

GOVERNMENT: FACTORY, ENTERPRISE OR BOTH?

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By Patrick Ibarra



The tendency for government officials, elected or appointed, to try to play it safe by seeking guaranteed outcomes leads to an over-reliance on rules, regulations, policies and procedures. The result, too often, is a "factory" approach to the delivery of government services.

Factories — the assembly-line production of customer-preferred outcomes — certainly have their place in government. From issuing building permits to enrolling WIC participants, the intent is for government employees, with a task-centric job description, to produce services that are delivered fairly, equitably and consistently.

But handing government workers detailed instructions and procedures that hopefully coincide with their job descriptions and waiting for better government to emerge is overly optimistic. What is more likely to result is conformity that fosters inertia as one-size-fits-all factory thinking spreads into the strategic and decision-making structure of government. I have dubbed this "bureaucratic gravity" — decision-making so as to avoid risk-taking while building an organization around the lowest common denominator.

At its best, government serves as the protagonist for a better quality of life, and the antagonist is not shifting political winds or volatile budgets. It's what those trends signify: change, often disruptive yet incalculably valuable. These "headwinds" provide public leaders with the opportunity to be swift and nimble in their pursuit of better government, but that's where the "we've-always-done-it-that-way" mindset that emanates from the guaranteed-outcome approach zaps hope for innovation and progress.

So how do we reconcile the push-pull tension between the need for progress and the desire for predictability? This is where the idea of government as an enterprise surfaces. The dictionary defines "enterprise" as a systematic, purposeful activity that is especially difficult, complicated or risky. Sure sounds like what ought to be the business of government, doesn't it?

Successful government leaders create a hybrid approach to running their governments or agencies, blending a healthy mix of factory and enterprise — combining science and art — to provide high-quality government by designing and steering their organizations to generate better results.

For example, Austin, Texas, under City Manager Marc Ott, recently adopted the concept of "competencies" to drive employee performance. Unlike the customary job descriptions, competencies focus not just on knowledge, skills and abilities but also on workplace behaviors, emphasizing political acumen, innovative thinking and effective judgment. In moving toward an enterprise approach, the use of competencies should be integrated at each touchstone of building workforce capacity, including recruitment, promotion, performance management and training.

Beyond implementing competencies, leaders who want to fully leverage the enterprise opportunities government offers also must foster a workplace culture that is creative and collaborative. Darin Atteberry, city manager of Fort Collins, Colo., continually emphasizes to his workforce that non-traditional solutions are part of the "answer buffet" needed to address emerging issues. In anticipation of a large number of retirements in the city's utilities department, for example, Fort Collins pursued a program to capture those veteran workers' "tacit" knowledge — the hard-earned expertise that goes beyond the assembly-line administering of rules and procedures. Fort Collins recognized that it is the application of such contextual knowledge by employees that is essential to business continuity.

The advocacy of leaders like Ott and Atteberry who see the value of the enterprise approach to government provides a clear expectation to all members of the workforce that "business as usual" is constantly evolving. In these organizations, innovation is not optional. It's expected, encouraged and actively pursued.



Patrick Ibarra is an “entrepreneur of ideas” and architect of innovation who takes the headwinds governments are facing about the current climate of unprecedented changes and translates them into a tailwind with practical, tactical and impactful solutions that can be used immediately. A former city manager, Patrick owns and operates The Mejorando Group consulting practice (www.gettingbetterallthetime.com). Mejorando is Spanish for “getting better all the time” and Patrick’s firm partners with governments helping them increase employee performance and organizational effectiveness by providing consultation, facilitation, and training. Ibarra is an author, speaker, blogger and educator who brings fresh thinking, innovation, and new ideas to help public sector organizations succeed in the 21st century.

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