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Transformation by Popular Demand – Citizens Drive Change

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Government reformers often seem to believe that transformation is a matter of simply showing officials a better, proven way to "do government" better, faster and cheaper. As though all we need to do is spread the good word, provide technical assistance and then watch in delight as governments transform themselves across the country.

Transformation doesn't work that way.

Increasing the "supply" of government transformation is not enough. The [Center for Creative Leadership](#) posits that transformation happens when the combination of demand, vision, knowledge and belief exceed resistance. Reformers have worked hard on creating and sharing the vision, knowledge and examples of transformed government. Unfortunately, we have yet to significantly increase the demand side of the equation among the general public or the public workforce.

Without a strong "demand," transformation will continue to muddle forward haltingly at best. Even with today's revenue crunch and drastic cuts screaming that we cannot incrementally improve our way forward, we continue to resist big change. Such is the power of the bureaucratic paradigm. Too often, demand for change is low and resistance wins.

Most observers also realize that simply railing at government and "starving the beast" does not produce better government, just less government, sometimes. A better option exists. Instead of painfully cutting money and people out of the way we do things now, transformation presents a better path -- though certainly not an easy one -- to closing budget gaps without raising taxes.

So what does constructive "demand" for transformed government look like? A couple of examples come to mind.

In Virginia, the business community became frustrated with state government's short-term thinking, exacerbated by governors limited to one term. Led by John "Dubby" Wynne, the Virginia Business Council approached the governor at that time, Mark Warner, and basically said that political campaign contributions would cease unless state government became more strategic and performance oriented.

Warner responded and subsequent governors have built on that progress. The [Council on Virginia's Future](#), [Virginia Performs](#) and the rest of the state's performance system are now award-winning national models. The

business community still solidly backs these efforts, regularly seeking commitments from gubernatorial candidates to maintain a strategic and performance focus for the state.

In Dallas, former CEO Don Williams illustrates how one person can create "demand." On stepping down from full-time leadership at Trammel Crow, a major real estate firm, Don launched himself into making Dallas a better place, particularly for those in South Dallas areas blighted by the legacies of segregation, poverty and neglect.

He created the [Foundation for Community Empowerment](#) to be "a change agent to marshal people, data, ideas and resources to lift up South Dallas and make Dallas a whole city." Don's civic engagement and leadership have led to:

- Dallas Achieves, a strategy to improve challenged urban schools;
- Frazier Redevelopment Initiative, a community redevelopment arm for Dallas's "Lower Ninth Ward;" and
- The J. MacDonald Williams Institute, gathering, analyzing and sharing data to "prove up" anecdotal claims of poor residents to guide and support improvements in housing, health, civic culture, economic development and political engagement.

"What we do is bridge," Williams told [Robert Wilonsky](#) of the *Dallas Morning News*. "I've got some degree of credibility in the business community and the philanthropic community and, in some levels, in the political community, and it takes all of those in appropriate partnerships with community leaders and organizations to effect real changes ... [O]ur interest is in large-scale system change, and I have become convinced that it is through empowering the neighborhood ... You've got to have grassroots relationships, and you've got to have relationships with the power structures. Otherwise, things don't change."

"Demand" also comes in smaller packages. Recently, citizen groups across the country have become active in their efforts to improve their city governments.

How can you nurture demand? A number of ways, including:

- Raise awareness about the existence and power of transformed government, with civic leaders, business, foundations, "good government" groups, editorial boards and others.
- Cultivate respected citizen champions and ask them to write letters to the editor and op-eds advocating transformation.
- Establish relationships with sympathetic reporters and share data and information that show the benefits of transformed government. Help them spotlight transformation high performers in government so they are recognized and rewarded.
- Ask civic and business leaders to seek commitments to a transformation agenda by candidates. Encourage political donors to condition their support -- and checks -- on a commitment to transformation.

We can have governments that deliver the results we want for a price we can afford. When enough people see a better way, believe it can happen, and act on that belief by demanding it, transformation will happen.

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