

Strategies for Creating an Innovative Public Sector

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How do you go about innovation?

So you want to encourage innovation in your government. How can you do so? Many strategies will help, among them, valuing innovation, changing the culture regarding change, involving clients, managing for change and managing risks.

Value innovation

Remember the old saying, do what I say, not what I do? We know how hard it is to act in keeping with our values, but that is how to lead. Value results rather than process. Explain why it's politically attractive.

Change culture

A culture which encourages change when it is needed stimulates staff to be curious and ask questions.

It could use scenarios to expand and predict the future or develop worst case scenarios. It might fire a planner and hire a futurist instead. It hires leaders with courage and recognizes innovation champions. It empowers employees to take risks, encourages people to disagree and to learn from their mistakes. It finds ways to reduce uncertainty, express confidence, borrows and publicizes ideas from other organizations. Leading by example, it sets demanding targets, develops a clear sense of responsibility and moves to be a values-based organization. It calls innovation exploration, creates trust, makes it safe to think and dream big.

With a reduced emphasis on career progression, it educates about different perspectives and encourages playfulness and irreverence - by including at least one person at each meeting who doesn't know anything about the topic; by continually asking why, why not, how might we; and by encouraging employees to innovate and suggest ideas for improvement. The innovative organization plays: through fun and frivolous behaviour, by holding an innovation party, put something in the water, generate revenue (perhaps for a charity) by selling pretend spiked water, announcing the water is spiked once per week, rewarding the most spectacular failure. It celebrates innovation - gives awards for the wildest ideas, celebrates achievements and innovations. It discourages risk aversion: hold mock trials for or threatens to (or actually) lays off anyone that didn't take any risk in the last six months, fires everyone then rehires them.

Above all, it asks for innovations and ideas, dedicates resources for innovation, acts on and implements suggestions. It explains why ideas are not accepted, it protects those who do innovate. Individuals are helped to be more innovative, by tracking their people's adaptive skills and improving their skills.

Involve Clients in Innovation

An innovation must not only be invented but implemented. The best way to assure that it will be accepted and used is to involve those who will benefit from it in developing the innovation.

Manage for Innovation

A government explicitly trying to be innovative organizes and manages for it. It makes everyone responsible for innovation, measures performance and rewards it. It might give everyone \$200-1000 to innovate. It defines clear boundaries, recruits or promotes the curious, the innovators, artists. It celebrates them.

Its leaders model risk-taking and exploration, they lead by example. They delegate authority to solve problems, train and create teams that are compatible and trusting, break down tasks into bite-size pieces. They define and clarify risk-taking, describe situations fully, and follow the Babe Ruth model, tolerating and accommodating strike-outs. Some say they should both reward and punish.

Innovative organizations are creative, they shake things up: reassign everyone, change all job descriptions, do away with job descriptions, train managers, keep managers on the job longer, have only one classification level in the organization, promote everyone. They throw away the rule book, get people to work with people they don't usually work with, shake up hierarchy by trade jobs, allowing flexibility/uncertainty, removing the desks, sitting in circles, involving people who have problems, accepting collective responsibility for problems, saying no to everything, including jokes in official documents, refusing to take no for an answer, sleeping in the afternoon and work at night, bringing the babies in, working out in the office. They work outside the government, ban fluorescent lights, never leave rooms until one problem and/or one answer or solution has been found, support a sports team ie people who are trying to get to the top.

Managing Risks

Innovation requires more risk-taking. It only makes sense to manage that risk. One way is to disengage from arenas that create risk-aversion, such as Question Period.

More importantly, find ways to encourage risk. U.S. Vice President Al Gore's National Performance Review identifies some interesting examples of how to do so. "All managers could take a lesson from what Secretary of Education Dick Riley is doing. He hands out wallet-size "reinvention permission slips" to every single employee in his department. That's a pretty powerful message from the secretary of a department to front-line employees.

Similarly, other government leaders hand out "forgiveness coupons" designed to encourage managers and workers alike to take risks. They can redeem them if necessary--and sometimes it is necessary. But the point is to encourage them to try something new, to innovate, to take some changes, to try to learn. Organizations that do not learn, do not change. Organizations that do not change eventually do not work."

Conclusion

Many strategies can be employed to facilitate innovation - none of them work all of the time, but they help.

About the Author

Eleanor Glor Eleanor, an executive with Health Canada, organizes The Innovation Salon and is Editor of The Innovation Journal.