

LEADERSHIP LESSONS

2024 CDSO CONVENING

CHIEF DIGITAL SERVICE OFFICER

[CDSO Toolkit](#) → Leadership Lessons

The Digital Service Network (DSN) hosts a monthly Community of Practice meeting for Chief Digital Service Officers (CDSOs). These meetings provide an opportunity for conversation, collaborative problem solving, and discussion about the realities of serving in the CDSO role.



In many government agencies, the creation of a digital service team or function is relatively new, resulting from the increased interest in digital service delivery during- and post-COVID, and so the leaders serving in CDSO roles are navigating not just typical government processes, but also being “first of their kind” in their agencies.

At the April 2024 in-person CDSO convening, the DSN hosted a conversation about the realities of serving in digital service leadership. We gathered 23 members of the CDSO community to talk about their roles, and summarized below to further explore and explain the realities of the work, and to provide perspective to new or developing digital service teams about the leadership experience.

What do you enjoy most about your digital service leadership role?

Vision

- + Casting a vision
- + Getting a team excited about new ideas

Solving Problems

- + Solving real needs with the constituents
- + Untangling problems that have impact

Making a Difference

- + Making a meaningful difference
- + Dreaming big about what's possible

Big Impact

- + Potential for real, significant change
- + Revolutionizing how digital is perceived in government

Taking Risks

- + Appreciate the freedom to ask challenging questions and change the status quo

Wins

- + Creating momentum and celebrating successes
- + Turning around organizational culture

Partnerships

- + Building a broad network of support and finding new partnerships to forge

Team Building

- + Watching team members succeed
- + Empowering the team to generate new ideas

What would you improve in your digital service leadership experience?

Build lasting and authentic relationships

Allow time for strategic planning

Build and develop defined teams

Enlist champions in leadership

Accept that some work might not get completed




Improve conflict resolution skills




Educate external people about the work





DIGITAL LEADERSHIP

Expectations → Reality → Encouragement

 EXPECTATION Strategy “I thought there would be more of a playbook for what I’d run into.”	→	 REALITY Uncertainty “I sometimes feel that I’m often preventing versus resolving issues.”	→	 ENCOURAGEMENT Find a Place to Start “Everyone is just figuring it out as we go, need to just figure out where to start.”
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 EXPECTATION Collaboration “I thought everyone would embrace digital... and would have expectations of me.”	→	 REALITY Silos “I’ve learned that central versus decentralized teams have different incentives and motivations.”	→	 ENCOURAGEMENT Leadership Support “There’s overwhelming buy-in from the top, but fear from the boots on the ground.”
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 EXPECTATION Hiring “I thought that there was a magic sauce for bringing in people who understood the work.”	→	 REALITY Managing People “The people part has been the hardest part in this space — to keep people motivated.”	→	 ENCOURAGEMENT Doer to Strategizer “It’s tempting to revert to individual contribution but I am learning to delegate and ask for help.”
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DIGITAL LEADERSHIP

What support do you need?

First in the Chair	If your digital service team is the first in your organization, additional supports to combat imposter syndrome or feeling alone are needed.
Communication + Storytelling	Digital service teams need assistance telling the story about the work they are doing and the impact they are making. Consider hiring a communications position or liaison for your digital service team.
Sphere of Influence	Help your digital service team expand their sphere of influence by inviting their participation in service design and delivery — not just to problem solve when something goes awry.
Budget + Staffing	Digital transformation will not happen overnight and teams need budget and staffing to drive innovation. Multi-year budgeting and staffing is key to strategic planning.
Management of Team Dynamics	Hiring teams to work in a new way in an established organization comes with unique challenges. Provide leadership and management training and supports.
Strategy + Expectation Development	Empower your digital service team in the strategic planning process so the role of the team and expectations for the work is clearly understood across your organizations.
Leadership Buy-in	Leadership support is essential to organizational change and a shift to digital service delivery. Mitigate the “that’s the way we’re always done it” mindset by articulating leadership commitment to digital transformation.