Advocating for public service innovation

The CAPAM International Innovations Award

David Waung

Our reality: innovate or perish

There’s a way to do it better – find it.

Thomas Edison

Never before has the need ‘to do it better’ been so central to the success of governments in supporting national development and safeguarding citizen welfare. The increasing interconnectedness between global issues and the rapid pace of change has altered the course of public service solutions. This necessitates a high degree of innovation in policy development, strategy formulation and programme implementation in order to address competing and cross-cutting demands.

Innovation will also be required to translate national development objectives into reality. The great distance between the proposed objective and the implementation of solutions can only be bridged through a process of change. Often, innovation is marked by a series of small changes that alter ways of thinking, doing or approaching issues and problems.

Increasingly, the expectations of citizens outweigh the means and ability of governments to respond and act accordingly. Given increasing restraints on government spending and programmes (in a post-financial-crisis environment), public administrations are increasingly tasked with ‘doing more with less’. Maximising limited resources will be a major task of the public service, and to do so will require innovative approaches in all aspects of government activities.

Despite these challenges, there are also great opportunities for improving how governments operate. New forms of partnerships with civil society and private firms offer wide possibilities for productive collaboration. Rapid changes in information and communication technologies (ICTs) provide new opportunities for gains in both efficiency and effectiveness. Innovations in management practices also have the potential for increasing the performance of public service organisations. These and other advances in policy ideas, governance concepts and technological developments offer great opportunities for governments.

The perilous task of innovation

There is nothing more difficult to take in hand, more perilous to conduct, or more uncertain in its success than to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things.

Nicolò Machiavelli

While there are many opportunities to innovate, public services face formidable pressures that can make innovation especially challenging. The process of transforming an idea for improvement into reality is a labour-intensive endeavour that is fraught with challenges and setbacks.

One of the major challenges of innovation is getting around the resistance to change. Established bureaucracies, set processes and policies, and often, the mindsets of management and staff have a negative impact upon the fostering and implementation of new ideas. To foster an innovative change environment, these barriers must be addressed to form a significant part of the solution.

Innovation is a fragile and unpredictable process with high rates of failure. Undertaking new ideas is a high-risk endeavour, and the fear of failure presents a significant barrier to the implementation of new approaches. It is unfortunate that in the public service environment, the pain of failure often outweighs the benefit of success. Within this environment, the status quo is often viewed as the safer choice as the incentive to innovate is not readily evident.

In light of these systemic challenges, special effort is needed to actively advocate for innovation in the public service, and to encourage the fostering of innovative change environments. Special attention is needed to advocate and endorse innovation as an essential element of public service operations.

Enabling a culture for innovation

The greatest danger in times of turbulence is not the turbulence; it is to act with yesterday’s logic.

Peter Drucker
The spark for a new idea can easily be extinguished before it has a chance to shine as a potential solution to pressing concerns. While not all new ideas will evolve into successful solutions, the organisation needs to encourage innovative thinking, and have structures and processes in place to assess innovations and further those ones with good potential. This culture of innovation is what distinguishes organisations that continue to grow and flourish from those that stagnate and decline.

Cultivating a culture for innovation requires a number of key ingredients:

- To recognise that there are always opportunities for improvement and to be constantly on the lookout for new ideas and new ways of doing things.
- To learn from the successes and failures of others, so that new ideas can be adapted to the needs of the organisation.
- To accept that failures are an integral part of innovations, and to have processes in place to identify, control and manage risks to acceptable levels.
- To provide a safe space for experimentation, whether these are as limited pilot projects or as simulations. The lessons learned can inform decisions to expand or terminate the idea at hand.
- To open lines of communication within the organisation and within the community of stakeholders. Such communications share the results of experimentation, open up sources for new ideas and build the culture of innovation.
- To share lessons learned from failures as these lessons will be the building blocks for new innovations.
- To celebrate successes and recognise contributions in order to inspire others to take up the arduous task of transforming new ideas into viable results.

The CAPAM International Innovations Award

The objective of the Commonwealth Association for Public Administration and Management (CAPAM) International Innovations Award is to help public service organisations cultivate the necessary culture for innovation. It celebrates the spirit of innovation in the public service by recognising those who have made significant contributions to improving governance and services in the public sector. In so doing, the award hopes to inspire and encourage innovators to improve public service governance, as well as the quality of life of citizens, communities and nations.

By documenting each innovation as a ‘case study’, the award also creates a rich knowledge base from which organisations can learn about new concepts, the challenges of transforming them into results, and to generate new ideas to adapt similar approaches to specific individual needs. More importantly, the award builds a network of senior executives that can provide mutual support and share experiences in their efforts to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of public service operations.

Created in 1998, the award has received over 1,000 submissions from more than 25 countries across the Commonwealth. The very difficult task of reviewing the submissions and selecting the winners is the responsibility of an international panel of jurors. Each award’s jury includes participation from senior levels of government, experts in public service innovation and other esteemed professionals.

As indicated by following list of Gold Medal Winners over the past seven cycles, the diversity of topics and ideas submitted is breathtaking. This speaks to the range of services that the public service is engaged in, as well as to the vibrant innovative spirit of public servants from across the Commonwealth.

2010: Mission Convergence, Government of Delhi

Mission Convergence is an innovative approach that represents a paradigm shift in governance. It takes concrete steps towards holistic human development with poverty alleviation and citizen’s empowerment in general, and women in particular, as core objectives. This policy decision altered the previously fragmented and vertical architecture by providing an integrated platform for convergence of nine departments that provide welfare services.

The Mission changed the way Delhi’s government acknowledged urban poverty. Traditionally, income has been used to measure poverty, and there have been significant inclusion and exclusion errors. A new criterion of using proxy indicators of income was developed by the Mission in close partnership with civil society and academic institutions. The Mission also fostered effective community participation in governance by creating a bottom-up implementation structure that currently engages more than 100 community-based organisations. These centres have now enabled government to reach the doorsteps of the vulnerable.

2008: Traveller’s Road Information Portal (TRIP), Government of Ontario, Canada

Ontario’s provincial roads are safer thanks to the road information system developed for travellers. This system, deployed with the support of citizen volunteers and community groups, places emphasis on service delivery and customer satisfaction by providing bilingual road condition information, 24/7/365 through its website and telephone hotline.

Ontario has 16,520 kilometres of provincial highways and is the gateway to Canada’s international trade. Goods worth C$1.2 trillion are transported on this network of highways. There are approximately 8.7 million drivers and
85,000 commercial carriers in the province of Ontario. The idea for a portal originated when a customer pointed out his difficulty in getting easy access to accurate and consistent information on highway conditions. Millions of drivers need this information and one of the ministry's strategic goals was to improve customer services. This resulted in a project that was initiated for improving road information services. The portal's hotline was also an opportunity to rationalise telephone infrastructure and use cutting-edge voice recognition and computer technologies for improved equipment and staff operation efficiencies and cost savings.

2006: eBario – access to ICTs in rural Malaysia

The eBario project demonstrated a people-centred approach in providing ICTs to an isolated rural community in Bario, Malaysia. By engaging the community prior, during and after the deployment of ICTs, Bario now has access to telephone and the internet, and is applying ICTs to enhance its livelihood.

The eBario pilot project was conceived as a research project by Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS). By applying a people-centred/participatory approach, the project aimed to deploy ICTs to empower and train the Bario community to apply ICTs in improving their livelihood. Participants in this project include a multidisciplinary research team, the Bario community, the government, private industries and schools.

2004: MARVIN community information software, Australia

MARVIN (Messaging Architecture for the Retrieval of Versatile Information and News) is a character-based software platform created in partnership with industry and community. MARVIN allows inexpensive, flexible and relevant health, education and governance resources to be created with the community, by the community and for the community.

MARVIN represents one of the most fundamental shifts in the way learning and knowledge is shared between cultures and language groups – especially in interactions between governments and the people they serve. MARVIN will help governments everywhere to engage in a real and committed way with citizen groups made up of various cultural, linguistic and geo-ethnic subsets. This is a necessity if global trends towards best-practice governance are to take effect. After all, how can governments claim they are committed to engaging their citizens when the very language and culture used to convey this message is foreign and without contextual substance?

2002: Community policing in Trichy City, Tamil Nadu

Innovative community policing initiatives effectively met the challenges of gang wars and terrorism in fragmented Trichy City, Tamil Nadu, India. Working from a status of mutual distrust, 'People-friendly Police' has evolved through a free-flow of information, accountability and an ethical image. Partnerships between citizens, bureaucracy, elected representatives, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and philanthropists have greatly improved the community's quality of life.

2002: Connecting and clustering ministerial teams, Ontario

Ontario engaged the motto 'making governments work better' by creating new ways of connecting and breaking down barriers between traditional hierarchical ministry structures. Clusters of ministries are co-ordinating policy and planning. A virtual government-wide network has been created to connect the inspection, investigation and enforcement function across ministries. Internal business support services are delivered more efficiently across the organisation through enterprise-wide models. Ontario is connecting the delivery of routine public services through multiple channels to meet customer needs.

2000: Poverty reduction by state and community, Kerala (Kudumbashree)

The Community Development Society of Malappuram in Kerala, India, fights against the multiple manifestations of poverty through people’s participation and empowerment. The story of the largest women’s NGO in Asia and its programmes, the Community-Based Nutrition Programme and Poverty Alleviation Project, reveals how the empowered women have brought about change to their dismally poor living conditions.

1998: Education Guarantee Scheme, Madhya Pradesh (Rajiv Gandhi Shiksha Mission)

This initiative put into operation a 90-day trained schooling programme for children aged 6–14 years in tribal areas with no schooling facilities. A trained teacher with teaching materials and other tools was allotted a local space for conducting teaching and learning. Following the 90 days, schoolchildren would be enrolled in an established ‘school’ for the project. Over 500,000 children were successfully enrolled in school programmes, and the project became a model to implement schools in remote communities in India.

1998: Ontario delivers – improving quality of public service

In 1995, Ontario faced the challenges many other jurisdictions were dealing with, such as shrinking resources coupled with increasing customer demands. As a result, the government proposed an agenda to reduce red tape, provide better service to the public, restore customer confidence and get the economy out of a recession by creating new ways to deliver quality customer service. By
Leadership

being customer-centred, changing the ideology of
government from ‘inside-out’ to ‘outside-in’, and
harnessing technology to increase efficiencies in
government, costs have been reduced, while meeting the
expectations and demands of an increasingly
technologically sophisticated public.

Endnote

1 Government of National Capital Territory (NCT) of Delhi.

David Waung is Executive Director and CEO of the
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