

# People-Centered HR in the City of Boston

## *A Digital Service Network Spotlight*

DSN Spotlights are short-form project profiles that feature exciting work happening across our network of digital government practitioners. Spotlights celebrate our members' stories, lift up actionable takeaways for other practitioners, and put the artifacts we host in the DSN Resource Library in context.

### Background

On the heels of a global pandemic, a rapidly changing labor market presents novel challenges for government Human Resource (HR) departments spanning recruitment, hybrid work, health and safety policies, and more. In the City of Boston, these changes are accompanied by a new mayoral administration – and fulfilling Mayor Michelle Wu's vision for Boston relies on the success and wellbeing of the City's 19,000 employees. Recognizing this, Mayor Wu created the People Operations Cabinet, led by a chief people officer (CPO), that is reshaping how the City serves its workforce using a people-first lens.

This large-scale project draws on common practices employed in strong government digital transformation initiatives. The Beeck Center's Digital Services Network (DSN) spoke with Boston's new CPO, [Alex Lawrence](#), to understand how the City is transforming its approach to people management.



### Contributing Authors



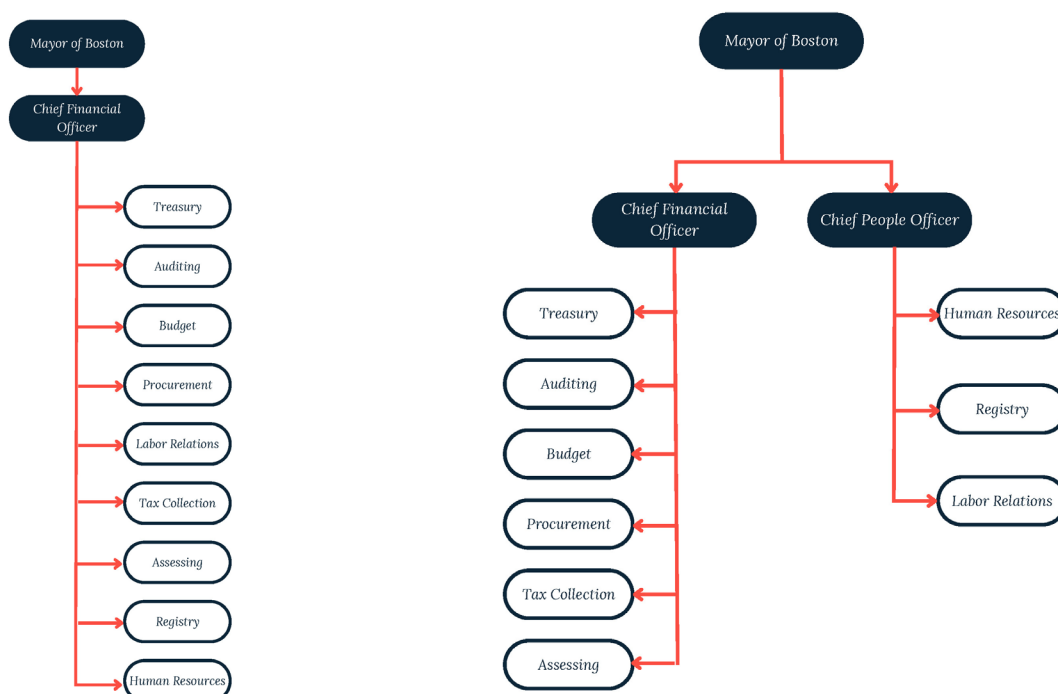
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## Restructuring the City’s people management functions

HR and Labor Relations long existed as two of 10 departments within the City of Boston’s Administration and Finance Cabinet, all of which reported to a chief financial officer (CFO).

The role of CFO is principally concerned with the financial management, protection, and security of the City’s resources and assets. This can be a challenging position from which to also oversee the success and wellbeing of the City’s workforce, because the priorities of Finance and the priorities of HR, while often intertwined, are also diverse. To give HR more of the attention it deserved, Mayor Wu split the Administration and Finance Cabinet in two, creating the Finance Cabinet and the [People Operations Cabinet](#).

Under the [new structure](#), the CFO remains in charge of Finance – managing budget, procurement, collections, and more – and the newly-appointed CPO oversees People Operations, which includes the HR, Labor Relations, and Registry and which manages things like workers compensation and health benefits. The separation opened the possibility for a new strategic focus on people management.



*Organizational charts illustrating the structure before (left) and after (right) the creation of the People Operations Cabinet.*

According to Chief Lawrence, the restructure not only created a dedicated team focused exclusively on developing the City’s workforce, it also elevated the HR and Labor Relations departments within the Cabinet level, making it easier for them to directly share and receive strategic guidance with and from the Cabinet head and mayor. Chief Lawrence hopes these changes will enable a more efficient and effective way of working to address workforce-related challenges.

Chief Lawrence sees government HR departments as operating “leaner” than other organizations of comparable size – that is, with fewer staff and resources, she said. Because of this, merely restructuring was insufficient to realize her vision for people management in Boston. In addition to maintaining long standing roles in the departments she now oversees, Chief Lawrence added three new director roles to her cabinet – diversity, workforce strategy, and employee relations – and also bolstered the team’s project management capacity.

## Prioritizing a people-first approach

Under Chief Lawrence's leadership, People Operations is focused on building its ability to communicate with and serve employees in a people-first way, as captured by the Cabinet's goals:

- + **Clear, consistent, and predictable:** Policies and procedures are documented, accessible, and understood by the workforce.
- + **Informed and responsive:** A culture where the needs of employees are understood; feedback is encouraged and accepted; workforce strategies are rooted in data and evidence; and there exists a continuous journey of improvement.
- + **Human-centered:** A focus on people over solely policy and procedure, and an understanding that the workforce is a culmination of human experiences.



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**ALEX LAWRENCE**

Chief People Officer, City of Boston

In advancing these goals, Chief Lawrence – former interim chief information officer with experience transforming the City's Department of Information and Technology – made the connection back to her experience with digital government clear: "Everything we've learned in the past 10 years of civic tech beautifully maps on to what the next 10 years of fixing government HR needs: break things into small manageable chunks, do user research before you solve problems, and write in human-centered plain language."

The People Operations Cabinet first set out to transform the language of work with people-centered titles like chief people officer and executive director of people and culture. "We're not talking about the products of people's labor, or talking about them as resources. They are people. So the language of work and how we staff the department matters," Chief Lawrence said.

Beyond shifting the language of work, the Cabinet plays an active role in reshaping workforce policy and process. Chief Lawrence believes policies should be transparent and accessible, and that everyone should have a thorough understanding of the rationale behind them. She explained that "government HR was designed to solve an entirely different set of problems than we have today," and "too many HR policies were built around one-off occurrences that received a disproportionate policy response." Chief Lawrence hopes to build a people operations system that creates policies for the majority while allowing for manager discretion in unique situations. This work is rooted in user experience research conducted (UXR) with the City's employees to better understand their needs and challenges.

Lastly, Chief Lawrence emphasized that new technology alone will not solve what she sees as challenges rooted in people and process: “While modern HR systems are important, a human-centered approach harnesses the unique experiences and strengths of employees to build a people management approach that serves everyone.”

## “Quick wins” for employees

Employee recruitment and retention, diversity, benefits structure, promotions and career development, personnel policy, and labor relations are top-of-mind for Chief Lawrence, with many changes in these arenas on an inevitably long time horizon.

While every problem can’t be solved in the short term, Chief Lawrence wanted to quickly demonstrate the new Cabinet’s value. “What can we implement today that employees already want?” she asked her team. The Cabinet turned to the City’s Employee Resource Groups – voluntary, employee-led groups organized around shared goals or life experiences – to identify high-demand opportunities with a low barrier to implement. So far those “wins” have included:

- + Establishing a new employee transit program offering a 65-percent subsidy on monthly public transit passes, free annual blue bike memberships, and \$200 towards bike repair and maintenance;
- + Standing up the City’s first Visa Sponsorship Pilot program to support and retain City employees seeking continued work authorization;
- + Rolling out a revised parental leave policy with new leave options, expanded eligibility to include more family types, and a new leave benefit specifically for employees experiencing pregnancy loss;
- + Instituting a hybrid work option for eligible employees; and
- + Resources and training for managers on workforce policies.

According to Chief Lawrence, City employees view the new Cabinet favorably so far. “The feedback I get every day is that the kinds of communications and policy decisions coming from our office feel different, like we’re leading with our values and investing in our people in a way that hasn’t happened in the past,” she said.

## Lessons learned

**The digital service “orthodoxy” scales.** The fundamentals of digital service transformation in government – listening to the people you serve, working in the open, making small changes and iterating as you go – are the fundamentals of good governance, period. These practices can be applied to improve any government change project, not merely “digital” ones.

**Effective policies and technology flow from a system that focuses on people and their experiences.** UXR powers a human-centered approach by seeking first to understand what people need and want. Policies should be rooted in this research, with transparent and plain-language communication making clear the “what” and “why” behind policies. Legacy systems often need to be improved, but tackling people-centric issues without engaging people – and instead rushing to apply new tech solutions – ignores the root of the problem.

**A focus on quick wins can establish value and generate lessons for teams undertaking ambitious change work.** Instead of channeling all resources toward big, complex changes straight away, dedicate some resources to locating small changes that can be piloted and scaled quickly. This establishes immediate value for teams working on large-scale transformation efforts, and often surfaces lessons that can be applied to bigger initiatives in the future.

## Resources and artifacts

To see how this work was put into practice, explore the following assets in the DSN Resource Library:

- + Boston's new [Paid Parental Leave Guide](#)
- + Boston's "[digital billboard](#)" (display screens around City Hall) advertising its MBTA Passport Program
- + Boston's [email communication](#) with City staff about the launch of the Visa Sponsorship Pilot Program
- + Boston's [employee highlight](#) of Public Works employee Allen Young