Creating an Innovative Government Environment

Adam Stone | May 2, 2013

Failure to change will leave government shackled to the status quo. Here are some ideas for changing your cultural mindset.

Contrary to popular belief, there is no bolt of lightning when it comes to sparking innovation. "It's not a momentary flash of brilliance, the next bright and shiny object," said Darin Atteberry, city manager of Fort Collins, Colo. Sometimes, innovation can be as humdrum as a utility meter.

The city's new "smart meters" may seem mundane, but they're having a profound impact on the civic experience. "Now the consumers will have a portal where they can watch their consumption on a real-time basis," Atteberry said. "We are building a two-way relationship with our customer."

Innovation isn't necessarily a dramatic change. Rather, it's something transformative. It may be a new way of thinking, a new way of managing processes or a new use for technology that no one had foreseen.

"Innovation is essentially about breaking constraints," said William Eggers, global director of Deloitte's public-sector research. "Previously, if I wanted to have high-powered computing, I needed a desktop and a laptop, but it wasn't nearly as convenient as a mobile phone. So I had to trade convenience for power. Today with tablets and mobile apps, we have eliminated that tradeoff. And the cost is less. That is a true innovation, because it broke a constraint that was previously there."

Easily said; perhaps less easily accomplished. How can government loosen it shackles, free its people to delve into their creative selves and emerge with something truly different?

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Photo: *William Eggers, global director of Deloitte's public-sector research. Photo courtesy of Wikipedia.*

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Often it begins with pain, said William Horne, city manager of Clearwater, Fla. Frustrated customers have typically spurred innovation in his town. The community groused about the city's website. Business leaders complained that permitting was too slow and the waits too long in City Hall. In each of these cases, "We said: There's got to be a smarter way to do this."

Creativity often requires a jump-start. Again: You can't wait for that bolt of lightning. Sometimes it's more like a kick in the pants, said Karen Thoreson, president and COO of the Alliance for Innovation, a Phoenix group working to encourage excellence in local government.

"You start by assessing how much innovation is going on in your organization right now," she said. "What is the internal tolerance for risk and change? Do you want to go soaring off the cliff or take some baby steps?"

With a view of the landscape shaping up, change drivers then need to gather likely innovators and shake up their thinking. "So you ask them, 'What's the most surprising thing that has happened to you in the last 10 years and why?'" Thoreson said. "It makes people look inside, makes them see all the changes that have occurred that they would not have anticipated. That, in turn, puts them in a new mindset. It takes your mind through a whole set of different clicks."

Ask local planners to work out the problems of a fishing industry executive in Thailand. Mental walls collapse, making room for change. "We want your brain to hurt a little bit," Thoreson said.

It may take a hard push to roll that stone: Government is notoriously resistant to change.

20 Tips on How to Start Innovating

1. Create momentum for your innovation project. There must be urgency otherwise innovation is considered playtime and nobody will be prepared to go outside the box. If this is not the case, create urgency and wait until the organization is ready.

2. Manage the expectations of your bosses and the line management before you start an innovation project.

3. It is essential to start your innovation expedition with a clear and concrete assignment. This forces the top management, from the start, to be concrete about the market/target group for which the innovations must be developed and which criteria these new concepts must meet. This forms the guidelines.

4. Use a team approach to get both better results and internal supporters for the innovative outcomes. Invite people for whom the assignment is personally relevant. Invite people for content creation and development as well as decision-making. Also invite a couple of outsiders as outside-the-box thinkers. Get a good mix between men and women, young and old, etc.

5. Let the internal top problem-owner participate in the innovation team.

6. Use a structured approach. Thinking outside the box is a good start. But you have to come back with innovative concepts that fit the in-the-box reality of your organization, otherwise nothing will happen.

7. Great ideas for innovative new products or services fit seven criteria. Use them actively in your project: 1.) Very appealing to customers. 2.) It stands out in the market. 3.) It has great potential for extra turnover. 4.) It has adequate profit potential. 5.) It fits management's goals. 6.) It is (somehow) considered quickly feasible. 7.) It creates its own internal support.

8. When you brainstorm unprepared with the usual colleagues hardly anything new appears. That's why it's essential to get fresh insights before you start creating ideas. Let all team members visit customers and others that serve as a source of inspiration for innovation opportunities

9. Successful new concepts give customers a concrete reason to change. If you want to create innovative products or services, start with discovering relevant customer problems to solve. There are several ways to discover them, like personal visits, focus groups, Web searching and crowd sourcing.

10. Be aware of the fact that a new product idea is not only a "creative product," but also must comply with the regular business criteria of the organization.

11. In ideation workshops, apply creative think techniques in the most effective way, and monitor all participants and involve them in the process at the same time.

12. Time box. Work with strict deadlines. They help you to get people outside the box and to make choices.

13. Be open to ideas or suggestions from your ideation team to adapt the process.

14. In brainstorming sessions, spend twice as much time on the convergence process as on the divergence process.

15. Allow people to choose which innovation opportunity, idea, concept board or mini new business case they want to work on. This way they can choose not only the project they have a passion for but also the one they have knowledge of, which will lead to good results.

16. Hire visualizers, cartoonists or make a movie to visualize your ideation process and the results.

17. Keep the pace of your innovation process going; otherwise it becomes long-winded and boring.

18. How attractive are the new product or service concepts really? That's a legitimate question. Therefore you should reflect on the concepts immediately. And you should check the strength of the ideated new concepts among potential customers. Use the voice of the customer internally.

19. Return with mini new business cases instead of Post-its or mood boards. And substantiate, in a businesslike and convincing manner, to what degree and for what reason the new concept can meet decision-makers' criteria.

20. Make use of the specific expertise of others from within the organization as much as you can in an early phase.

Published with the permission of Gijs van Wulfen, LinkedIn thought leader on innovation and founder of the FORTH Innovation method. Van Wulfen also is the author of The Innovation Expedition.

It's not just that bureaucracies by definition tend to get stuck in gear, though that's part of it. Government can also stifle innovation simply by doing its job well.

Look at it this way: "Government is set up to cause the routine to occur in a non-extraordinary way. If you do the same thing every day and you don't do it negligently or stupidly, no one will notice in an adverse way," said Stephen Goldsmith, director of

the Innovations in American Government Program at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government.

Change, on the other hand, involves risk to the public servant. Somewhere among the citizens, the unions, one's fellow employees, middle managers or other constituents, there's a chance that innovation will raise ire. "All those things are aligned to suffocate innovation in a bureaucracy," Goldsmith said.

Living always under the microscope, government tries to be fair and not corrupt. But it isn't built for speed.

That's the bad news. The good news is that it is possible for government to steer a new course. All that's required is a willingness to sail over the edge of the Earth.

In order to change you have to be willing to fail, said Doug Matthews, chief communications director of Austin, Texas, and a White House Champions of Change 2012 honoree.

"If your job is to get the streets paved and the potholes filled, there is no assumption that people will say, 'Oh, you meant to fill that pothole but it didn't work. That's OK,'" Matthews said. Just the opposite: One assumes failure will be punished, either by the public or by one's higher-ups.

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This openness to error is one of the hallmarks of private-sector companies known for their creativity. In order to innovate, you must throw a lot of stuff at the wall and see what sticks. "You want to encourage an environment where people fail frequently, where they do a lot of prototyping and take smart risks, because you can't have innovation without failure," Eggers said. "Fail fast, fail smart, fail often."

It's a view almost universally put forward by advocates of innovation. In order for an organization to break through the bonds of old thinking, dramatic cultural changes must happen. Whether it's the freedom to fail or the readiness to explore the unknown, innovation comes with the freeing of the mind.

When Matthews set his sights on encouraging innovation, he polled Austin's department leaders, looking for potential champions. He asked what they would need to really open up the avenue for change. "We kind of expected money to play a big factor," he said. "In fact, the two biggest things people said they needed were time and support from management. That really hammered home the sense that we had a cultural thing we needed to manage here."

His initial idea of micro-grants to fund new thinking never got off the ground. What people wanted most was a shift in thinking on the part of management.

Sometimes getting to a new place means standing an old problem on its head.

In the past, large IT problems have often missed the point, said Peter Coffee, vice president and head of platform research at Salesforce.com. "There are these massive boil-the-ocean projects that have years of effort and millions of dollars spent, and the spending never catches up with the evolving problem. The problem changes more quickly than you are able to bring the solutions to bear."

In practical terms: You don't want an enterprise resource planning deployment; you just want the garbage picked up on time. People forget, but innovation reminds them. "In too many environments, the technology becomes the project, rather than the project being the project," Coffee said. "In almost every case, IT should be the means to the end."

It takes a cultural shift — a new way of thinking — to break those old patterns.

How to give a push to get to that new place? Harvard's Goldsmith lays down some key points:

Remove the obstacle. Every bureaucracy will likely have a sticky wicket, someone who is set against change. "The guy who said no, you move him," Goldsmith said. "There is a lawyer, there is a manager, there is someone who says no. Put them somewhere else."

Cross the hall. "The best innovations are cross-agency, so you have to have access to other people, you have to have access to other data, you have to have access to other resources."

Find the beneficiaries. New ideas will need support, so look for likely allies. "Identify that person, see who represents them, give them a voice and find an avenue for them to help you," Goldsmith said. "It could be the citizen whose trash has been poorly picked up or the trash picker-upper whose equipment and routes make it impossible to pick up the trash well. Include them."

Tap leadership. Innovators, for instance in the IT shop, will need support from those higher up the food chain, be it friends in the state house or the executive suite, a mayor or governor who sees the big vision. "You have to find leaders who care about change."

It's one thing to set the wheels in motion, but institutions, just like individuals, tend to fall back to center. Every move toward innovation will be challenged by the natural return to equilibrium. It takes formal structure to sustain the effort.

In Livermore, Calif., that structure has come through the creation of deep ties across local institutions, the kind of cooperative play that some say is key to sparking new ideas.

Director of Economic Development Rob White has nurtured ties between the city, Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory and Sandia National Laboratories/CA. His efforts created the i-GATE Innovation Hub, a regional change driver, and won him White House recognition as a 2012 innovator.

"Innovation comes from things that are known being put together and reassembled in new ways," White said. "You do that by taking people who would otherwise not be exposed to one another and bringing them together at an organizational level."

So far the new cooperative structure is driving a plan to retrofit a wastewater treatment installation, creating a plant that will generate hydrogen, which in turn may be used to fuel vehicles. It took the formal interconnection of local institutions to make it happen. "That conversation would never have taken place in the norm we had created before," White said.

Cooperation among institutions is one key element in sustaining a culture of innovation. Another involves changing policies. "It's all about incentives. People do what they are rewarded for doing," Coffee said. "There is no point in trying to devise a system in which you urge people to do one thing, but the rewards all flow the other way."

Reward creativity and minimize the penalties. If managers say it's OK to try something, but then it doesn't work out, there cannot be reprisals for failed efforts.

A structural change also might involve new work patterns. To shake up people's thinking, change the environment — get them out of city hall or the conference room. "When you put them in a new place, that can change the interactions," Thoreson said.

For many, the biggest structural change will be the implementation of a formal innovation office, whether it's a team or an individual — a place to go with new ideas.

"Most of the time, nobody knows where the front door is," Matthews said. "If I've got an idea, where do I go? Having that pathway is a very powerful thing."

http://www.govtech.com/e-government/Creating-an-Innovative-Government-Environment.html