

# Public Innovation: The Opportunity and the Challenge

David Thornburgh 01 November 2013

Some wise guys will wag that the words public and innovation don't belong in the same sentence, that talking about new ideas and processes, doing things differently, improving constantly and continuously in the context of government is naturally oxymoronic.

At Penn's Fels Institute of Government, one of the nation's oldest and most respected professional master's programs for aspiring public leaders, we think the wise guys are wrong. In fact, there's never been a more exciting time for public leaders, civic activists and entrepreneurs to join in common cause to bring innovation into government. Handheld computing power gets cheaper and more powerful by the day. Data—much of it public data once locked up in dusty file cabinets—are raining down in buckets from the cloud. Constituents clamor for more, more, more, all the while calling for government to spend less, less, less. Never before have effectiveness (doing the right thing) and efficiency (doing it right) been in such demand.

And yet. And yet we remind ourselves that innovation

means doing things differently, and that doing things differently means change and that, in the words of Bobby Kennedy, "everyone loves progress and hates change." Any veteran of government service who's been faced with tradition-bound civil servants, restrictive union contracts and work rules, a "gotcha media" and a risk-averse political climate knows how tough it is to drive lasting change. Change is work, change is tough, change is hard. Innovation—change—in government is still probably more noted in its absence. To quote Tom Hanks in *A League of Their Own*: "It's supposed to be hard. If it were easy, everyone would do it."

So what do successful public innovators know how to do that makes them successful—and what can we learn from them? First, they know that innovation is a process, not an idea or a cool new app. More specifically, it's a human process: messy, political, frustrating, rewarding. Processes can be learned, taught and managed, and successful public innovators are masters of all. Second, good public innovators know that they need to build bridges with other innovators in their communities. They build relationships with entrepreneurs, hackers and civic and academic leaders, all of whom bring their own process knowledge to the table. Finally, strong public innovators persist in the face of challenges and obstacles. To effect the cultural and institutional culture change for innovation to take root, they surround the problem with good ideas, people of good will and good relationships

and restless energy. They're not afraid to grind it out.

This year, 2013, is the 20th anniversary of *Reinventing Government*, one of the most influential books on public management and public innovation ever written—in fact the only one I know of that's made it to the New York Times bestseller list. One of the core ideas in the book, cowritten by journalist David Osborne and veteran city manager Ted Gaebler (a Fels grad, of course) is that successful public leaders “steer” rather than row the ship of state. Their job is to chart a course, share a vision and engage many others in their community in the pursuit of problem solving. (Sounds almost like crowdsourcing, long before it was a thing!)

The articles in this edition of the Philadelphia Social Innovations Journal are testament to the best of public problem solving at work. Public leaders steering and civic and business leaders and entrepreneurs rowing together, in pursuit of new and innovative approaches to persistent public problems. Ben Franklin—founder of the University of Pennsylvania—would be proud indeed!

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