

Management Insights

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Football and Innovation

To meet the demands of a changing world, governments need to program themselves for change.

By Babak Armajani

Before the Vikings came to Minnesota, I grew up a Packers fan. They had this great announcer, Ray Scott. He did some national broadcasting; you may remember him. The thing about TV football in the '50s was that all the announcers were former radio announcers. By talking at a fever pitch, they were able to describe the action in such detail that a radio listener could picture the game. This, of course, didn't work well with TV. The picture told the story, and the best announcers adapted their style to work with this reality.



Ray Scott was a pioneer in understanding the new paradigm, and his approach contrasted sharply with his peers. For instance, many of Paul Hornung's long runs involved reversing his field more than once, juking and dodging, running over people — a radio announcer's proficiency test. I remember Scott's call on one such Hornung gem. In a slow deep voice: "This ... is ... Hornung." That was all he said.

He was willing to work with the picture. In the closing moments of a playoff game, the Packers trailed by four and had the ball deep in their own territory. I'll never forget Scott's cogent call. With each of these three words his voice rose in controlled excitement: "Starr ... McGee ... touchdown!"

Managing in government today is as different from just a few years ago as TV football announcing is from radio. Think of all the changes. New technologies offer us opportunities we never had before. Citizens have much higher demands for speed and service. Globalization is changing the way we think about basic government services. We are faced with enormous challenges as we embrace new waves of immigration.

And then there's the economy. The next few fiscal cycles are going to feature two new realities. First, the influx of federal stimulus dollars means there is an unprecedented — at least in our professional lifetimes — flow of one-time capital. Second, shrinking revenues are resulting in dramatically constrained budgets.

Will we find ways to invest that one-time capital in things that promote long-term growth in government productivity? Now is not the time to assume a defensive posture; on the contrary, the times demand we invest in change. Just as Detroit must invest in designing smaller, more fuel efficient cars and retooling their factories to make those cars, so too, must government invest in innovation.

In fact, for public managers, I would argue it is more important to build an engine of innovation than it is to do a single innovation. There are three key components to an innovation engine:

- First and foremost, the engine needs fuel: money and time. So job one is to build money and time into your organization that are committed to nothing other than innovation. Sometimes this means moving a little money from the status quo and investing it in change. Start with a manageable investment of your time and the money you control. It doesn't have to be huge. These are your first dollars and first minutes that get invested in response to a changing world, not time and money you might invest if available after you do your regular job.
- Second, innovation requires measures and data. To innovate, you need some objective against which to measure hypotheses. And you need data to tell you what works and what doesn't. This doesn't have to be a fancy Web-based performance-management system. Tick marks on a piece of scratch paper are data as well. Yet, data is crucial because the "system" only values what exists — how we did things yesterday, how we spent money yesterday, etc. So one needs data to show whether a new way is working better than the old way. Or not.
- Third, innovation requires a culture of learning. Questions must be considered as important as answers. People should be expected to ask "What if?" When outcomes become apparent, celebrations and witch hunts should take a back seat to real dialog about what works and what doesn't. "Who gets the credit or blame?" must be replaced with "What can we learn from this?" Managers can set up organizations to learn, or they can set them up to preserve the status quo.

To meet the demands of a changing world, Ray Scott modified his approach to calling a game. Making such modifications in the way we deliver government services requires understanding the extent to which the "old ways" are cooked into the system.

Let me illustrate with this example. The other day I was giving a PowerPoint presentation and the computer I was using apparently had a wireless Internet connection. Throughout my presentation, a dialog box kept popping up on the screen urging me to update software. It was very annoying. This computer was programmed to relentlessly improve itself, and it wouldn't take no for an answer. By contrast, government systems are programmed not to change. The challenge is to change the programming, and the three elements above are the key.

You don't have to be the governor, the mayor or a department head to build an innovation engine. It would be great if they did, but the big lasting changes rarely come from the top. It's up to public managers, one by one, to build innovation engines and continually adapt to new realities. Just like Ray Scott.

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