



If We Can Put a Man on the Moon...: Getting Big Things Done in Government

William D. Eggers , John O'Leary

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The American people are frustrated with their government-dismayed by a series of high-profile failures (Iraq, Katrina, the financial meltdown) that seems to just keep getting longer. Yet our nation has a proud history of great achievements: victory in World War II, our national highway system, welfare reform, the moon landing.

We need more successes like these to reclaim government's legacy of competence. In *If We Can Put a Man on the Moon*, William Eggers and John O'Leary explain how to do it. The key? Understand-and avoid-the common pitfalls that trip up public-sector leaders during the journey from idea to results.

The authors identify pitfalls including:

- The Partial Map Trap: Fumbling handoffs throughout project execution
- The Tolstoy Syndrome: Seeing only the possibilities you want to see
- Design-Free Design: Designing policies for passage through the legislature, not for implementation
- The Overconfidence Trap: Creating unrealistic budgets and timelines
- The Complacency Trap: Failing to recognize that a program needs change

At a time of unprecedented challenges, this book, with its abundant examples and hands-on advice, is the essential guide to making our government work better. A must-read for every public official, this book will be of interest to anyone who cares about the future of democracy.

If We Can Put a Man on the Moon...: Getting Big Things Done in Government Details

Date : Published November 1st 2009 by Harvard Business School Press (first published 2009)

ISBN : 9781422166369

Author : William D. Eggers , John O'Leary

Format : Hardcover 296 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, Leadership, Politics, Business, Government

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Pierre says

Eggers and O'Leary have done an excellent job in finding and discussing an analytical framework to judge government policy as success or failure. As the title eludes, it is written out of deep respect for the interconnected roles and responsibilities that our society and economy rely upon, and often take-for-granted, from all levels of government institutions in the U.S.

I highly recommend this to public policy (and related) majors, public benefit advocates, government affairs staff in private companies, and civil servants (gov employees).

Melanie says

I really enjoyed this book. It was full of great examples and was both educational and entertaining at the same time. I literally laughed out loud at a few points while reading this book. I learned a lot about different government undertakings and why some succeeded and why some didn't. I would highly recommend this book to anyone who has an interest in developing programs and policies, whether in the public or private sector.

Jules Arntz-Gray says

Great book for those looking to make successful public policy change.

Sheli Ellsworth says

Hong Kingston's book is a brilliantly penned memoir written in a fluid, narrative poetry genre. She has perfected "turning a phrase" into a campaign all its own, while toting Thoreau and Whitman as running mates. The author reflects on turning 65, takes us on an extended journey into self, and eventually onto China, all while sojourning scenes from earlier transmigrations. The manuscript is not only a memoir, but also the author's own liberal sentiments in poesy form.

Kingston's belief in reincarnation and her respect for those who do not share her views, keeps the reader on their toes. She shares cultural experiences with a primal pentameter that may equal or surpass anything her readers have ever experienced; telling stories that are gritty, simplistic and energetic all in one breathe. Those unfamiliar with the author's previous work may find in the style a tiresome promenade. The spontaneous rants include cultural phonemes and characters created in previous writings. However, the book's layout is clean and minimally stylized. The ragged paper edge gives the hardback the feel of a collectible, an excellent gift for Kingston fans and poetry lovers.

Carrie says

Gave me a good perspective on where policy and administration goes wrong and how to avoid those problems. My favorite part is the "Stargate" metaphor -- the part where policy transforms into the bureaucracy, and the hardest part of the policymaking process. I loved the image of the crumpled-up policies trying to make it through the stargate and piling up just outside its doors.

April Fleming says

I read this as part of an application for graduate school, so it's not something I would have regularly picked up. That said, it was actually REALLY interesting. The authors use 75 case studies of major public policy initiatives - everything from California's energy disaster of 2005 to the Boston Public School busing disaster of the 1970s and 80s - and analyze what went wrong and in the case where things went right, how it worked. They formulate a 'plan for success'. Sounds more hokey than it is. I wish all public servants would read this.

Paul Frandano says

A remarkable work. One scholarly reviewer named *If You Can Put a Man on the Moon* "the most important book on government since James Q. Wilson's *Bureaucracy*," a view I'm close to seconding, but Wilson's project - to explain why government organizations behave the way they do - is not quite that of Eggers and O'Leary, who offer up a large measure of wise counsel to practitioners and interested citizens on why government mega-projects either float or sink. Having studied more than 80 such projects, they have winkled out seven species of traps public-policy practitioners - elected or appointed executives, legislators, and career bureaucrats - routinely fall prey to. Those who avoid these errors may go on to glorious policy success. Those who do not will in all likelihood conspicuously fail in a phosphorescent flash.

Each species of Eggers and O'Leary's snares gets its own catchy name - the Tolstoy Trap, the Design-Free Design Trap, the Stargate Trap, etc. - and its own chapter, in which the authors, with economy and good humor, felicitously relate their tales of public-policy weal and woe. In the course, they introduce us to officials we may have known from the news, people like Pat Moynihan and Richard Riordan, and others we may have never heard of - but should have - like the remarkable Dwight Ink, career civil servant and organizational troubleshooter under seven presidents, who oversaw the Alaska recovery effort following the great earthquake of 1964 and gave us the Senior Executive Service. At the conclusion of each chapter, the authors recapitulate, identifying the main manifestations of the trap, best practices for avoiding its clutches, and tools one might deploy to move process execution along.

And in the end, the Eggers and O'Leary's central message that big projects form a continuous, tightly coupled process that must be deliberately designed and staged for execution, tooth to tail, with all steps clearly envisioned and all manner of failure and traps anticipated. That they have been able to take such a deadly dry, but surpassingly important, topic and turn it into a wise, lively romp through the implementation minefield assures this book will live for decades in the public-policy schools, if not on home shelves.

Dianna says

interesting read. includes facts and anecdotes about many of the public policy initiatives that we all know by name (And others that we don't) and then provides insights and analysis on why it succeeded or failed. while I do not work for the government, the topics and recommendations given by the authors 100% applies to all project management. this book really resonated with me as I am reading it during a time when I am really struggling on a client project. it also doesn't hurt that one of the authors works at the same consulting firm as I do and speaks the same language that I find relatable and can easily understand. I would love to see an updated edition of this book that includes analysis of the policies instituted in the past few years.

David says

Written by two business gurus and published by the Harvard Business Press, this book should be *required* reading for anyone connected with government and *recommended* reading for everyone else!

It's a serious book, leavened by tongue-in-cheek humor. Case histories abound, with some fascinating details of major governmental successes and failures.

Kate says

Readable and insightful. I could have used more thorough case studies but this was still a good overview of successful and unsuccessful government projects. Government managers would benefit from a lot more of these.

David Farrell says

One of the best books I've read on applying systems thinking/engineering to large government/public projects and overall public policy and administration. The authors treat the policy process more like a system lifecycle and recommend tools/techniques for each major phase as well as highlight traps to avoid.

Mary says

Really great book detailing the paths to success (and failure) for 75 large public sector projects and initiatives over the past 60 years. It's a really engaging read and fascinating for anyone interested in learning how government works.

Michael Veselik says

Fantastic book about how government can still get great things done. An incredibly important book for

individuals in government no matter what stage of their career and the casual observer of politics and government.

Enrico Accenti says

Great book!

Beth says

This book was surprisingly refreshing and entertaining. I think that the way the authors have managed to conceptualize what is it about the political process that is so darn irritating reflects a deep understanding of how our system is broken.

But yet through their use of really interesting examples of policies and practices that have worked, the authors manage to lay out a framework that I believe if politicians, policy-makers, and government workers actually tried to do - would change the way Washington works. I really enjoyed the sections at the end of each chapter that listed other resources interested readers can explore to gain deeper perspectives on the steps highlighted in the chapter. A great way to encourage more scholarship on the issue.

I also applaud the authors for their non-partisan views - and use of examples from both Republican and Democratic administrations. Not an easy feat I am sure.

My only recommendation is that there were a few examples (mainly the one about Wisconsin Welfare reform) where the authors highlighted the success of the policy, but did not detail exactly what the steps were that the bodies took to get there. In the case of Wisconsin, the reader is made aware that the amount of people on state welfare dropped dramatically - but the how of the policy is conspicuously missing.
