

“We’ve Always Done It That Way” Is Over— WHAT’S NEXT?



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PART 4: Innovating Your Future

BY PATRICK IBARRA

“Sometimes it’s not how hard you row the boat, it’s how fast the stream is moving” —Warren Buffet

This is the fourth in my four-part series in which I focus on the effects from the numerous changes impacting local government and the “we’ve always done it that way” mindset as a relic of the past. Leadership-as-usual and government-as-usual is over. Relying on the status quo is not a viable option in a fast-changing world. You must transition from the status quo to the status go. Remember, if you always do what you’ve always done, you’ll always get what you’ve always got and today (and tomorrow) that’s not nearly good enough—not by a longshot! In this edition, I share that innovation is a verb, not a noun, and I focus on the role of leaders and the “how” of innovation.

Government is trying to make progress with the emergency brake on. Important for you to recognize is that in the attempt to make your organization more efficient and predictable, you have pushed out the opportunity for creative thinking and imaginative solutions. The more tightly managed organizations are, the less adaptable they are. The uncomfortable reality for leaders is that innovation requires variability. This is

the reason I coined the term the “Innovation Paradox” as it concerns local government—be innovative; just make sure it works every time, all the time. In short, a guarantee is expected. The pursuit of innovation is riddled with mistakes and while mistakes are bad, what’s worse is a culture that doesn’t tolerate them. A great way to not make mistakes is by not trying anything new.

If your organization thinks of itself only as a government, it behaves in only one way. But if it begins to think of itself as a community builder, quality of life advocate, and service provider, then it starts to behave differently. And that’s where innovation surfaces because to innovate is to implement change that creates a new dimension of performance. An absence of innovation leads to your services becoming less relevant to consumers, whose needs are always evolving. Local government is in the business of building communities and adding value to peoples’ quality of life; focus less on your functions and more on the benefits and outcomes.

Innovation focuses on creating the future rather than relying on past successes. Innovation matters because



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it fosters growth; it excites employees by focusing on what can be; it anticipates customer requests and delights customers with what they did not expect; it responds to disruption with a positive impact; it builds confidence with elected officials and residents by creating intangible value by strengthening your community.

If you want to realize your organization's and community's full potential, you need to practice creative thinking. Creativity means new ideas; innovation means that new ideas have impact. Indeed, innovation is the fuel for renewal and isn't a game of chance, but one of skill.

Current Situation

Uncertain times are exactly the moment for innovative solutions, yet they are also exactly when many organizations bury their heads in the sand and adopt a defensive posture. Sometimes leaders think that frequent, abrupt change makes people more flexible. But instead, this makes people turn passive. Why bother working on anything new, or anything that will take time to develop, when the organization could change direction unexpectedly at any moment with no time to

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prepare for it? Ambiguity is exhausting and can direct people to their default of "this is the way we've always done it" because it's most familiar. Uncertainty makes people anxious. The most familiar path is always the status quo.

Resources are no substitute for resourcefulness. The gap between the knowledge, critical thinking, problem-solving, and creativity needed to survive the challenges and exploit new opportunities and the insistence on doing things as they've always been done is referred to as the imagination gap. And to move forward requires imagination: infusing your work with a disciplined capacity to go beyond what

you know and conceive is possible. And that starts with a shift in mind-set. Belt-tightening goes only so far—sometimes you have to "change your pants." You must give yourself permission to imagine a new future and act on it. I contend that curiosity illuminates our imagination, which drives creativity that results in innovation.

Here's a table to compare and contrast the mindset shift necessary to be fluent in innovation:

"WE'VE ALWAYS DONE IT THIS WAY."	"LET'S TRY A DIFFERENT WAY."
• Event	• Process
• If it's not broken, it's fine	• Break lots of things
• Settling for standard answers	• Questioning
• Failure	• Mistake
• Suggestion box	• Traffic in ideas
• Committee	• What's new, what's next
• Comfort	• Curiosity
• Conformity	• Creativity
• Predictability	• Progress
• Leaders responsible for new ideas	• Everyone is responsible for new ideas
• Empowerment is a program	• Empowerment is a principle
• Bureaucrats	• Pirates
• Compliance	• Commitment
• Risk averse	• Risk tolerant
• Rules	• Results
• Policies	• Principles
• Best practices	• Next practices

Innovation is not just an act of putting systems and processes in place to create new things. Innovation is an act of leadership. It comes down to the behaviors that leaders are modeling (chief example officer) and building in others to shift the organization's culture. The more that leaders are creating a culture of innovation, the more people are energized and innovating, creating a living ecosystem that builds on itself. Keep in mind that innovation is way more than the sole responsibility of your IT department.

The Role of Leaders

"It is fairly easy to produce heat, but very tough to produce light." —Jim Lehrer

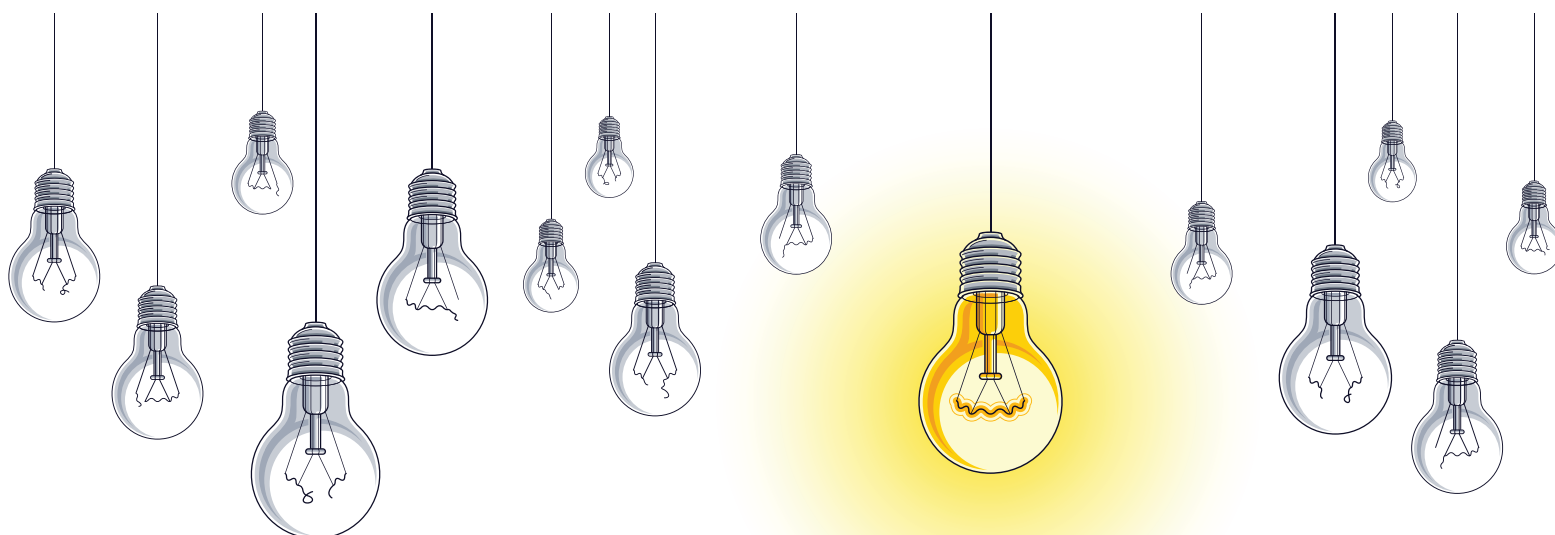
Innovation has always been a primary challenge of leadership. Today we live in an era of such rapid change and evolution (some might say revolution) that leaders must work constantly to develop the capacity for continuous change and frequent adaptation while ensuring that identity and values remain

constant. They must recognize people's innate capacity to adapt and create—to innovate. For sure, creative people come in all shapes and sizes and fields.

Leading creative people in this age of diverse work arrangements and digital relationships requires leaders themselves to be thoughtfully innovative. I suggest that periodically you have a virtual meeting to explore the unknown—to pose thoughtful, provocative questions to employees without being focused on the "correct" answer. If you were to host a monthly session on rotating topics, what would the next two topics be? The role of leadership is to unlock the door to release creativity by amplifying peoples' imagination.

Innovative leaders think differently about the business of continuous improvement and invariably talk about it differently as well. Conversations are the oxygen of priorities, and if organizations truly want to adopt and practice more innovative approaches, they begin by inserting new words into daily discussions and steering people into new ways of thinking. For instance, refer to the following table of typical language in local government and contrast that with a vocabulary to spur innovation:

CONVENTIONAL	TO SPUR INNOVATION
• Elected officials	• Passion
• Public meeting	• Imagination
• Ordinance	• Pride
• Budget	• Discretion
• Unions	• 100 things 1% better instead of 1 thing 100% better
• Citizens	• Explore
• Compliance	• Innovation
• Report	• Results



Nothing at all wrong with the conventional vocabulary as it's an effective shortcut that's helpful, but it can also be a barrier to the introduction of new ideas. Now, if all of a sudden you start using the language in the "to spur innovation" column, some might say to you, "did you just read an article or "attend training?" In other words, they might be skeptical of your motives so be deliberate, intentional, and purposeful in using those words, just don't overwhelm your staff with them because they may be ready to wait you out!

The leader behaviors outlined below are crucial to creating and sustaining an environment in which employees are motivated and enabled to innovate.

Inspire Curiosity: Innovation leaders encourage employees to expand their understanding of both internal and external stakeholders: who they are, how they are interdependent, and the unique contexts in which each one operates.

Challenge Current Perspectives: Innovation leaders help employees view problems and opportunities differently and

Keep in mind that innovation has to do with new value, not necessarily new things—and comes in many flavors. For example, there are three types of innovation:

- **Efficiency** focuses on identifying new ideas for improving what already exists. This strategy for efficiency innovations is usually to shorten cycle time, improve quality, or attract new customers.
- **Evolutionary** focuses on identifying ideas that represent something distinctly new and better. Instead of duplicating what already exists, you and your team must look for new ways to bring value to the customer.
- **Revolutionary** focuses on radically new and better ideas that don't operate within the existing structure of the organization and marketplace.

Waiting for serendipity to occur with innovative solutions as the outcome is entirely too random and unreliable—and exceedingly risky in today's climate. Instead, you must unlock the straitjacket

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envision alternative possibilities. Think about those teachers you had in school who showed an interest in you and your desire to learn more, maybe when you were struggling with a subject, but he or she was patient, kind, empathetic and helped you "think" differently. Remember: while all teachers aren't leaders, leaders must be teachers.

Create Freedom: Innovation leaders empower experimentation, risk taking, learning from mistakes, and valuing effort over perfection.

Drive Discipline: Innovation leaders help employees identify execution implications early and often and align efforts to ensure successful implementation of innovative solutions.

Leaders who have a high degree of self-awareness realize their behavior that was associated with yesterday's results may not be the behavior that is needed to achieve tomorrow's innovation.

Innovation—The "How"

"At Apple, we never invented anything, we just happened to find it." —Steve Jobs

What limits innovation in established organizations isn't a lack of resources or a shortage of human creativity, but the absence of pro-innovation processes. The most innovative organizations are usually the ones that are uncomfortable with the status quo. Innovation cannot survive when individuals believe that everything worthwhile has been done; also known as the "not invented here" syndrome. To improve the quality of your innovation pipeline, you have to improve the quality of your innovation thinking.

You must do more than think "outside the box." Rather, you must learn to think in new boxes, which means deliberately creating a range of fresh mental models and methodically exploring them.

and unleash leaders and their employees to engage in real talk about real change and introduce an innovative approach that disrupts the status quo. In fact, I argue that government increases risk by not taking risks or chances.

Your objective is to come up with a new way of examining the problem or situation, something unfamiliar that forces a shift in perspective. Ask yourself these questions and determine where your organization is in relation to being innovative on purpose:

- Does my organization have a legitimate and acknowledged mechanism through which employees can dedicate a certain percentage of discretionary time to innovative projects?
- Do we "require" employees to bring a solution when they present a problem? Sounds good in theory, doesn't it? Revise this unwritten practice immediately because every time an employee encounters a problem, they feel obligated to bring forward a solution. But when they don't have one, guess what? They don't bring you the problem. Now, you're touching velvet!
- Does my organization have formal programs, perhaps organization-wide, for teaching people the principles, skills, and tools of innovation?
- Does top management reserve time for regular meetings where the sole purpose is to discuss the organization's growth and innovation efforts, reflect on new strategic insights and ideas, track ongoing innovation projects, set priorities, and allocate resources?
- Do we have a significant number of people in the organization who officially work on a full- or part-time basis on innovation activities?
- Would a large percentage of our employees say that innovation is part of their job or role? (You might want to scan job descriptions for your workforce members and find out if innovation is even mentioned).

I believe that it is completely possible to increase government's innovation performance in a remarkable and lasting way, but it can only be done if you are prepared to make innovation a systemic organization-wide capability. Nobody can hope to achieve anything by throwing a light switch and saying, "Okay, beginning Monday morning we're all going to be a lot more innovative." Despite the enormous nature of the challenge, building a deep, systemic capability for innovation is now the inescapable imperative for every

- Rename conference rooms in your building to DaVinci, Beatles, Sinatra, and other people from the arts and decorate the room accordingly. It's more hip (I'm such a boomer) to have a meeting in the Sinatra room than the conference room on the second floor.
- Organize virtual field trips to fascinating places.
- Start a book club, but please don't require members to provide a PowerPoint presentation covering certain chapters. That's a buzzkill.

Innovation is a social activity. One person's ideas build on another's. Someone else reframes it through the eyes of the customer. It's never clean or linear. Innovation is often iterative, so not every idea generated will appear as perfect, polished, and packaged.

government and it won't be realized by over-relying on a series of brainstorming sessions that some of your employees feel are a waste of time, because nothing productive ever comes out those discussions. Innovation isn't about programs; it's about principles.

Numerous theories speculate about what makes people and organizations innovative leaders in their fields. One concept nearly every researcher and practitioner studying innovation agrees on is the need for ideas—lots of ideas. In fact, the more ideas, the greater the chances for innovation. The best way to have a good idea is to have a lot of ideas. Whereas effective leaders' traffic in trust, innovative organizations traffic in ideas.

People often underestimate the influence of the physical environment in the workplace as helping creative thinking. Factoring in the physical environment along with a healthy workplace culture, here are some proven ways to generate more ideas in your workplace:

- Create a virtual idea lounge—an unstructured place for employees to hang out and exchange ideas.
- Provide virtual training/learning opportunities on innovation as the means to developing your employees' capabilities.
- Bring in guest speakers.
- Attend a webinar.

- Host a group of employees from another jurisdiction and have an open-ended conversation on how they're handling COVID-19 related operational issues.
- Encourage employees to invest 15 to 20 minutes each day writing down questions that challenge the status quo in your organization, then schedule a conversation to explore what people captured.

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Essential to understand is that you're trying to infuse energy into the idea generation realm. Idea generation isn't efficient, and it's not supposed to be. There are no guarantees as you pursue innovative solutions, but I can guarantee you with 100-percent success that nothing will change if you don't try.

Innovating organizations believe the potential for good ideas is in every corner. This does not mean that every person in their organization is capable of innovation. But it does mean that they are ready to bet that a good idea could come from just about anywhere. By refusing to anoint the special few, they open themselves to the possibility of innovation from anywhere.

Innovation isn't about a leader's ideas; it's about enabling great ideas to be born and to flourish. The essential role of the leader is to shepherd creativity through to impact.

Closing

Unfortunately, the future seldom lines up with the organization chart. We can't make uncertainty disappear. But we can change the way we respond to it. Every uncertainty is a new potential future. Seen through that lens, uncertainty doesn't need to be a cause of unease; it can be a sign that it's time to change. The importance of your future success will depend on your ability to manage your organization with a focus on innovation.

*I'll be authoring additional articles on innovation in 2021. Please email me at patrick@gettingbetterallthetime.com with aspects of innovation you'd like me to explore. **PM***



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