

LEADING LOCAL GOVERNMENT IT

*Proven over 25 Years of Award-Winning
CIO Leadership*



*A CIO-Level Framework and Field Guide for building
a High Performing IT Organization*

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CGCIO | CGEIT | CRISC | CISA

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FOREWORD: WHY THIS FRAMEWORK EXISTS

The Moment Everything Changed

A CIO from a much larger county pulled me aside at a conference and asked: “How does an organization your size do what you’re doing? How do you get so much stuff done?”

At the time, my county had just been awarded first place in the Digital Counties Survey. I’d been recognized as California’s Public CIO of the Year. Our team was winning digital government awards. I knew what the outside world didn’t: we weren’t operating with superior resources or staff compared to other counties our size.

So when that CIO asked, it forced me to reflect deeply about why we were delivering results while many equally capable organizations weren’t. And the answer surprised me.

We didn’t have more money. We didn’t have more staff. I wasn’t smarter or more innovative than my peers. Our team wasn’t materially different from the IT professionals at other agencies doing equally good work.

What was different? After years of reflection and conversations with CIOs across the country, I realized we had something many organizations didn’t: a leadership framework in place. Not perfection in any one area — in fact, we had gaps everywhere. But we covered the major areas that actually mattered. We had alignment and balance.

That realization led to the creation of the High-Performing Government IT (HPG-IT) Framework. This book is the culmination of that work, a practical guide for IT leaders who want to build exceptional organizations without burning out in the process.

The Problem: You Were Promoted for the Wrong Reasons

Let me say something that might sting a bit: your promotion to CIO or senior IT leader was probably based on skills that are only marginally relevant to your new role.

You got here because you were a technical expert. You successfully implemented IT projects. You solved complex technical problems. You had a strong basis in computer science or information systems management. You earned your promotion through technical excellence and a successful track record of delivering solutions.

And the reward for that track record? A role that demands an entirely different set of capabilities.

The uncomfortable truth is that being a CIO is not primarily about being a technical expert. It's about being a technology delivery expert. These are different jobs requiring different capabilities.

As a technical expert, you focused on systems, infrastructure, security, applications, and technical architecture. You solved technical problems. You implemented technical solutions. That's what you were trained to do. That's where you built your confidence and credibility.

As a CIO, you're now responsible for building and operating what amounts to a business within a business. You're running the IT department inside the larger county, city or special district organization. And they don't teach you how to build, mature, and operate a business with an entrepreneurial perspective in your computer science degree program.

Your new job requires:

- Employee and talent development and management
- Stakeholder engagement and alignment
- Strategy development and planning
- Whole-organization operational planning and oversight across the entire IT department
- Political savvy working with executives and elected officials
- Budget management and financial stewardship
- Service portfolio management and "product" development
- Customer relationship management and meeting expectations
- Building organizational culture and structure
- Handling ambiguity and organizational politics

These are the skills that determine your success and your IT department's success. And most new IT leaders have limited or no experience with them.

Where New IT Leaders Fall Short

Many new IT leaders struggle here. Once in that top position, they view their promotion as validation of their technical success and strengths. This leads them down a path of focusing primarily on technical solutions to all the challenges their organization faces.

This is their comfort zone. This is what they know best. This is where they've accumulated wins. This is where they've received accolades and reinforcement.

So they focus on fixing technical IT management issues. Updating infrastructure. Improving security. Training staff in the latest tools and technologies. Implementing new systems. Following best practices frameworks like ITIL or COBIT.

These are all worthy efforts. But they happen at the neglect of the more important aspects: people, processes, stakeholders, governance, structure, culture, and strategic alignment.

Why? Because these activities don't offer quick wins. They're messy. They take time. They can be uncomfortable. And many IT leaders have no previous education, training, or experience working in these areas.

Some don't know what they don't know.

The result? IT departments that are technically competent but organizationally dysfunctional. Systems that work but customers who are frustrated. Infrastructure that's secure but staff who are burned out. Projects that deliver on time but don't solve the problems people care about.

That's the gap that HPG-IT addresses. It lays out a big-picture framework for IT leaders to execute a balanced approach to the IT leadership role, one that honors technical excellence while building organizational health.

The Paralysis of Traditional Frameworks

If you've tried to implement ITIL, COBIT, NIST frameworks, or any of the major IT management frameworks, you know the problem: they're overwhelming.

These frameworks are comprehensive. They're excellent. They're built for large, complex organizations with specialized teams and deep resources. ITIL was developed by the British government. Microsoft Operations Framework (MOF) was designed for large enterprise IT environments. COBIT emerged from enterprise audit and control needs.

If you have multiple deputy CIOs or multiple chiefs reporting directly to you, if your IT department has hundreds of staff and a budget in the tens of millions, then yes, implement these frameworks in their full glory. You have the capacity and complexity that justifies them.

But for the rest of us, and we are the majority, these frameworks create more problems than they solve.

When a mid-sized or smaller local government tries to implement them wholesale, something predictable happens: staff get overwhelmed, initiatives stall, nothing really gets implemented. You end up paralyzed by the complexity. Your team is stuck in survival mode, working frantically in the business with no capacity to work on the business.

This is the fundamental tension: you know you need to improve. You know you need to raise the maturity level of how IT is supported and delivered. You need continuous improvement. But you're already drowning in daily technical tasks that deliver IT services and maintain infrastructure. Where do you find the capacity? How do you balance keeping the lights on with building something better?

Most organizations give up. They accept mediocrity because improvement feels impossible.

Who This Framework Is For

Let me be specific about who needs this approach.

This is for the 90,837 local governments in the United States; the 35,705 general-purpose governments of cities, counties, towns, and townships, and the 39,555 special-purpose local governments. The vast majority of these serve populations well under 500,000 with IT departments of 150 staff members or fewer.

This is for the single CIO in a district, county or city who is juggling relationships with an executive, department heads, elected officials, and a capable IT team. You don't have multiple deputy CIOs. You most likely don't have a Chief Technology Officer separate from the CIO. You may not have business analysts, organizational development specialists, or dedicated customer service staff. You're it.

This is for IT leaders who need help building and running the business of IT service delivery. In private sector companies, you'd have sales, marketing, customer service, operations management, and business development roles. In government IT, you're expected to perform all of these functions with technical staff who were hired to manage systems, not relationships or strategy.

This is for IT departments that are trying to balance technical excellence with organizational health, where every team member, not just leadership, needs to achieve a healthy balance between doing their daily technical tasks and working on continuous improvement projects that raise organizational maturity.

This is for leaders who feel stuck, who know their organization could be better but can't figure out how to break through the paralysis of limited resources, competing priorities, and overwhelming frameworks that promise transformation but deliver frustration.

If you're in a large organization with specialized deputies and deep resources, you probably don't need this approach. You have the capacity to implement full industry frameworks in their full complexity.

But if you're part of the vast majority of local government IT organizations, working with constraints, limited staff, tight budgets, and enormous expectations, then this framework is designed specifically for you.

What HPG-IT Is

The High-Performing Government IT Framework is not another standards-based framework like ITIL, COBIT, or MOF. It's not a compliance checklist. It's not a certification program.

It's a guidance framework, a clear, digestible map of the core functions every IT department needs to build a mature, resilient organization. One that delivers great service, innovates, and attracts and keeps good people.

What makes it different:

It's right-sized for government IT reality. The framework addresses the areas that matter for mid-sized and smaller IT departments. It doesn't try to cover everything. It focuses on what drives results in real-world local government environments.

It's flexible and adaptable. You can implement it in any order you want, based on your priorities, gaps, and what's already working. You're not locked into a rigid structure. You work with what you have and build from there.

It's built on a systems thinking foundation, which means that no single practice, structure, or leadership behavior operates in isolation. If you are unfamiliar with systems thinking, Daniel Kim's Iceberg Model offers a useful mental image: the visible events in any organization, a failed project, a budget shortfall, a staff resignation, are merely the tip of the iceberg. Beneath the surface lie the patterns and trends that produce those events, the organizational structures and processes that drive those patterns, and deepest of all, the mental models and assumptions that shape everything above. **The five modules of the HPG-IT framework** map to those deeper layers, and that is precisely why you will find persistent cross-referencing throughout the module summaries and action plans.

If a passage on workforce development points you back to organizational culture, or a discussion of vendor strategy connects to governance and leadership posture, that is not repetition for its own sake. It is the framework showing you how the pieces reinforce one another beneath the waterline. This cross-referencing may occasionally feel tedious, but I encourage you to follow those threads rather than skip past them. A high-performing IT organization is not assembled from independent best practices bolted together; it emerges when leadership mindset, organizational health, service delivery, workforce investment, and strategic governance operate as a coherent system. The summaries are designed to make those systemic connections explicit so that you can see where a change in one area will ripple across others, and where neglecting one area will quietly undermine the rest.

It covers the full scope of IT leadership: people, culture, strategy, governance, relationships, communication, and continuous improvement. The things that determine whether you succeed or fail as a leader.

It's realistic and achievable. These aren't aspirational goals for someday when you have more resources. These are practical objectives that any organization can implement, starting now, with the resources you have.

How to Use This Framework

To state your job plainly as an IT leader: it's not to personally solve all your organization's challenges and problems. Your job is to create the IT service organization that can solve them.

That requires building the team, organizational structure, environment, and culture so that your talented staff can do their best work. Because they know what's wrong and how to fix it. They see the inefficiencies, the technical debt, the customer frustrations, the process problems. They have ideas about how to improve.

What they need is a leader who puts in place the framework and structure for them to be successful.

That's what you'll find in these pages.

The framework organizes around five major modules, each covered in detail in subsequent sections:

Module 1: Being a Government IT Leader. This is about defining your purpose and role. Leaders who actively shape their vision, build relationships, and drive strategy become drivers of excellence. Leaders who let it happen to them become firefighters.

Module 2: Building a Healthy Organization. A high-performing IT department starts with organizational health. In practice, you're establishing shared values and vision, building culture, creating clear structure, investing in people, and maintaining honest communication. These aren't soft skills, they're what all other improvements depend on.

Module 3: Working on the Right Stuff. Good governance, strategic planning, portfolio management, and financial stewardship all make sure your organization does the right work, prioritizes ruthlessly, and delivers measurable value. No more churn. No more reactive chaos.

Module 4: Delivering Great Service. Documented policies, right-sized industry framework components, knowledge management, exceptional customer service, and strong business relationships mean your team doesn't just fix problems, you solve them consistently and earn trust.

Module 5: Continuously Improving. Feedback loops, improvement culture, efficient processes, solid performance management, and innovation leadership keep the organization progressing and adapting to real needs.

Each module provides practical guidance, real-world examples, and actionable steps. The goal isn't perfection, it's progress. It's building an organization that's serious about getting better at the things that matter.

The modules are designed to build on each other, but you can also use them independently based on your most pressing needs. The cross-references throughout the book will guide you to related content in other modules when deeper exploration of a topic would be beneficial.

The Cost of Waiting

When IT organizations lack a coherent framework, the problems compound. Planning becomes fragmented. Service delivery slows. Staff stay confused about how their work connects to anything bigger. The best people leave. People lose trust.

And here's the hard part: these problems feel normal after a while. You stop seeing them as solvable.

But when you implement a mature, deliberate framework such as HPG-IT, the transformation is real. Leadership has clarity on priorities. Employees understand their roles and see how they contribute. Culture shifts from reactive to proactive. People become partners. Innovation becomes possible because you're not in survival mode anymore.

For CIOs, this means you can deliver reliable, value-driven technology services and lead with confidence. The system you put in place supports good outcomes.

A Personal Note

I wrote this book and framework because I've lived the struggle. I've been the technical expert promoted into leadership without all the skills I actually needed. I've felt overwhelmed by massive frameworks that promised transformation but delivered paralysis. I've worked in an organization where everyone was drowning in operational urgency with no capacity for strategic work.

And I've also experienced what happens when all of this works. When you build a structure that aligns people, processes, culture, and strategy. When you create an organization where talented people can do their best work. When you serve your customers effectively while also taking care of your team.

It's possible. It's achievable. And it doesn't require resources you don't have or capabilities you can't develop.

What it requires is deliberate effort. A willingness to work **on** your organization, not just **in** it. A commitment to building something sustainable, not just reacting to the crisis of the day.

These insights didn't emerge in isolation. Over twenty-five years, I've been privileged to serve alongside hundreds of government IT leaders through professional associations that became laboratories for testing these ideas. As an active member of the California County Information Services Directors Association (CCISDA) for twenty-five years, including five years on their board of directors, I developed the CSAC/CCISDA County Technology Executive credential program and taught several hundred IT leaders through this program over the past decade. Through twenty years with MIX, the Metropolitan Information Exchange, the nation's leading CIO association for large cities and

counties, including eight years on their board of directors, I witnessed what separated high-performing organizations from those that struggled.

My twelve years with GMIS and twenty-five years actively engaged with city and county associations including NACo, RCRC, ICMA, and CSAC, serving on multiple committees and advisory groups, provided countless opportunities to learn from peers facing similar challenges with limited resources and unlimited expectations. The stories, examples, and peer experiences woven throughout this book come from these conversations, these relationships, and these shared struggles toward excellence. Every “a CIO I know” reference represents real leaders doing real work in communities like yours.

This book is the roadmap. The work is yours to do.

But you don’t have to do it alone. Thousands of IT leaders in local government are facing the same challenges you are. Many have found their way through using these principles. You can too.

The question is: are you ready to try something different?

If the answer is yes, then turn the page. Let’s build something better together.