

Getting to Yes:

Why Every Leader in
Government Should Care About
Usable and Trustworthy Data



Strategy[®]



Introduction

Public sector modernization doesn't typically stall because of bad ideas. It stalls because the right people aren't speaking the same language at the same time.

In the private sector, a single executive can greenlight a technology initiative. In government, that's rarely how it works. Progress requires alignment across six distinct lanes of authority, each with its own mandate, vocabulary, risk tolerance, and definition of success. A CIO can be fully committed while a budget office is still waiting on appropriations language. A program director can be convinced while legal is still reviewing contract eligibility. A mayor's office or governor's office can be enthusiastic while a legislative or council committee hasn't yet scheduled a hearing.

This isn't dysfunction. It's how democratic institutions are designed to work. Checks and balances exist for good reason. But it does mean that anyone working to advance a modernization initiative, whether you're a department head, a technology leader, or an agency program manager, needs to understand not just your own lane, but how to communicate across all six.

This guide is written for that purpose. Each section describes one lane: what they're responsible for, what they're trying to protect, and how to speak to them in a way that earns their engagement rather than their resistance. The context throughout is semantic governance and modernization-in-place, but the communication principles apply broadly.

What Is Semantic Governance, and Why Does It Matter Even If You Aren't in IT?

Before walking into any of these rooms, it helps to be clear on what you're actually asking people to support.

Semantic governance is the practice of aligning the definitions, metrics, and business logic that agencies use across their systems, without requiring those systems to be replaced, merged, or centralized. It addresses a challenge every multi-department, multi-program environment eventually runs into: how do you make confident, explainable decisions from the vast amount of data government already holds, share insights across programs and jurisdictions when the mission demands it, and still protect sensitive information, respect statutory boundaries, and preserve the constitutional separation of powers that makes the whole system legitimate?

When it works, agencies can share real-time insights across programs without moving sensitive data, deploy AI tools they can actually defend to oversight bodies, and pursue modernization without the budget exposure and operational risk of a system overhaul. Leaders walk into rooms with numbers that match. Grant reporting closes without a reconciliation marathon. A new AI initiative doesn't require a years-long data migration before it's useful.

When it doesn't work, none of that is possible, regardless of how much technology an agency already has. The constraint isn't infrastructure. It's the absence of a shared foundation that makes the infrastructure trustworthy. That's what semantic governance provides, and that's what makes it the right conversation to be having right now.

6 The Six Lanes

Who They Are and How to Reach Them

Every significant government technology initiative moves through six distinct lanes of authority. They don't always move at the same pace, and they don't always speak the same language. But each one has a legitimate role, and each one can either accelerate progress or bring it to a halt.

The sections below walk through each lane: who typically occupies it, what they're trying to protect, and how to communicate with them in a way that earns engagement rather than resistance. If you're already in one of these lanes, you'll likely recognize your own perspective quickly. The more valuable read may be the lanes you interact with least.

Lane 1.

Executive Leadership



Roles include, for example: Governors, Lt. Governors, Cabinet Officials and Senior Staff at the state level; Mayors, County Executives, County Administrators, Commissioners, and City Managers at the local level

What Matters To This Lane

Executive leaders are responsible for setting direction, building public trust, and delivering on the commitments they've made to their constituents and their organization. They're asking practical, outcomes-focused questions: will this initiative deliver visible results? Will it create risk or controversy? Does it align with the priorities this administration has already committed to?

This isn't cynicism. It's accountability. Executive leaders are judged on whether things get done and whether those things matter. That makes them naturally oriented toward impact, timeline, and explainability over technical approach.

How To Engage This Lane

The most important thing to understand about this lane is that they don't need to know how something works. They need to know what it changes, why it matters to the people and programs they're responsible for, and whether it creates or reduces risk for the organization.

Frame the conversation around outcomes, not architecture. Instead of explaining what a semantic governance layer does, explain what becomes possible: agencies can share insights across programs without moving sensitive records, leaders can cite statistics they can actually stand behind, and modernization can happen without the disruption and cost of replacing core systems. Those are the outcomes that resonate.

Connect it explicitly to something already on the executive agenda. If cross-agency coordination is a stated priority, this enables it. If AI readiness is a direction they've signaled, this is the foundation it requires. The goal is to show that this initiative advances something they already care about, not to introduce a new priority they'd have to explain.

Useful Framing

"This moves us toward [stated priority] in a way that doesn't require replacing what's already working. The impact is visible, the risk is low, and the approach is one we can explain simply to anyone who asks."

Lane 2.

Business and Agency Leadership



Roles include, for example: Agency Heads, Deputy Directors, Program Directors, Division Chiefs, Chiefs of Staff, Assistant Commissioners, and Service Line Directors

What Matters To This Lane

Agency and program leaders are protecting mission delivery. They're asking: will this solve the operational problem I actually have? Will it create work for my team during implementation? Will it change the way we do business in ways I can't absorb right now?

This lane has historically been the end-user of IT decisions, not a co-owner of them. That's changing, and many program leaders are navigating that shift in real time.

How To Engage This Lane

Program and agency leaders sit closest to the data that drives decisions, and they're often the first to feel it when that data can't be trusted or used effectively. A program manager wants to ask a simple question about their own caseload and can't get a straight answer without routing it through IT or waiting days for a report. Staff spend hours reconciling conflicting outputs before a briefing because two systems describe the same population differently. An agency wants to deploy an AI tool to surface insights from years of program data, but can't do it safely because the data isn't governed well enough to trust the outputs or control what gets exposed to whom.

Those aren't technology problems. They're governance problems. And they tend to get worse, not better, as more systems are added and more programs share overlapping populations. What looks like a reporting issue is usually a sign that definitions, the terms and logic that describe who is counted, how outcomes are measured, and what data can be shared, haven't been established in a consistent, documented way across the organization.

Many agency leaders are watching the rise of tools like public AI assistants with a mix of interest and anxiety. They can see the value of being able to ask natural language questions of their own data the way someone might ask a question of a popular AI chat tool, but without sending sensitive program data to an outside service or introducing the risk of oversharing across programs or jurisdictions. Semantic governance is what makes that possible. It creates the governed foundation that lets agencies deploy that kind of capability internally, with the access controls, definitions, and audit trails that the mission requires.

When engaging this lane, lead with the problems they already know they have, not with the solution. They don't need to understand what a semantic layer is. They need to hear that the reason their team can't get a straight answer from their own data, or can't safely share insights across programs, or can't deploy the AI tools they keep hearing about, isn't a technology gap. It's a governance gap, and it's one that can be closed without replacing systems, retraining staff, or absorbing a major implementation lift.

Be specific about what changes for them. This lane responds to concrete before-and-after scenarios more than to architecture diagrams or vendor capability lists.

- What question can they answer tomorrow that they can't answer today? What process gets shorter?
- What risk goes away?

Frame it in terms of their program's outcomes, not the platform's features.

It's also worth engaging them as contributors, not just beneficiaries. Program and agency leaders bring something no one else in the organization can: deep, on-the-ground knowledge of what the data actually means in practice. Federated governance works best when the people closest to the mission have real input into how shared definitions are established and maintained. That's not a courtesy. It's how the definitions stay accurate and useful over time.

Useful Framing

"Your team already has the data. The question is whether it's structured in a way that lets you actually use it, share what needs to be shared, protect what needs to be protected, and get answers without a two-week turnaround. That's what this makes possible."

Lane 3.

Technical and IT Leadership



Roles include, for example: CIOs, CTOs, CISOs, CDOs, Directors of Technology, Directors of Data and Analytics, Deputy CIOs, and Enterprise Architects

What Matters To This Lane

Technology and IT leaders are responsible for keeping systems stable, secure, and sustainable, often while managing aging infrastructure, limited resources, and an accelerating pace of change coming from every direction. The questions they carry into any new initiative are practical and legitimate: will this integrate with what's already in place? Will it create new security or compliance obligations? Who owns it over time, and does the team have what they need to support it?

This lane also increasingly carries the weight of the organization's AI readiness. Whether or not IT leaders have asked for that responsibility, it's landing on them. And they know better than anyone that deploying AI on top of ungoverned data doesn't produce trustworthy results.

How To Engage This Lane

Of all six lanes, this one has perhaps the most natural reason to champion a semantic governance initiative. IT and security leaders are uniquely positioned to see how ungoverned data creates risk across the entire organization, and a federated governance approach gives them a concrete, architecturally sound way to address it while enabling every other lane to operate more effectively. When this lane is engaged and aligned, the initiative gains not just a technical validator but a credible internal advocate who can speak to every other stakeholder's concerns from a place of authority.

Engage this lane early, and be direct about the architecture. IT leaders are most effective as partners when they have time to evaluate, ask questions, and make the initiative their own. When they're brought in late, even a well-designed initiative can stall while they work through concerns that could have been addressed months earlier.

The good news is that a federated semantic governance approach is architecturally aligned with what most IT leaders already believe: you don't need to centralize data to govern it, and modernization should be incremental rather than disruptive. A semantic layer connects to existing systems without requiring data movement, doesn't force consolidation, and respects the security boundaries already in place. For a security-focused leader, that matters a great deal. For someone managing a portfolio of legacy systems, it's the difference between a feasible initiative and a non-starter.

On AI readiness, the message is straightforward: AI tools are only as reliable as the data and definitions underneath them. An agency that deploys AI on top of inconsistent, ungoverned data will get inconsistent, ungoverned results, and will struggle to explain or defend those results to oversight bodies. Semantic governance is what makes AI outputs auditable, explainable, and trustworthy. It's not a competing priority. It's the foundation the organization needs before AI delivers on its promise.

Useful Framing

"This doesn't require consolidating or migrating anything. It creates a governed layer above your existing systems that also happens to be the foundation you'd need before AI is something you can stand behind in production."

Lane 4.

Budget and Finance



Roles include, for example: CFOs, Budget Directors, Finance Directors, Controllers, Grants Managers, Fiscal Officers, and Revenue Commissioners

What Matters To This Lane

Budget and finance leaders are responsible for ensuring that public funds are spent appropriately, that spending can be documented and defended, and that the organization doesn't create financial or audit exposure through inconsistent or undisciplined reporting. They're asking questions every good steward should ask: is this allowable under existing funding? What does it cost, and over what period? If this gets audited, can we defend it clearly?

This lane often determines when an initiative can move, not just whether it can. A well-aligned executive team and a committed program leader can still find themselves waiting if the budget office hasn't been engaged and hasn't found a clear path to allowability.

How To Engage This Lane

The most compelling message for this lane is one of risk reduction and documented stewardship. When definitions and reporting logic vary across systems, that inconsistency shows up in audits. It creates reconciliation burdens, generates findings that require staff time and management attention to resolve, and can put future funding at risk. These aren't hypothetical concerns. They're a predictable consequence of governance that hasn't kept up with the complexity of multi-program, multi-funder environments.

Semantic governance addresses this directly. It creates a single, documented, auditable source for the definitions and logic that drive how data is reported, without adding new systems or changing how existing ones operate. When an auditor asks why two reports describe the same population differently, the answer becomes straightforward rather than a project.

For grants managers specifically, this lane often manages programs with multiple funding streams, each with its own eligibility definitions and reporting requirements. A semantic governance layer can maintain those distinctions clearly and consistently, which reduces the manual reconciliation burden at reporting time and gives the organization a defensible record of how each funder's requirements were interpreted and applied.

When engaging this lane, be concrete about cost and be ready to speak to allowability. Come prepared with information about existing procurement vehicles and a clear scope. This lane responds well to an initiative that has done its homework.

Useful Framing

"The audit findings that come from inconsistent definitions are preventable. This creates the documentation and definitional consistency that makes reporting defensible, without adding new systems to maintain or new costs to justify from scratch."

Lane 5.

Procurement and Legal



Roles include, for example: Procurement Officers, Purchasing Directors, General Counsel, Deputy Counsel, Contracts Managers, Compliance Officers, and Inspector General staff

What Matters To This Lane

Procurement officers, legal counsel, and compliance leaders are responsible for making sure that how an initiative moves forward is just as sound as why it moves forward. They're asking the questions that keep the organization out of legal and regulatory trouble: is this procurement compliant? Is the contracting vehicle appropriate? Are there risks in the vendor relationship, the data arrangements, or the scope of what's being authorized?

This lane is where decisions become real. Everything that gets approved in principle still has to be executed through a process that holds up to scrutiny. The people in this lane take that responsibility seriously, and they're most effective when they're part of the conversation early enough to shape it rather than review it after the fact.

How To Engage This Lane

The most important thing you can do is bring this lane in early, with a clear and well-prepared ask. Not because they're obstacles to work around, but because their ability to move efficiently and confidently depends on having complete, well-organized information. An initiative that arrives with a defined scope, an appropriate contracting vehicle already identified, and a straightforward vendor relationship is one they can work with. One that requires them to interpret ambiguous terms or navigate novel legal arrangements is one that takes considerably more time.

For this initiative specifically, the architecture is an advantage worth making explicit. Because a semantic governance approach doesn't require data movement or centralization, the legal complexity around data sharing is significantly reduced. There's no cross-agency data transfer that would typically require a formal intergovernmental agreement, no new data residency questions, and no expanded vendor access to sensitive records. That simplicity is meaningful, and this lane will recognize it.

It's also worth knowing that cooperative purchasing agreements, where they exist and apply, allow organizations to procure products and services that have already gone through a competitive procurement process. When applicable, these vehicles represent a fully compliant path that this lane can feel confident in. Surfacing that option early, with documentation that supports it, gives this lane something concrete to work with rather than questions to resolve.

Useful Framing

"The architecture avoids the data-sharing complexity that typically makes these initiatives difficult to procure. We've also done the homework on contracting options, and there are compliant paths available that this lane will recognize as straightforward."

Lane 6.

Legislative



Roles include, for example: State legislators, City or County Council Members, Board of Supervisors members, Committee Chairs, Policy Directors, and Legislative Staff Directors

What Matters To This Lane

Legislative stakeholders are responsible for representing their constituents, maintaining oversight of the executive branch, and ensuring that public resources are authorized and spent appropriately. They're asking the questions their role requires them to ask: is this a legitimate use of public funds? Does this expand agency authority in ways that haven't been authorized? What are we committing to long-term, and will we be able to explain it?

This lane defines the policy and funding boundaries within which agencies operate. When legislative stakeholders are informed and engaged, they can become genuine advocates. When they're surprised, even well-intentioned initiatives can become political problems.

How To Engage This Lane

Legislative stakeholders respond best to plain-language explanations, constituent-facing outcomes, and evidence that the executive branch is exercising responsible stewardship of public resources. This lane is generally less interested in technical architecture and more interested in a clear answer to three questions: what problem does this solve, who benefits, and what does it cost?

The semantic governance story translates well here without requiring much translation. Agencies have been working with conflicting data, it creates waste and creates audit exposure, and this resolves it without expensive system replacement. That's a responsible stewardship message. Lead with it.

Be clear about what this initiative does and does not do in terms of agency authority. Legislative stakeholders are alert to initiatives that expand what agencies can do in ways that haven't been formally authorized. A federated governance approach that works within existing systems, doesn't consolidate data across agencies without appropriate agreements, and preserves separation of responsibilities is a story that tends to land well with this audience.

For committee chairs and legislative leadership, brevity and clarity matter most. A one-page summary that answers the three questions above, written without technical jargon, is often the most effective first step. For committee staff and policy directors, more detailed briefing materials are appropriate. Staff often do the substantive policy work and can become well-informed advocates if given materials that treat them as the capable professionals they are.

Useful Framing

"This addresses a longstanding problem with how agencies report on shared programs, and it does it within the existing authority and funding structure. It reduces the audit exposure that tends to create oversight friction, and it doesn't require new systems or a major appropriation to get started."

Bringing The Lanes Together

The goal isn't to convince each lane independently. It's to create enough aligned understanding across all six that the initiative can move. In practice, that means:

Executive Leadership provides direction and political cover.

Business/Agency Leadership defines the operational requirements and champions the mission case.

Technical/IT Leadership validates the architecture and owns implementation.

Budget/Finance clears the funding path and documents allowability.

Procurement/Legal selects the right contracting vehicle and manages compliance.

Legislative sustains the authority and funding for the long term.

Progress doesn't require unanimous enthusiasm from every lane. It requires enough alignment that no single lane becomes a blocking force. The communication work is about reducing friction, not manufacturing consensus.

If you're navigating a modernization conversation across these lanes, the strongest move is to start with the lane closest to the operational pain, build a credible internal coalition from there, and engage procurement and legal earlier than feels necessary. The late-stage collapses almost always trace back to a lane that was surprised.

One final point, and it applies regardless of which lane you occupy: don't wait.

Federated data governance and a well-implemented semantic layer benefit every lane in this document. It's the reason this approach works in government environments where no single stakeholder controls the outcome. Because the value is genuine across the board, the communication responsibility is shared. If you're in the IT lane and you can see why this matters for program delivery, don't assume the program leaders are already having that conversation. If you're in the finance lane and you understand the audit implications, don't assume budget and legal are aligned.

The lanes don't naturally communicate at the pace modernization requires. Consistent, proactive coordination, even with colleagues you don't work with day to day, is what turns a good initiative into one that actually moves. When you see the value, share it. The guidance in this document isn't just for the person making the case externally. It's for anyone who understands what's at stake and is willing to help build the coalition.

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