

Functional Direction in the Government of Canada

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What is Functional Direction?

The term “functional direction” can be defined as *guidance or direction that cuts across the normal, vertical lines of authority in an organization*. That is to say, functional direction refers to guidance provided:

- by one branch or division to another, or
- by HQ to local or regional offices, or even
- by one department or agency to another.

Functional direction addresses matters of policy, procedure or precedent. It can take the form of formal directives, operating memoranda, instructions, written guidelines or the like, or it can consist of informal guidance or advice by telephone, e-mail or in person. Often functional direction is seen in the form of one unit with a policy responsibility providing guidance to another that delivers the corresponding program.

For the individual employee, being subject to functional direction means reporting to a line manager for operational aspects of the job while relating to a functional manager for certain other aspects. For example, a program officer in a regional office reports to the Operations Manager in providing service to the public but receives guidance from the program shop in HQ on matters of policy. An employee delivering several programs could receive functional direction from several sources. Thus functional direction means, in a very real sense, having more than one boss.

In practice, what is loosely called “functional direction” or “functional guidance” forms a spectrum ranging from advice, to guidance, to formal direction. These important distinctions are closely tied to accountability. If you take functional direction from an authority, then you are clearly accountable to that authority for what you do; if you seek functional advice, you are clearly not (though you are still bound by the organization’s rules and policies).¹ The term “functional guidance” is ambiguous (is following the guidance mandatory?) and this ambiguity in meaning is often reflected in a corresponding uncertainty about what is expected of people in practice.

It is important to bear in mind that authority for *policy* does not carry with it any direct accountability for *programs* that are delivered according to that policy, though the adequacy of the policy, or the adequacy of direction provided by the policy authority, may have a great deal to do with the effectiveness of programs, or with how they are delivered.

Functional Direction in the Organization

Functional direction is not something that is confined to one form of organizational structure. But in all cases, the organization must somehow reconcile the need to manage both functional and output driven requirements.

¹ Thus, accountability for applying policy may be achieved through the functional relationship or the line. For example, where a regional program officer is subject to functional direction from HQ, it is the HQ shop that must answer for the application of policy; where only functional advice is involved, the regional manager is directly responsible for the application of policy. In the end, both approaches lead to senior management.

The degree to which “functional direction” is an issue in an organization depends on:

- the complexity of the organization
- the stability (or lack of stability) of the policy environment
- the size of decentralized operations
- the degree to which authority is delegated to managers outside headquarters, and in that context, the degree of discretion involved in decision-making at all levels (especially the front line), and
- the extent of recent organizational change.

Thus functional direction is not usually an issue in departments where the policy or operational environment is stable, or where the discretionary authority of employees is relatively limited.

In some government organizations, by contrast, the policy environment is volatile; regional operations are substantial; the organization has been through considerable organizational upheaval and downsizing; field officers exercise considerable discretion; and operating circumstances vary widely among regions, among offices, and among functions. Under these circumstances, it should not be surprising that the quality, accessibility and timeliness of functional direction is a subject of concern to managers and employees alike.

Making it Work

Functional direction is to some extent a feature of nearly all federal government organizations. Practical experience shows that for it to work well three basic requirements must be met:

- **The roles and responsibilities of both line and functional management must be clearly defined.** This means setting out clear accountabilities so that employees know to whom they are accountable for each aspect of their work. It also means making careful distinctions between formal functional direction and the much softer functional advice or guidance.
- **Good communication must be maintained between functional and operational (line) managers at all levels.** Functional direction does not replace the need to work together on specific issues; on the contrary, it puts a premium on such cooperation. Line managers, to utilize resources effectively, must know what direction or advice their staff are receiving from the functional shop(s), while functional managers must get feedback from the line if they are to ensure that policies fit the operational reality. Communication at the staff level is also essential if functional direction is to work.
- **Senior managers must hold both line and functional managers accountable for their respective responsibilities.** With responsibility divided, it is all too easy for policy to slip down the crack.

Problems in functional direction nearly always stem from confusion about roles and responsibilities, combined with inadequate communication between managers and a lack of attention by senior management.