Agile and Inquisitive—AI Leadership

by Michael J. Keegan

Finally, this contribution explores two leadership qualities essential for meeting the demands and challenges of a continuously evolving technological landscape. With the promise of artificial intelligence no longer in some far-off future, government leaders must comprehend and harness both its perils and possibilities and doing that effectively will require these leaders to be agile and inquisitive—AI leadership.

The ability to adapt to change and anticipate disruption and use both to your advantage, rather than being sidetracked by either, marks the qualities of an agile leader. Coupled with this ability to pivot, inquisitive leaders investigate and probe. They guard against poor decision-making and faulty assumptions by asking questions, so they are empowered to make the best possible decisions in the situations they face. Both qualities can help leaders navigate a complex and ever disruptive world

Times of Great Change: Collusion of AI, Social Networking, and Humanity

Professor Jim Henlder, co-author of *Social Machines: The Coming Collision of Artificial Intelligence, Social Networking, and Humanity* and a recent guest on *The Business of Government Hour,* puts a finer point on why these two leadership qualities are necessary today: "Times of great change can produce great opportunities, but also significant personal stress or major societal upheaval. Many things can cause change, but technological innovation is often a facilitator." And one challenge for people during times of change is understanding the realities of these technologies. Leaders who possess an agile and inquisitive mindset can better position the organizations they lead to realize the benefits of artificial intelligence while avoiding potential pitfalls.

Using AI to Transform Government

For purposes of definition, AI refers to the use of computers that simulate human abilities and perform tasks that people typically do. Examples include reading documents to understand their meaning, looking at an image and recognizing the content, or making decisions. Related concepts and names include cognitive computing, predictive analytics, robotic process automation, and machine learning. AI can forever change how the world works, revolutionizing the way we perceive, think, reason, learn, and make decisions. Additionally, AI has the potential to help address many of our country's pervasive problems and advance our safety, health, and well-being.

AI has enormous potential for government. It can improve agencies' effectiveness, make data more understandable and easier to use, and help citizens navigate government services. As noted in *The Future Has Begun: Using Artificial Intelligence to Transform Government,* AI could save government up to 1.2 billion work hours and $41.1 billion annually. No one sets out to use AI simply because it is available. Government leaders must weigh options, assess scenarios, and understand the inevitable disruption of turning

to AI to do such things as streamline processes, relieve employees of tedious tasks, and provide new insights into their agencies' work. In such a situation, that leader is better served by possessing an agile and inquisitive mindset. So, what does it mean to be an agile and inquisitive leader—and how does acting as such help one better address the realities of AI?

Agile and Inquisitive Leader

The AI revolution is here to stay, so what do leaders need to do to adapt and thrive in an AI world. Regardless of scale, introducing AI into your agency will have an impact on performance that can either derail it or take it to another level. An agile leader must meet this challenge head on, but also recognize that challenges. like opportunities. morph almost immediately. As such, leaders must always be ready to respond and be open to new ideas, pivot priorities when factors dictate, and more importantly, commitment to a new approach when circumstances warrant.

Canvassing your organization's mission and needs is critical. Not every process or activity is worthy of AI. Cost in terms of time, budget, and cultural disruption should play a significant role in whether you leverage AI. Having a vision of how you want to increase productivity or derive new value from AI is also important. That vision clarifies the best areas in which to use AI: Is it in a specific mission area to transform how you do business and achieve mission outcomes? Or is it in a mission support area where you can realize efficiencies and reallocate scare resources towards your mission objectives.

Though AI is here to stay, it is also new, ever evolving, and no doubt disruptive. Leaders need to question, be inquisitive: admit what they don't know and be willing to learn by asking questions rather than giving answers. Inquisitive leaders embrace ambiguity and problem solve by asking thought provoking questions. The best leaders are insatiably inquisitive. They keep asking why. They dig for answers, experiment. They're keenly aware of what they do not know—enjoying experimentation, being curious, and effectively dealing with the discomfort of change. AI has serious potential, but leaders need to manage expectations, understand implications, and develop AI solutions tailed to their agency mission and needs.

- **Define and focus your AI goals and objectives.** AI is more than just another technology. It has the potential to transform. Leaders must define and then tell people what you want to get accomplished in their AI pursuits. A key to successfully accomplishing your goals and objectives will be clearly communicating them to a variety of audiences in your own organization. Another key will be your ability to focus on a defined set of goals and to avoid being distracted by secondary issues or activities.

- **Articulate a strategy for moving forward.** Everybody will be looking to you for how to act on the organization's mission and vision. Articulating a forward-looking strategy that bridges the gap between pre-and-post AI implementation will help ensure that the organization is doing what you want it to be doing. A clear strategy provides a map of how you and your leadership team get to where you want to go, given constraints within your operating environment and the resources available. The Center's 2018 report by Kevin DeSouza, *Delivering Artificial Intelligence in Government: Challenges and Opportunities,* offers an approach to such a roadmap.

- **Engage employees.** Employees have much to offer the organization via their ideas, including innovations, to improve the performance of the agency's programs and activities. It might be best to engage people and then decide, rather than the traditional practice of "decide, then explain."

- **Involve key stakeholders.** In a similar approach to engaging employees, you must launch an active outreach program to meet with the stakeholders of your organization with whom your organization collaborates. It may better inform your overall efforts.

- **Seize the moment.** The simple fact is that you must "seize the moment" and take full advantage of the environment now surrounding your organization. You must take advantage of the moment and move as quickly as you can to implement your goals and objectives.

- **Communicate, communicate, and communicate.** Many employees will likely become uncomfortable because change creates uncertainty regarding their future. You must be sensitive to this phenomenon and repeatedly meet with employees (as well as stakeholders) to answer all of their questions and attempt to alleviate concerns to the extent possible.

- **Create alignment.** A key element of leadership is "putting it all together." The accomplishment of your AI goals and objectives will depend on your ability to align the people in your organization around effective practices, technology, and organizational structure.

- **Expect the unexpected.** While you will have your plan in place, it is likely that an unexpected event will occur which will require that you adapt and adjust your game plan to new realities and situations. You will need to be resilient in your capacity to overcome obstacles and unexpected problems as they arise.

Going Forward

AI has captured the popular imagination. For some, it offers solutions to serious problems, while to others AI is seen as a threat. Professor Jim Henlder summed up for me during our conversation what's needed going forward:

> As exciting as this technology is, with great potential for good, it also has this potential to disrupt society as we know it today. If we are to steer the technologies between the benefits it can bring and the challenges it can create, our society needs to seriously think about and build a set of standards and policies that guide the development of these technologies. Rather than being afraid of this coming collision, we believe that people need to become more knowledgeable about what AI can, and more importantly, cannot (currently) do if we are going to make smart decisions, as individuals and as a society, as to when, where, and why we should use, or limit, these powerful technologies.


CENTER RESOURCES ON AI IN GOVERNMENT

The Future Has Begun: Using Artificial Intelligence to Transform Government
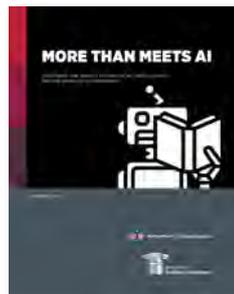
More Than Meets AI: Assessing the Impact of Artificial Intelligence on the Work of Government
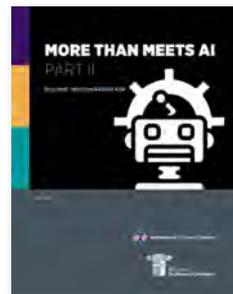
More than Meets AI— Part II: Building Trust, Managing Risk
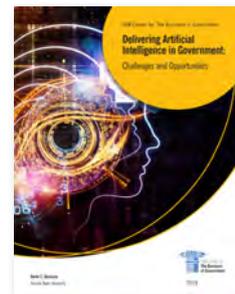
Delivering Artificial Intelligence in Government: Challenges and Opportunities

For more research on AI in government visit businessofgovernment.org and search artificial intelligence.