Agile Government is not an Oxymoron:

Helping Agencies Sense and Respond in Today's Environment

AFITC
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MITRE: A not-for-profit company that manages FFRDCs for federal agencies
(Federally Funded Research and Development Centers)

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What is Organizational Agility?

An organization’s capacity to **sense** and **respond** in a **timely** and **effective manner** in a changing and uncertain environment

*Our definition based on literature review*
Development of the Government Organizational Agility Assessment (GOAA)

Summary of GOAAs Conducted So Far

- Five operating units in three government agencies
  - Two civilian, one military
  - IT and non-IT units
  - 726 participants invited
  - 90% response rate

The GOAA was developed under MITRE Innovation Program funding.
Agile Government Is Not An Oxymoron

Why do federal agencies want to become more agile?

We know we can't operate the same way as we have been, but we just can't keep our heads above water if we keep doing things the same way.

The world will be different in 10 or 20 years. We need to start planning now for approaching our work differently. We need to empower employees.

Our reality is that we will not get more money or staff. But, we need to be more strategic and find ways to streamline and collaborate.

Agility is now part of our agency mission statement, but we're not sure what it means for our division.

Some of our development teams are embracing an agile mindset more than other teams. Using the GOAA can help us understand how to help our teams continue to become agile.
GOAA Framework

Environment

Sensing, Interpreting, & Responding Routines

Organizational Factors
- Organizational Structure
- Knowledge Sharing and Experimentation
- Decision Making
- Leader Actions
- Process Management
- Roles
- Norms and Expectations

Outcomes
Organizations of the past…

“Any color you want, as long as it is black”

- Henry Ford

Photo credits: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ford_assembly_line_-_1913.jpg
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...are not prepared to meet the conditions of today.

Organizational agility can help us reconceptualize how work gets done and meets the demands of our **VUCA** environment.

*VUCA – Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous*
## GOAA Organizational Dimensions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organizational Dimension</th>
<th>Characteristics of Agile Organizations</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Organizational Structure</td>
<td>A stable, flat organizational structure is used in conjunction with groups of employees that form and re-form as needed to share information, perform experiments, and modify processes.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Decision Making</td>
<td>Decisions are made based on expertise and at the lowest possible level.</td>
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<td>Knowledge Sharing</td>
<td>In addition to continually scanning the environment, knowledge is obtained through reflection and lessons learned reviews; information is widely shared as needed and is stored systematically and proactively.</td>
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<td>Process Management</td>
<td>Some processes are well-defined and stable while others are intentionally flexible, allowing for continual improvements in response to changes in environment.</td>
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<td>Leader Actions</td>
<td>Leader actions are participative and collaborative; actions reinforce norms and expectations. Leaders create climate of psychological safety.</td>
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<td>Roles</td>
<td>Employees roles in stable routines and flexible routines are clearly defined. Employees engage in regular training and develop multiple skills.</td>
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<td>Norms and Expectations</td>
<td>Organizational norms focus on high achievement, employee development, and enjoyment of work. Employees are expected to view mistakes as positives and as learning events in a climate of trust and psychological safety.</td>
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The GOAA Process Models an Agile Approach

Identify unit and set desired levels (1 week)

Administer assessment (2 weeks)

Facilitated session with participants (60-90 minutes)

Additional sessions to review results (Ongoing)

Leader introduced to Organizational Agility paradigm

Staff introduced to Organizational Agility paradigm

Unit creates shared meaning

Unit develops own action items
Representative Results: Environment Items

The unit is strongly impacted by naturally occurring events (such as natural disasters or diseases)

The unit is strongly impacted by technology factors (such as pace of technology development, application, or availability)

The unit is strongly impacted by customer demographics and expectations (such as demands to deliver faster services, higher quality services, individualized services, or new services)

The unit is strongly impacted by social factors and trends (such as demographic changes, pressure from the public, or changes in workforce expectations)

The unit is strongly impacted by legislative changes (such as new laws)
Participant Insights: Environment Questions

We really are impacted by our environment!

We are high on most of the dimensions. The results confirm what we’ve been feeling and give us a way to talk about how the environment impacts us.

It’s not surprising that we are so high on customer and demographic factors, given our unit’s mission!

These results help us understand the types of pressure we have been experiencing.
Representative Results:
Organization Questions

- The unit is strongly impacted by organization policies and procedures
- The unit is strongly impacted by organization leadership
- The unit is strongly impacted by the organization's expected behaviors and norms
- The unit is strongly impacted by the organization's ability to collaborate and communicate across units
- The unit is strongly impacted by organizational re-structurings or re-organizations

Organization's Impact on Unit

- 7 – Entirely agree
- 6 – Mostly agree
- 5 – Somewhat agree
- 4 – Neither agree nor disagree
- 3 – Somewhat disagree
- 2 – Mostly disagree
- 1 – Entirely disagree
Participant Insights: Organization

I have a better understanding of what we can and cannot control.

We can control some factors that impact our unit but cannot control other aspects.

How can we do a better job communicating with other units? Let’s talk more as a leadership team about how to do that.

We can try to figure out how to accept the factors that are outside of our control and how to influence some of the factors that we might be able to control.
Representative Results:
Sensing and Responding Questions

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<td>Actual</td>
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Participant Insights: Sensing and Responding

I now realize the **importance of sensing and scanning** the environment.

We have been **over-responding** to our customers changing needs, resulting in us feeling pulled in every direction. **Through sensing, we can begin to anticipate** customer needs, which will lead to us feeling less hectic.

It really made me think about the role I have in **scanning the environment** and the role I need to play in making sure my staff is scanning the environment and **bringing that information back** to the team.
Representative Results: Agility Dimension Questions

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The unit’s agenda remains constant even when those in leadership positions change

Those in positions of formal authority encourage employees to share mistakes so that we can learn from them

Those in positions of formal authority help the unit frame changes in the environment as opportunities

My immediate supervisor supports decisions made by employees

Those in positions of formal authority take steps to ensure employees understand the unit’s mission

Leader Actions Questions

- 7 – Entirely agree
- 6 – Mostly agree
- 5 – Somewhat agree
- 4 – Neither agree nor disagree
- 3 – Somewhat disagree
- 2 – Mostly disagree
- 1 – Entirely disagree

Leader Actions

Representative Results: Leader Actions Questions
Participant Insights: Leader Actions

Unit Leader: Why are we low on “Those in positions of formal authority encourage employees to share mistakes”? I am always telling people that it’s ok to fail!

Individual Contributor: That’s not the message that we hear. We hear, “It’s never ok to fail.”

Unit Leader: An immediate action that I can take as a leader is to more clearly communicate that it is ok to fail in production but not in operations.

Manager: As managers, we can do a better job listening to our more junior employees when they have ideas about how to improve our processes.
Representative Results: Roles Questions

- Unit roles are balanced between supporting stable processes and experimenting to adapt unit processes
- The unit uses all of its members’ skills and experience
- The unit has enough people so that it can continually monitor the environment with little impact to the mission
- The unit has enough people to devote to trying new ways of doing things, with little impact to the mission
- The unit dedicates time and resources to continuing education and training activities

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Participant Insights: Roles

As a manager, I am often overwhelmed by emails from my employees asking me to make decisions that they should be making. I can talk with them to make sure they understand what decisions they can make on their own without asking me and what decisions I need to make.

Manager A: I wonder why we are low on both “the unit has enough people” and “the unit uses all of its members’ skills and experiences.”

Manager B: When we re-organized last year, some silos were created, which made it harder for us to share staff.

Manager A: As managers, we can all agree to share information about what skills we have in our unit. We can work together to share staff when needed.
Representative Results: Norms and Expectations Questions

The unit values new ideas
Members of the unit are expected to share information
The unit welcomes differences of opinion
The unit seeks out dissenting views
Members of the unit focus on developing expertise while enjoying their work
Mistakes are viewed as opportunities to learn how to improve our mission-critical processes
I trust those in a position of formal authority
I am expected to bring mistakes or errors to the attention of others so that we can all learn from them
I feel comfortable taking calculated risks in my work
Employee development is viewed as an investment

Norms and Expectations

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Participant Insights: Norms and Expectations

I am now more aware of how my words and actions impact my employees…if I want them to bring new ideas forward, I need to **make sure I don't chastise** them when they do that.

I want to share more information with unit staff about decisions that are made at higher levels. I can **test out** different ways of making that information available in a manner that is convenient for our staff.

Let’s talk more about how we can do a better job sensing by **talking with other units and outside experts**.
Our Recommendations to GOAA Participants

- **Use an agile approach to interpreting the results**
  - Leaders can model agility by acknowledging that they do not have all of the answers
  - Engage staff members in open discussions of results

- **Take an “appreciative inquiry” approach to action planning**
  - Acknowledge and build on positive results
  - Frame areas for improvement as opportunities to learn
  - Invite and support experimentation to test remedial actions and solutions

- **Continue the journey toward agility**
  - Use GOAA to gauge impact of actions and progress over time
  - Expand GOAA to cover a larger group of employees
Take-Aways

Organizational agility can be measured.

Any organization can find ways to become more agile.

Organizational agility is a paradigm shift, not a checklist.
Thank You!

Questions?

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