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Unleashing innovation in public agencies

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Nurturing continuous innovation and renewal in public agencies is not only important but critical to successful public management in an environment of change. Innovation is a tool for transforming the entire culture of organizations and there is a growing recognition that fostering a culture of innovation is critical to success. It is even as important as mapping out competitive strategies, maintaining good profit margins in revenue areas or meeting statutory requirements. There are fifteen types of teams and individuals that fuel innovation inside organizations: five outsiders and ten insiders. By developing and supporting some of these innovation personalities that often include private citizens, we as public managers are able to support fledgling concepts so that they live long enough to make a difference in improving our processes and outcomes.

First, we need to understand that we as public managers 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 citizens may not realize that they have. The outside in approach flips the innovation process around and assumes that citizens have outcomes that hey 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. Harnessing the power of the community's organic creativity means supporting their creative processes by providing them with tools, resources and support.

Keys to unleashing community 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 be able to do as well as see the public agency accomplish. Secondly, we need to engage with our most creative yet grounded citizens–the stars of the community if you will–and work with them to achieve ideal outcomes. Thirdly, we need to empower lead users with cooperatively designed 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 citizens can do today and what they ideally want to be able to do is the structural tension that spawns innovation.

There are five distinct citizen innovator roles in my experience–The stars, the contributors, the consultants, the coaches and the promoters.

Stars innovate without being asked. Often they aren't fulltime members of the community–yet. 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-generation services or business models because they have the commitment, talent and energy to do so. By engaging them in cooperative-design activities, we enable them to extend, modify and/or 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 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 insights in areas like homeland security, emergency management, healthcare, elderly services, homelessness, business licenses 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 citizens, solving problems, offering insights and, more importantly, creating maps that help those citizens become oriented to navigating complicated processes and explain relationships between complex concepts. Coaches also classify, filter, organize and review alternatives so as to make sense out of the confusing information and data. They add value by creating new understandings and approaches.

Promoters are enthusiastic about public service and are happy to spread the word and come up with innovative ideas about how to attract and delight other citizens. They contribute to the shortening of the adoption of new

processes and services, partnering with other agencies and promoting the excellence of what you do.

Organizations that are successful in engaging and harvesting the results of citizen innovation all have one thing in common: A large percentage of their employees at every level of the organization are deeply curious about what problems and issues that the community is trying to solve and what those citizens want to see happen in the agency, in the community or at the state, local, federal level of government.

These public managers aren't just focused on developing, producing and delivering great service. What they really love is to get into a citizen's shoes, to view the world from their perspective and to appreciate what it is that citizens ideally want to accomplish. Citizen-led innovation happens almost organically in those organizations with this kind of culture. If everyone is focused on what citizens are trying to accomplish rather than their own internal governmental process, it becomes natural to empower and engage citizens to invent new ways of achieving mutually defined and important outcomes.

Within the organization, we see learning, organizing and building innovators.

Learning innovators are often described as anthropologists, experimenters or cross-pollinators. The anthropologist brings new learning and insights into the organization by observing human behavior and developing a deep understanding of how people interact with the organizations services, spaces, products or people. Experimenter prototypes bring forth new ideas continuously, learning by a process of enlightened trial and error. The Cross-Pollinator explores other agency and governmental approaches and then translates these findings and revelations into a unique fit and benefit to agency endeavors.

Organizing personas know that 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 sparking the creative talents of a talented team. As an example, the Hurdler does more with less. They get a charge out of trying to do something that has never been done before such as turning a small budget or time constraint into an opportunity. Collaborators champion and cheer-lead talented and coordinated teams much like Thomas Edison was known to do. Sometimes they do so through collaboration just as some 10 years ago, Samsung, then considered a second-tier consumer electronics company came to IDEO with a bold plan to have a group of designers from Korea work and essentially live with IDEO's designers for three years. In the end, the collaboration resulted in 27 new products–from computers to televisions.

Builders, or directors map out initiatives and the crafting of new organizational images. They bring out the best among principal spokespeople, 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, own a large toolbox and like shooting for the moon.

In the final analysis, organizational innovation is critical to successful public management because change is unavoidable and will affect outcomes regardless of whether or not the organization is directly involved. Without acknowledging the importance of inside out and outside in approaches, processes and outcomes will never improve. They will only be buffeted by unmanaged forces.