

**ACTION GUIDE FOR FEDERAL LEADERS**

# PRIORITIZING THROUGH *tumultuous* TIMES

## LEADING CHANGE WHEN LITTLE IS CLEAR

Against a daunting backdrop, Federal leaders and their teams are deep in the process of defining priorities and mapping critical plans. A divisive election, a devastating global pandemic, a burgeoning social justice movement, many communities recovering from the ravages of fire or hurricanes – the list goes on. We are living in an avalanche of change and challenge. Federal employees are also currently operating under a Continuing Resolution, strictly limiting budgets and spending. The mounting level of ambiguity begs the question: how can Federal leaders – and all who keep the wheels of our Federal systems turning – set meaningful priorities in such an uncertain environment? How can they reduce the overwhelm felt by their teams tasked with juggling growing needs with fixed resources?

The most recent neuroscience research, overlaid with Kotter’s expertise in leading change, underscores the importance of deeply understanding how human hardwiring impacts response to change. Kotter has developed a research-based model, Survive + Thrive, describing two hardwired channels that coexist in each of us. Their relative strength and interactions influence our behavior, especially at work. For organizations and agencies to best navigate today’s ambiguous environment, leaders must get people behaving in new ways – which means engaging directly with this Survive + Thrive hardwiring. We created this action guide to help you define priorities, despite all the uncertainty, while achieving a balance of Survive + Thrive that will support your leadership through these times of change.

## UNDERSTANDING SURVIVE + THRIVE | OUR BRAIN-BODY HARDWIRING



**SURVIVE**

**THREAT-SEEKING RADAR**  
(Chemicals release)



**BRAIN + BODY + EMOTIONS**  
Laser-focused  
Energy spikes  
Fear, anxiety



**BEHAVIOR**  
Fast problem-solving

**THRIVE**

**OPPORTUNITY-SEEKING RADAR**  
(Chemicals release)



**BRAIN + BODY + EMOTIONS**  
Perspective broadens  
Energy increases  
Passion, excitement



**BEHAVIOR**  
Innovation, collaboration

*Survive in action*

When all works well, the individual acts, the threat goes away, anxiety goes down, muscles relax, and all returns to normal.

*Thrive in action*

When all works well, individuals innovate (often with passion) and continue to do so until the opportunity has been realized.



## SURVIVE + THRIVE IN TIMES LIKE THESE

Let's begin with understanding more fully how Survive + Thrive shows up in our professional lives. A threat or challenge is perceived (such as a drop in the stock market, a hiring freeze, budget cuts), triggering our Survive response. Our bodies produce a temporary spike in energy and a flood of emotions such as fear, anxiety, shame, or anger. We go into rapid problem-solving mode to avoid the threat we perceive. When the threat passes, the Survive response abates. When the stressful circumstance or situation remains acute, we stay in a protracted state of Survive. Sound a little like 2020? It's safe to assume that many individuals are operating day-to-day with an overheated Survive response as threats have accumulated and few have resolved. This is important to remember as you lead change.

There is another, albeit less strong, side of this two-channel system: Thrive. What are common Thrive triggers? A game-changing technological advance. A bright new opportunity. The chance to make a difference. These events produce a more sustainable source of energy and trigger emotions such as excitement, passion, and pride, prompting us to broaden our perspective, collaborate, and create. Yet, even Thrive triggers can elicit a Survive response. A change may be positive, but its attendant uncertainty can provoke Survive, especially where this response is already overheated. Leaders can have a disproportionate impact on whether individuals view a given situation or change as a threat or as an opportunity.

Federal leaders are in the midst of such unique conditions that prioritizing action alone is not enough. When leading change in tumultuous times, it's critical to keep a close eye on how Survive and Thrive are showing up in yourself and in others. Doing so will help you better understand the associated behaviors you observe both inside your team, organization, or agency, and outside of it. Equipped with this lens, we see leaders better able to regulate a sometimes paralyzing Survive response, exacerbated by events of late, and amplify a more mobilizing Thrive response. To mind only the necessary actions, but overlook the human hardwiring that underpins peoples' response to those actions, will not produce effective change. The human side of change, evident in Survive + Thrive, and the prioritization of aligned action are essential ingredients for success.

With this model in mind, Kotter has identified three key ways to prioritize and lead change in government with confidence and agility, despite countless unknowns:

1. *Become customer-obsessed*
2. *Focus on advancing mission delivery*
3. *Be a leader – even if you're not in leadership*

## 1. BECOME CUSTOMER-OBSSESSED

Though the seats at the top of government shift over time, mission-driven federal employees continue to deliver on the mandates of their organizations. They faithfully process tax returns, provide services to Veterans, ensure vaccines are safe – the list goes on. The 2019 American Consumer Satisfaction Index (ACSI) survey, which measures citizen satisfaction along four dimensions, found satisfaction with Federal government services slipping for the second year in a row, effectively wiping out gains made in the 2016-2017 period. While not exhaustive, these four dimensions provide a useful starting point and are relevant to most agency and department leaders: timeliness and ease of government processes; professionalism and courtesy of government services; government website quality; and information quality. As more businesses adopt hyper customer-centric business models – think Amazon or Uber – the public's expectations around service quality have predictably risen. Federal leaders must help their departments become “customer-obsessed”.

Prioritizing customers isn't new. The president's management agenda for the two most recent administrations have included a focus on customer experience. Numerous agencies have launched programs at the organization level and have made great strides.



Though useful, such official initiatives are not a precondition for customer focus. Nor do they guarantee it, especially where the enormity of the task may be triggering Survive, undermining creativity and collaboration, and paralyzing action. To activate Thrive in your customer satisfaction efforts, place them in the context of the opportunity to truly help people during this difficult time. Complement your vision of the big improvements with a focus on what's possible today. Look for bite-sized improvements, fast wins, that move your organization in the right direction while boosting people's confidence in their ability to succeed. In this context, some questions to help clarify priorities include:

*questions to ask*

- *What services must we secure and safeguard to ensure continuity and consistency through this period of upheaval?*
- *What feedback have we received from our customers, and what does it say about our most urgent opportunities for improvement?*
- *Are there any services we must add to meet the demands of this moment in time?*
- *What will it take in terms of organization, capabilities, and resources to deliver the best service possible to our customers in the coming year(s)?*

---



---



---



---



---

## 2. FOCUS ON ADVANCING MISSION DELIVERY

This year brings the prospect of substantial changes in both priorities and personnel. A typical incoming administration reviews and fills or confirms around 4,000 political appointment positions, meaning senior-level changes are to be expected. Although policies and appointees shift with the party in power, much of the Federal government's work is constant. Citizens must be served, data tracked, contracts procured, laws enforced. Civil servants remain dedicated to their agency or department missions. Despite swirling uncertainty, there is a lot you already know about what's needed to deliver your mission.

Also predictable are the improvements required to ensure the ongoing provision of core services. Recent American Council for Technology-Industry Advisory Council (ACT-AIC) research has shown that throughout the Federal government there are several areas urgently and consistently demanding attention. It finds that most departments need to:

- Deliver services in more accessible, convenient, personalized, efficient ways.
- Improve the customer experience.
- Transform and strengthen both physical and digital infrastructure, making it more effective, efficient, and resilient.
- Become more agile, delivering consistent outcomes to stakeholders while keeping pace with policy changes, technological advances, and public needs and expectations.

It also found that delivering these improvements will require:

- Better data, as well as enhanced sharing and leveraging of that data.
- Stronger collaboration across government departments as well as with the private and academic sectors.
- Intelligent automation to increase speed and efficiency, reduce errors, and free up people to do higher value-added work.
- A workforce that can meet the coming demands.



By now it is clear that neither life nor work will return to the way they were pre-pandemic. We see businesses from American Express to Google to Twitter shifting to long-term or permanent telecommuting, and employees demanding more flexible workplace arrangements to cope with Covid's myriad of household impacts. Federal agencies and departments are following suit. For example, the Air Force announced in September that it would continue to support remote work practices as a way of increasing productivity and reducing cost. Said Vice Chief of Staff Gen. Stephen Wilson, "We've had an 800% increase in our ability to do this teleworking digital experience. Nobody wants to go back to what we were doing. So, how do we take this challenge and use it as an opportunity to move us forward?" This is one example of a predictable shift that can be factored into planning and forecasting. With Covid-19 thrusting the United States into a Survive-inducing health, economic, and possibly security crisis, mission delivery in all departments means contributing – each in its unique way – to the country's recovery.

The same principles apply to dialing up Thrive to advance mission delivery. Identify the compelling opportunity to serve in a new and valuable way. Use this opportunity to excite, motivate and align people throughout your organization. As well as becoming the North Star for setting priorities, it provides the focus for identifying impactful quick wins. Celebrate and share these wins, amplifying all progress along the way. When setting priorities for securing and advancing mission delivery, consider:

*questions to ask*

- *What are the "show must go on" certainties in your department?*
- *What are the most important improvements your department must make this year? How will you make them?*
- *What impact will the shift to more remote and flexible work have? To what extent will it continue, even after people can safely return to the workplace? How do you lead differently – supporting, while also getting the most from your distanced workers? How do you transition from crisis mode to new norm?*
- *What role will your department play in the recovery?*

---



---



---



---



---

### 3. BE A LEADER – EVEN IF YOU'RE NOT IN LEADERSHIP

Leadership transcends position. Whether you are in a top job or not, times of rapid change demand leadership throughout an organization. Today you are planning and budgeting for the ongoing essential work of your agency or department – incremental improvements and fundamental transformations. Even after narrowing down the mountain of needs that exist, there will be more to do than fits your team's time, capabilities, and budget. Leaders help themselves and their people by stepping back and asking: what is the window of opportunity open for us right now, in this precise moment in time, that may not be open forever? Where is the greatest urgency to make an impact? Leadership is enabling your organization to drive – together – toward that North Star through the noise. The adage "if everything is important, nothing is important" is especially acute in the public sector where every facet of the mission is vital. Yet, chronic overwhelm can trigger Survive. Everything cannot sustainably be equally important all the time. A central "above all else" priority must be articulated and repeated over and over again. It is impossible to overcommunicate. Otherwise, individuals, teams, or divisions will cope by ordering the chaos in their own ways.



Because rapid change requires that everyone row in the same direction, considering the vantage points below can help you determine the singular big opportunity before you and your team:

*questions to ask*

- From an analytical perspective, against which directives and KPIs must you outperform?
- From the emotional perspective, where do you as a leader feel the greatest excitement and engagement?
- From a behavioral perspective, what is so vitally important that you and your team will be compelled to show up to work every single day to make it better?

---



---



---



---



---

## STRATEGIES TO CALM SURVIVE + AMPLIFY THRIVE

Remember – Survive + Thrive is part of our human hardwiring. Examining activities, messaging, and behaviors through a Survive lens allows leaders to help their organizations avoid an overheated, Survive response. The following strategies help to modulate the Survive response, in turn creating space for the creativity, collaboration, and optimism born of Thrive.

*take stock*

Name your personal Survive + Thrive triggers and assess your own current level of activation. How might that be impacting how you respond to the actions and ideas of others?

*identify the opportunity*

Even in challenge, focus on what is possible. What will get you excited and passionate about the future? How will you communicate that opportunity to others?

*celebrate progress*

Resist the temptation to wait for the big result at the end of an effort to celebrate. People thrive on acknowledgement and celebration along every stage of a change journey.

*reduce the noise*

Give yourself (and others) permission to say no. Results matter over activities, so give permission to stop activities that do not add value.

*involve others*

Find opportunities for your team to contribute in new ways. Doing so fosters a broader sense of purpose and contribution, and enhances a necessary sense of connection.

*foster transparency*

Be as open, empathetic, and honest as you can be with your team: about your own experience, what is known and not known, and what is expected.



## AT KOTTER, CHANGE IS WHAT WE DO.

With Kotter at your side, you can mobilize your people to achieve unimaginable results at unprecedented speed. Interested in learning more about our Federal practice? We'd love to hear from you: [info@kotterinc.com](mailto:info@kotterinc.com)

In the meantime, you and your team may find these other resources and success stories useful.

### 8 RECESSION LEADERSHIP PITFALLS EBOOK



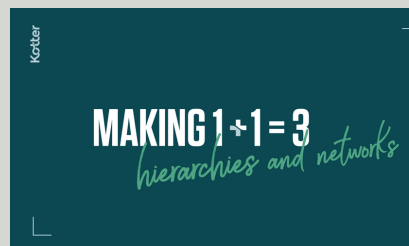
*Discover common leadership pitfalls that are all too easy to fall into plus the steps to avoid them and come out stronger.*

### 8 STEPS TO ACCELERATE CHANGE EBOOK



*Based on Dr. John Kotter's seminal research, this eBook shares Kotter's 8 Steps and 4 Leadership Principles necessary to lead change.*

### MAKING 1+1=3 HIERARCHIES & NETWORKS EBOOK



*To drive change, you need to engage both your organization's hierarchy and build a robust network. Learn how in this eBook.*