



How to Conquer Obstacles to Innovation and Drive Change

Thinking of ways to improve how government works might be easy for federal leaders, but taking steps to actually implement such changes may seem impossible. Yet federal employees across the government are successfully taking these impossible steps to design and implement creative solutions, and to help agencies better fulfill their missions.

Of course, federal leaders face constraints, limitations and inertia—common hurdles that are often cited as impediments to innovation and change in any organization. The Partnership for Public Service and Booz Allen Hamilton hosted a roundtable discussion with federal executives and interviewed other government leaders to identify some of the challenges to innovation they faced and the solutions they employed to drive transformational change. Three common hurdles they cited that can stifle public sector innovation include: overly strict interpretations of laws, regulations, policies and processes; a failure to listen to those being served; and limitations on staff and resources.

A number of federal leaders who were interviewed found ways to work around



What is Innovation?

The term innovation is used so broadly today that it has often become trite in the way leaders talk about adding value. Yet top leaders in the public and private sectors continue to call for increased innovation as a means to address national and global challenges. So what does innovation really mean? In our discussions and research, it is clear that innovation is not a project, program or an invention. It is a mindset and a willingness to accept and even lead change—to identify root causes of problems and take new, alternative approaches that lead to improved outcomes.

these obstacles and become catalysts for change. These leaders have helped farmers, assisted individuals seeking citizenship, found ways to enhance American diplomacy around the globe and so much more. Their experiences demonstrate what leaders across government can do to ensure that agencies are effectively addressing public needs.

Learn more about the Powering Government Innovation initiative

With the administration pushing for change across the federal government, agencies have been asked to rethink how they deliver programs and meet their missions. The Partnership for Public Service and Booz Allen Hamilton are working together to help agency leaders embark on efforts that will lead to leaner, more accountable and more efficient government; a workforce more aligned to future needs; and the elimination of barriers that hamper frontline employees from serving the public effectively.

To learn more, visit: ourpublicservice.org/government-reorganization

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How do you respond when someone asks, “Is that legal?”

Changing the status quo brings new and unique risks, and leaders need to balance those risks with the anticipated benefits. In the government, doing something new or different is often met with skepticism and concerns about whether the new approach adheres to the law or regulations.

Thomas Debass, who manages the Department of State’s Office of Global Partnerships, said he makes every effort to stay within legal boundaries as he promotes collaboration with the private sector. But he said those boundaries should never hinder the capacity to build and strengthen public-private partnerships that can provide solutions to some of our most pressing challenges.

As Debass and his team advance U.S. diplomacy and development around the world, he often hears the question, “Is that legal?” At times, he said, this question is not so much about legality as it is about a lack of new, innovative precedents.

“It’s important to showcase how innovative solutions can be developed and deployed within the context of legal rules and existing policies,” said Debass.


Mariela Melero, chief of the Office of Citizenship and Applicant Information Services at U.S. Citizenship and

Immigration Services, said the legal division is a key partner in improving her agency’s online application process for those seeking citizenship. USCIS receives more than one million naturalization applications each year, including some from applicants who may not realize they are already U.S. citizens. This includes people who derived citizenship from their parents because they were under 18 when one of the parents became a citizen or through other special circumstances.

To avoid having applicants unnecessarily apply for naturalization and to save staff time, Melero and her team developed an online eligibility screening system—a series of questions designed to help applicants determine if they are eligible and need to apply for naturalization.

Melero noted that her team “worked hand in hand” with the agency’s legal advisers to make sure all of the rules were being followed. “We wanted to make sure we were asking the right questions and not inadvertently providing legal guidance,” she said.

Melero added that working with the legal team ahead of time instead of after the fact “enhanced the quality of the product and accelerated the design process significantly.”



How can you better understand the needs of the people you serve?

Federal leaders administering programs often find themselves operating in a vacuum, disconnected from those they serve. These leaders might not see the unintended effects of their policy choices or have a way of hearing first-hand about ideas for program improvements. There are a number of cases, however, of government employees going to the end users or customers to fully understand the impact of their agency’s policies and programs, efforts that have led to greater efficiencies and better outcomes.

One promising example centers on the difficulties farmers across the country have faced in navigating the requirements of the departments of Labor, Homeland Security and State to hire a sufficient number of temporary foreign guest workers in a timely manner to harvest their crops. Although not directly involved in the foreign guest worker program, the Department of Agriculture

has routinely fielded complaints from disgruntled farmers. Last year, it enlisted guidance from the U.S. Digital Service, an organization that helps agencies use technology to better deliver government services.

A USDS team traveled to farms across the country and also met with representatives from the three agencies to get direct feedback about the program. They learned that the temporary guest worker application process was quite onerous. It required filling out numerous duplicative forms on paper as opposed to online. They also found the process was riddled with delays and a series of burdensome requirements.

Based on the feedback, USDS is now working with the three agencies to create a centralized online application that may be housed at the Department of Agriculture. As envisioned, the new system will simplify the

process, eliminate filing duplicative information, and create better coordination among the three departments to help resolve problems and speed the approval process. In addition, some policy changes may be in the offing based on the feedback to eliminate several requirements that have proven onerous and costly.

Eddie Hartwig, the deputy administrator of USDS, said the lesson for federal leaders from the farmworker experience is to “get out of your building and the four walls of your office.”

“Go out and see the people getting your services,” said Hartwig. “In our office buildings, we lose touch with the people we are meant to serve.”

Interacting with the customer does not have to take significant time or resources. In fact, USDS sometimes performs these engagements in two-week “sprints” during which they collect stakeholder feedback and other information. The results for customers can be transformational.

This customer-centered approach was taken by Flora Jordan, an armor and load bearing team engineer with the Marine Corps Systems Command. Jordan had a mandate to design new, lighter body armor that would be as protective as existing equipment, but more suitable for women and soldiers with smaller physiques to provide greater mobility.

In years past, those in Jordan’s position generally managed the development of new equipment while having limited contact with the Marines who would use it. Once completed, the Marine Corps would seek bids from companies to produce the equipment. Jordan took a

Customer Focus Yields Agency Success

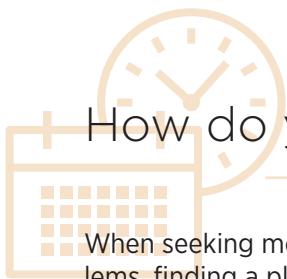
Tips for ensuring alignment between program actions and customer benefits

- ➔ Prioritize field trips to obtain stakeholder feedback
- ➔ Use the data they provide to shape how you measure success
- ➔ Go fast and thoughtfully but decisively. Engagement shouldn’t become a complicated endeavor
- ➔ Check with stakeholders throughout the effort to continue to garner support and to increase transparency

different approach, interviewing hundreds of Marines in different specialty units to understand their needs and concerns. In addition, she fitted herself with the heavy armor, went on training marches and collected data on what improvements could be made.

As prototypes were developed, Jordan went back to test her new ideas. “We never lost connection with the Marines,” she said. “I was just the translator of what they were telling me.”

Col. Robert Bailey, the former program manager of the Infantry Combat Equipment Office, described Jordan’s approach as “absolutely game-changing.”



How do you focus your time and resources?

When seeking more efficient ways to address problems, finding a place to start often seems impossible. Federal leaders have finite time and resources. These constraints, however, can actually be catalysts to innovate in order to achieve agency missions.

Such was the case for Quentin Cummings and Jordan Manos during the summer of 2017 when Hurricane Harvey dropped torrential rains and caused massive flooding in Houston, severely damaging or destroying thousands of homes and businesses.

Before reconstruction of the nation’s fourth-largest city could begin, the Federal Emergency Management

Agency was required to assess affected homes and commercial properties for substantial damage under terms of the National Flood Insurance Program. The damage assessments would assist local communities in determining whether families and business owners could move back into their homes and offices, or if they would have to make significant improvements to the structures or demolish them, potentially becoming eligible for financial assistance to support rebuilding. The stakes were high and time was in short supply.

The problem FEMA faced was the size and scope of the Harvey disaster, a category four hurricane. “The

damage covered huge amounts of land and an unprecedented number of structures,” said Cummings, a FEMA floodplain management specialist.

Cummings and Manos, an engineer with the Department of Veterans Affairs on temporary assignment to FEMA, focused on finding ways to get displaced families back to normal life as quickly as possible, and they galvanized a team across several agencies by highlighting the impracticality of past damage assessment practices.

In the aftermath of previous natural disasters, FEMA would manually inspect each structure affected by the disaster and make assessments based on a set of criteria. But this old way of doing things was not possible since more than 100,000 structures had been damaged. Using the old assessment process, they said, would have taken at least 200 days to complete at a huge cost to the government.

Manos and the FEMA team revised a damage assessment tool that Cummings had created, adding numerous new data points that included a component which predicts the relationship between the depth of the flood water and the percentage of damage the structure sustained. When water damage is greater than or equal to 50 percent of a structure’s value, it must be brought up to the newest building codes and ordinances for high flood risk areas in that community.

This team relied on available data to modernize FEMA’s approach. As a result of the changes, the agency was able to filter out buildings that would

Find a New Way to Focus

Tips for doing more, better, faster and with less

- ➔ Think about where data analytics can free up staff time for higher-priority work
- ➔ Seek out staff who may have interests or talent to apply and provide opportunities and encouragement for them to engage with new ideas and enthusiasm
- ➔ Make connections across government and join forces to accomplish similar missions

not need inspection. Instead of having to inspect more than 100,000 structures, FEMA focused on about 20,000, cutting the number of inspection days from about 200 to about 60, and saving about \$350 per inspection. These changes saved millions of dollars and enabled officials to assess structures with a high probability of damage, and speed rebuilding and mitigation insurance payments to residents.

The assessment tool was subsequently modified for use in Florida’s Hurricane Irma damage assessment operations, and is currently undergoing changes so that it can be used in future large-scale flooding disasters, representing continued cost-savings for the government and faster recoveries for communities.



Leading change in the federal government is difficult. There are always reasons to maintain the status quo and many barriers to overcome. But agencies have to adapt and improve, and the American public deserves and demands a more effective and efficient government.

During this time of reform, agencies have a unique opportunity to think about and approach their work differently. Many federal leaders are capitalizing on this moment to overcome longstanding obstacles and find

new solutions to difficult problems. They are doing it by finding partners across agencies or in the private sector. They are listening to the public to learn about opportunities for improvement. And they are using data to focus efforts where challenges are greatest and impact can be huge. Other federal executives can learn from the successes we have cited as they engage in their own creative problem-solving and drive much needed innovations to address some of the most important issues facing our country and the world.