

PUBLIC
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INNOVATION

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Lessons from the Field

Recommendations for Up and Coming
Innovators from the City Accelerator

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In December of 2014, Living Cities and Citi Foundation launched its first cohort of the City Accelerator program, which was focused on embedding innovation in local government. The goal of the City Accelerator program is to advance and promote the spread of promising innovations that will have a significant impact in the lives of residents. In the 18 months that the cohort has been together, we have had the chance to support teams from three cities work to develop a sustainable approach to innovation. Louisville, Philadelphia and Nashville were each trying to figure out how to create an innovation team that leverages local assets and targets the needs of low income people in their communities.

The original Guidebook, drawn from my experiences in City of Boston's Office of New Urban Mechanics, was framed as a relatively simple starting point for teams embarking on the innovation journey. Our hope was that the Guidebook could serve as the initial hypothesis as to how to get innovation going and that we would learn along the way what was really most important and what the interplay between the different elements looked like in a range of cities, as well as where they they needed to focus attention at different stages of their work. The goal of this paper is to distill those elements into recommendations for innovation teams seeking to sustain their work over time.

We found over the course of this project that the original imperatives largely fit into four main categories.

- 1) [Set Up Your Team](#)
Don't worry about roles and structures; start doing projects and build a large portfolio of initiatives that make your team a vital part of government operations.
- 2) [Partner internally and externally](#)
Provide a valuable service to your colleagues and partners to build strong working relationships while maintaining momentum for your innovation agenda.
- 3) [Develop Criteria for Innovation Projects](#)
Keeping your mayor, city officials, and partners happy is tough work. Determine the scope of work on a given project and balance the need to achieve big impact.
- 4) [Tell Your Story](#)
One important, but often overlooked duty of the innovation team is cultivating an image and reputation. Be able to tell your story to build new partnerships and take on transformative work.

It is important to recognize that creating and sustaining an innovation is in no way a linear approach and there will be times when you will be working in two or more of the categories at any given time.

Your team: Entrepreneurs vs. Consultants

Cities that have a dedicated, separate staff to focus exclusively on innovation can work jointly with departments, providing a home to innovative efforts that departments often don't have the resources to create and maintain.

Your innovation team should be the hub for developing and nurturing a culture of innovation in local government. You need to become the go-to group where city staff can bring problems and challenges and expect to be greeted with enthusiastic thought partners who will explore potential experiments and pilots that can be implemented with existing resources and partnerships. Where none exist, the innovation team can identify potential partners and resources.

Balancing quantitative personalities with more qualitative personalities is very important in order to ensure creative problem solving.

In terms of the hiring innovation team members, it is useful to think carefully about the needed skills and abilities of the team members as you begin to staff up. Many city teams begin their initial hiring by looking for people who have skills in analysis, process re-engineering, and project management, but it is also vital that cities take into account a potential employee's history of execution. The key is to find people with skills in delivering products or services, have the ability to work in an ambiguous context, and get things done.

Breadth on the team is very important. Balancing quantitative personalities (eg. data analysts, economists) with more qualitative personalities (eg. designers, social scientists) is very important in order to ensure creative problem solving.

Throughout the process, the team should be restructuring and building itself. While many teams start out spending a lot of time on team structure early on, it can often be like putting the cart before the horse. So much about the work of the innovation team is unknown during the early days, thus it can be very unclear as to what the right longer-term team configuration should be. As such, it is generally best to start first with doing projects and then to learn from this experience which organizational structure is most appropriate. The experience gained while building a track record of work should provide important insight into the composition and skills of the team.

Build a Large Portfolio

Part of setting up your team is being intentional with how you organize the team to the work. Some projects are better geared towards achieving a measurable impact on the outcomes of your residents than others. Other projects may be helpful in building credibility. By becoming the “Department of Yes” (see below) you will be positioning yourself to create a portfolio of initiatives that will make you a trusted and valuable partner both inside and outside of government.

One way to build a balance between the “low hanging fruit” and the “heavy lift” initiatives is to build a large portfolio of projects that enables them to figure out over time where they can add the most value. The projects in this portfolio can be broken down into two designations: *Innovation Projects* or *Rent Projects*. Innovation projects are those that advance the agenda of the innovation team and can generally considered “innovative”. These are projects that achieve a big impact in your community, no matter how feasible or infeasible they may first seem. Rent Projects are those that are intended to build a relationship with a particular department (with the ultimate goal of doing more creative work down the line) and can be everything from writing an RFP to designing a logo to finding good job candidates for the client department. Essentially, these projects are the rent the innovation team pays for doing the more innovative work later.

Another advantage of a large portfolio is that projects also proceed at different velocities, so the team can use downtimes to scout for more opportunities and develop relationships when certain projects slow down.

Louisville

The Louisville team started out with several different somewhat disconnected innovation units in their local government. These included the Office of Performance Improvement (OPI), the Office of Civic Innovation and an i-team (originally funded by Bloomberg Philanthropies). A critical aspect of Louisville’s work has been to connect or rationalize their innovation process by connecting these various units into a whole so that when a new project comes up, it is clear how these units will work together to execute. A key organizational change to support this pipeline-approach to innovation has been the expansion of the purview of OPI to now become the Office Of Performance Improvement and Innovation.

Nashville

Nashville's City Accelerator team worked with external partners, the Entrepreneurship Center in Nashville and Design Impact in Cincinnati with the intention of building bridges that would result in collaborative projects. The partnerships resulted in a cutting-edge training program for city employees to learn how to develop innovative projects called Ideas2Reality.

The Louisville City Accelerator team took this way of thinking and working to heart and created a pipeline approach to supporting and driving projects down from a wide range of different city departments. These various projects created a huge capacity for the team to get things done and thus to build a strong reputation across local government.

Be a partner

Innovation teams know they need to invest in building strong working relationships both inside and city government and beyond.

City departments and agencies can become the biggest asset an innovation team has if you can make innovation a thing they are a part of creating, instead of a thing that is done to them, as is often the case in government. City employees have real-world knowledge of how systems work and what the unintended consequences of innovation could be. Working with them to develop solutions creates stronger initiatives, and helps secure a pivotal constituency during implementation.

An example of great work with internal partners comes from Philadelphia, where the City Accelerator team developed an ad-hoc approach to agility via their cross-disciplinary team which included on-the-ground decision makers from all the departments they were working with on a given initiative. These departmental representatives were able to design and develop – in collaboration with their research partners – new experiments which they could quickly decide how best to deploy without having to subject themselves to the type of bureaucratic back and forth that slows, and often stalls projects.

Potential partners outside of city government, including local entrepreneurs, businesses, universities, nonprofits and residents are also powerful allies in creating change – especially during a time where resources are constrained in many cities. These groups offer a combination of ideas, skills, time, passion, and financial support to develop new projects.

As such, reaching out to these groups is critical for the innovation team. This could mean doing meet and greet sessions with people or holding office hours during in which entrepreneurs, university professors and others can connect with city officials to pitch their work and explore collaborative opportunities.

Department of Yes

One of the most important steps to take at the onset is for the team to become the “Department of Yes.” This doesn’t mean overpromising or under delivering, this means gaining early momentum by becoming the place where innovators can start out with a ‘Yes’ and getting an honest look at ideas and their potential for impact before receiving judgement. Becoming the “Department of Yes” helps build credibility and good relationships with potential partners while also giving them permission to raise potentially game-changing ideas- all of which are critical enablers for the team to drive innovation.

As the Department of Yes, your job is to roll up our sleeves and execute projects small and large in collaboration with your partner departments. It’s not simply about doing an analysis of your colleagues work and then stepping away once the report is delivered.

Working with university researchers and professors in particular affords many advantages. Long-term relationships allow innovation team and university folks to explore a range of research projects that are of mutual interests. Fellowships may also be available to pay or support students to work in local government for some period of time.

Criteria for Innovation Projects

Innovation teams must deal with a lot of competing tensions. Small projects are important to building momentum and securing buy-in from partners, but don’t necessarily have a big impact. Top city officials may want the big, flashy cutting edge project but it will take time to experiment and then scale and may require more resources than exist. Teams need to develop criteria for initiative selection that balances these competing interests and pushes the team towards achieving meaningful progress in their cities.

In the early stages of work, developing the capacity to quickly be able to deploy new programs and services is an important skill for a team. When determining what projects to advance, innovation teams need to focus first on **building momentum** by focusing on those that can move quickly, whether it’s because of partner enthusiasm, mayoral mandate, or limited barriers to execution. These are projects that have a high degree of feasibility, whether they are driving high impact or not.

As the team establishes its credibility, it can begin to **take on larger and more complex problems**. This is especially important to keep in mind, as Mayors and senior leaders are often the innovation team's biggest cheerleaders and supporters. Their imprimatur can be vital for forging connections with stakeholders. There is a danger that innovation teams can get stuck on "low-hanging fruit" projects and lose the interest of top brass, because while these projects do rank high on the feasibility scale, they also tend to rank very low in terms of impact. In short, they are not the kinds of ideas that mayors are interested in or talking about.

Knowing what to say yes to, and when to say no are two more essential skills innovation teams need to develop. The role of the innovation team can be to say: "Yes, we'll meet with you" to a potential partner or client agency, but when the prospective idea has been explored and can't be made to fit with the goals of the innovation team and/or city, to give critical feedback to the innovator and to say "no, thanks". Ideas that are not feasible and do not have the potential to achieve big impact are ideas that can be passed on. Sometimes even an idea that can achieve high impact should be passed on, if the resources required are so great that other worthy items that can also achieve impact will be delayed. When delivering a "no," it is important to give critical feedback because it gives lets people know how or why a solution does not work, and give them the chance to either develop the idea or project into a format that may be more aligned with the city, or shut it down and move on to more important stuff.

Sometimes you also need to know when to say no to yourself. Your concept for what a project should be will be challenged throughout its implementation. Being forceful in the face of challenge, however, isn't always a strength. If early feedback encourages a different direction, seriously consider shifting the focus.

When the innovation team has built the ability to execute and to create a reputation both inside local government and in the community about the capabilities of the team to experiment and scale it may make sense to create an informal networking group of like-minded individuals who are interested in doing work that is outside the box to some degree. This group would meet to discuss ideas, explore collaborations, here from thought leaders from the world of

Philadelphia

The Philadelphia City Accelerator team was able to consistently demonstrate the value of testing and centering their work around people; from tech-oriented solutions, like the expansion of the BenePhilly enrollment process, which includes a website that assists low-income residents who want to learn more about their eligibility for different municipal services to low-tech experiments like colored envelopes that increased response rates from senior citizens. The team has been able to make the case to a new mayoral administration that what worked in the Office of Revenue will also work in other agencies, and is introducing training in behavioral science and human-centered approaches into other departments.

innovations, etc. As part of the approach, the innovation team can be the first stop for new ideas that are being directed to city hall. Developing a “culture of yes” is about creating a friendly front-door to city hall (both to employees as well as outside innovators)

Failure

As cities look at these more complex issues, taking risk is an essential aspect of criteria to consider. In order to achieve success with solutions that have a lot of impact, but don't look very feasible at first, there is a good chance of failure. You will fail, and so will your partners- and that is a good thing. Part of creating a culture of innovation is supporting strategic risk taking on the part of city employees. This means giving people the space and freedom to try out new ideas that have the potential for yielding innovative solutions but at the same time have some potential for not working. It is important that the innovation team provide cover for these innovators so that a failed experiment doesn't result in a tidal wave of bad news (nasty phone calls from the press, the Mayor, the public, etc). Further, a failure is really only a “failure” if nothing was learned. Every experiment should at the very least result in learning something about what works and what doesn't. In this sense, real failure is only a precursor to success.

Orient Towards People

An essential criterion for any innovation project is to orient your work towards the people you are designing solutions for. The idea of putting the needs of our residents at the center of our work in government may at first be nothing new, but in many ways it's a potentially revolutionary idea. In government we often deploy programs and services because we are able to and not so much because the public wants or needs them. By putting the needs of residents at the forefront we adopt a perspective in which we are constantly asking ourselves how to make our services more useful and to watch and listen to how the public responds to those services.

The Philadelphia City Accelerator team did this very explicitly via their various behavioral science-inspired experiments in their Office of Revenue designed to increase the number of people who were accessing various public benefits they are entitled to, but are not applying for. These experiments explored a wide variety of dimensions of how the city can best to outreach to residents to get them to enroll in public benefits programs.

Tell Your Story

One important, but often overlooked, aspect of the innovation team is crafting your brand and then leveraging your reputation to build new partnerships with agencies or organizations that have been reluctant to work with them in the past. This in turn means that the team must find ways to spread and expand the

team's brand so that they can amplify their visibility in their city and its various communities.

As your innovation team develops a portfolio, document and promote your work through stories of the departments that implemented successful pilots, partners they worked with, and the residents who are positively affected by the changes made by city staff. Teams who fail to craft their brand tend to struggle in building good collaborations both internally and with outside organizations and their work can often seem opaque to partners, press and the public.

In all fields, developing a narrative explaining who an organization is and why they are important in a clear, concise and compelling way enables the team to make in-roads with groups. Government is no different. People may be skeptical or not understand why government should be devoting resources to an innovation team at all. Developing a narrative enables teams to build the support they need to deliver innovative products and services. Government is no different.

An essential criterion for any innovation project is to orient your work towards the people you are designing solutions for.

One of the most important skills that your innovation team must develop is the ability to tell your story that enables potential partners, funders, and others to support the work. In the early days of an innovation team, before any real work has been delivered, focusing on the “the pitch” isn't a good use of time. A good pitch can be developed after actual projects are being delivered and value is being generated. When you have a few projects under your belt, take a look at patterns that form a track record of what the team does well and what it doesn't. Those patterns become the basis of your “Innovation Story.”

In Nashville, the team used an opportunity to deliver a presentation at a TEDx event to develop a structured narrative. The TEDx format was such that the narrative had to be both convincing and entertaining in order to connect with the audience. While the team was initially somewhat reluctant to focus so much time on shining a light on themselves rather than the City or the Mayor, they soon realized how useful it would be to talk about themselves and their work in order to build interest and support within the innovation community in Nashville.

Conclusion

Innovation teams are a new phenomenon in local government. As such, there are still precious few resources for such teams to follow as they begin their work. This means that people thoughtfully engaged in this work have lots to teach the

world, including our City Accelerator teams from Louisville, Nashville and Philadelphia.

From the get-go, one of my hopes for the City Accelerator was that, by working to support these three teams, we would be able to learn a thing or two about how to do this work. The knowledge that we have gathered is cutting edge and is very much in the mode of “lessons from the field”.

Another of my hopes is that lessons such as these will also help teams to see past the shiny objects and glossy pamphlets of vendors as to how to do this work and to instead rely on their peers and their own experience as a guide.

Finally, I’d like to thank Citi Foundation and Living Cities for the incredible opportunity to work so closely with my colleagues in these 3 cities and support their work directly. This has been a once in a lifetime opportunity and I’m very grateful.