



## The Elected Official as Chief Innovation Officer

By Patrick Ibarra

*Patrick Ibarra will serve as the facilitator for the [2014 Annual Leadership Summit, "Leading through Innovation,"](#) to be hosted by the city of Mountain View, CA, and held on August 13-16 at the Santa Clara Hilton.*



*"To have a great idea, have a lot of them." - Thomas Edison*

Playing it safe is no longer playing it smart. Elected officials are under intense pressure to innovate: to purposefully generate and implement fresh solutions, adopt continuous improvement and pursue planned change. Forward-thinking elected officials understand that innovation and progress are inextricably linked.

Innovation, at its core, is an act of leadership. Waiting for serendipity to spawn innovative solutions is entirely too random, unreliable, and risky in today's climate. Innovation is fostered by three key behaviors that leaders can practice -- and can inspire in others -- that can fundamentally shift the culture of the city government:

### **Be Curious.**

- **Look at the data.** Too often we make assumptions about what is going on in our communities. Use data to check these assumptions and inspire new questions and insights.
- **Ask questions.** It is easy to fall into the "answer trap," and provide a steady supply of solutions, but asking the right questions can uncover options that weren't previously on the table.
- **Put on your "anthropology hat."** Innovators are fascinated with the human condition, and possess an insatiable appetite for increasing their understanding about what makes people do things the way they do. Schedule time to wander around your community and your offices. People might look at you strangely, wanting to know what you are doing on the 3rd floor of City Hall when your office is on the 5th floor, but be willing to surprise them. Ask about what they do and how they do it. Illuminate your perspective by shadowing a fellow executive for a day to observe how he/she navigates their day. Better yet, anonymously observe how citizens use your city's services.
- **Stretch your imagination.** It is essential for successful innovators to think -- and inspire others to think -- in terms of "what if?" instead of "what?" What if every registered voter actually voted in the next election? If economic growth accelerated, what dividends would

be realized, and what unintended consequences would be created?

### Challenge Current Perspectives

- **Change the level of analysis.** Innovators utilize a menu of lenses: magnifying, microscopic, and yes, binoculars, as critical thinking tools. The key is how to define the problem while respecting its ambiguity.
- **Shift the paradigm.** Innovative thinking is the way to solve complex problems through paradigm shifts. When there is pressure to “tighten your belt,” ask what it might look like to change your pants instead.
- **Expand the options.** Innovation includes both doing things differently and doing different things. Embrace a mindset that there is no “box”; enlarge your thinking. Adapt practices from all sectors – public, private and non-profit – to create a blended mix of solutions to complex local challenges. Use the arts to turn reality inside out and catapult people out of their comfort zone. Take your staff on a field trip to a local art museum, or watch a film and debrief over lunch. Discuss applying what you have just learned to your community’s toughest challenges.
- **Engage in real talk about real change.** Schedule an “advance”, as opposed to a traditional “retreat” with your colleagues, and spend time peering out the front-windshield into the future of your community. Introduce an approach that disrupts the status quo mentality of “we’ve always done it that way” by holding listening sessions with residents or new staff members who aren’t as familiar with the city’s routines.
- **Get outside.** People think differently in nature than in an office. Take a walk while you’re working through a challenging situation, or hold a staff meeting outdoors.

### Create Freedom.

- **Focus on desired results.** New paths open up when you look at the result you are seeking to achieve rather than the starting with the existing process.
- **Develop many options.** As Thomas Edison said, “To have a great idea, have a lot of them.”
- **Think creative vs. compliant.** Innovators focus on developing creative solutions to achieve your results, rather than focusing first on “staying within bounds”. Determine the ideal solution first, and then work to ensure that it meets necessary requirements.
- **Accept a certain amount of risk.** It is natural for government leaders to develop an aversion to making mistakes. Mistakes can be bad, but not nearly as a culture in which there is no room for risk. The most essential element for creating innovation is to create an environment that inspires trust, where people will venture out from comfortable to more disruptive thinking.
- **Pursue a passion.** When elected leaders and city staff have at least a little time to pursue new ideas about which they are personally passionate, even if they are only tangentially related to their job description, it can spur incredible innovation.

Contemporary research dispels the myth that innovation will happen organically or simply through the hiring of innovative people. Innovation needs to be cultivated and nurtured. In doing so, city leaders can harness the forces for change – within themselves, their city governments, their residents and their local economy – into a better community for all.

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