

Being Innovative in Government: How to Contribute Ideas that Stick

by John Haecker, Management Systems International



Your work in government may be related to educational programs, improving quality and availability of health services, transferring new technologies, advancing scientific research or one of many other areas. Regardless of where you concentrate your efforts, the ideas and innovations that you and others generate will be important to the ongoing success of government programs. Government, of course, can be a challenging place in which to innovate. And to many, especially to those who work inside of government, the words *bureaucracy* and *innovation* may seem like polar opposites.

But these challenges are not only present in government. Gary Hamel, one of the pre-eminent thinkers on innovation, tells a story about the inventor of the PlayStation, Sony's video game business offering. When the inventor, Ken Kutaragi, started dreaming about the video game business as an opportunity for Sony, he found little support inside the company. He described his success as coming

despite the system, not because of it. Hamel says he's not the only one. Most people who succeed at innovation inside large organizations tell you that they did it despite the system. Control, hierarchy, diligence, efficiency, replication and quality are virtues that grew out of the industrial age, but they can work against innovation.

So, whether you are advancing public health or developing a new technology, operating as part of government or plugging away in private industry, many of the same forces are operating—forces that are enemies of innovation. Although much of the available advice about innovation is oriented

toward the private sector, you can use proven techniques to generate ideas and push creativity in government and its programs. Here are some principles to consider, along with tactics for honing an innovative edge.

Know What's Come Before

Knowledge of past practices gives you a foundation to build on for future ideas. A mentor of mine is fond of saying that few ideas are truly new; most have been thought of or tried before. On the plus side, that means lots of previously used theories, designs, methods, etc., exist that might work or be adapted to a variety of contexts. Look at what's been done in other places and in related fields. Often you can build on those previous experiences to adapt ideas to new circumstances.

While there's no substitute for knowing your technical or programmatic area, what if you don't have 10 or 20 years of experience to draw on? Find a mentor who does, and use him or her as a sounding board. Many organizations also have been documenting



best practices in their various programs for years. Take a look at electronic and other archives to examine what worked in the past and see if it could help you today.

Learn the Rules

This sounds dreadfully dull, but learning the rules of the game allows you not only to accurately follow and comply with them, but also to recognize what those rules do and do not permit. George Leonard, author of the book *Mastery*, observes a

great paradox: Those who are true masters of their craft are totally dedicated to the fundamentals of their calling, yet they are precisely the people most likely to challenge previous limits and take risks for the sake of performance gains. If you are

a government expert who has a solid technical understanding in your field, you are likely in a great position to suggest innovations, improvements or efficiencies that are grounded in reality.

Knowing the rules actually gives you more freedom to innovate. I'm often surprised at how many

U.S. Government rules and regulations allow for or have exceptions to them. Furthermore, many rules and regulations are self-imposed by agencies and offices within them. In those cases, even the rules can be changed.

Understand Your Tolerance for Change

Are you a conformist or a rebel? Both roles have a place in every organization. The conforming role helps the organization follow established procedures, run an efficient operation and adhere to quality control standards. On the down side, a conformist can become a yes-person—following rules for the sake of rules—and a stalwart representative of the status quo. Rebels contribute to organizations by challenging the status quo, having a critical mindset and driving change. But too much rebelling can be seen as volatile, not being a team player and even obstructionist.

Work to understand your own tolerance for each of these organizational roles, recognizing that you can draw a healthy balance between the two. If you find that your go-to perspective is conformity, try being more open-minded to new ideas and

question the status quo from time to time. Push yourself to think creatively about different ways of doing things, especially when an approach may buck convention. Are there alternative or better ways of doing things? Are there cases where the existing rules and procedures just don't make sense?

If you are a rebellious type, you may need to adopt a more subtle approach and hold back from being too forceful. For example, when you question how things are being done, use the “yes, and” technique. That is, recognize the legitimacy of the current practice, and then offer up an alternative: “*Yes, I can see the merit of that approach, and what if we tried . . .*”. Pick your battles to ensure that you direct your energy toward high-priority and doable efforts that you have a good chance of achieving.

Beware of Organizational Politics

In addition to the many challenges of coming up with innovations and new ideas, there are myriad ways to squash them. Some people will not like your idea simply because it came from you and

not them. More generally, people are creatures of habit who are resistant to change. So, to win the day, you may need to do some selling of your idea. Some people are turned off by the notion of selling

something that seems to make good logical sense, but if you believe the idea is a good one, own the responsibility to make it happen by vetting your idea and building agreement. If you are successful, it's quite possible that the idea will no longer be attributable to you. If that's the case, try to let go of the ownership and take personal satisfaction in the achievement. Lastly, even if the idea gets accepted, people still may not take it and run with it. The idea may take time to implement and require some organizational championing before it becomes fixed in day-to-day operations. So be sure to see

things through to the end—if it's important to you, then follow through.

Being creative and innovative in any established government institution takes diligence and persistence. Remember that change often happens gradually through a slow and deliberate process. So learn from the past, use the rules to your advantage, take the other's perspective and share ownership of your ideas. By using these proven tactics, you'll create new possibilities—innovations that contribute to the future success of government programs and have a positive impact on society.

John Haecker is practice area lead for Leadership and Organizational Development at Management Systems International and is a certified coach. He can be reached by e-mail at jhaecker@msi-inc.com and by phone at 703-979-7100.

HOW TO CONTRIBUTE IDEAS THAT STICK

KNOW WHAT'S
COME  BEFORE

 LEARN THE **RULES**

 UNDERSTAND
YOUR **TOLERANCE**
FOR **CHANGE** 

BEWARE OF
 ORGANIZATIONAL
POLITICS 