



Innovation for the Public Good: Taking the First Steps to Build an Innovation Culture

Four Initial Steps Federal Agencies Should Take to Promote Innovation

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Government agencies need to be more innovative, especially when tackling social issues like poor educational attainment, crime, or homelessness. Over the last five weeks, this series has set out five keys to unlocking an innovation culture: leadership, finance, permeability, incentives, and planning.

But where should an agency that wants to promote a culture of innovation start? Today we set out four initial steps agencies can take to launch a culture of innovation.

Understand your strengths and weaknesses

You need to know which of the five keys to innovation are strongest in your agency and which require more attention. A successful plan to promote innovation will need to include action in each of the five areas. But you can certainly invest less energy in those areas that are relative strengths. The next piece in our series (to be published in two weeks) is a diagnostic tool that asks a series of questions in order to establish an agency's relative strengths. It can be used by individuals or groups of staff, and will analyze how your agency is performing on each of the keys to building an innovation culture.

You should supplement the results of the diagnostic by seeking further input from staff and stakeholders.

Start thinking about actions

You can only change the culture of your organization if you develop a set of implementing actions. Using what you have learned about which of the five keys demand your attention, and the areas of policy where innovation is most needed, you should be able to identify actions that will help to make change a reality.

This series has included numerous examples that you might find useful to emulate, from asking leaders to support more calculated risk taking, to developing new funding streams, to supporting promising innovations. You will want to ensure your plan is manageable: A plan with 10 ambitious but achievable actions is likely to be more effective than one with 100 less-practical steps.

Develop an implementation strategy

Clearly identify who will be responsible for turning each aspect of your plan into reality, and make sure they feel accountable for delivering change. You should also identify metrics that would reflect the effects of your plan, so you can establish whether your strategies are proving effective, or whether they need to be revised. For example, you might want to monitor how agency staff responds to questions on innovation in the annual employee viewpoint survey. Be sure to review progress regularly. At least every three months, you should discuss whether your plan is on track and what else needs to be done.

Enlist external support

Changing cultures is never easy, especially in large organizations, but having senior and external advocates can help. You should ensure that key outside organizations support your strategy to promote innovation and are willing to help defend it when necessary. They can also be sources of inspiration when you need ideas, and can help hold you to account as you continue your path towards change.

Promoting a strong culture of innovation is particularly challenging in government. But with budgets tight for the foreseeable future, many agencies will find that the only way to tackle increasingly complex social issues will be by working hard to innovate. Whether you start within a single team or project, or tackle organizationwide change all at once, the most important thing is to take that first step to reflect and plan for innovation.

This is the latest installment of a weekly column on government innovation produced by CAP's Doing What Works team in partnership with the Bellwether Education Partners and the Young Foundation, as part of the "Innovation for the Public Good" series supported by the Rockefeller Foundation.

We are taking a publishing break for Thanksgiving. The final piece in our series, published November 30, will be an interactive diagnostic tool that allows agencies to establish how they are performing on each of the five keys to unlocking innovation.