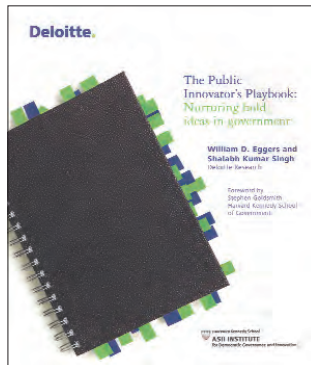


Making Innovation the Rule, Not the Exception

By Shayne C. Kavanagh



The Public Innovator's
Playbook: Nurturing Bold
Ideas in Government

By William D. Eggers and
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Governments face a “new normal” economic reality of decreased revenues and permanent cut-backs in consumer spending, while demands on government service are not abating. Innovation is essential to adapting to these new conditions.

The Public Innovator's Playbook is dedicated to helping make innovation the rule rather than the exception in government. This requires an organizational culture that supports sustained innovation and a defined and managed process for creating innovation and bringing new ideas to fruition. Eggers' and Singh's aim is to make innovation a regular feature of public service, rather than relying on innovation-in-response-to-crisis or the occasional special project supported by particularly enthusiastic and capable individuals.

Public managers who share the authors' goal will need to develop and institutionalize dedicated processes to generate ideas, select the best ones, implement them, and spread the benefits throughout the organization. Along the way, public managers will need to use a variety of implementation strategies, including those that rely on the organization's own resources and those that seek to harness resources from outside. Finally, they will have to create an organizational culture that is not just conducive to innovation but actively encourages and even demands it.

The Public Innovator's Playbook argues that innovation is a “discipline, just like strategy, planning, or budgeting.” Therefore, the book presents three aspects of the discipline of innovation and illustrates them with an arsenal of examples. These three aspects are: the innovation process; the strategies of innovation; and the innovation organization.

THE INNOVATION PROCESS

The authors describe the innovation process as a cycle with four phases:

- **Idea Generation.** Consistently coming up with good ideas first requires defining meaningful shared goals for the organization. Next, methods for coming up with new ideas to meet the goals must be institutionalized. This might include initiating employee suggestion programs, carefully examining the practices of other organizations, and working with clients to understand their perspectives and reaping the creativity that can come from taking the view of the customer.
- **Idea Selection.** A transparent idea evaluation process that is informed by data on constituent preferences is key to picking the right ideas to move forward with.
- **Implementation.** The government must create a disciplined implementation approach that creates a sense of ownership over the results among employees, obtains constituent feed-

back, maintains open communication between leadership and line staff, and defines the standards against which progress will be measured.

- **Diffusion.** The organization must transfer successful innovations to other parts of the organization and share knowledge of how to make the innovation work.

THE FIVE STRATEGIES FOR INNOVATION

The authors identify five strategies to help along the innovation process at every part of the cycle:

- **Cultivate.** Encourage the organizational culture to be idea-friendly. Institute mechanisms designed for the explicit purpose of generating new ideas. For example, create a secure intranet site where employees can submit ideas to improve processes.
- **Replicate.** Borrowing ideas that have proven successful elsewhere is a time-honored tradition in government. Steps can be taken to improve an organization's ability to find and adapt other's successes.
- **Partner.** Work with other organizations to test new ideas and get around institutional barriers that may prevent implementation within the organization.
- **Network.** Networking uses the ideas and resources of a diverse set of organizations at all points of the innovation process cycle. A network can be used to implement ideas inside or outside of an organization's boundaries and gather constituent feedback on how the innovation is working. In short, networks present the opportunity to harness

the resources, perspectives, and talents of a number of organizations in the pursuit of shared goals.

- **Open Source.** Open source is about encouraging voluntary collaboration among individuals of different disciplines to create flexible, customizable solutions. For example, the province of Ontario has created an online repository of education resources developed by local teachers. This information can be customized to meet local conditions and accessed by teachers and students at no cost.

Governments have used the first three of these innovation strategies for some time but have not consistently gotten the best results. The last two strategies, conversely, are new and underdeveloped in the public sector. *The Public Innovator's Playbook* suggests tactics to optimize the first three and make best use of the last two.

ORGANIZING FOR INNOVATION

While there are certainly cases of successful innovation in the public sector, the authors make the case that "without changing traditional roles, processes, and organizational structures, innovation initiatives become mired in bureaucracy and fail to create a fundamental change." Therefore, culture and structure must change to realize sustained innovation and the kind of powerful innovations that transform government. The authors suggest four approaches to making this happen:

- **Redefine Organizational Boundaries.** Create a network of partner organizations and individuals with goals that are compatible with the government's in order to increase access to talent and flexibility in approaches to problem solving.

- **Take an Integrated View.** Do not rely on just one innovation strategy to take an innovation from idea to action. Use multiple strategies throughout the innovation process.

- **Flatten the Organization.** Rigid hierarchical structures encourage conformance, not innovation. They also do not attract talent — particularly young talent.

- **Create a Culture of Innovation.** First, define a shared vision for what the organization wants to accomplish. Then assess gaps in the capabilities needed to achieve the vision. Here is where culture change must be carefully managed. Employees may worry that closing the performance capabilities gaps may lead to job losses and consequently resist innovation. However, the leaders of the organization must make expectations clear, define accountabilities, provide support to employees, and persist despite the setbacks that will invariably occur.

CONCLUSIONS

The Public Innovator's Playbook is a richly illustrated and compelling guide on how to develop the constant attention to innovation that is needed to confront the complex challenges that government faces. Whether a public official is searching for new solutions at the level of strategic policy or looking to improve day-to-day operations, the concepts presented in the *Playbook* should prove very valuable for getting innovation started and keeping it going. |

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