

## Management Insights

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### 4 Tips to Redesigning Services

This fiscal crisis demands transformational changes. Here's how to do it.

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*How to turn a bike into a motorcycle...while you are still riding it.*

Public officials use this metaphor to describe the challenge of making major changes in operations while still delivering services. It sounds nearly impossible.

Difficult, yes, but not impossible. Indeed, the fiscal crisis demands not just incremental, but transformational changes if governments are to deliver the same or better outcomes with less money.



My confident assurances to public leaders that they can radically improve through redesign, reinventing government or transformational change are often greeted with skepticism.

“What have you been smoking? I don't even have time to think about redesign, let alone pull it off,” is one typical reaction. Or: “Sure, I have ideas about how to make things work better. Lots of them. But there is no way the politicians or the system will allow me to pursue change.” Some smile kindly and address me as one might an idiot child: “That's a fine idea, Babak, but we just can't afford it.”

Folks, this column is devoted to you.

To start with, here are my assumptions:

- Except in a few places that are rampant with waste, fraud and abuse, 90 percent of the American public sector is already efficient, and incremental productivity improvements won't be enough. To make the sort of efficiency gains citizens are demanding, we must engage in public service redesign. Put differently, today we are operating with efficient steam engines. What we need is solar power.
- Public delivery systems can be redesigned to produce better outcomes at much less cost. There are lots of examples that prove this, and from which we can model our efforts. Redesign is not only a necessity, it is a realistic possibility.

- Redesign requires an investment of three things: leadership attention, the time of your best people and cash. We have a surplus of none of the above. Therefore, something has to give.

### **Getting Redesign Launched**

The first step is the hardest. That is why redesign is so difficult. You must start by divesting 10 percent or 15 percent of what you are doing now (pedaling the bike). In this way, you mobilize the resources you will need to redesign and transition to a system.

Won't your citizen-customers and their elected officials object to this divestment? Absolutely. Which is why you need to make a deal with them. You have to be specific about this, not mushy. You must promise that by a specific date you will deliver measurably better outcomes and you will do so at X percent lower cost. In return, you are granted a grace period while you design and build a new system.

This takes courage, but these are not times for the faint of heart.

Organizations navigate the inconvenient transition of redesign all the time. If you promise *and* deliver something better, you will be given license to redesign things. How many times do we all put up with traffic delays while roads are improved? It's not pleasant, but we understand it's the only way to get better roads.

### **The Process of Redesign**

The heavy lifting in any change process is not designing a new system, but in the implementation. Nonetheless, the design is critical as it must be worthy of all the hard work it will take to bring it to fruition. It must deliver service outcomes and cost savings that fully justify the investment and the risk.

While the redesign process may only take a few weeks of a multiyear project, getting it right is essential. Many implementation problems can be avoided by a sound design.

Here are some tips on the redesign process itself:

- **Start with a clean slate.** Too often, redesign efforts fail because the design process *begins* with how things work today and seeks to improve from that. We have found that our clients who are willing to spend a few days working from a "clean sheet of paper" are much more likely to come up with innovative breakthroughs that deliver better outcomes at less cost.
- **Distinguish customers from providers.** Of course, those who are involved in providing a service must be engaged in the design process. But too often it is perceived as a political imperative to have the redesign driven by the providers' interests. The design process works best when the customers' interests drive it.
- **Bring diverse people to the design process.** One of the most consistently fruitful design strategies is to bring customers as well as people from completely different fields into the design process. Diversity creates innovation. A panel of "experts" in the field will not be able to generate a creative redesign as well as a group of smart, diverse people that includes a few of these experts.

- **Protect and nurture new thinking.** Redesign works best when the designers are encouraged to conduct thought experiments. Sometimes the facilitator will forbid criticisms of suggestions, and instead, only allow people to “plus up” suggestions. This encourages creative thinking and takes groups to places they might not otherwise go.

For those who are up to the challenge, redesign can provide an alternative to the grim twins of higher taxes or fewer services. Your reward? You’ll know you’ve done the right thing. And riding a motorcycle is a lot more fun than pedaling a bike.

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