

PLANTING THE SEEDS TO HARVEST INNOVATION

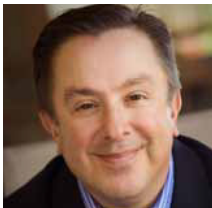
This article originally appeared in the June 16, 2014 edition of Governing.com



More and more, government leaders are under extraordinary pressure to innovate -- to purposefully create and execute solutions while implementing continuous improvement and managing planned change. But simply waiting for innovation to happen is perilous, especially in today's political and fiscal climate. In short, playing it safe is no longer playing it smart. Today's government leaders must be effective catalysts, creating and maintaining the conditions that make innovation happen. In effectively implementing a culture for growing innovation, there is much that leaders can borrow from the people who grow our food. Successful farmers are disciplined, and they rely on a set of sequenced steps to achieve their desired results. Farmers consciously adapt to shifting conditions, both economic and environmental, in their pursuit of a bountiful harvest. Similarly, government leaders must become fluent in change management, adapting to their own shifting conditions, for innovation to be realized in their organizations. The steps in the farming cycle can serve as a guide:

- 1. Crop Selection:** Farmers don't simply toss seeds into the dirt and wait for serendipity to arrive. Instead, they use a blend of hard-earned knowledge, intuition and commercial viability to determine what to plant. In government, with its heavy emphasis on measures of outputs rather than outcomes, it can be hard to determine what's not working as it should and may be ripe for improvement. But effective innovators apply the principle that "if it's not broken, break it": They are curious, vigilant and constantly scanning their agency's operations for opportunities for innovation.
- 2. Land Preparation:** Farmers create fertile soil for seeds to take root and grow. Similarly, innovators emphasize smart risk-taking in their pursuit of disrupting the status-quo thinking of "we've always done it that way." They recognize that the absence of failure does not constitute success; they not only tolerate mistakes but encourage them as a means of generating creative solutions. Their focus is on asking mission questions as opposed to solely relying on their agency's mission statement.
- 3. Irrigation and Fertilization:** In farming, providing sufficient irrigation and fertilization is critical to ensuring a successful yield. In government, the gravitational pull of bureaucracy -- the resynthesizing of past solutions to try to deal with new problems -- is a severe constraint on identifying creative new solutions. Innovative leaders think differently about the business of continuous improvement, and they invariably talk about it differently as well, integrating into the daily dialogue words such as "imagination" and "entrepreneurship." Innovators realize that growth and comfort don't co-exist but that creativity and discipline do.
- 4. Harvesting:** The intent of farming is the harvest, the gathering of mature crops from the field in order to sell them in the marketplace. Innovators, when they reach this stage of the cycle, follow through to implement their solutions, since in the end innovation is all about problem-solving. Innovators recognize that innovation is often iterative, so they don't use perfection as the guidepost when applying solutions.

In the end, what successful farmers and effective public innovators do isn't that different. They combine replicable processes with sound judgment and the creativity to seize on opportunities that arise. For both, it's the formula for a bountiful harvest.



Patrick Ibarra, a former city manager, owns and operates a Glendale, Arizona-based organizational-improvement and efficiency consulting practice, the Mejorando Group (gettingbetterallthetime.com).