Intrapreneurship in government

Making it work

About the authors

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Executive summary

GOVERNMENT bureaucracy can throw all sorts of barriers in the way of people who are trying to drive constructive change. But some people, when they run into a barrier inside their own organization, can't help but try to figure out ways to climb over it, creep under it, squeeze around it, or knock it out of the way. We call those people "intrapreneurs."

Some of the strategies that government intrapreneurs have used to get great things done, in spite of barriers, include:

- Bringing in ideas from outside the organization to fill an unmet need

- Building vibrant, energetic, passionate teams to pursue their objectives

- Finding detours around old ways of doing things, perhaps by leveraging their networks, building new connections, or making sales pitches for their new ideas

- Keeping quiet about the changes they implement until the new idea or approach has had a chance to prove itself

Leaders who want to cultivate intrapreneurship can do the following:

Incentivize intrapreneurship. Organizations can adopt formal programs that promote intrapreneurial skills among employees. They can also informally highlight the importance of intrapreneurship: for example, by holding cross-silo meetings or happy hours to encourage employees to make connections.

Give intrapreneurs a playground. Even worse than a lack of incentives is a culture that discourages change. Leaders should provide safe places where intrapreneurs can potentially fail—where they can experiment and iterate until their idea or approach is demonstrated to be effective.

Cheer intrapreneurs on from the sidelines. Managers should not require intrapreneurs to be heroic or sacrifice their careers to make a difference. They should help their employees navigate the processes and procedures in an organization to make change, and act as advocates to help intrapreneurs navigate their agency's political process.

"There must be a way"

INTRAPRENEURS are employees who don't let bureaucratic barriers stop them from driving constructive change. To a large degree, they succeed because they're creative and tenacious enough to make the best of suboptimal or difficult circumstances. But leadership matters a great deal, too. Often, an intrapreneur's success can depend in part on a manager who offers early support, an advocate in the agency, or a program or policy that allows them to try something new.

Here are some of the strategies that successful intrapreneurs employ to make a difference in government, plus a look at how some of the best leaders foster intrapreneurship in their organizations.

Four best plays for intrapreneurs

1. Connect seemingly unrelated dots

When Blake Schaeffer, a research ecologist at the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), attended a scientific conference in 2010, he learned about a new remote-sensing technology specifically designed for coastal ocean applications. Schaeffer believed that a sensor on the International Space Station could be used to monitor water quality and, coupled with mobile devices, transmit this information to end users. A few months later, Schaeffer submitted a proposal to the EPA's Pathfinder Innovation Project, a tournament that funds innovative research efforts. Schaeffer's project was selected, and over the course of a year, his team demonstrated that this new technology could indeed be used to monitor water quality in locations where traditional satellites had limitations.[1]

Potentially big impacts don't always require the invention of something new. Intrapreneurs often bring ideas from outside their organization to address an unmet need.

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2. Identify allies

Discouraged by levels of employee attrition at the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), Anthony Soriano and Michael Lawyer formed the "Under Five," an employee group that supports a sense of community and champions changes favored by the workforce. For example, some employees were frustrated when the agency failed to support Google Chrome as a browser on its computers. The HUD team placed a voting poll on an existing (but rarely used) platform called "HUD Ideas in Action"; more than 100 employees voted within a single day for Chrome, and the browser was reinstated.[2] Now HUD's deputy secretary reviews any proposal that receives more than 100 votes on HUD Ideas in Action, amplifying the voices of employees. "We're doing it because we want to see HUD get better," says Soriano.[3]

Groups such as HUD's Under Five are one way for intrapreneurs to gain support for important initiatives. Team members can help generate and validate ideas, and provide and collect feedback. Extra hands help anchor the effort and foster a culture of bottom-up commitment to change.

3. Look for detours

Don Burke and Sean Denehy worked at the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to build "Intellipedia," a Wikipedia-like clearinghouse of intelligence expertise that is now widely used across the intelligence community.

When Burke and Denehy started planning Intellipedia, they realized that the intelligence community simply did not allow this sort of open information sharing at the time. Rather than trying to push against that obstacle, they went around it, working with their managers to obtain a waiver for their pilot. When current computer configurations didn't allow the program to run properly, they taught individual employees how to change them. When someone said that he or she wasn't interested in helping launch the product, they looked for someone else who was.

"At the core of the way both Sean and I operated, we knew the ways in which the intelligence community didn't work, and we knew that this could help," says Burke. "Despite all those other distractions, there was the self-assurance and self-confidence to make it happen."[4]

When rules block positive change, intrapreneurs can leverage their networks, build new connections, and become salespeople for their ideas to find the detours that make progress possible.

4. Adopt a "beta" mindset

Richard Culatta, acting director of the US Department of Education's Office of Educational Technology, is leading an "Education Datapalooza" to make open data available to developers around the country. He's creating a "learning registry" to align all online learning content with learning standards and forming "regional innovation clusters" that encourage developers, researchers, and schools to work together.[5]

All of these new initiatives are pilots. "Everything that I ever do anywhere is always beta," he says. When there are naysayers, Culatta can respond, "It's just a pilot."[6]

Culatta also packages innovations with things he knows already work well. For example, when Culatta was building a new online learning platform for the CIA, he was also interested in piloting the use of a secure Twitter platform. Instead of launching the Twitter platform on its own, he packaged it with existing training.[7] By packaging the new feature with an already successful course, Culatta could tweak elements users didn't like rather than losing the product altogether.

When introducing a new idea or approach, there can be a tendency to have a "ribbon cutting" to celebrate its success. But it takes time to test new ideas and for stakeholders to buy into new ways of doing work. Pilots don't grab headlines, but they can be better for getting things done.

How leaders help intrapreneurs make big plays

AGENCY executives and managers should take the lead in supporting a culture of intrapreneurship and helping change agents push new ideas across the finish line. Leaders who have been particularly successful in supporting intrapreneurs across government volunteered the following insights.

1. Adopt intrapreneurship as an organizational value

Making intrapreneurship an organizational value can involve adopting formal programs to promote intrapreneurial skills in employees. The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), for instance, is launching a new program called "HHSentrepreneurs" that pairs external experts with "internal entrepreneurs," or intrapreneurs, to tackle complex challenges.[8]

In addition to installing formal expectations and programs, leaders should highlight the importance of entrepreneurial attitudes in day-to-day work. Lewis Shepherd, former chief of Requirements and Research at the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), spurred intelligence innovation and reform with a strategy called "Management by Walking Around." Popularized by Hewlett-Packard's founders, this approach encourages leaders to meet and talk with line employees frequently to get to know them and tap their ideas.[9]

As Shepherd met with DIA employees, he took the opportunity to identify and motivate intrapreneurs within his staff. "You could

detect the seeds of an intrapreneur who had never been allowed to think that way before," says Shepherd.[10] He encouraged entrepreneurial urges by sharing stories of employees who introduced innovative ideas in their daily work.[11] Shepherd's team excelled under his leadership and helped lead the intelligence community with a number of new hardware and software systems, including "A-space," a social networking environment for the national intelligence community that was named one of *Time* magazine's "Best inventions of 2008."[12]

2. Create a fail-safe space

Intrapreneurs should have a "playground" where they can experiment with new ideas and approaches.

As director of eDiplomacy at the US State Department, Richard Boly leads a team dedicated to advancing diplomacy through technology and knowledge-sharing platforms. His team has developed a series of new tools and initiatives, including Corridor, an in-house professional networking platform, and Diplopedia, a wiki-based online encyclopedia of State Department expertise.[13] Boly's team has succeeded in implementing cutting-edge solutions because of his ability to create a safe space for experimentation.

Boly encourages his team to pilot ideas on a small scale, test them, and gather feedback from employees before rolling new products out to the workforce. Even if an idea is not ready for wide-scale deployment, he still

recognizes individuals for their efforts and motivates them to generate and try new ideas. "It's about creating an environment where failure is okay," Boly says.[14] "It's better to launch and learn and be a bit more entrepreneurial, without worrying that the stakes are too high."[15]

3. Be an advocate for intrapreneurs

Intrapreneurs shouldn't have to violate policies or risk their careers to try new ideas. Managers should help them navigate organizational processes and procedures to achieve change.

Kana Enomoto has helped many intrapreneurs grow their ideas at the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). As acting deputy administrator, she built a team called "PeopleFirst" to promote an agency culture of learning and improve both vertical and horizontal collaboration. Initiatives varied from building a food cart to meet the agency's need for a cafeteria to establishing a bimonthly managers' forum that improved agency processes for knowledge sharing, decision making, and problem solving.[16]

Enomoto says she turned the leadership model "upside down," encouraging employees at any level to lead efforts—as long as they were passionate about the cause. She harnessed the "ground-up energy" of intrapreneurs and helped them navigate the organization to get their tasks done. "I don't let them fight all the battles, but they certainly know what the battles are," she says. "It's part of their learning and experience."[17]

The PeopleFirst campaign sparked significant positive change for the agency, increasing employee morale and empowerment. During a two-year period, employee job satisfaction rose from 55 percent to 68 percent, while employees' overall satisfaction with SAMHSA as an organization increased from 39 percent to 60 percent.[18]

The future of government intrapreneurship

Intrapreneurship should not be reserved for a few "exclusive" individuals or the "coolest" startups. Government organizations everywhere can and should prioritize intrapreneurship to help improve their effectiveness.

The answers to your organization's biggest problems could be anywhere—but it's likely there are some great ideas in an office right down the hall.

Endnotes

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Acknowledgements

About GovLab

GovLab is a think tank in the Deloitte Federal practice that focuses on innovation in the public sector. It works closely with senior government executives and thought leaders from across the globe. GovLab fellows conduct research into key issues and emerging ideas shaping the public, private, and non-profit sectors.

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