Conversations With CXOs:
Lessons Learned in Management, Workforce and Technology

Introduction

This guide pulls together our conversations with three high-ranking executives at different levels of government. Their roads to public service are different, but all three officials have learned lessons and established priorities that often are remarkably similar.

We asked them each three specific questions: What lessons have you learned regarding…

- **Translating policy into management goals?**

- **Creating an environment where employees feel like they belong?**

- **Responding to evolving technology?**

Government employees at all levels, not just current and future leaders, will find the interview responses helpful. And readers will be interested in the executives' thoughts on work-from-home arrangements — a bonus question, of sorts. Do they support remote work…or no?

The guide also contains industry insights on the technology and processes that help agencies perform their best — a goal to which all government employees aspire.

The path to executive leadership is difficult, but it's especially challenging for some demographics. Overall, its true that government workers are more diverse today — for instance, the federal level has more white and Black civilian employees than their respective percentages of the total U.S. population. But senior ranks are a different matter.

Nearly 76% of senior federal executives are white, nearly 12% are Black and barely 5% are Hispanic, although Hispanics account for almost 19% of the total population. Executive leadership data at the state and local levels is less available, but if governorships are any measure, diversity is a significant problem: There are only three non-White governors, in Hawaii, New Mexico and Oklahoma.

But making executive ranks more representative of the constituents they serve will be difficult. As Joelle Martinez, CEO of the Latino Leadership Institute, explained, "There are many zigzags. There are many hills to climb…"

"We know and remember the successes of others because of their success. We don't always remember the struggles they faced, the fear they had to overcome, and their actions that followed a downfall."

— **Tim Rahschulte**, CEO of the Professional Development Academy

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The Big Picture

Here is some workforce, management and technology data to get us started.

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How employees rank "opportunities to learn and grow" when defining an "exceptional work environment."

38%

The number of Americans with a four-year college degree. As a result, degree requirements exclude 76% of Black adults, 83% of Latino adults and 75% of rural residents.

1958

The last significant law regarding training for public-sector professionals was the 1958 Government Employee Training Act, which long predates the internet.

695,000

The number of employees state and local governments have lost since the pandemic.

91%

of employees say it's important for managers to inspire learning.

4 Tips to Become a High-Performing Organization

Managers can build a culture of excellence by following four guiding principles.

- Mindset is everything.
- Employee recognition makes a difference.
- Employee creativity/innovation should be encouraged.
- Cross-functional teams can optimize employee and agency value.

Source: ICMA

6 Key Trends Shaping Government Technology

Innovative public-sector technology:

- Puts the citizen at the center
- Is driven by data
- Must be interoperable
- Requires security by default to thrive
- Should be ready for the future
- Is committed to connecting, not dividing

75%

The number of government chief information officers (CIOs) who will be directly responsible for security outside of IT, including operational and mission-critical tech environments, by 2025.

56%

of government executives don't know if their defenses are strong enough for hackers' new strategies, and 50% view cloud security as a significant barrier to realizing cloud value.

A Job Performance Model

Person	Process	Product/Service
▪ Knowledge	▪ Tools, Equipment, Technology	▪ Quality
▪ Skill	▪ Procedures	▪ Quantity
▪ Experience	▪ Behaviors:	▪ Timeliness
▪ Attitudes	♦ Prescribed	▪ Safety
▪ Ability	♦ Voluntary	
▪ Temperament	♦ Proscribed	
▪ Personality		

Source: Granicus

Source: Society for Human Resource Management

"If you think you are leading and turn around to see no one following, then you are just taking a walk."

Benjamin Hooks, former director of the NAACP

"The pessimist complains about the wind. The optimist expects it to change. The leader adjusts the sails."

John Maxwell, best-selling author, speaker, leadership coach

"The pathways to the senior-most roles in public service are as varied as the people who take them. But every senior leader has something in common… They know their leadership matters."

Kiran Ahuja, Director, U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM)

In Their Words

Our conversations with government leaders were focused — we asked each person the same three specific questions — but we allowed and often encouraged our interviewees to "color outside the lines" when answering.

In the pages that follow, we focus on the executives' responses and on their lessons learned, rather on than their impressive resumes. You can read additional career details by clicking on each of their names.

Here are insights the agency leaders shared.

A Conversation with
Andrea Fletcher

Andrea Fletcher became the first Chief Digital Strategy Officer (CDSO) at the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) earlier this year while retaining her role as the agency's Director of Digital Service. She's held that post since June 2022.

"My role now is helping to transform the way we use technology to implement our programs," she said. We asked her to share what she's learned as CDSO.

How do you translate policy into management goals?

For Fletcher, putting policy into action is all about having the right people. "I joke that I've become a reluctant hiring hacker," she said. "I never thought that so much of what I do would be recruiting new talent and new skillsets for the federal government."

For instance, to help put the federal zero-trust cybersecurity strategy and other cyber safety programs into practice, CMS has hired its first zero-trust cybersecurity architect and is looking to fill an insider threat cybersecurity position. "**These are really difficult positions to hire for**," Fletcher explained. "They [call for] top-tier talent in the country and in the world, and yet you're also competing against other federal agencies to get people into these roles."

Her efforts are paying off. "Up until a couple of years ago, we didn't even have any data scientists at CMS," Fletcher said. "But this summer, we had 25 candidates make the cert [list] for 21 positions. We had more people wanting a job as a data scientist at CMS than we had open spots, which is amazing for us."
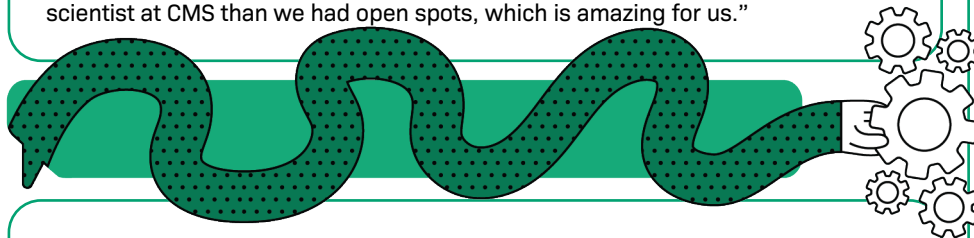
How do you keep up with evolving technology?

There's a saying that deploying technology in government should be boring. "We should be using things that we know work," Fletcher said.

But that loops back to her emphasis on getting people with the right skills who are familiar with a variety of applications. "[Large language model] AI is the topic of the day, right?" she said. "But as somebody in public health, I've been working with models my entire career."

Fletcher's team is standing up **what may be the first open source program office in federal government** and hired an open source lead with experience at X (formerly called Twitter) and Spotify. The office will help CMS control the fragmentation of its software and data and get a better handle on the work other contractors have done.

"They've created templates so that every project, every repository, has a description," Fletcher said. That will allow CMS to make the best use of code it already has, reduce duplication of effort, and enhance cybersecurity not only within CMS, but with the entire Department of Health and Human Services, and even the federal government.

How do you create an environment where employees feel like they belong?

"We're trying to make it fun and exciting," Fletcher said. For technology experts, that means doing cutting-edge work and having access to like-minded colleagues.

Her team works with human-centered design specialists and project managers to **find ways of linking digital experts across the agency's three centers**.

"We have a really robust data science community," she explained. They meet regularly and hold open office hours during which they help one another with difficult data analysis problems. While there is always the need for formal training, sometimes "all somebody needs is an hour to answer some questions and get some feedback. So we're building that community."

The digital services team has significant autonomy in the projects it's working on, making the work more self-directed. "We're like an in-house consulting firm of technologists," Fletcher said. Leaders bring the team tech-related issues to resolve. But the group also is proactive.

"In working with various communities, we'll see everybody's running into the same problem. We have this pattern," Fletcher said. "What's something we can do to help all these different teams across CMS?" The issues are often a combination of technology and process, and the team works with end users to identify and remove the roadblocks.

A Conversation with
Nathan Tierney

Nathan Tierney is the Deputy CIO and Chief People Officer for the Office of Information Technology (OIT) in the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). His resume is long and distinguished: veteran of the Army Special Forces, roughly five years in private-sector leadership roles and author of books on health care value management, among other achievements.

We asked him about the lessons he's learned during his nearly nine years at the VA.

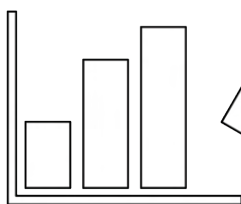## How do you keep up with evolving technology?

Technology is an enabler, Tierney believes. It's an agnostic tool that helps you achieve your desired outcome. But if you don't have the journey from process to result mapped in advance, you can make faulty assumptions about what certain technology can do for you. Avoid "racing ahead of technology," he said.

Tierney is working with HR staff to evaluate the performance potential of current systems and processes, so that people ultimately have technology that allows them to complete newly authorized HR tasks effectively. Tierney said it goes back to his **mantra of "policy, process, performance, people."**

In the early days of the pandemic shutdown, OIT didn't struggle like other agencies and departments did. "I think we were in a much better place," he said, because many staff already worked remotely, at least in part, and because OIT had an end-user support team that easily could mail out laptops, for instance.

"We were pretty well-positioned, [but] I think where … we got caught off-guard was on [measuring] this thing called 'productivity,'" he said.

In terms of AI, the evolving tech that everyone is talking about, Tierney said he "has some pretty distinct opinions on this whole push" for it.

How do you create an environment where employees feel like they belong?

Tierney asks people what he needs to improve, then he goes about fixing the problems. "I want to be judged by my actions, not my words," he said.

Each month he holds a town hall meeting with his internal team, and each quarter he organizes a larger, shareholder-type town hall so people can air concerns. He fields 30 or more questions at each event and reports on his progress with addressing issues they previously raised.

Tierney also **creates journey maps for each stage of his agency's employee experience**, from recruitment to retirement, and uses feedback from employee engagement surveys and other sources to identify pain points and resolve them.

He began conducting exit interviews and learned, for instance, that people very often received their service awards more than two years after they should have. "Think about that," he said. Now, 90% of all service awards appear in people's mailboxes the month they're due.

And by reading the fine print in department policies, Tierney learned that as a senior executive, he can give on-the-spot financial awards for good performance — so he does. He also tells people about career opportunities: "I feel like I owe it to [them] to paint that picture," he explained.

"If you say you're going to put people first, prove it," Tierney said.

How do you translate policy into management goals?

Tierney said that to execute what otherwise would be a "dead policy document," he develops journey maps that reveal pain points, bright spots and areas of potential innovation on the way to achieving a desired outcome.

But in addition to policy and process, Tierney stressed the need to gauge performance — "I'm a big data guy," he acknowledged — and care for people. That's where he struggled when transitioning into government after careers in the military and the private sector.

His background made him believe "that you have to standardize … how you receive, analyze and disseminate information" and that putting "numbers on the board" to drive better performance made sense, he said. His government team became defensive, however, because he never explained his rationale and because data transparency can be uncomfortable.

"My lesson learned … is [that now] I try to **look at measuring the health of the workforce [to] take us to the next level**," he said. "I've really paused now that I'm in this role to take the time to explain the why."

A Conversation with
Michael Mayta

Michael Mayta has been CIO of the City of Wichita, Kan., for 14 years. He oversees IT across 17 departments ranging from the police to the local airport — with widely varying degrees of internal technical-savvy.

He's also seen a lot of change in how cities use technology. Here are some pearls of wisdom from his experience.

What have you learned about keeping up with evolving technology?

One thing Mayta has learned about technological innovations is to sort out the hype. "We use the cloud for a lot of things. But I find it funny that it started as the internet, and then it was the web, and now it's the cloud. It's really all the same thing."

But **he's also seen the cloud's benefits change over time**. At one point, a main selling point was that it allowed you to pay for only what you used. That solved a problem Mayta didn't have. "We know what we're using two years ahead because of the budgetary process," he explained.

On the other hand, he's now doing a proof-of-concept project with Microsoft's Dataverse cloud platform because it offers tools and storage that would be out of reach otherwise. "For me to buy all that stuff would not be feasible," Mayta remarked.

In choosing what to adopt, he goes old-school: costs vs. benefits. "I keep it based on how I've always made decisions. It's a value proposition," Mayta said. That doesn't make it a purely financial decision, though. "In the public sector, the benefits can be less quantifiable, so it does become a little more challenging."
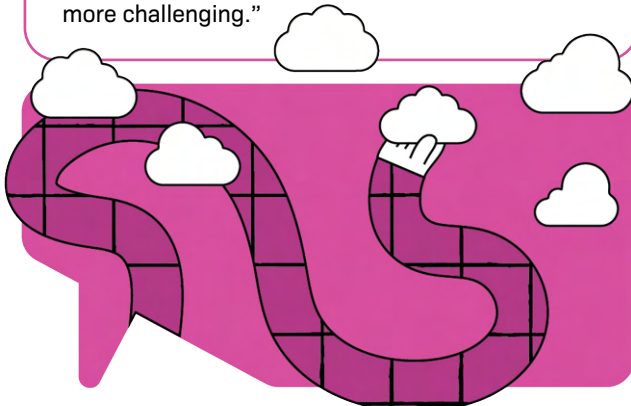
What have you learned about creating an environment where employees feel like they belong?

Mayta recognizes that the city needs to offer employees some working conditions they won't find in corporate jobs. "I think in the public sector you have to be a little more flexible. If I push as hard for results as the private sector, why wouldn't you just go to the private sector, where you'll be paid more? So, I'm not going to say, 'If you don't stay up until midnight every night this week and get this thing out the door by Friday at 8 a.m., we're going to put all your things in a box and off you go.' We're not doing that," he said.

Flex time and remote work also contribute to an environment that accommodates student interns, employees with kids and a cadre of mid-career specialists.

But the most important factor may be **an emphasis on mission**.

"I think in the public sector, it's about making sure that our folks understand that they actually are making a difference," Mayta said. "The work they do has tangible impact. People get housing because we've helped them sign up for it. If the police catch a bad guy, we provided the data and networks that helped make it happen."
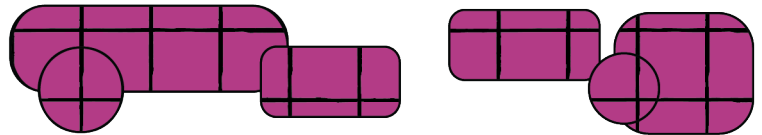
What have you learned about translating policy into management goals?

Sometimes the issue isn't so much implementing policy as educating city leaders about what's possible so that the policies they set are practical to implement, Mayta said. He sees his role as bringing departments and business units up to speed on their digital options. "Because what value is there in discussing a policy on content that they don't really understand?" he asked.

With technology changing so fast, it can be a challenge even for seasoned IT professionals to keep up. He doesn't expect his non-tech colleagues to do so. "They're running their organizations, which is what they're paid to do," Mayta said.

On the other side, he can't be an expert in managing the services those departments provide. "It's **more of a partnership, an open discussion**, that has to be continuing," he said.

"Imagine the director of public works, whose main task is not IT, and I come along and say, 'We can connect all your traffic lights,'" Mayta said. "What's [the value of] that? How do we do it? I try to just isolate things that are relative to what they need to do from a business perspective. Like, 'AI, what can it be used for? Automation, how do you incorporate that?'"

Where Should People Work?

Because an increasing number of public- and private-sector leaders now think remote work is a problem, not a solution, we asked our interviewees a bonus question, of sorts: What are your thoughts about work-from-home arrangements?

Here are highlights of their responses.

In-person work builds relationships.

"The whole point of on-site isn't necessarily to do a bunch of strategy work. It's to get to know each other because it can be really hard to understand the nuances of somebody's email or what they're not saying in a Zoom call when you don't know them that well," said CMS' Fletcher.

Occasional on-site work fosters trust.

"I can't [bring people together] and build those relationships of trust doing it 100% remote because you lose that collaboration, you [lose] focus [and] because then people multitask," said Tierney, with the VA.

Outcomes should be the top priority.

"We have to have outcomes. You have to be able to get the work done, and you have to be adult enough to tell yourself … [when] you can't do the work that you need to do at home [and] you need to come [into the office]," said Mayta, with the City of Wichita.

Measuring outcomes will identify problems.

"The important thing is that we measure [what we do] … to see what's working, what's not working, so we can figure out where to improve," said Tierney. "I think we're all kind of figuring this out and prototyping some solutions."
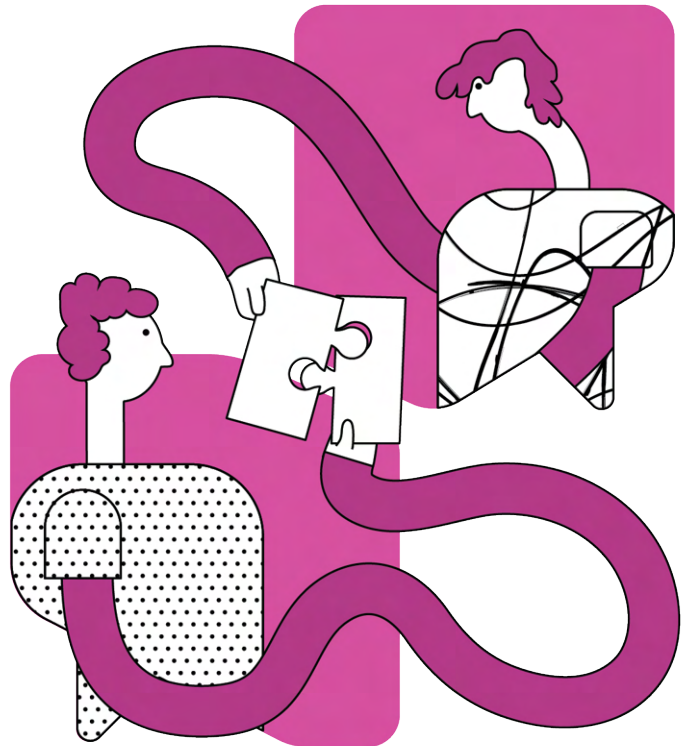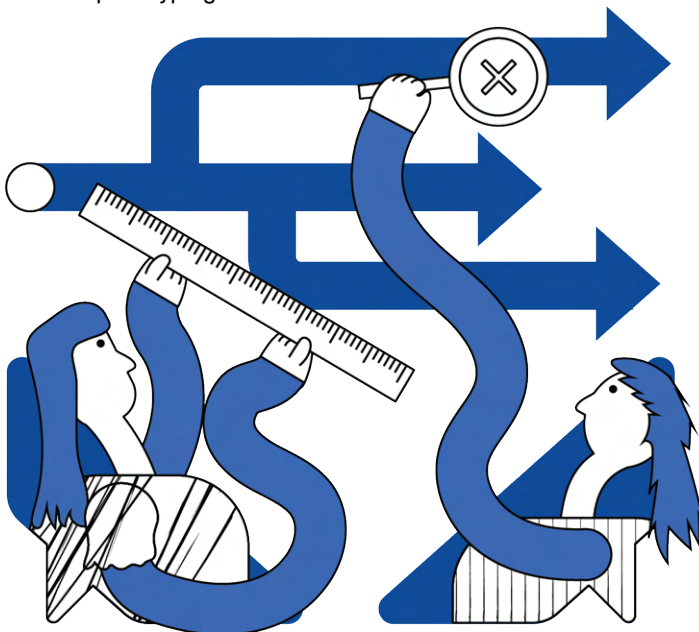
Remote work's effectiveness depends on the individual.

"Like a lot of things, it's never here or there. It's always … depending on the individual. [Remote work] can be effective if they do it the right way," Mayta said.

Remote options make recruitment easier.

Hiring great talent in smaller cities, where CMS offers more competitive salaries, "seems to be a really smart play and … leads us to talking about … how we recruit new talent and new skillsets," Fletcher said.

Communication is key, no matter where you are.

"Either remote or in person, the hardest part for me is getting [people] to communicate and partner … with their fellow employees," Mayta said. "They just don't want to ask for help, and it doesn't matter if they're on premise or remote."

Some work is hybrid-friendly, some is not.

"If you just do a blanket [approach], is that really going to help you solve the problem?" Tierney said. "Depending on the work being performed, [what's appropriate] may not be the same. I don't think it's going to be a cookie-cutter solution."

Telework allows for a more geographically diverse organization.

"I think there is something really nice about having people around the country being able to go into local offices," Fletcher said. "It seems like a really big win to be able to have federal jobs outside of the D.C. area." But we need to consider "what does it look like to have a workforce that is spread across the country?"

Government Needs a New Approach to Securing Software

An interview with John Allison, Director, Public Sector at Checkmarx

Federal agencies need to make new software available quickly in order to meet emerging mission needs and rising constituent expectations. At the same time, they must protect their systems and processes.

It's an inherently difficult situation. If the code behind a new application has flaws, adding code for cyber defense on top of it "is not necessarily bringing you more security," said Allison, with Checkmarx. "With the money you spent to buy a firewall, would that … have been better invested in application security, [in] the original application you're trying to secure?"

Agencies are under pressure to get this right. The National Cybersecurity Strategy calls for "secure development practices" related to software, while documents such as the Secure Software Development Framework from the National Institute of Standards and Technology likewise call for robust security throughout the application-development process.

AppSec Testing During Development

So how can agencies release new applications without creating new vulnerabilities? They can embrace a cloud-native platform for application security testing during the development phase.

Testing the security of applications during their development "benefits not only the federal agencies, but the end-users as well," Allison said. Constituents can interact with government safely, knowing their personal data is secure, "and agencies are not waiting for delivery to find out that there are critical flaws, and then having to address those after an application has already been delivered."

Seeing Your Application Security Mistakes

The comprehensive Checkmarx One cloud-native application security platform offers agencies the testing they need throughout the software development lifecycle. With a holistic set of scanning engines, and analytics to help developers discover and remediate vulnerabilities in their preferred workflow, "it offers near real-time response: Here are the mistakes you made, here's what you may have overlooked," Allison said.

And with the ability to support teams in multiple programming languages, the AppSec platform "integrates seamlessly in [agencies'] build process, so as to not disrupt to their workflow," he said. "And it gives leadership a single dashboard to see where everything's going."

The platform includes a risk prioritization indicator — so developers can focus their efforts on an application's most critical vulnerabilities first — and a policy management tool that helps agencies comply with relevant requirements.

Considering Contractor Security

In addition to securing their in-house efforts, organizations can leverage Checkmarx One to ensure that applications built by outside contractors are secure.

"Agencies can mandate application security requirements as part of the processes that their contractors need to meet when developing software," Allison said. And they can go even further, building fee structures that incentivize contractors to reduce the number of security issues in their applications, before they deliver to the government.

"Fixing software after it's delivered is always more complicated and expensive. Let's raise that bar before delivery," he said. For agencies moving in this direction, "Checkmarx is great for helping contractors meet those contractual obligations."

Checkmarx

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We asked three agency executives about their experiences translating management goals into reality, helping employees feel like they belong and responding to evolving technology. And we asked about their thoughts on work-from-home arrangements: Are they good, bad or somewhere in between? The answers may surprise you.

About GovLoop

GovLoop's mission is to inspire public-sector professionals by serving as the knowledge network for government. GovLoop connects more than 300,000 members, fostering cross-government collaboration, solving common problems and advancing government careers. GovLoop is headquartered in Washington, D.C., with a team of dedicated professionals who share a commitment to the public sector.

For more information about this report, please reach out to info@govloop.com.

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