USDA Change Agent Breaks Down Data Silos in Analytics Push

We spotlight the change agents and what it takes to drive transformation in government.
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GovernmentCIO Media/Brink
Bernetta Reese
Digital Manager, Office of Communications, USDA

Driving change in government is notoriously hard — but not impossible. GovernmentCIO Media sat down with those who made things happen to hear their stories on how they successfully drove change and transformation in a bureaucracy. One important takeaway: You don’t have to be in the C suite to make change happen; in fact, sometimes a senior position will be more of a straight jacket,
stifling movement in right direction.

When the White House unveiled the Digital Government Strategy in 2012, data played a key role. Federal agencies were required to start adopting digital analytics programs, working with the General Services Administration. The Agriculture Department was the first agency to implement a digital analytics program, and Digital Manager Bernetta Reese was there to make it happen.

“That took a lot of buy-in, getting agencies to agree —‘put this on your site because we need to collect this data,’” she says. “We led that effort, but since that time, we haven’t really done the best job at telling our story through that data and really understanding what the public needs, what citizens want from us and are they getting what they want from us.”

Bernetta Reese, USDA

So, to understand those needs and change how the department handles data, Reese is working to ensure all USDA components are involved in implementing new processes around how they collect data “and what story that data is telling us,” she says.

“This is something that we have never done before,” Reese says.

The data collected will be able to say what brings people to the USDA website and how users are engaging on social media. Reese says the first challenge was figuring the basics: How much data will be collected? How many platforms to include? Will the focus be just on the department’s data or all the data across all the sub components?

“Initially, the thinking was ‘just the department,’ because we don’t have a lot of
staff and obviously with budget cuts, we are not going to be getting any new staff,” Reese says. “As we’ve gotten further and further along, I’ve made the decision that I want to involve agencies and offices. I want to know what it is exactly that they want. Do they need data from us and if so, what kinds of data?”

Reese says the feedback she’s received is across the board, yes, we want the data as well as sharing capability across the department — which supports her efforts and the need for collaboration. She then has to show how all of USDA digital platforms work in tandem and how all the agencies can look at all the data — not just one individualized piece of data.

“It’s definitely a big undertaking,” Reese says.

“If people can tap into what they are passionate about, they will discover the change agent inside themselves as well.”

Despite the magnitude of the project, Reese has made significant headway. Today, all USDA components participate in the program. She credits her communication skills and governance to her success.

“I have the ability to sit down and talk to different stakeholders,” she says. “Whether it is stakeholders internally in our offices or whether it is stakeholders outside of the USDA that are looking at what we are doing and are giving us feedback and really just piecing all of that together.”

But when it comes to being a change agent, Reese never saw herself in that way.

“I didn’t really realize that I was that person who was always pushing for change,” she says. “I think everybody wants to do good. Everybody wants to see their agency succeed. If everyone is doing their part, then technically everyone can be a change agent because we are all contributing to change.”

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