



6. Six Conditions that Foster Innovation, Speed, and Performance

By Robert Shea

Introduction

Fostering innovation, speed, and performance in government is not the impossible task it seems. I recall debates over the government's broken security clearance process in which a lofty goal of 40 days for conducting background investigations was being considered. Those involved in the process said it was a ridiculously aggressive target. But the goal was set and, with steady attention and perseverance, background investigations are now being conducted faster and better than ever.

Another example is when agencies were asked to produce audited financial statements within 45 days of the end of the fiscal year. Financial managers balked. Today, all but one of the major federal agencies meet this deadline. And there are many other examples where the once considered impossible is now eminently doable. But it would be naïve to suggest that bureaucracies are always laboratories for innovation, speed, and performance. So, how do we create an environment that fosters these important qualities? Let's first look at the real barriers that must be overcome.

Barriers to Innovation, Speed, and Performance

Barrier One: Aversion to risk. The biggest barrier to innovation in government is a stifling aversion to risk. In the federal government, at least, there is an oversight juggernaut made up of congressional committees, the Government Accountability Office, and agency inspectors general waiting to find and advertise every stumble. The reward for risk-taking in government may well be a subpoena to testify in a congressional investigation—not everyone's definition of fun.

Barrier Two: Difficulty in setting clear goals. Another shortcoming among government agencies is in clarity of purpose. It's not always clear what it is we are trying to achieve. Federal agencies have a long-standing difficulty setting clear goals that capture the outcomes they are supposed to accomplish. Instead, they often simply report the amount of money they spend or the activities they perform as an imperfect proxy for measuring the results they achieve.

Barrier Three: Declining resources. Finally, federal programs suffer from declining resources for the foreseeable future. That means they may not have all the money they need in each program to make it successful. Programs will have to find ways to leverage other programs to accomplish their objectives.

Conditions to Foster Innovation, Speed, and Performance

The above barriers to success will take a concerted effort to overcome, but there are six conditions that give innovation, speed, and performance a fighting chance in government.

Condition One: Set clear goals for speed and performance. It sounds basic, but it is hard to do in government. One of the biggest intellectual challenges is setting goals for a program or organization that has minimal control over the outcome. This is a good time to remember that there are very few things over which we have total control. But the sphere of influence we do have, especially in government, is profound. That is why it is so important to be very, very clear about what it is we are trying to achieve.

Whether it's innovation in internal management, medicine, science, technology, energy, diplomacy, criminal justice, or any other imaginable mission of government, the first step is clarifying what it is you are trying to accomplish. And it's not activities or output, but outcomes that are most important. Outcomes are the results a program is designed to achieve. And we should assess our progress toward those outcomes in quantitatively measurable terms using a reliable source of data. Of course, just setting the goals is not enough. To really spur innovation, you also need intermediate targets for incremental improvements in performance and the speed with which you hope to achieve them.

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Condition Two: Be completely transparent about how well you are (or aren't) doing. Report widely and accurately how well you are achieving your goals for performance and speed. There are lots of reasons federal agencies give for not sharing too much. There are privacy concerns, political concerns, fairness concerns . . . lots of excuses for not being totally transparent about goals and progress. They're all cop-outs. In my experience, one of the surest ways to ensure that goals are taken seriously is to be completely open about what your goals are and the progress (or lack thereof) we are making. Openness lets your potential critics know what you're up to and why you've made the decisions you have, depriving them of anything to complain about. The understanding that speed and performance results will be reported widely, especially in the public sector, drives people to action.

Condition Three: Promote or hire good leaders who are experienced and invested in good management. Although it may sound trite, the quality of leadership is among the most important factors that determine an enterprise's success. When the Partnership for Public Service and Grant Thornton interviewed federal agency performance improvement officers, they told us that "[t]he importance of leadership in improving the government's performance management was [their] area of greatest consensus." Leaders who cared about performance and management created a culture in which everyone cared about performance and management.

To foster innovation, speed, and performance, you need leaders with the experience to manage large, complex organizations and a commitment to invest the time and energy in the sometimes dull and thankless work of monitoring and managing a program's or project's success. A leader can ensure that people are held accountable for their progress while also ensuring that risk-taking, even if it results in failure, is recognized and rewarded. Members of a team will push a lot harder and take greater risks if they know their leader has their back.

Condition Four: Hold leaders and their teams accountable. One of the most frequent complaints about government is its lack of accountability. It's true that too few are held accountable for their performance. Accountability is more likely in a framework in which there are clear, transparent goals. That doesn't mean people should be unfairly punished for failing to achieve targets. They should have a good explanation for the shortfall and, perhaps more important, what they are going to do to improve. As former New York City Police Commissioner William Bratton is famous for saying in the context of his highly touted, crime-reducing CompStat, "No one ever got in trouble if the crime rate went up. They got in trouble if they did not know why it had gone up and did not have a plan to deal with it."

A major part of accountability is knowing who is responsible for doing what. Goals and plans should have clear assignment of responsibility. Those responsible should be identified with and invested in the achievement of a goal or plan and should be able to answer basic questions about how a program is performing and what's being done to improve it. They should be rewarded for its success and held accountable if goals go unmet. "Held accountable" is not a euphemism for being fired or losing pay. It should be clear, though, that success is rewarded and failure requires explaining and often changing course.

Condition Five: Celebrate risk-taking. If we are going to achieve the breakthrough performance we hope to achieve, we need to encourage our people to take big risks that will often result in failure. Not all attempts at innovative ways to achieve aggressive goals for speed and performance will work. Those who take risks and fail are likely the ones who will try again and succeed. That's why when people fail, we should celebrate it, learn from it, and move on. If our people are being treated unfairly as the result of meaningful risk-taking, leaders should stand up for them and protect them.

Former Department of Commerce Secretary Gary Locke told an audience at the Partnership for Public Service, "[O]rganizations that fixate on failure never take the risks necessary to achieve the extraordinary." He continued, "I have never faulted an employee for falling short of a goal that was difficult to reach. What is important is working diligently. What is critical is constantly challenging ourselves to perform even better." Gary Locke is a leader who understands the need to create an environment in which risk-taking is not only permitted, but encouraged.

Condition Six: Collaborate to achieve goals faster. There is no program in the federal government that does not depend on numerous other programs, agencies, or entities for its success. And many of those programs could be barriers to improvements in performance and speed. Consider the inventory of duplication GAO puts out every year. In its 2011 annual report inventorying the extent of duplication among the government's programs, what GAO found was mind-boggling: "[t]here are 32 areas in which [GAO] found evidence of duplication, overlap, or fragmentation among federal government programs." Among them: nine federal agencies charged with food safety, 53 programs designed to assist entrepreneurs, 50 programs promoting employment for people with disabilities, and 21 government programs that play a role in preventing and detecting smuggling of nuclear materials and illicit trafficking of related technologies overseas.

If you want to get something done in government, you're probably going to have to work with someone outside your program, perhaps even outside your agency. Sometimes, these programs are working at cross-purposes, competing for resources, or getting in the way of success. Working together—collaborating toward improvements in speed and performance—can illuminate barriers to improvement and more important, highlight different, better, faster ways of achieving goals.

The complexity at the federal level is multiplied exponentially, of course, when you have to work with state and local entities to accomplish your objectives. Territorial jealousies should be checked and collaboration with other agencies and programs and state and local government entities is a must. Establish shared objectives and clearly define roles and responsibilities among different partners. Invariably, from this collaboration will develop a better way of getting the job done.

Conclusion

As I write this, creating the conditions for innovation, speed, and performance seems a whole lot easier in theory than in practice. It's simple to say we should celebrate-risk taking, but the ramifications for failure in the public sector may be harsh. It's easy to suggest we need good leaders when few have the desire to focus on the mundane demands of management. And collaboration is a nice word, but having to get so many players on board with a plan is easier said than done.

But public servants don't come to work each day because the job is easy. Public service is about doing big, important things for the citizens of the United States. And if we're going to achieve such big things, we need to do the hard work of setting clear goals, insisting on transparency, developing strong leaders, creating a culture of accountability, celebrating risk-taking, and collaborating with others outside our cocoon. These steps won't guarantee success, but they will surely make it more likely.

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