THE INSPIRATION BEHIND THE FEDERAL MODERNIZATION WORKBOOK

# Expectations for *Public Tech* Leadership

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Sixteen operating principles the Federal CIO sent to federal technology leaders in May 2025: *"a commitment to integrity, service, and transformational delivery."* They are the standard the Federal Modernization Workbook tries to meet, chapter by chapter.

### WHY IT MATTERS HERE

The workbook exists to show its work. Every claim is checked against a primary source and footnoted, every correction is logged, and every book names the problem plainly before proposing the fix: the principles below, applied to modernization.

### EDITION

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# Purpose

Choosing to serve in this office means choosing to build. It means choosing accountability over comfort, clarity over confusion, and outcomes over process. This document outlines the expectations we hold for ourselves—and each other—as we modernize the digital infrastructure of the United States.

This is not a typical government shop. We are here to fix what's broken and build what's missing. The standards below are how we ensure that mission is fulfilled.

01

## Trust Is the Foundation

Every success we'll have is downstream of trust. Trust among teammates, between agencies, with the public, and with our partners. Trust is extended to you on day one—and it is yours to lose.

You will be exposed to sensitive information: interagency cybersecurity gaps, budget vulnerabilities, contract disputes, employee performance data, and more. With transparency comes responsibility.

- Don't lie. Don't omit to mislead.
- Know when to speak and when to withhold. If in doubt, do not tout.
- Confused? Ask a Lead. No one gets in trouble for asking.

Breach of trust is the one failure from which there is no guaranteed recovery. Everything else is coachable.

02

## Exercise Judgment Relentlessly

Judgment is not instinct—it's a learned skill. Learn it. Practice it.

Good judgment requires understanding both *intent* (why are we doing this?) and *context* (what are the circumstances?). If either is unclear, you are expected to ask until it is not.

Before you act:

- Understand the mission.
- Understand the system.
- Understand the impact.

No matter your title, you are empowered to improve how we think, decide, and execute—by bringing good judgment to the table.

03

## Own the Outcome

Imagine every system failure is your fault. Act accordingly.

- Don't limit yourself to your job description.
- If you see a problem, you own the solution.

- Default to action, not passivity.

Push beyond your comfort zone. **This is how we shift the culture of federal IT from slow and reactive to bold and effective.** This office only works if everyone behaves like a founder.

04

## Show Your Work

Transparency is the fuel of accountability and shared learning. We are not interested in black-box decisions or vague plans.

- Document your logic.
- Share your assumptions.
- Make it easy for others to follow.
- Ask the same of your colleagues.

This creates a "hive mind" where decisions improve through scrutiny and learning compounds across the team.

05

## Truth Over Comfort

We are truth-seeking above all. The truth is often inconvenient, uncomfortable, or career-challenging—but we pursue it anyway.

- Call out broken processes.
- Identify policy contradictions.
- Challenge assumptions, even from the top.

We don't sugarcoat: the stakes are too high. **This is a mission-driven team, not a compliance-driven bureaucracy.**

06

## Default to Positive Intent

Start every interaction assuming your colleagues are here for the right reasons. This reduces friction, improves collaboration, and supports high-bandwidth communication.

- If something feels off, assume miscommunication before malice—and talk it out.
- Extend the benefit of the doubt. Expect it in return.

07

## Burnout Is a National Security Risk

You can't deliver if you're depleted. And you're not serving the mission by pretending everything is fine.

- Know the signs: cynicism, disengagement, irritability, fatigue.
- Speak up early. Leads are here to help you deal if it's too much.
- Leads are responsible for managing workloads and expectations.

Preventing burnout requires intentional investment in well-being. We're in this for the long haul—act accordingly.

08

## Feedback Is a Civic Duty

High-performing teams give and receive feedback constantly—and constructively.

- Feedback should be frequent, actionable, and kind.
- Don't wait for a performance review.

- Don't talk behind backs. Say it directly, or escalate it responsibly.

We're not here to coast. We're here to grow.

09

## Label the Problem

Call a problem what it is—don't avoid it to protect egos, maintain surface harmony, or wait for someone else to say it.

- Call out technical debt.
- Flag a failed procurement strategy.
- Surface ambiguous goals.
- Name the "elephants in the room."

Nothing gets better until someone identifies what's broken. Be that someone.

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## Commitments Are Sacred

This office runs on trust and delivery. If you say you'll do something, it gets done—on time, to spec, or renegotiated early.

- Don't ghost.
- Don't leave others guessing.
- If priorities shift, communicate fast.

Everyone has too much to do. That's why clarity and follow-through matter.

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## Lead When It's Time, Follow When It's Not

Leadership isn't about hierarchy—it's about ownership. When it's your turn to lead, take full responsibility for vision, planning, communication, and outcomes.

When you're not leading:

- Contribute fully.
- Voice dissent during planning.
- Execute the final plan with conviction.

Mission-first doesn't mean consensus-first. It means clarity, commitment, and speed.

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## Proactivity Over Permission-Seeking

We're here to build new systems—not wait for new instructions.

- If you need information, go find it.
- If something's unclear, ask fast.
- If bad news is coming, surface it early.

Don't assume someone else is handling it. Don't hope the issue will resolve on its own.

You are the system now.

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## Cross-Functional Thinking Is Mandatory

Government doesn't need more people who only care about their own swim lane. We need generalists who can spot patterns, challenge assumptions, and think holistically.

- Learn the language of other functions.
- Ask how policy affects engineering.
- Understand how tech affects procurement.
- Think like a product manager, a security officer, and a strategist.

Our edge is interdisciplinary thinking applied at speed.

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## Forward Deploy to Earn Trust and Surface Truth

The mission doesn't live in conference rooms at headquarters. It lives in the systems, networks, and workflows of the 100+ sub-agencies that make up the federal government. If we're not embedded in their world, we can't claim to understand their challenges—let alone solve them.

That's why we **forward deploy**.

Whether it's a field office, a regional data center, or a program team buried under legacy systems and outdated contracts, our job is to meet them where they are.

- **Proximity creates perspective.** The best policy and architecture decisions are informed by on-the-ground reality.
- **Trust is earned face-to-face.** When agency teams see that we show up, listen, and help—without judgment—they start picking up the phone.
- **Influence requires empathy.** Transformation doesn't happen from the top down. It spreads when we understand lived pain points and tailor solutions that work in real-world environments.

You don't need to be asked to visit a sub-agency. You should volunteer. Show up early. Stay late. Ask the hard questions—and the basic ones.

This is not a remote-control mission. It's a hands-on, forward-leaning effort to unlock the latent potential of government systems by working alongside those who maintain and endure them every day.

If we want to modernize the system, we have to walk through it.

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## This Office Only Works If You're All In

We are building a new operating model for government. One that delivers faster, secures smarter, and serves better.

That won't happen with part-time passion or half-hearted effort. This job isn't easy. It's not always fun. But it matters—immensely.

We are here to serve the public and leave behind a better government than we found.

That's the standard.

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## Your Best Is Our Best

Your commitment, passion, and drive will deliver success. I am most thankful for all you do!

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Executive Office of the President

ABOUT THIS EDITION

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Mr. Barbaccia served as Federal CIO from January 2025 to August 2026. Edition prepared for the Federal Modernization Workbook (whalermike.github.io/modernization-workbook) by Michael F. Stratton. Not an official U.S. government publication.