

COVID-19 Local Response Initiative Session Seven “Taking Risks Responsibly and Innovating in Real Time: Possibility Government in a Pandemic”

This handout reviews key points on crisis leadership from session seven of the Coronavirus Local Response Initiative for city leaders with Mitch Weiss and Jorrit de Jong.

FROM PROBABILITY GOVERNMENT TO POSSIBILITY GOVERNMENT

The COVID-19 crisis has made the previously unthinkable part of our new daily reality, forcing a huge number of **innovations and adaptations at every level of society**. As city leaders, you are at the helm of many of these changes, and you understand the risks and the stakes at play in the choices you make. How can you act now in a way that **maximizes learning and informs future action while managing risks**? What kinds of experiments drive innovation, and how can you face the challenges inherent in **experimenting “in public”**—with your constituents’ eyes on you, money under your stewardship, and lives and livelihood depending on you? How can you transform what was once unthinkable into **new understandings of what is now possible**?

Possibility Government is a different kind of government than we typically practice. Governments often confine themselves to questions of what is probable: What can we reasonably expect or do based on readily quantifiable information, resources currently at hand, and what we have seen work in the past? Probability government is appropriate in places, but too often leads to middling outcomes. **Possibility government is the pursuit of new programs and services that may only possibly work**. This means, they probably won’t work. This is the realm of the entrepreneur: Most new ventures fail. But the ones that succeed, can be transformative.

Possibility Government is not new—it has always been a necessary feature of democratic governance—but it is especially necessary in the face of COVID-19, and it is a fact of public life at present. Much of what you are doing is untested, and **acknowledging to yourself, your teams, and your residents that some of what you are doing will not be successful is simply a recognition of reality**. At the same time, you can promise them that while you will pursue the merely possible, you will not waste time on the delusional.¹

Effective Possibility Government requires **a shift in mindset** on the part of public officials and the public. Elected and appointed public servants must engage in Possibility Leadership: sourcing, trying, and scaling new efforts. And residents must engage in Possibility Citizenship: permitting, encouraging, and co-participating in the development of these efforts. Possibility Government = Possibility Leadership + Possibility Citizenship. **We’ll all have to move together**.

GOVERNMENT THAT CAN IMAGINE, TRY, AND SCALE

If “possibility government” and “public entrepreneurship” are not to be the oxymorons skeptics make them out to be, we have to be effective in their practice. This requires public leaders to do at least three things: generate new ideas, try them, and ultimately scale these efforts up to make a large and lasting difference.²

¹ Adapted from *The Possible, The Probable, The Delusional* by Eric Paley

² From *We The Possibility: Harnessing Public Entrepreneurship to Solve Our Most Urgent Problems* by Mitchell Weiss

Sourcing Ideas

- Cast a wide net for ideas. Bring in traditional experts, non-experts, and experts from other domains.
- Look to the crowd: leverage challenges, competitions, and contests.
- Engage residents. Look for their workarounds. “Nothing about them without them.”
- Be most interested in the quality of the best idea that crosses your desk, not the average quality of all the ideas. More ideas + different ideas = better ideas.
- Don’t settle for “best practices” when “best” isn’t good enough.

Experimenting

- Maximize learning while minimizing the waste of resources and time. Follow five steps.³ (See appendix for detailed worksheet):
 - ENVISION: Set a vision, translate to a falsifiable hypothesis.
 - BUILD: Develop a “minimum viable product”—i.e. the smallest set of features or activities needed to test a hypothesis.
 - MEASURE: Run tests, using the real service with the real users.
 - LEARN: Was your hypothesis validated or not?
 - DECIDE: Persevere, pivot, or perish?
- Experiment *with* the public, not *on* them.
- Promise learning, not success.
- Consider portfolios of experiments, then aim high so the “wins” cover the losses.

Scaling

- Think about how you can use government as a platform: a way to bring individuals together in ways that create value for other individuals—and for the broader public.
- Work to generate positive network effects, where user two makes user one better off. Look to mitigate negative network effects, where users make each other worse off (e.g., congestion, fraud, etc.).
- Use four sets of tools to make your platforms function well: rules, process, software, and hardware.
- Generate and preserve trust in the platforms.

ORGANIZE FOR PROBABILITY AND POSSIBILITY; CRAFT AN “AMBIDEXTROUS” RESPONSE

Possibility is fraught in public organizations. Expectations are high. Risk aversion abounds. Trying things that will only possibly work cannot and should not be the sole strategy. Public leaders must keep an eye on the present and the future; on doing what they already do well, and looking for new things worth trying. **The crisis response should combine possibility and probability approaches. “Ambidextrous” leaders can perform this mental balancing act.**⁴ They can also separate these approaches somewhat within their teams’ operations so that innovation streams can benefit from “cross-fertilization” with other parts of the organization, but neither approach suffers from “cross-contamination” by the other.

Pursuing new—and therefore risky—efforts is difficult in public life and especially difficult in a crisis. But **innovation cannot simply be left to the private sector or philanthropy**. Both can play key roles in catalyzing new efforts, but they cannot effectively solve public problems without the co-participation of governments. Governments are often better positioned to do this work, and they can lead meaningfully (as they have before) in the pursuit of novel approaches.

³ Adapted from “Hypothesis-Driven Entrepreneurship: The Lean Startup” by Thomas Eisenmann, Eric Ries, and Sarah Dillard

⁴ From *Lead and Disrupt: How to Solve the Innovator’s Dilemma* by Charles O’Reilly and Michael Tushman

LEAN EXPERIMENTATION WORKSHEET*

1a. ENVISION: What is the solution you plan to work on?

(Be specific and concrete about the proposed solution.)

1b. LIST UNCERTAINTIES : Translate your vision to falsifiable hypotheses. What are you assuming to be true with this solution (that might not be) to make it work?

**Demand/Need
Uncertainties**

Operations Uncertainties

Technical Uncertainties

Financial Uncertainties

Political Uncertainties

2a. SELECT: Start with one hypothesis that is important to validate...and can be, with modest investments of time, money, etc. Circle it above.

2b. BUILD: What “minimally viable product” (MVP) could you build to test this hypothesis? Try to include the smallest amount of features/activities you need in order to get validated learning. Describe or sketch.

3a. MEASURE: Who could you test the MVP with? How? When?

3b. TARGET: What (quantifiable) result are you expecting?

4. LEARN: Is your hypothesis validated or rejected?

5. DECIDE:

PERSEVERE. You validated your hypothesis. What's the next uncertainty from your list that you want to resolve? How will you build an MVP to test it?

or **PIVOT.** Your hypothesis was rejected. Do you have an alternative approach; another, related, way to attack the problem that retains parts of what you have created and changes others?

or **PERISH.** Your hypothesis was rejected and you think there is no productive way forward. How will you communicate this to the team? To the public, if at all?

* This worksheet was created by Mitchell Weiss, based on the methodologies laid out by Thomas Eisenmann, Eric Reis, and Sarah Dillard in their "Hypothesis-Driven Entrepreneurship: The Lean Startup" HBS Note 9-812-095, July 2013.