 percent of the senior executives said the reforms had made their jobs a lot or somewhat easier to do, compared with 43 percent of middle- and lower-level managers

and 41 percent of middle- and lower-level nonmanagers. It is not clear who is right. Senior executives have the higher perch from which to view organization-wide impacts, but middle- and lower-level employees have the front-row seats.

There are two obvious problems with asking employees about reform. First, as Steven Kelman cautions, not all federal reforms are designed to make jobs easier.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, as Terry Moe argues, some reforms are even designed to make federal jobs impossible. According to Moe, government organizations reflect an amalgam of choices that lead almost inexorably to disaster: “Just as policy can get watered down through compromise, so can structure—and it almost always does. . . . In the economic system, organizations are generally designed by participants who want them to succeed. In the political system, public bureaucracies are designed in no small measure by participants who explicitly want them to fail” (1990, 127).

Second, all employees have an obvious self-interest in downplaying the need for major reform, particularly because it might involve more work for them, not to mention the potential loss of their freedom and jobs. Given the heavy dose of compliance in the recent past, one might expect federal employees in particular to worry about any invitation they might give to further reform.

### Explaining Perceptions of Performance

One way to address these biases is to ignore employees’ impressions of reform altogether and focus instead on perceptions of their organizations’ overall performance in four basic tasks: (1) helping people, (2) spending money wisely, (3) being fair in decisions, and (4) running programs and services. After all, improved performance is the theoretical goal of reform.

Fortunately, perceptions of federal performance in these four areas are highly correlated and sum to a very useful measure of just how well government was doing its job at the time of the 2001 survey, which was completed before September 11. Using ordinary least-squares regression, Table 13.6 shows the relationships between perceptions of work life and this summed measure of performance.

Table 13.6 Determinants of Reform Success, 2001

Independent Variable	Standardized Beta Weight in Predicting Job Improvement
Fellow employees are not competitive with each other	.040
Fellow employees are open to new ideas	-.030
Fellow employees are willing to help other employees learn	.027
Fellow employees are concerned about achieving their organization's mission	.158***
Organization encourages employees to take risks or try new ways of doing work	.070**
Respondent is given a chance to do the things he or she does best	-.015
Respondent is satisfied with job overall	.043
Respondent is satisfied with opportunities for advancement, opportunities to develop new skills, public respect, and chance to accomplish something worthwhile (summed scale of four questions)	.082**
Respondent can describe how his/her job contributes to mission	.074**
Respondent's job contributes to the organization's mission	-.007
Overall morale of fellow employees is high	.002
Estimated percentage of fellow employees who are not doing their job well	.013
Overall competence of senior leaders, middle-level managers, middle-level employees, and lower-level employees is high (summed scale of four ratings)	.221***
Quality of senior leaders has increased in past five years	.059
Quality of middle-level managers has increased in past five years	-.002
Quality of middle-level employees has increased in past five years	-.001
Quality of lower-level employees has increased in past five years	-.033
Respondent is a senior leader or middle-level manager	.101***
Respondent's organization has been reformed in past five years	-.010
Respondent thinks organization does not need major reform in the future	.129***
Organizations always or often provides access to information, technology, training, and enough employees to do its job well (summed scale of four ratings)	.099***
Respondent's length of service in government	.055*
Respondent believes there are too many layers between him/her and top of organization	.077***
R <sup>2</sup>	.579
Adjusted r <sup>2</sup>	.568
F test	52.130***

N = 1,051

\**p* < .05; \*\**p* < .01; \*\*\**p* < .001.

These findings provide a simple message to Congress and the president: Reform only matters if it actually strengthens organizational capacity. This message should be reassuring to those who worry about the steady erosion of capacity (Ingraham 2005), as well as those who have invested enormous energy in improving the federal government's antiquated personnel system. Thus, recruiting and retaining quality employees

while disciplining poor performers clearly matters greatly to perceptions of successful reform, as does giving employees the opportunity to do what they do best. So do providing needed resources and creating a market basket of satisfaction with opportunities for advancement, the chance to develop new skills, public respect, and the ability to accomplish something worthwhile.



The results are also reassuring for those who, like this author, worry about layering in government, which emerges as one of the most significant predictors of organizational performance. The further employees are from the top, the more they lose track of the mission of the organization, how their jobs contribute to that mission, and the basic resources to do their jobs. It appears to be a sense of drift and isolation that these employees attribute to their colleagues.

There is other evidence that the view of performance looks better from the top—the number of years of service is correlated with one's rank in the organization, which is correlated with perceived performance. Years of service and rank are also correlated with perceptions of layering—obviously, the distance between the top and bottom of government is greatest at the bottom. Years of service may also capture a bit of the numbing that comes from repeated reforms, cutbacks, and hiring and pay freezes. The longer one stays in government, the greater the reservoir of doubt about access to the resources one needs.

The analysis also reinforces the general notion that reform does not improve employees' perceptions of performance unless it contributes to organizational capacity. What matters most is whether employees believe their organization need major reform in the future, not whether they have been reformed in the past.

These findings should caution future reformers, including members of Congress and senior presidential appointees, to think carefully about both the rhetoric and reality of change. To the extent that they exploit public distrust through caps and cuts, they may create intense resistance to future reforms. They also create a climate of internal distrust that weakens commitment to the organization.

Although trust in one's organization may be as much a consequence of perceived performance as a cause, it clearly matters to satisfaction, morale, and the embracing of mission. The more government can do to build a climate of trust, explain the overall mission of each agency and unit, and reduce the distance between top and bottom, the higher the perceived performance. Although these perceptions are just perceptions, they do suggest the value of plain-speaking reforms designed to help employees understand how they contribute to the greater good. This understand-

ing is of little help, however, if employees do not have the resources to do their jobs.

## Conclusion

This article has suggested that the deluge of recent reform may have done little to actually improve government performance. On the contrary, it may have created confusion within government about what Congress and the president really want, distraction from needed debates about organizational missions and resources, and the illusion that more reform will somehow lead to better government. As the Internal Revenue Service example illustrated, every reform, no matter how well intended, has at least some unintended consequences, whether through misinterpretation, maladministration, or conflicts with already existing reforms.

Moreover, the acceleration of reform gives government and its employees little time to fully test and implement the most promising ideas for improvement. Yesterday's reform is swept aside by today's, which will be quickly forgotten by tomorrow, just as yesterday's training is rendered obsolete by today's, which will be overwritten tomorrow. All the while, federal employees are left to wonder when or whether Congress and the president might tackle the systemic problems that act as barriers to the high performance they want to achieve.

Reluctant though one should be about proposing blue-ribbon commissions, it seems reasonable to suggest a moratorium on new reform until an independent body can complete a detailed examination of just how past reforms have worked. When coupled with an action-forcing device of the kind used in the military base closing exercise, such a commission could provide Congress and the president with a single list of statutes, rules, and reforms that should be abolished.

There comes a time when the sediment of past reforms becomes so thick that agencies simply cannot operate with any semblance of the efficiency, economy, fairness, or performance envisioned in the four tides of reform. Nor is it possible to implement new reforms within a hierarchy that is packed with offices