TIM A. FLANAGAN · JOHN S. LYBARGER

LEADING FORWARD

SUCCESSFUL PUBLIC LEADERSHIP AMIDST COMPLEXITY, CHAOS, AND CHANGE

WITH **ONLINE ASSESSMENT**

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PROLOGUE

I t is critically important to us, as authors, that we present our findings and our suggestions in easily understandable ways. Many leadership development models are so complex that leaders aren't able to digest their guidance. To combat this trend, in this book we've provided dozens of real examples from agency leaders, a sprinkling of personal stories, analogies from movies and books, and illustrations of exemplary leadership from historic figures. We hope you find the reading not only educational, but engaging and thought provoking as well.

Our intent is to provide a thorough yet easy-to-grasp explanation of our model. Then, after reading the first five chapters, we provide you with a comprehensive tool kit that enables you to quickly assess your strengths and development opportunities and begin to build a plan for improvement.

This prologue is designed with the following old adage for speakers in mind: First, tell them what you're going to tell them; tell them; then, tell them what you told them. Over the next ten pages or so, we offer you a thorough, yet concise overview of the entire book. The main body of the book, Chapters One through Five, provides the "telling." Here we'll describe our premise in depth. Finally, in Chapter Six and beyond, we won't exactly "tell you what we told you," but instead offer you options for developing your future as a public service leader.

We've had the opportunity to work with hundreds of public agency leaders over many years. We hope the inspiration we've felt is adequately reflected in the pages that follow.

In Chapter One, *Introduction*, we review the foundation and basis of our work. We begin by presenting four themes that are impacting leadership development in federal agencies: (1) federal employees are experiencing assessment

fatigue; (2) leadership competency models are often composed of so many competencies that it's not practical or feasible to expect a leader to remember them; (3) shorter assessments are becoming more widely used and accepted; and (4) Generation Flux (GenFlux)—pioneers of the new and chaotic frontier of business.

Additionally, we have uncovered five independent factors that influenced the creation of our Four Leadership Meta-Competencies model and our Public Service Leadership Assessment to measure them. Using stories from our interviews, we illustrate the key concepts embedded in each of these five factors. The first factor includes the four themes just listed as impacting leadership development. Second are the findings from conducting interviews with thirty executives from twelve federal agencies and the intelligence community. Third, we present the collective perceptions we gathered with the Public Service Leadership Survey from 233 federal workers representing twenty-four agencies and the intelligence community. Fourth, we highlight three research sources: (1) *The Best Places to Work in Federal Government 2011 Rankings* completed by the Partnership for Public Service and the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (Partnership for Public Service, 2011), (2) Gallup's extensive research on leadership and employee engagement (Gallup, 2012), and (3) the Senior Executive Service Core Qualifications (ECQs) and Leadership Competency Model developed by the U.S. Office of Personnel Management. Fifth, we share our reflections on our observations gleaned from our combined twenty-five years' experience providing executive coaching, organization development consulting, and leadership development to the federal workforce. We have summarized these four themes and five independent variables in detail in the Appendix for those who are interested in our research and conclusions.

We begin Chapter Two, *Agile Learning Capability*, by breaking down the three words in our first meta-competency. Agility is the ability to be nimble and quick thinking, learning is the ability to acquire new knowledge or skills, and capability is the ability to be affected by a specific action or thought. Putting it all together, agile learning capability is the quality of being fleet and nimble of thought, learning quickly through experience, and continuously expanding capacity for current and future mission demands.

The most successful leaders of tomorrow will be able to adjust in the moment as conditions change, evolve, and swirl. They'll be keen learners, acquiring

knowledge and skills as they adjust, for use in similar situations in the future. They will be lightning-quick to ascertain the essence of issues and challenges without rushing to judgment, yet rapidly reaching potential conclusions for consideration. Future successful agency leaders will display a knack for embracing even the most trying of circumstances as learning opportunities. Finally, they'll be inspirational models for others to become continuous learners. They'll encourage those around them to seek opportunities to develop new skills and contribute to an organizational climate that supports the constant acquisition of knowledge and capability.

Each of the four Leadership Meta-Competencies has three components, which in turn each have three subcomponents (see Table P.1). As we discuss each competency, its three components, and their three subcomponents, we continue to use stories from our interviews and personal examples from our own life experiences to provide practical examples.

Table P.1 Four Leadership Meta-Competencies Model				
Leadership Meta-Competencies	Agile Learning Capability	Adept with Ambiguity	Adroit at Thinking Strategically	Ambitious Drive to Execute
Component #1	Passionately learning	Adapting and flexing in the midst of chaos	Skillfully juggling competing demands and incomplete information	Practicing responsible risk-taking
Sub-components	Acquiring a passion for learning	Adaptability and flexibility	Juggling competing demands	Driving to action
	Continually learning	Getting comfortable with ambiguity	Juggling incomplete or inaccurate information	Willing to risk responsibility
	Focusing the passion—learning forward	Making meaning out of chaos	Letting go when you have no control	Embracing the mission

Leadership Meta-Competencies	Agile Learning Capability	Adept with Ambiguity	Adroit at Thinking Strategically	Ambitious Drive to Execute
Component #2	Agilely acquiring new skills	Bouncing back after challenging demands and setbacks	Thinking beyond the immediate horizon	Influencing and empowering others
Sub-components	Taking advantage of opportunities	Bouncing back from setbacks	Mitigating tactical thinking	Leading by example
	Seeking fresh perspectives	Persisting and "stick-to-itiveness"	Focusing forward thinking	Fostering relationships
	Processing large quantities of information	Facing uncertainty with spirited enthusiasm	Linking current realities to future objectives	Enabling others to act
Component #3	Creating a learning climate	Demonstrating calm confidence amidst chaos and ambiguity	Inspiring a vision of the future	Encouraging others to engage in responsible risk-taking
Sub-components	Inspiring others	Managing stress and pressure	Painting a compelling picture of the agency's future	Encouraging innovative thinking
	Energizing the environment	Focusing on the facts	Compelling forward momentum	Rewarding efforts, not punishing mistakes
	Recalibrating skills	Building self-confidence	Clarifying purpose-driven strategies	Demanding rationale and learning

The first component of agile learning capability is *passionately learning*. Its three subcomponents are (1) acquiring a passion for learning, (2) continually learning, and (3) focusing the passion—learning forward. Successful leaders

have the ability to acquire skills and knowledge in formal ways such as taking classes, obtaining advanced degrees, and reading books. They also learn through reflection on and analyses of their experiences on and off the job. They seek mentors, they ask questions, and they question answers. They are masters of continuous learning. They possess a desire to discover and an endless sense of curiosity. They also focus their passion so it's not undisciplined. They learn forward rather than simply staying current. They seek a balanced approach for embracing opportunities.

The second component of agile learning capability is *agilely acquiring new skills*. Its three subcomponents are (1) taking advantage of opportunities, (2) seeking fresh perspectives, and (3) processing large quantities of information.

Successful leaders take advantage of opportunities as they are presented and create opportunities out of their experiences. They seize the moment. They jump at the chance. As they monitor their environment for opportunities, they are especially adept at identifying those that have the greatest likelihood of bringing fresh perspectives. Novel, innovative concepts and ideas are the lifeblood of the forward-thinking leader. Accomplishing this successfully requires them to sift through large quantities of information as they analyze, evaluate, and make decisions about the data. All of this occurs at an appropriate pace so opportunities are addressed efficiently but with enough restraint to ensure high-quality decisions.

Creating a learning climate is the third component of agile learning capability. Its three subcomponents are (1) inspiring others, (2) energizing the environment, and (3) recalibrating skills. Leaders find ways to inspire others to become continuous, enthusiastic learners. They encourage, support, and coach those around them. They motivate, guide, and challenge. They know that inspiration is more a product of relationships than a result of speeches or tactics. It's clear to forward-focused leaders that the right climate is key to inspiring others. They energize the environment. They promote activities, processes, and systems that support learning options. Workers in an energized environment won't have to look far for learning opportunities.

In Chapter Three, *Adept with Ambiguity*, we describe and discuss our second leadership meta-competency. Adept leaders are those who display an affinity for gaining skill and proficiency. They may be described as clever in their approach or wise in their application of knowledge, or both. They may also be recognized as subject matter experts. Ambiguity is uncertainty or vagueness, often arising out of too much or too little information. Leaders adept with ambiguity apply

their expertise and make meaning during uncertain circumstances and unclear situations encountered while working.

The future holds much uncertainty for all of us. Information and data are available in ever-increasing volumes arriving with blinding speed. Our senses, if we allow it, are constantly bombarded with a variety of stimulants—some useful, some worthless. We have to filter it all. Just as we need to gather information to make sense of confounding circumstances where we don't know enough, we sometimes need to limit or organize data that overwhelms our ability to focus. Leaders have always had to confront new and uncertain challenges. They always will. Ambiguity would most certainly prevail if we didn't make an effort to harness it.

Again, we break down this second leadership meta-competency into three components, each supported by three subcomponents. The first component of being adept with ambiguity is *adapting and flexing in the midst of chaos*. It is supported by (1) adaptability and flexibility, (2) getting comfortable with ambiguity, and (3) making meaning out of chaos. When addressing unclear situations, leaders must demonstrate great adaptability and flexibility. In the midst of uncertainty, the lack of direction or information must never be incapacitating. Leaders find comfort in knowing there is always a way forward. Finally, when chaos abounds, leaders are competent at making meaning out of the chaos. Slowing the flow of information, focusing on what's possible, and filtering data carefully enable leaders to bend but not break.

Bouncing back after challenging demands and setbacks is the second component of being adept with ambiguity. Its three subcomponents are (1) bouncing back from setbacks, (2) persisting and "stick-to-itiveness," and (3) facing uncertainty with spirited enthusiasm. The ability to bounce back quickly after setbacks and failures is a hallmark of great leadership. Persistence and resolve in the face of challenge is another component of this trait. Skilled, successful leaders are focused on getting things done despite the barriers and obstacles presented. An attitude of stick-to-itiveness drives leaders to persevere. Facing uncertainty with spirited enthusiasm helps leaders fuel their optimism and resiliency.

Our third component of being adept with ambiguity as a leadership meta-competency is *demonstrating calm confidence amidst chaos and ambiguity*. We delineate its three subcomponents as (1) managing stress and pressure, (2) focusing on the facts, and (3) building self-confidence. Finding ways to manage stress and tension is critical for leaders at every level. Taking steps to calm

oneself in the midst of chaos enables the settling of an emotional hijack and the engagement of rationale thought. Deep breathing, centering, and slowing are all techniques one can embrace and teach to others. Staying focused on what one knows and what one can control brings stability and a sense of calm to most situations. Developing self-confidence through practice, training, and exposure to a variety of circumstances is key for every leader.

In today's workplace, ambiguity is probably more common than certainty. As the information age continues, it's likely to only grow more common. Agency leaders of the future must be ready to address the unknown, the uncertain, and the unclear. They must prepare for paradigm-busting innovation and brace for the continuing tidal wave of information flooding over and over them into the future.

We introduce Chapter Four, *Adroit at Thinking Strategically*, by describing one of our early observations about public leaders. We believe the vast majority of those in public service are highly committed, dedicated public servants. They work, diligently and without wavering, to do the very best they can, despite declining resources and competing priorities.

As human beings, we have finite physical, mental, and emotional energies. When we default to tactical execution based on a drive for quick solutions, we can waste precious resources. We believe that developing competence in being *adroit at thinking strategically* will not only offset these negative outcomes but result in more accurate, focused actions with desirable results.

Next, we break down the key words in our third leadership meta-competency, *adroit at thinking strategically*. First, adroit means cleverly skillful, resourceful, or ingenious; or deft, apt, or adept. Adroitness is a skillful performance; ability without difficulty; or having or showing skill, cleverness, or resourcefulness in handling situations. Second, we define strategic using Julia Sloan's description from *Learning to Think Strategically* (2006). She explains that *strategic* is both specific and broad in its context, and it is dynamic and generative, not static and finite. Leaders who are competently *adroit at thinking strategically* skillfully juggle competing demands and incomplete or inaccurate information over which they have no control. They think beyond the immediate horizon, linking future objectives to current realities, and they inspire a clear, compelling vision of the agency's future.

Adroit at thinking strategically contains three components, each of which comprises three subcomponents. The first component is *skillfully juggling competing demands and incomplete information*. Its three subcomponents are

(1) juggling competing demands, (2) juggling incomplete or inaccurate information, and (3) letting go when you have no control.

Effective leaders skillfully juggle competing demands and incomplete or inaccurate information over which they have seemingly little control or influence. These competing demands may be in the form of internal competition among peers or departments for things like limited resources (people, money, and space) or external demands from partner agencies, both domestic and international. They may also take the form of laws, regulations, policies, or guidance that impact mission priorities. Sometimes the available information is incomplete or inaccurate and there is nothing within your span of control that can help to make it more complete or improve its accuracy.

Thinking beyond the immediate horizon is the second component of adroit at thinking strategically. Its three subcomponents are (1) mitigating tactical thinking, (2) focusing forward thinking, and (3) linking current realities to future objectives. Leaders can so easily become caught up in the moment, focused on tactical actions and immediate demands. It's imperative to balance the here and now with the ultimate goal and the mission. Successful leaders learn to attend to both.

The third component of adroit at thinking strategically is *inspiring a vision of the future*, broken down into three subcomponents: (1) painting a compelling picture of the agency's future, (2) compelling forward momentum, and (3) clarifying purpose-driven strategies.

Effective leaders create compelling, inspiring, and meaningful visions of the future—the future state of an agency, its mission, or a change effort. Inspiring visions are contagious—and effective leaders want their followers to "catch" them!

As leaders learn to become more adroit at thinking strategically, they improve their abilities to clearly articulate both the current state (as is) of affairs and the ideal future state (vision of the future). They apply their strategic thinking to the visioning process to formulate strategic plans that include goals and objectives that guide their followers in executing the mission.

Chapter Five chronicles our fourth meta-competency, *ambitious drive to execute*. The first of the three main components is *practicing responsible risk-taking*. It is divided into three subcomponents: (1) driving to action, (2) willing to risk responsibly, and (3) embracing the mission. Successful public service leaders have a drive to action. They have a sense of urgency and a need to get things done. When answers or solutions are needed, they are willing to risk

responsibly, which positions them to discover new innovative ways to embrace and execute the mission.

Influencing and empowering others is the second component of an ambitious drive to execute. Its three subcomponents are (1) leading by example, (2) fostering relationships, and (3) enabling others to act. Public service employees want their leaders to set the example and walk their talk. When employees perceive their leaders as credible, dependable, and reliable, they are much more apt to want to follow them. Successful leaders know that leadership is a relationship. Employees don't care how much their leaders know until they know how much those leaders care about people. When leaders lead by example and have relationships with their employees, they are in the ideal position to enable others to act. Leaders who know their people put themselves in the best place of opportunity to align the right people in the right roles to foster an ambitious drive to execute the agency's mission.

The third component of an ambitious drive to execute is *encouraging others to engage in responsible risk-taking*. Its three subcomponents are (1) encouraging innovative thinking, (2) rewarding efforts, not punishing mistakes, and (3) demanding rationale and learning. Successful leaders encourage innovative thinking that adds new possibilities and solutions to the agency's mission challenges. When mistakes are reframed as learning opportunities and effective effort is rewarded, employees stretch and grow into a broader comfort zone of responsible risk-taking. When a clear rationale is expected and opportunities for learning are seized following innovative attempts, everyone becomes an active participant in continual learning. When this happens, they are simultaneously engaged in an ambitious drive to execute the agency's mission.

In Chapter Six, *Public Service Leadership Assessment and Personal Development Plan*, we discuss how and why we developed our assessment tool. We provide instructions on how to complete, score, and interpret the assessment, as well as a comprehensive guide to help you create your personal leadership development plan. We offer six categories from which to choose for strengthening your leadership competence: (1) find a role model or mentor, (2) consider a developmental assignment detail, (3) work with an executive coach, (4) take a class, (5) take an assessment, and (6) read a book. These are listed and explained in detail.

Following the list of development activities, you will find a list of leadership competencies, complete with easy-to-understand definitions. Where possible or known to us, we have listed relevant assessments you may wish to consider.

(We also caution you to be judicious in completing more assessments—as noted earlier, many agency leaders already suffer from an overuse of assessments.) In addition, we provide a list of recommended readings for each competency. At the end of the chapter you will find a leadership development plan worksheet that you can use to record your personal leadership development plan and choose an accountability partner.

We wish to thank the many active and retired employees who so graciously shared their stories with us. Their experiences and examples provide the backbone for our work. We also wish to thank everyone who reviewed our drafts, provided feedback, and made suggestions along the way. Feedback is truly a gift. The guidance and assistance we received from our editors and their staffs kept us focused and encouraged. The support from our wives and children has truly made our work, and this book, possible.

We hope that our efforts to capture the essence of effective public service leadership provides you with many ideas for enhancing your future. It's a complex world, full of chaos and change. Leaders who can successfully address the challenges of today's workplace while preparing for the eventualities of tomorrow are destined to become the foundation of leadership in public service for generations to come. Embrace the journey. Lead forward!

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Tim Flanagan and John Lybarger
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Introduction

*The primary element that drives worker satisfaction in the
federal space is effective leadership and in particular,
senior leadership.*

—Partnership for Public Service

During our years of working with federal agencies and their employees, we never intended to write a book. The idea came to us only after we had the opportunity to work extensively with hundreds of mid-level managers during a series of leadership development programs beginning in 2009. The number of compelling stories we heard inspired us to investigate the complexity of agency leadership. What we discovered led us to a simple, profound conclusion. Leadership is suffering in public service arenas because the traditional models of leadership have not kept pace with the ever-changing scope of challenges faced by those in leadership positions. Yet there continue to be individuals who transcend the changing environment to become pillars of exemplary public service leadership in their organizations.

We'd like to begin by sharing the story of one such leader. His story illustrates the very essence of our *Four Leadership Meta-Competencies*:

1. Agile learning capability

2. Adept with ambiguity

3. Adroit at thinking strategically

4. Ambitious drive to execute

We met Hal several years ago. He was the program manager for an agency's mid-level leadership training. John was the contract program manager hired to

lead a design and facilitation team that would pilot a new program for his agency's mid-level managers. Tim and John were both working as contract instructors and executive coaches for Hal's agency at the time. Hal was fairly new to the agency and had experienced a recent failure. The existing mid-level leadership development program had not met his senior leadership's expectations. In fact, they rather abruptly cancelled the contract with the vendor. Then they tasked Hal with finding a viable and more suitable alternative. They also "suggested" that this was a clear priority for the agency and gave him less than ninety days to implement a new program. Hal was on the spot. He was anxious, fearful, and even mistrustful. Recent events had caused him to doubt his abilities. He didn't know if he had what it took to find a new contractor, let alone lead and influence them to provide a successful program design. He was, though, anxious to recover from this setback and committed to better results in the future.

We observed Hal demonstrating each of our four Leadership Meta-Competencies during our work together as we designed, redesigned, and piloted the new program. Hal had a passion for learning and was continually analyzing new concepts and techniques for leadership development and organizational culture change. One particular component of the program needed to focus on change management. Hal drove us to examine the research and dozens of models before settling on a final approach. Persistently he drove us to seek fresh perspectives, take advantage of opportunities, and process large quantities of information. All the while he kept us focused on his mission requirements. Hal's enthusiasm and unquenchable thirst for knowledge (and its practical application) challenged and inspired our team to excel and perform at our best.

As we worked on a needs assessment and put together an initial pilot program design, Hal was adaptable and flexible. He realized that he needed to get more comfortable with the ambiguity in his agency's culture around leadership, training, and management. To avoid a second failure, he had to search for ways to make meaning out of the chaos all around him. Together, we identified several core leadership competencies that needed to be integrated into the mid-level leadership program. Then we looked at how we could create threads through the agency's entire leadership development training platform. We looked across the spectrum—from frontline leaders to mid-level leaders and up through senior leaders.

Hal's compelling vision of the agency's future included creating managers who were also leaders—people whom others would willingly want to follow—

with passion, commitment, purpose, and a drive for mission excellence. He realized that with the current realities of pending budget cuts, retirements, and new recruits, it was imperative that leadership competencies be given the same priority as technical competence and expertise. This realization provided clarity amidst the frequently competing leadership visions provided by senior executives.

Our team was encouraged by Hal to think innovatively and creatively while simultaneously keeping our learning objectives and course design tied to a clear rationale or mission objective. He used his influencing and political savvy skills to align key stakeholders across the agency. By fostering key relationships and empowering others to share ownership in the program, he built a strong support foundation of internal champions. The new pilot program was gaining momentum as the launch date approached.

The pilot program received rave reviews. In comparison to the rejected approach, the new design was a virtual home run, but not without opportunities for improvement. Hal listened carefully and critically to the feedback and pushed our team to stretch further. After the first year, Hal received a promotion to a GS-15, and the senior leadership gave him recognition for leading the development of best-in-class leadership training in the Department of Defense.

Through this experience, Hal demonstrated a real knack for learning quickly (agile learning capability). He displayed uncanny skill at clarifying key priorities despite the often unclear or unknown needs suggested by his sponsors (adept with ambiguity). His ability to identify leadership development competencies as critical elements of organizational success focused the path forward (adroit with strategic thinking). Finally, Hal's uncompromising passion to find a solution inspired the entire team to make it happen (ambitious drive to execute). Through it all, Hal demonstrated an ability to recover from setbacks, persist through challenges, filter amazing amounts of data, and ultimately accomplish a mission.

OUR GOAL: DEVELOP A LEADERSHIP META-COMPETENCIES MODEL AND SHORT ASSESSMENT

Our goal was to develop a Leadership Meta-Competencies model with a short self-assessment that would measure the critical leadership behaviors required for successful public service leadership. We're confident that our four Leadership Meta-Competencies and the Public Service Leadership Assessment achieve this