

Overcoming Barriers to Success in the Public Sector: Lessons from the 2005 Innovations Finalists

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The innovations recognized through the Innovations in American Government Awards Program are selected because they are novel, effective, significant, and replicable. But, from the perspective of improving public sector outcomes, an important next question is not about the innovations themselves but about the conditions that made them necessary. Specifically, why were ineffective practices in place before the innovation, and why did these ineffective practices persist until the innovation occurred? If we can identify the underlying barrier that made the innovation necessary, perhaps we can promote success by attacking that barrier directly.

To make this idea more specific, consider some possible reasons why the old practices didn't work—some possible barriers to effectiveness. Perhaps the old practices didn't work because there was an entrenched agency way of doing business, and no leader had emerged to challenge it. Or, the old practices used to work and then the world changed, requiring an innovation to meet the new reality. Or, the old ways didn't work because political conflicts—over goals, over the interests of different groups, over exactly what results the public agency should be accountable for—prevented moving in any direction that would emphasize one result over another. Perhaps the innovation happened because a change in the political climate broke the logjam—for example, a crisis or tragedy illustrated the terrible failure of the old ways. In addition to the traditional approach of seeking to replicate the innovation, each of these possibilities suggests strategies for spreading success by attacking the underlying problem. If the problem is lack of leadership to break entrenched agency habits, then perhaps we need to train leaders or change the skills expected of the workforce. If the problem is that circumstances changed but practices didn't, then we may need to improve the capacity of public agencies to scan the environment for changes. If the problem, at least in some policy areas, is the political environment, then the best way to spread success might be to look for ways to shift the dynamics of political accountability.

For this brief paper, I have tried out this framework on the eighteen programs selected as 2005 innovations finalists. Drawing on the limited information available about the finalists from applications and site visit reports, I looked for patterns and hints that might help guide a more systematic look at these questions in the future. Specifically, I drew on the written record to answer two questions: Why did problems persist (before the innovation)? Why did innovation happen now?

Three themes emerged:

1. Many different reasons—from political context to long-term underinvestment to internal agency failures—explain why problems persisted and an innovation was needed.
2. Two of these reasons were particularly striking:

- Failures in the political environment, such as conflicting goals or a stalemate among different political interests; and
 - Fragmented operational authority, where no one person had control of enough pieces to solve the problem.
3. While both of these problems may seem hard to solve, the innovations offered an intriguing list of approaches to solving them, providing a useful starting point for further exploration. In particular, the solutions to fragmented operational authority offered even by this small group of programs were varied and creative.

1. Many different reasons—from political context to long-term underinvestment to internal agency failures—explain why problems persisted and an innovation was needed.

Using a list of seven possible reasonsⁱⁱ why the innovation might have been needed, I reviewed the program applications and site visit reports to explore what reasons might apply to each case. The first reason was that the old practices were working well until something changed, while the rest of the reasons explain why old practices that were *not* working nonetheless persisted.

All of the reasons were true of more than one program, and almost all of the programs had several reasons. I list below the seven reasons along with one example for each, for the purpose of illustrating what the reason might mean in practice. (Given the limited documentation available, it is very possible that I missed reasons or that some of the reasons I identified would seem unimportant in the context of fuller knowledge about the program and its setting. Therefore, these results should be seen as illustrating the breadth of possible reasons, not providing definitive answers about individual programs.)

- New or emerging trend. For example, the Advanced Language Program created by the police department in Lexington, KY, responded to a dramatic increase in the community's Hispanic population. As a result of that trend, officers' inability to communicate in Spanish became a problem for policing.
- Longstanding political or accountability problem. The Corridor Housing Strategy in Minneapolis responded to the lack of affordable housing, a longstanding problem in Minneapolis. One of many reasons why this problem has persisted over time, in Minneapolis and elsewhere, is the political difficulty of siting affordable housing: neighborhoods targeted as the location of affordable housing often resist effectively, while those that might benefit are scattered and unable to influence the political process.
- Conflict of goals. The Global Development Alliance is a strategy put forward by U.S. AID to create public-private partnerships to increase investment in development, in a world in which funds available from the private sector greatly exceed those available from the public sector. One underlying reason why this problem was not solved before was a conflict between two goals: the programmatic goal of leveraging maximum assistance and the procurement goal

of ensuring a hands-off relationship between the government and private organizations.

- Fragmentation of operational authority. Adolescent Portable Therapy in New York City seeks to provide young people in the juvenile justice system with effective assessment and treatment for substance abuse. One reason this problem had persisted for so long is the role of multiple agencies, both city and state, in supervising and serving these youth.
- Long-term underinvestment. The Laboratory Response Network, a federal-state network led by the federal Centers for Disease Control, upgrades the nation's capacity to respond to biological and chemical threats. One of several reasons the innovation was needed was underinvestment over time in the public health infrastructure, which had created inadequate capacity in some state laboratories.
- Lack of research knowledge or of a proven program model. In addition to the fragmentation of authority described above, lack of a research model tested for adolescents is another reason cited by Adolescent Portable Therapy to explain the persistence of failure before their innovation took hold.
- Staff or managers weak, fearful, demoralized, or resistant to change. In the Iowa Charter Agency innovation, the underlying problem addressed by the innovation is the effect of multiple constraints (such as personnel and contract rules) on the ability of agency heads to accomplish the state's goals efficiently. One of many reasons that problem has persisted seems to be resistance or at least inertia at the administrative agencies charged with enforcing these rules.

2. Two of these reasons were particularly striking:

- **Failures in the political environment, such as conflicting goals or a stalemate among different political interests; and**
- **Fragmented operational authority, where no one person had control of enough pieces to solve the problem.**

The three most frequent reasons for persistent failure prior to the innovation all had to do with the external context, the world *outside* the innovating agency. The two political reasons (longstanding political or accountability problems and conflict of goals) each appeared as part of the explanation in about half of the innovations,ⁱⁱⁱ and fragmentation of operational authority appeared in more than half. The specific numbers are not very meaningful, because of the extremely limited documentation on which the assessments of significant reasons are based. But they do, at least, suggest that attention to the external context of public agencies and programs, not just to internal agency functioning, could pay off in greater success and innovation.

3. While both of these problems may seem hard to solve, the innovations offered an intriguing list of approaches to solving them, providing a useful starting point for further exploration. In particular, the solutions to fragmented operational authority offered even by this small group of programs were varied and creative.

In the innovations in which political reasons contributed to past failure, moments of political opportunity sometimes made change possible: the election or appointment of a new political official, a budget crisis or a budget surplus, a tragedy or crisis that crystallized the problem for the public, or a critical report that provided momentum and attention to past failures. Most likely, key skills for innovators in the public sector include recognizing these moments and figuring out how to seize and build on them.

Beyond this core ability to *respond* to the political environment, a number of the innovators also *influenced* that environment in order to solve a problem. Among the strategies represented in this limited documentation of a small group of finalists:

- Creating a new relationship among previously isolated constituencies or problems . Two examples are the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board, which brought together affordable housing and open space advocates and committed to address both issues together, and the Corridor Housing initiative in Minneapolis, which linked economic development and transportation improvements with affordable housing, to help neighborhoods see advantages in participating.
- Creating a new funding source controlled in a different way and by different interests than previous funding sources. Two examples are the Systemic Code Enforcement Program in Los Angeles, which includes a new dedicated fee system to fund housing inspections, and the Partnership for Results in Cayuga County, NY, which obtained a major federal grant that was conditioned on collaboration among different agencies and programs.
- Highly developed strategies for outreach to key partners. Examples include almost all of the programs cited above as well as others.

The group of innovations that is responding to fragmented authority—that is, to a situation where no one person or agency has enough authority to solve a critical problem—offer an even more interesting range of potential solutions. These solutions are especially important because the problem of fragmented authority is so widespread—yet the solutions we typically imagine are limited and unhelpful.

Why is fragmented authority so widespread a barrier to solving important public sector problems? First, important problems—particularly those in the domain of the public sector, and particularly those that have persisted over time—often involve complex relationships across multiple causes and effects. For example, the problems facing struggling individuals, families, and communities may result from connections among physical and mental health, housing quality and affordability, family stress, availability of employment, and family income, to name just a few factors. With problems this complex, there is simply no way to draw neat organizational boundaries that will work for all cases. Second, limited authority in the public sector often results from deliberate political choices. For example, elected officials may split authority between two agencies

to ensure checks and balances (this agency is in charge of setting contracting rules and making sure the government never risks scandal, while that agency is in charge of accomplishing specific programmatic results), to accommodate a conflict among goals, or to ensure that no single organization becomes too powerful. Third, in our complex federal system, authority may be fragmented across different geographical jurisdictions—cities, counties, school districts, states, and federal agencies.

Too often, we think in overly simplified ways about these extremely complex problems. We may think that there must be a sensible organizational structure out there that would put the “right” things together and solve all the problems—when, in fact, it is more likely that any structure will solve some problems and create others. Or, we may think in terms of consolidated funding streams or super-agencies, which may solve problems for one set of people or political interests—those who control the new funds or agencies—while creating problems for all those who used to have a seat at the table and now do not.

In this context, these Innovations in American Government awards finalists have a great deal to teach. Among this small number of programs, the range of different approaches to fragmented authority is impressive:

- Adolescent Portable Therapy solved a problem of extreme fragmentation in a novel way. Multiple agencies at both the state and city levels had authority over young people in New York City’s juvenile justice system, and their real authority was further fragmented by their limited relationships with other key people and institutions in the youths’ lives, such as family members and schools. The solution was a unique role for an outside organization. It first became the glue at the level of the individual child, by sending a therapist along with the child throughout the system. Then, based on the expertise it developed, it brought people together to solve problems at a more systemic level.
- From among the finalists, Partnership for Results, in Cayuga County, NY, addresses fragmentation of authority most explicitly. It involves an entirely new governance structure, a board made up of the directors of key children’s agencies at the city and county levels, which has taken on the responsibility of collectively spending substantial resources according to agreed-on criteria. None of the directors has given up their authority over their own agency, but they have agreed to oversee substantial funds jointly.
- Several of the finalists use a strategy of project teams, supported and given clout to make decisions. In the Global Development Alliance, at AID, a high-level leadership team reporting directly to the AID administrator has taken on the job of reforming the procurement system sufficiently to make the innovation possible (though this is reported as a continuing challenge). In Olympia, Washington’s innovation, Sustainable Technology, Engineering, Planning, and Strategies, a cross-disciplinary team with expertise across public works, transportation, and other fields reviews capital-spending proposals. The work of the team is backed up by a change in organizational culture throughout city government and by a

very specific and creative software package to guide the analysis, all intended to make sure that long-term environmental and energy issues are part of the decision-making process.

- In the Iowa Charter Agencies project, agency directors get new authority over administrative functions that were previously outside their turf (such as personnel and contracting) in exchange for a commitment to specific results.
- And, in Corridor Housing, a more traditional merger of departments (Economic Development/ Planning with Housing) was integral to the innovation, as it brought two kinds of key expertise together.

Conclusion. How can we promote more innovation and more successful public programs? This initial review of the 2005 Innovations in American Government award finalists suggests the value of exploring approaches that go beyond replicating programmatic innovations. In particular, a look at why ineffective practices persisted *before* the innovations suggests that the political context and the fragmentation of authority are often underlying barriers to success. And, a look at what the programs did to attack these barriers suggests that we should broaden our ideas about what kinds of solutions can make a dent in apparently intractable problems.

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ⁱⁱ Before reviewing the case files, I had identified eight potential reasons based on other research and experience. I collapsed two of them (staff weak, fearful, demoralized, or resistant to change; and other bureaucratic inactivity or resistance) when I found it hard to distinguish between them on the available evidence.

ⁱⁱⁱ Since they often overlapped, this does not mean that the whole group had one or the other reason.