

A Five-Point Plan to Cultivate Citizen Support for Tech Initiatives

Stephen Goldsmith | October 19, 2016



A tech champion in a government entity needs to cultivate allies, especially when the innovation presents transformative opportunity. In my [last column](#), I wrote about the importance of obtaining buy-in from departments when launching new tech initiatives — a key way to ensure initiatives fully take hold and revolutionize city hall. But another crucial stakeholder must be engaged as well: the public.

An intentional approach to cultivating citizen support would incorporate several threads. First and most obvious is the quality, quantity and usability of open data. Usable open data includes ease of use and high-quality visualization, which allow the casually interested resident to track his or her service request to see both the response time for that request as well as how the city is doing over time on various metrics.

The second element of citizen stakeholder management includes creating the conditions for advancing citizen collaboration, from crowdsourced traffic patterns to apps and algorithms built by civic tech community groups. Whether the city organizes big app contests with prizes or simply adopts the apps, utilizing residents as co-

developers of knowledge and co-developers of apps will produce support as well as improve the quality of life.

Third, any effort to build community support for digital advancements must start with trust. When technology is involved, the issue of trust must start by addressing privacy and security, or else the new initiatives will prematurely end. Residents want to know exactly what city hall is doing with personal data, how it is being handled and the lengths officials are going to in order to protect it.

As cities continue to pursue more expansive data projects that more directly affect citizens, such as the Internet of Things (IoT), the opportunities and risks related to data aggregation and mining will increase exponentially, as will the risk of having to cancel, delay or substantially modify a new project, all of which can be costly.

Seattle addressed many of these concerns with its citywide digital privacy initiative, launched in fall 2015. Led by CTO Michael Mattmiller, Seattle worked with citizens to develop a list of principles and an ethical framework to guide city departments on data usage and privacy matters. The policy requires departments to complete annual online privacy and security awareness classes to stay up-to-date on the latest practices. It will also provide them with a Privacy Impact Assessment protocol that requires departments collecting new types of data, embarking on new programs or introducing new technologies to go through a process to self-assess any privacy risk that innovation may entail.

By partnering with residents to develop these policies and continuing to actively inform citizens of how the city is using and protecting their data, Seattle can alleviate and preempt future resident concerns about how data is handled in new innovative ventures.

Fourth, transparency around how a city plans to use the data will not only build support but also dampen anxieties. Chicago worked hard to ensure citizens' voices were heard in its Array of Things sensor project. The city partnered with the Smart Chicago Collaborative to inform residents about the project and garner feedback about proposed plans and policies. They held a series of neighborhood meetings where, beyond simply asking for feedback, city officials sought input and advice on sensor locations, privacy and security plans, and how residents want IoT and similar initiatives to be used to improve city life in the future. Chicago can now use the results of these meetings to better guide its Array of Things implementation, pre-emptively ease residents' worries and develop stronger IoT plans for the future.

Fifth, any process of collaboration requires a city to find a way to curate and use the information it receives and to find ways to use social media and even SMS texting to improve the way it involves and responds to those who often are ignored.

Collaborating with citizens to gain buy-in on new initiatives can be a much larger task for a city than gaining internal support, but doing so is critical to ensure new technologies are being best leveraged to improve civic life. Including residents throughout all stages of a project can help cities prevent disputes, implement smarter policies and better solve pressing civic problems.

<http://www.govtech.com/opinion/A-Five-Point-Plan-to-Cultivate-Citizen-Support-for-Tech-Initiatives.html>