

Unleash Your Creativity and Make More Public Value

By Beverly Stein and Shane Sasnow

Government needs to be able to respond flexibly to the many changes it faces within a new culture that supports creativity.

What we usually do is get ideas, judge ideas, and kill ideas — all in three seconds. But what if we nurtured and supported government employees who wanted to explore how to do things differently? What would that look like?

Governments rarely provide the conditions for encouraging creativity that leads to innovation. There are many reasons: inertia; fear of change; fear of bad publicity; lack of know-how; lack of investment of time, energy, and money; and the impact of those who benefit from the status quo. Yet, now more than ever, government needs to overcome these obstacles and fundamentally redesign service systems, making room for new and innovative ideas to flourish. The current budget crisis highlights this need, but the imperative to respond creatively to our challenges doesn't start or stop there. The world is changing, and the pace of change continues to accelerate with new technologies, environmental challenges, and demographic shifts. Government needs to be able to respond flexibly to these changes within a new culture that supports creativity. The imperative is to transform government service systems to achieve more public value, not to tinker around the edges of bureaucracy.

GETTING AT INNOVATION

Many government leaders and managers believe that we need to redesign

systems and be open to entirely new ways of doing business, but they feel stalled, in part because they don't have the information about creativity that would allow them to create the conditions for innovation. Creativity is not a mysterious process that only a few geniuses can access. Creative thinking can be developed — there are techniques that have proven successful.

“How to Generate Innovation in the Public Sector,” a recent research report from the Young Foundation and the Center for American Progress, lists a set of conditions that support public-sector innovation. They are:

- Identifying priority fields for innovation
- Opening up the space for ideas
- Financing innovation
- Fixing incentives
- Changing the culture
- Growing what works

The techniques they recommend are:

- Unleashing the creative talents of agency staff
- Setting up dedicated teams responsible for promoting innovation
- Diverting a small portion of agency budgets to harnessing innovation
- Collaborating with outsiders to help solve problems
- Looking at issues from different perspectives to notice things you wouldn't otherwise

Creativity is a universal human characteristic, and there are systematic approaches to encouraging it in individuals and groups. Everyone has the capacity to use his or her experience, knowledge, and imagination to generate unique ideas, but from childhood on, most of us have been trained to restrict the use of our imaginations and the expression of unique ideas in order to fit social and organizational norms. This limits creative expression. It is habit-forming, and it is perpetuated in most organizations. However, we can recognize what discourages creativity and change it to develop creative habits and to use tools and guidelines that stimulate creativity.

Creativity that leads to innovative public service system changes can be a very structured process, such as a design lab,¹ or can be incorporated in every staff meeting or brainstorm session. In a design lab, stakeholder input (and interests) are separated from the design process. Six to eight people — chosen because they are open to new ideas, not because they are representative of stakeholders — spend 2 to 3 days in a structured agenda that leads to breakthrough ideas for the chosen system.

ENCOURAGING CREATIVITY

Following are some tips that are used in design labs for encouraging creativity. You can put them to work in your organization — the key is to just start using them.

Crush Creativity Killers. If you've ever expressed yourself in some way, only to be discouraged by the words or actions of another, you have experienced a creativity killer. Creativity

killers can be phrases like “That'll never work” or “we've done that before,” negative facial expressions or body language, or any other disapproving reaction to an idea. They also include explicit or implicit work and social rules that are controlling and oppressive, and threaten negative reactions to unusual behaviors and ideas (e.g., taking risks and making mistakes on purpose to learn and strengthen creative ideas). The good news is there are many things to do to counteract these creativity killers and encourage creative thought and action.

Be a Model. The best place to start encouraging creativity is with yourself. Characteristics of creative people that you can practice and develop as habits are being open and curious, tolerating ambiguity, embracing the ability to think like a child, being willing to take risks and make mistakes, feeding your brain, and seeking remote associations. People who are experienced with improvisation theater know that the quickest way to stop a clever exchange is for one person to say no. Practice saying “yes, and...”

Be Curious. Being open to everything is key to seeing things differently, and if you can see things another way, you are thinking creatively. Being curious is all about the desire to know more. The more you know, the more material you have to feed your creative thinking. Try to be curious about something every day, and express that curiosity by asking more questions than you usually do. You will learn something new, discover a train of thought you might want to explore further, or find that a bad idea has something good to offer.

Prove Your Flexibility by Tolerating Ambiguity. Generating creative ideas takes time, and the process of finding them is not generally linear. It tends to be iterative and messy. There is a lot of ambiguity, often about both the problem being addressed and potential solutions. Next time you find yourself uncomfortable because a situation is unclear, acknowledge that you are dealing with ambiguity, take a deep breath and do your best to keep moving through whatever process you are using to work on the problem. Forcing yourself to stay in this place of chaos or ambiguity for little longer than you are comfortable with can yield unexpected results.

Be a Kid Again. Children are not concerned with what people think about how they explore the world, and they use their imaginations to make whimsical and fantastic connections. They have a natural tolerance for ambiguity, embrace and seek the unusual, and are not afraid to express their wildest ideas to the world. The world even encourages them to do so. Children get to play. As adults, we are not encouraged to explore our imaginations and play — we are often discouraged from doing so. Yet it's this imaginative play that produces creative ideas. Children also take risks and accept mistakes. Taking risks is part of learning.

Children who are learning to walk take real physical risks because they know the rewards will be great. They fall repeatedly and, without question, get up and try again until they learn to walk. As adults, we have learned that mistakes are often accompanied by punishment or negative consequences, and that taking risks gets us hurt. So

we stop taking risks and we stop getting hurt, but we also stop learning and using our imaginations to create new ideas. Make up your mind to take a risk every day (small ones are fine) and accept mistakes as learning opportunities.

Feed Your Mind Both Fast Food and Gourmet Entrees. Creative ideas come from unusual connections, and the best way to get unusual connections is to cross-pollinate information from different areas. If you want more creative ideas, then put new and different stuff in your mind so more unusual connections can be made. If you are an auditor, explore music and art. If you are a caseworker, explore fashion.

Find Remote Associations for Creations. The human mind likes habits. This is fine when we are getting

across the street safely, but it's not helpful when we want to generate creative ideas or solutions because our minds want to go to the solution they already know or think might work.

When you think of crossing the street, your instinct, or first thought, is to look for cars — but that isn't the only component of crossing the street safely, or the only way to do it. You could also use a footbridge, hire a taxi, dig a tunnel, buy a small helicopter, or teleport. Each of these ideas gets further away from your first reaction to crossing the street: look left, right, left, and walk. The point is that every idea has other ideas associated with it. The connections, or associations, get more and more remote, but they are still relevant. It's these remote associations that

generate novel and unusual (creative) ideas. The simplest way to find remote associations is to force yourself to identify more than just the first two or three answers you might come up with. Next time you have to find, make, or create a solution to a problem, generate 30 to 50 potential solutions before you evaluate and decide on one. (See Exhibit one for an exercise on seeking remote associations.)

Give 'em a Chance (Ideas, That Is). Just like children, ideas need to be encouraged, shaped, and supported to become the best they can be. To do this, you must first avoid the creativity killers, including those inside yourself. To work with ideas and help them grow, you can follow a simple thought process. Listen to the whole idea, ask and share what's good about it, consider the positive things that could come out of its implementation, and when you critique it, do so by asking questions based on those concerns.

For example, if someone tells you they want to raise taxes, first think a positive thought, and share it (for example, "That will help with the budget shortfall."). Then consider and share some potential positive outcomes ("That means more money for services.") Then phrase your concerns as a question ("How might we avoid raising taxes?" or "What might be all the ways to do what we need to do without raising taxes?"). Phrasing your concerns as questions provides the potential for answering those concerns and giving the idea a chance to be a better idea.

Find a Champion. To develop the right environment for ideas to grow and for you to grow in your use of cre-

Exhibit I: Seeking Remote Associations



Look at this photo and seek remote associations. What do you observe, and how might you make a connection with the system you want to change or the problem you want to solve?

ative thinking habits, someone needs to believe in and stand up for the power of creativity and innovation. Encourage leadership to help create and embrace a learning culture that tolerates mistakes and takes risks. It's hard to feel comfortable taking risks in government, knowing that the media is ready to pounce on any mistakes, so think carefully about how you take risks, make plans for "talking points" for failures, and recognize that many risks and mistakes do go unnoticed.

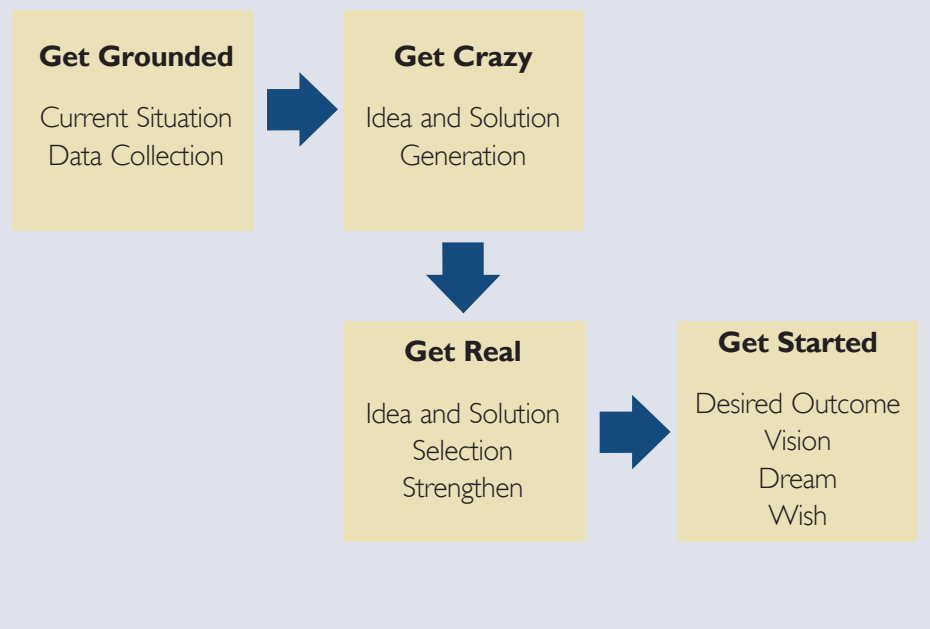
Seek Wild and Crazy Ideas. It may seem ridiculous to propose the complete demolition of the highway system in order to plant crops where the roads used to be, but that doesn't mean it's a bad idea, and it might lead to something good. It's always easier to tailor a crazy idea down to something practical, and potentially innovative, than it is to make something practical innovative. Let your crazy ideas fly and then work with them, once you're done laughing. What you might find is that ripping up highways to make gardens isn't a good idea in itself, but that the ideas derived from it, such as gardens planted on rooftops and in abandoned neighborhood lots, are. (In fact, that is pretty much what they are now doing in Detroit, Michigan.)

THE CREATIVE PROBLEM-SOLVING MODEL

The creative problem-solving model is a structure process used to develop creative solutions to ambiguous and complex problems. It consists of the following steps:

Get Grounded. Identify a goal, desired outcome, wish or challenge;

Exhibit 2: The Innovation Gap



generally define what it is you wish to accomplish. Gather as much information as possible about the problem and related areas. Look at root causes to be sure you are trying to solve the right problem, then (re)state the problem as clearly as possible.

Get Crazy. Generate creative solutions/ideas — get creative. Generate as many solutions and answers to the problem as possible. (Try the tips above.)

Get Real. Get down to brass tacks. Decide on your criteria and evaluate all the ideas against them to select a few possibilities. Analyze and strengthen options by exploring, analyzing, improving, and debating the merits of each of your final choices. Then choose the one that best addresses the problem.

Get Started. Develop and implement plan — bring the idea to life. Develop it fully and then implement an action plan.

CONCLUSIONS

Many government leaders realize that the current fiscal crisis cannot be resolved by just increasing revenues or cutting budgets. Meeting our future challenges will require public services to be redesigned. Jurisdictions that learn to harness their creativity have an additional, powerful tool they can use to respond to their situations and improve the value they offer their citizens. |

Note:

1. For more information about Design Labs, go to www.psg.us/innovation.

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