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Putting a face on organizational innovation

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Putting A Face On Organizational Innovation

Nurturing continuous innovation and renewal in public agencies is not only important but critical today as change, new challenges and retirements dominate our management discussions. Innovation is a tool for transforming entire cultures and there is a growing recognition that fostering a culture of innovation is critical to success in public management. In my opinion, it is even as important as mapping out competitive strategies, maintaining good profit margins in revenue areas or meeting statutory requirements.

...there are 15 types of teams and individuals that fuel innovation inside organizations...

I have come to understand that there are 15 types of teams and individuals that fuel innovation in public organizations: five of them are outsiders and 10 are insiders. By strategically developing and supporting these innovation personalities, we as public managers have a chance to support new concepts so they will long enough to make a difference in improving our processes and outcomes.

First, we need to understand that we as public managers we don’t have all of the answers. Traditional inside-out approaches to innovation assume that subject-matter experts invent and design innovative new processes to meet needs that stakeholders may not realize affect them. The outside-in approach flips the innovation process around and assumes that stakeholders have outcomes they want to achieve, that they have unique knowledge about their own circumstances and context, and that they are unhappy enough about the way things are being done today that they are willing to act to improve them. To harness the power of the community’s organic creativity requires our supporting their creative processes by providing them with tools, resources and support.

Keys to unleashing stakeholder innovation are to first, find and commercialize the innovations of lead users who are already closing the gap between how they do things today and what they ideally would like to see the public agency accomplish tomorrow. Secondly, we need to engage with our most creative yet grounded stakeholders—the stars of the community if you will—and work with them to achieve ideal outcomes. Thirdly, we need to empower lead users with co-design tools and innovation toolkits so that they can design their own solutions, innovating within legal boundaries as they go. In all three approaches, the discrepancy between what stakeholders can do today and what they ideally want to be able to do is the structural tension that spurs innovation.

There are five distinct outside in innovator roles in my experience—stars, contributors, consultants, coaches and promoters.

• **Stars** innovate without being asked. Often they aren’t full-time members of the community—but whether they are fully participating or not, they are thoughtful and passionate about the outcomes they want to achieve. They are the stars that will design our next-generations of services or business models because they have the commitment, talent and energy to do so. By engaging them in co-design activities, we enable them to extend, modify and redesign our products and services.

• **Contributors** are happy to donate their time and work for others. They innovate within guidelines and provide value by doing so. As an example, they may create software or music or designs and offer their creations freely to others. They contribute their time as debuggers and testers of new concepts and demonstration projects. They enjoy seeing their contributions and ideas put into action.

• **Consultants** provide deep subject-matter expertise and offer valuable guidance and insight in areas that require substantive experience and insight like homeland security, emergency management, healthcare, senior services, homelessness and development planning. They can analyze policy trade-offs, help prioritize goals and recommend integrated approaches that truly resolve problems and expand upon opportunities.

• **Coaches** act as advisors to other stakeholders, solving problems, offering insights and, more importantly, they create maps that help stakeholders become oriented in navigating complicated processes while explaining relationships between complex concepts. Coaches also classify, filter, organize and review alternatives so as to make sense out of the conflicting positions. They add value by creating new understandings and approaches.

• **Promoters** are enthusiastic about you and your agency and are happy to spread the word and come up with innovative ideas about how to attract and delight other stakeholders. They contribute to the shortening of new process and service adoptions, partnering with other agencies, and promoting overall excellence.

Organizations that are successful in engaging and harvesting the results of outside in innovation all have one thing in common: A large percentage of their employees at every level are deeply curious about what problems and issues their stakeholders are trying to solve and what those stakeholders want to see happen in the agency, in the community or as a governmental response to a problem. These public managers aren’t just focused on developing, producing and delivering great service. What they really love is getting into a citizen’s shoes, viewing the world from their perspective and appreciating what it is that stakeholders ideally want to accomplish. Outside in innovation happens almost organically in those organizations with this kind of culture present. If everyone is focused on what the community and key stakeholders are trying to accomplish rather than their own internal governmental process, it becomes natural to empower and engage stakeholders to invent new ways of achieving mutually defined and important outcomes.

Within these organizations, we see learning, organizing and building innovators.

• **Learning innovators** are often described as anthropologists, experimenters or cross-pollinators.

An Anthropologist brings new learning and insights into the organization by observing human behavior and developing a deep understanding of how people interact with the organization’s services, spaces, products or people.

An *Experimentor* prototypes new ideas continuously, learning by a process of enlightened trial and error.

A Cross-Pollinator explores other agency and governmental approaches and then translates these findings and revelations into a unique fit and benefit to organizational endeavors.

• **Organizing innovators** know the path to innovation is strewn with obstacles and find ways to overcome them by either outsmarting them, overcoming them with eclectic coalitions and multidisciplinary solutions or by sparking the creative talents of talented stakeholders.

As an example, Organizing Hurdlers do more with less. They get a charge out of trying to do something that has never been done before often turning a small budget or time constraint into an opportunity.

Organizing Collaborators champion talented and coordinated teams much like Thomas Edison was known to do many years ago. Sometimes they do so through collaboration just as IDEO’s Samsun, then considered a second-tier consumer electronics company, came to IDEO 10 years ago with a bold plan to have a group of software designers from Korea work and essentially live with IDEO’s designers for three years. In the end, the cobalitators designed 27 new products—from computers to televisions.

Organizing Directors, on the other hand, map out productions, craft scenes and bring out the best endorsements and spokesmen, honing the project or the programmatic theme because they are willing to give center stage to others, enjoy finding new projects, rise to tough challenges, and own a large toolbox of communication strategies.

• **Building Innovators** design compelling and substantive experiences, create stages on which team members can do their best work, go beyond mere public service and deliver compelling narratives about what is and will be happening.

For example, the Building Architect sets the stage for positive encounters through services, digital interactions, spaces or events that keep the organization fresh and authentic and even summon up a mood or spirit when stakeholders hear the organization’s name similar to what Virgin Airlines, IDEO, Apple and the Ritz-Carlton Hotel do with their customers.

Building Designers are dedicated to exploring and improving the “inner space” where managers spend most of their time. They understand that well designed offices can raise the quality of people and of work by creating things like an Innovation Lab which dedicates a room for 15-20 people to regularly meet and share the results of what they are doing with others using sketch boards, maps, picture and engaging visuals. Innovation Labs are well stocked with innovation tools and people are well located to team members but far enough away from their desk phone ringing that they can tune in to the discussion without interruption.
Letter to the Editor

Reader Responds to June Frederickson Perspective
Editor.

What better prescription for undermining individual rights and governmental transparency necessary for democracy than Professor H. George Frederickson’s advice: “to worry less about the democratic accountability of the public service and to worry more about the competence, independence, resources, and managerial leadership of the public service”? (Frederickson Perspective, June 2007, page 11).

Experience in the Twentieth Century made it abundantly clear that getting the trains to run on time is not enough. One must focus on their destination, whether in Europe, literally, or figuratively as in the treatment of Martin Luther King, Jr. by J. Edgar Hoover’s FBI, the downwinders by the Atomic Energy Commission, the Tuskegee syphilis patients, and the many others who suffered serious—sometimes unspeakable—abuse at the hands of public servants throughout the United States.

Let’s get beyond the tired and debilitating ideas that public servants are sufficiently angelic to rise above the Madisonian system of checks and balances and that trading off rights and democracy for cost-effectiveness is good governance. The Frederickson Perspective becomes the “Frederickson Problem” when it substitutes Dr. Feelgood cheerleading for the difficult challenge of making public administration both effective and fully consonant with our democratic-constitutionalism.

David H. Rosenbloom
American University

Innovation Doesn’t Happen On Its Own

From INNOVATION, pg. 9

Building Caretakers are competent and confident much like good personal trainers. They work to extend the relationship and their approach is one-on-one. They offer others an experience so exciting and seamless they are often considered friends not colleagues. Their guide to great service includes first a recognition that stakeholders need the organization’s expertise and knowledge to sort through all possibilities, second, that becoming a trusted source of information or advice will build a loyal base of stakeholders; third, starting small can be a beautiful beginning just as a café’ or bistro can grow into a restaurant chain. Fourth, relationships can resonate with sustainability by encouraging virtuous cycles of giving and receiving; and fifth, outside in stakeholders should somehow have an opportunity to be recognized and should be given special treatment in some way almost as if they were members of a special club—because they are members of a special club—outside in stakeholders.

Building Storytellers persuade others in a way that facts, reports, agendas and market trends rarely do because stories make an emotional connection with the stakeholder. By telling their stories, they help build the organization’s credibility, facilitate team bonding, give people permission to openly discuss a relevant but controversial idea, create heroes in clients, citizens and stakeholders that have gone unnoticed, create a vocabulary of change and create order out of chaos.

By recognizing the outside in as well as the inside innovators, we are able to make the most of innovation in the organization and to literally put a face on those who are helping the organization change in positive ways. Teaming up for innovation is similar to an athletic event and many of the same principles apply:

• Stretch for strength: flexibility is new strength
• Go the distance: innovation is not just a program—it a way of life.
• Never Surrender.
• Embrace the mental game: innovators have the uncommon sense to pursue promising ideas long after others have given up or given in.
• Celebrate coaches by seeking them out and trusting their judgment.

In the final analysis, innovation does not happen on its own, but with the right team, it turns things around, becomes a way of life and moves the organization and the individuals ahead in positive ways.

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