

# The BAS2A Briefing



## Using the Viable System Model to Improve Government Operations

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Creative frameworks are essential for improving the operational efficiency of public institutions. The Viable System Model (VSM) provides a powerful design for organizational growth, especially for state and local governments that want to enhance their operations. Let's explore the power of the VSM, investigate its connection with value chains, and examine how governments can use this model to boost functionality and service delivery.

### Understanding the Viable System Model (VSM)

British theorist Stafford Beer created the VSM in the 1970s, based on cybernetics—the science of how machines and living things communicate and control themselves. Its main goal is to make organizations that are as viable and adaptable as living organisms, able to survive in different environments.

The model identifies five essential systems that any organization must have to be functional:

*System 1:* The basic activities that make up the primary operations of the organization, such as services provided by a municipal government.

*System 2:* The structures that coordinate and stabilize these activities, preventing oscillations between them.

*System 3:* The control mechanisms that provide an internal "regulatory framework," ensuring that different parts of the organization work together harmoniously, and resources are used efficiently.

*System 4:* The adaptations and strategic responses to external environmental changes, helping the organization remain relevant and proactive.

*System 5:* The overarching policies and ethos that maintain the identity and cohesion of the organization, guiding overall direction and ensuring alignment with its mission.

## **VSM and Value Chains: A Strategic Intersection**

A value chain analysis, which examines the different stages an organization goes through to produce and distribute a product or service from its creation to its end use and beyond, can benefit a lot from VSM insights. The common ground between VSM and value chains is their focus on system health and operational efficiency.

Using VSM, state and local governments can improve every part of their value chains. For example, in a city government context, this could mean enhancing the performance of public services—from garbage collection to public security—by making sure that each service (System 1) is properly backed by coordination mechanisms (System 2) and fits with both internal policies and external rules (Systems 3, 4, and 5).

This integration can enable governments to improve not only the delivery of individual services but also the overall organizational capacity and adaptability, ensuring that services keep up with changing community needs and expectations.

## **Applying VSM in State and Local Governments**

VSM can help state and local governments overcome bureaucratic and departmental barriers and improve their operations and flexibility. Here's how they can use the model:

*Evaluating Systemic Problems:* Governments can start by analyzing their existing operations according to VSM's five systems. This evaluation stage can help detect where communication and coordination gaps happen, such as inconsistency between what citizens require (System 1 activities) and what is actually delivered.

*Improving Coordination and Control:* By putting in place strong coordination mechanisms (System 2) and control frameworks (System 3), the dangers of departmental silos can be reduced. For example, a city might create a cross-departmental team to manage and align major projects among different agencies.

*Enhancing Strategic Adaptability:* Governments can improve how they foresee and respond to external changes, like economic or technological changes, by strengthening System 4. This could mean creating a team to monitor trends and use them for strategic planning.

*Keeping Policies in Tune with Community Values:* System 5 is about making sure that the government acts based on a consistent set of values and policies. By updating these policies

regularly to match changing community values, the government can preserve public confidence and organizational honesty.

*Ongoing Feedback and Adaptation:* VSM is not a model that can be left alone once implemented. Ongoing feedback cycles among the systems are crucial. Governments should set up ways to regularly collect feedback from citizens and adapt operations as needed, making sure services stay current and efficient.

VSM offers a complex and useful approach to comprehend and enhance the operational systems of local and state governments. These entities can boost their effectiveness in handling complex, adaptive systems by adjusting their operations to follow VSM principles. This results in better and more efficient services, as well as strengthening the government's ability to adapt to new situations and prospects in a constantly changing world.

By combining VSM and value chain analysis, governments can improve their performance and efficiency, and change the way they provide services and run public institutions. This approach offers a more adaptable, effective, and citizen-focused government, able to cope with complexity and change.

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***About Brantley Advanced Social Sciences Applications (BAS2A) and Dr. Brantley:***

*BAS2A provides innovative training solutions for government agencies. We help agency leaders develop the skills and knowledge they need to succeed in the changing public sector.*

*Dr. Brantley is an expert in digital workforce development. He helps government employees improve their competencies and adaptability, creating an innovative and flexible workforce.*

*At BAS2A, we create customized training that meets the specific needs of government organizations. Using our experience in instructional design and advanced learning technologies, we offer different types of educational programs—from short, focused learning modules to detailed, realistic simulations.*

*With Dr. Brantley's expertise, our training programs are tailored to the changing needs of our clients, giving them the tools and knowledge they need to face current and future challenges. Our goal at BAS2A is to create a lasting culture of learning and improvement within your agency, ensuring long-term success and innovation.*