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## Innovation's Hurdles

By Babak Armajani

What is it that makes change so difficult? Have you ever seen a great idea wither on the vine over the course of implementation? Do you sometimes feel discouraged that "the system" won't allow change?

Public-sector innovation can be stifled by partisanship, by the narrow special interests of powerful groups vested in the status quo, or even by the inflexibility of an individual official. Yet, more often than not, the real barrier to change comes directly from the norms of the dominant culture.

A new public culture would embrace norms that today seem abnormal, including:

- Making employees accountable for producing results instead of just "doing a good job."
- Empowering front-line workers to make decisions instead of asking permission.
- Making the customer more important than the boss.
- Treating people differently so that an equitable outcome is reached, rather than treating everyone the same.
- Creating choice and competition rather than giving public organizations exclusive jurisdiction.

Culture, however, isn't an easy thing to change.

When seeking to implement innovations that challenge cultural norms, the culture often pushes back with strong resistance by sending out "status quo" messages. Adhering to these old scripts and messages will doom innovation. Successful innovation depends on directly challenging the status quo messages. Here are some examples of status quo messages you might find in your organization:

**Do what is familiar. This is no time to be thinking differently.** Innovation often requires a new way of thinking or a new language regarding the challenges we face. The culture will inevitably seek to pull people back to frameworks and behaviors that are more familiar. It will dismiss new language as jargon, and new frameworks as theoretical. As a result, many innovations, bold in conception, are eventually turned into clones of the status quo. Einstein said, "We can't solve problems with the same thinking that went into creating them."

**Put all the resources into the status quo.** Change will have to wait for better times. Financial and human resources are already overtaxed running our existing systems. While an innovation may hold

great promise for producing better results at significantly less cost, making the transition to a new system usually requires making investments in time, money and political capital. The culture will demand that all resources continue to be vested in the status quo. John F. Kennedy said, "Change is the law of life. And those who look only to the past or present are certain to miss the future."

**The burden of irrefutable proof is on the innovation.** Fiscal circumstances facing state and local governments across the country have led to unprecedented cuts in services. The culture, in an effort to resist being starved for resources, argues in favor of draconian consequences. In many cases, the only way to maintain a vital service is to completely redesign the delivery system. Yet, the culture will also make unreasonable demands for proof before new ideas are tried. Better to starve than to change. Edward Young said, "Caution, while a valuable servant, is a dangerous master."

**We are better off sticking with the old ways unless we can get everyone to agree on a new approach.** Everyone isn't going to agree. In fact, few significant changes in the public sector began with consensus -- not the U.S. income tax, nor Social Security, nor charter schools, nor the creation of many of our most cherished human service programs. Yes, consensus often emerges after people see how well they work. Henry Ford said, "If I asked my customers what they wanted, they would have said a faster horse."

**Let sleeping dogs lie.** Many a change process is sabotaged because planners are afraid to communicate things they know will upset people. It's a cliché, but communication is the key to successful implementation. It must flow freely and in multiple directions. Better to inform people of something they won't like than to keep it mum. Silence will be interpreted in terms of peoples' worst fears -- innumerable layoffs or other painful cuts, for example -- usually more onerous than the realities. Anne Morrow Lindbergh said, "Good communication is as stimulating as black coffee and just as hard to sleep after."

The key to successful implementation is to realize that these and other cultural messages may be at the heart of what we want to change. If we comply, we sabotage what we are trying to do. By contrast, successful innovators directly challenge such cultural messages with these antidotes:

- Redesign: "We need new thinking and new language to solve this problem. Expect some of this to feel uncomfortable at first."
- Reinvestment: "To get better outcomes at less cost, we need to take some resources from the status quo and invest them in change."
- Experimentation: "The consequences of sticking with the status quo are so onerous that we have no alternative but to experiment with better ways of doing things."
- Leadership: "We believe so strongly in the potential of our innovation that we will move forward with it even though many people disagree."
- Transparency: "People need to hear the truth, no matter how uncomfortable it might be."

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