

Book Review

Steven Cohen and William Eimicke

Tools for Innovators: Creative Strategies for Managing Public Sector Organizations

San Francisco: Jossey-Bass

Reviewed by Eleanor Glor

I must admit to my scepticism that a book about strategic planning, reengineering, total quality management, benchmarking/performance management, team management and privatization is really about innovation. After all, these tools have now been around long enough that, personally, I would not call them innovative.

Cohen and Eimicke take a more intelligent approach to the tools than I expected, however. Instead of portraying them as the best way to "do" innovation, they treat them as what they are—several among many possible ways of approaching tasks, that can help to produce innovative results, if used the right way, but that can get it wrong. Just as true, adopting them can help make an organization more responsive, or help it remain unresponsive, with a limited future.

The parts of this book that I found most interesting were not the descriptions of the tools, with which I am already familiar, but the assessments of how and when to use them, and the descriptions of the attempts to do so—especially the ones that did not work very well. These real-life situations were much more interesting, and exhibited more vitality, than a toolbox.

Thankfully, Cohen and Eimicke begin their book with a definition of innovation—for them it is the development and implementation of new policy designs and new standard operating procedures by public organizations to address public policy problems. New is not defined. Has it never been done before anywhere, is it new to the organization, or is it new to the unit adopting it? The authors then outline a framework for assessing management innovation techniques. The framework consists of three elements: the definition and characteristics of the tools, the organization's social structure and operational capacities, and the organization's environment. Based on identifying the answer to a key question—What is the purpose of management innovation? What are we trying to change?—the book identifies each tools' characteristics, how it works, addresses the benefits, costs and challenges of using it, and assesses its utility in specific situations.

Cohen and Eimicke then describe cases that used the six tools. Although each the three case studies is described as being in the public sector, two of the three are outside government. The cases are located in the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation, the Indianapolis Private Industry Council, a non-profit organization, and America Works, a private company providing job training and job placement for welfare recipients. The first two cases used several of the tools, while the third used one.

The book concludes with lessons learned and advice on how and when to use the innovation tools, comparing them to traditional functional tools. The authors wrap the book up with cautions on the constraints of various tools and the challenges of implementation.

Given the limited scope of this book—the focus is on tools rather than innovations or innovation strategies—the lessons learned are limited and not particularly unique. They are:

- Innovation can take place within all three of the public sector organizational forms identified in the case studies.
- The three forms of organization are increasingly interacting in the process of delivery of public policy and programs.
- Leadership is a critical variable.
- Change is gradual, and failure often precedes success.
- Innovators use multiple tools.
- Results must be measured.

Although I am intrigued that some of these lessons are close to those identified in my books, the lessons fail to give us a new window on or any depth of understanding of how and why innovation occurs or does not occur in organizations. The authors showed more depth of understanding of organizations in their use of systems analysis concepts in describing the elements of the framework, especially the organization and the environment. Their characterization of organizations as complex social systems built on patterns of interaction, their recognition that a large number of complex, interconnected variables must be understood, and that the manager must develop a feel for a tool, leading to their conclusion that real change is gradual, incremental, and organic provided better guidance than their lessons learned. Despite the unevenness of the value offered in the different sections, this book would be of interest to innovators.

Books mentioned in this review:

Eleanor D. Glor, Editor. 2000. *Is Innovation a Question of Will or Circumstance?* Ottawa, Canada: The Innovation Journal at <http://www.innovation.cc> under Articles.

Eleanor D. Glor, Editor. 1997. *Policy Innovation in the Saskatchewan Public Sector, 1971-82.* Toronto, Canada: Captus Press

About the Author:

Eleanor Glor Editor-in-Chief, The Innovation Journal