

Cultivating Innovation in Government

Oxymoron or Core Competency?

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When we first proposed a university course on innovation in government 15 years ago, the Dean rejected it as an oxymoron. Innovation has finally made it onto the agenda, to the extent it promises to change the landscape of contemporary public administration. Increasing numbers of constituents and government officials alike are calling for higher levels of innovation to meet increasing demands for quality and service, and to reform the way that the public's business is being conducted.

How do we go about increasing innovation in government? What can we do to build and sustain the innovation capacity of the public sector? In this article, we explain the "Seeds" or core competencies that drive innovative thinking and what the organization needs to do to nurture these seeds. But first we examine the composition of the "Innovation Field", the supporting environment within which innovation takes root. Everyone is part of the equation and has a role to play in ensuring that the maximum "return on innovation" is realized. Fortunately, public sector innovation can be influenced by deliberate action and need not be left to chance.

Background

Innovation has always been necessary—in business, in government, and in the nonprofit sector. But the pace has increased and the need has become greater in all three. We often hear statements like, "If only we ran government more like a business," yet the private sector does not always provide an appropriate role model for managing the *public's*

business. Nor does it necessarily offer a suitable benchmark for personal or organizational innovation in government.

Still, demands from citizens and political masters are pushing the envelope in terms of the need for continuous innovation in government. Emerging technologies, coupled with social changes that seem to be occurring at the speed of thought, are forcing us to look for new approaches to everything and to do so faster, smarter, and cheaper than ever before. The public sector faces some formidable internal challenges: the impending retirement of a large share of its workforce with the accompanying loss of intellectual capital; the shift to integrate technology with all aspects of government operations; and the need for integrated services across ministries and levels of government in order to respond to increasing demands in an era of budget reallocations.

The external challenges governments face are equally formidable. Integrated services delivery, for instance, must be carefully balanced against the need to deliver differenti-

ated services and programs. Citizens now demand services in "fast food time." Governments must also try to accommodate the rising expectations of their global citizens, enlightened by their travel, contacts and Internet research, they are aware of innovations and best practices around the world. They expect, for example e-services to be available around the clock, one-stop shopping, and customized service. At the same time, standard delivery processes must be maintained for those who are not e-savvy.

All of these challenges provide opportunities for innovation. Innovation in 21st Century government needs to be moved consciously to the forefront. The ultimate challenge is to ensure that there is an increased awareness and understanding of the discipline of innovation versus simply talking about it or just setting it as another organizational or jurisdictional mandate. This innovation imperative must apply to all employees rather than to a "chosen few". Innovative thinking must also apply to all aspects of government operations, not just technology or new services/programs. This expanded view of innovation includes the need to look for improvements in current services and programs. All kinds of ideas are needed, from those that build incrementally upon what is already being done to those that may be truly breakthrough and revolutionary in their effect.

The Innovation Field

Our experience with both government and business has shown that “good intentions are not enough” to cultivate, support, and sustain innovation. Indeed, innovation capacity-building is extremely hard work and requires ongoing leadership and sponsorship. Leading an “innovation revolution” in a complex organization requires certain personal attributes, such as courage and tenacity, in order to be successful. These attributes are very much like those found in such daring revolutionaries as Spartacus, the Roman slave and gladiator! Yet, when push comes to shove, how many government executives are really willing to step forward and take the risk?

By its very nature, leading innovation in government can be viewed as a revolutionary undertaking, since public programs are known to be especially slow to change and very difficult to terminate. Nonetheless, the opportunity to create an environment or culture that supports innovation in government exists and, fortunately, not every innovation initiative needs to be as disruptive as overthrowing an empire! It is the cadre of government executives who read this magazine who are best positioned to create such an environment for innovation.

What can be done to prepare the “field” for innovation? Over the years, our work in organizational innovation has revealed eight basic elements that comprise the soil needed for a fertile Innovation Field.

1. Shared Innovation Vision and Strategy

The first of these elements is a “Shared Innovation Vision and Strategy”. Government organizations, similar to companies like Disney, Microsoft, and 3M that are known for their innovation, need first to articulate innovation as an explicit vision and strategic objective and then make sure that everyone knows about and understands this vision and strategy. A policy pronouncement is not enough; there must be a shared understanding as to what this means for the organization and the community of stakeholders who are ultimately responsible for carrying it out.

Equipped with a Shared Innovation Vision and Strategy, the organization is now ready to put the systems and climate in place to support it. The shared understanding of this particular element opens the floodgates. To the extent that it is authentically understood and supported, the Shared Innovation Vision and Strategy provides a platform or framework for integrating innovation with other government initiatives. An excellent example of such an integrative platform can be found in the ongoing work being done by the Ontario Public Service and, in particular, its 2002 Framework for Action document *The Innovation Culture in the Ontario Public Service*.

Now let's take a quick look at the remaining elements in our soil composition formula for the Innovation Field.

2. Innovation Culture Supports

One of the biggest influences on innovation is the culture, which either supports or hinders innovation. The culture of the organization includes its patterns of behaviors, shared values, formal and informal power structures, style of communications, and its “way of doing things around here.” Everyone, in one way or another, ultimately contributes to building the cultural environment for innovation. By being willing to experiment, having an open mind, exploring different solutions, and finding ideas that may have worked elsewhere, all stakeholders can strengthen this particular element of the Innovation Field.

3. Innovation Resource Allocation

Without adequate resources – time, people, money, information, and other tangible supports – the Field will be unable to support innovation. In order to ensure that the organization has a culture of innovation, leaders must support their intentions with resources! As always, decision-makers need to “walk their talk” when it comes to supporting a culture of innovation with tangible resources. The Canadian Federal Government's Learning and Innovation Seed Fund provides an illustration of this kind of recognition and resource support.

4. Innovation Process Networks

One of the biggest obstacles to building innovation capacity is how to capitalize on insights and ideas across the functional silos that thwart even the best intentions. Organizations need processes or networks for identifying, developing, and implementing innovative ideas across the “organization,” be it from one unit to another or from one ministry to another. The World Bank, for instance, began an Idea Expo or Marketplace, complete with the motto, “In search of solutions together,” to overcome the obstacles created by functional silos. The Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation, award recipient for its unique innovation mindset, has used a similar vehicle to share ideas and reinforce a true culture of innovation.

5. Innovation Programs

It is also important to “rally the troops” behind innovation programs or special events. An innovation program, as used here, is specifically designed to focus everyone's attention on improving and sustaining innovation and has a designated time frame for starting and finishing. These programs or special events serve to align the members of the organization and instill a stronger innovation culture.

6. Innovation Skills Development

Innovative thinking is a skill. It can be taught, and with practice, can be improved. As we detail below, innovation needs to be considered a “core competency” for all employees. Innovation skills development is a key element of developing and sustaining a fertile Innovation Field.

7. Innovation Recognition and Rewards

It is everyone's responsibility to identify and implement continuous innovation. Indeed, innovation should be clearly described as an objective in everyone's performance review. Recognizing and rewarding innovation efforts help to reinforce

the vision and the climate that the organization wants to develop. Such recognition can take many forms—from a simple “thank you” letter to an official “Public Service Innovation Recognition Week”. Innovation rewards structures also vary considerably in the public sector and, for various reasons, are not always able to follow private sector models and practices. Most notable among the recognition and rewards programs dedicated to public sector innovation excellence are those administered by the Commonwealth Association for Public Administration and Management and the Institute for Government Innovation at the John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University.

8. External Stakeholder Innovation

No organization stands alone. Each is part of a complex web of interdependent stakeholders. Great ideas often come from knowing how this web operates and from capitalizing on ideas from both inside and outside the organization. By working closely and seamlessly with constituents, customers, suppliers, regulatory agencies, and others to cultivate new ideas and approaches, governments increase the likelihood that they will be able to achieve their intended results, as well as fashion new partnerships that bring value to the entire community of stakeholders.

Innovation as a Core Competency

The Innovation Field, to build further upon our agricultural metaphor, needs constant tending so that the soil is fertile and ready for planting. And because it is people who are the driving force of most organizations, it is their “knowledge, skills, and attitudes”, i.e., their core competencies, in the area of innovation that are of most concern to us. Indeed, these core competencies comprise the “seeds” that need to be planted and cultivated.

It is important to underscore that the notion of building innovation as a core competency for all workers is relatively new, even within the corporate world. It has only been recently that professional training

associations, such as the Ontario Society for Training and Development (OSTD) and the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD) have identified “innovation” as a separate target for human resource development.

Training to build innovation as a core competency should be available for both front-line workers and managers. We have developed a simple model that includes three key areas to strengthen:

- **Creative Thinking:** the Knowledge, Skills, and Attitudes relating to curiosity, exploration, and connection of new ideas.
- **Strategic Thinking:** the Knowledge, Skills, and Attitudes relating to understanding the bigger picture, how things are evolving/future citizen needs, as well as benchmarking and integrating ideas from those who are doing the extraordinary.
- **Transformational Thinking:** the Knowledge, Skills, and Attitudes relating to the awareness of self and others, igniting passion within oneself and others, and taking action. The greatest innovation challenge for most people and organizations is not developing innovative ideas, but in idea acceptance and implementation.

Conclusion

Innovation in both government and business is a hot topic and getting hotter. Efforts to “walk the talk” on the innovation agenda will require the kind of disciplined approach outlined in this article. Action (and related success) will definitely speak louder than words.

In order for public sector organizations to reap the benefits from their innovation investments, the “seeds of innovation” will have to be planted and cultivated in the fertile soil of the Innovation Field. Canadian government executives will need to ask themselves a series of tough questions, including: “Is my team, organization, or ministry an innovative one?” “Would others want to work with us (either as employees or partners)?” “How can we make our organization more innovative?” And then, they will have to decide on and take some specific action steps to respond to these questions, in order to demonstrate that they are willing

to walk the talk. And it is here where the spirit of Spartacus will prod them to answer the ultimate question: “Is innovation in government an oxymoron”?



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