



# Innovation in government? Let's get practical

Becoming an innovative organization takes more than a call to “be innovative” or an invitation to submit ideas. What are you doing to lead innovation on your teams? How are you fostering a culture of innovation? What processes are you using, and how are you engaging and appreciating the best thinking from your people?

**THE WORD “INNOVATION”** is evident in government policy documents, strategies, performance indicators, professional values in values and ethics codes and in the target leadership competencies in strategic thinking. A number of departments have embarked on cross department idea-mining exercises using specialized idea management software.

In his Eighteenth Annual Report to the Prime Minister on the Public Service, the Clerk of the Privy Council defined innovation as “doing things differently that are more effective and efficient.”

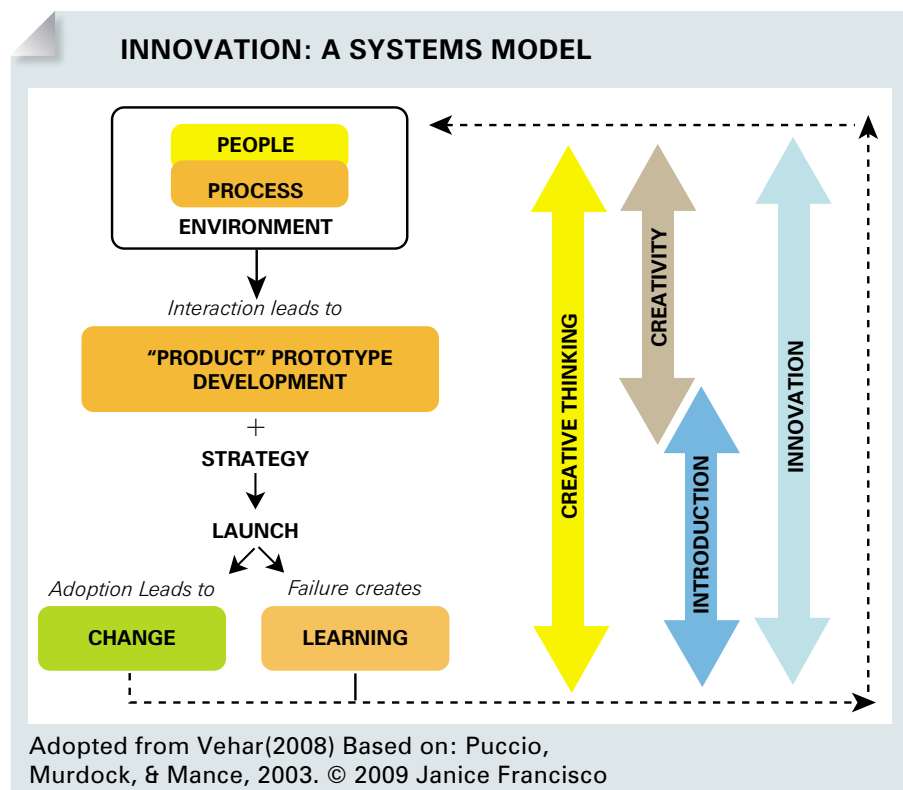
Here are some basic concepts and prac-

tices every government leader needs to know about what’s really involved in fostering a climate of innovation in their organization.

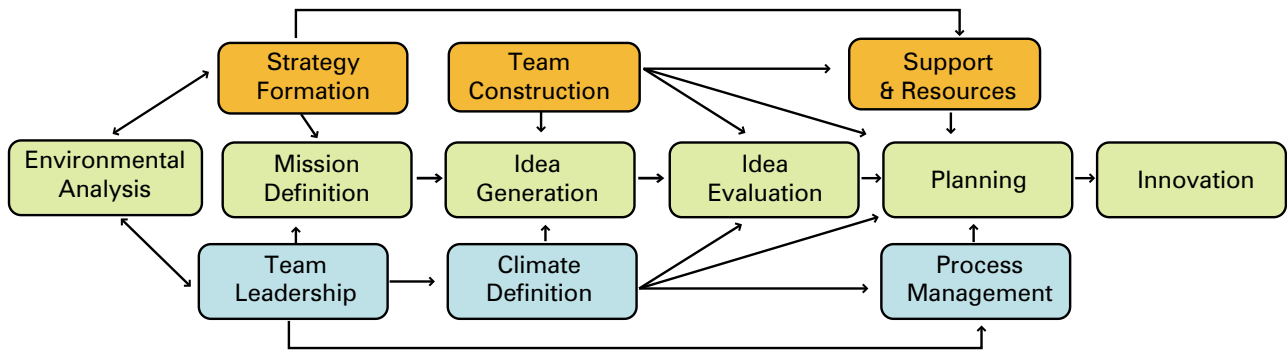
**Recognize innovation as a process, not a specific end result.** Viewed as a systems model, innovation requires people using creative thinking processes in an environment that supports creativity. When these elements interact, they create a work “product” or an idea for how to do something differently. In government those products could be anything from a strategy, research or consultation document, new policies, program improvements, changes to business processes, project work packets, services, delivery models, financial outcomes, etc.

To get these “products” implemented, a strategy is required. Upon launch, one of two things tends to happen. If the product is adopted, you achieve change; if the product isn’t adopted or isn’t ready for acceptance, you’ve “failed” at effecting the desired change. At this point, you can choose to abort and chalk it up to experience or you can continue to innovate and use your “failure” as learning and an opportunity to rethink the challenge and change your approach. The innovation process requires creative thinking processes throughout to drive creativity and to bring the ideas to implementation.

**Be explicit in your support for innovation and how you plan to use your staff’s creative efforts.** In nine studies conducted between 1978 and 2006, a common theme was the importance of leader support to creative and innovative ef-



CORE FUNCTIONAL REQUIREMENTS FOR LEADERS OF CREATIVE EFFORTS.



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forts. Yet in government, when asked, most employees indicate they don't feel supported in their creative efforts and they aren't sure what role their manager expects them to play in the creative process.

Human nature is such that when we put our best thinking and creative efforts to a work task without feedback or understanding its value or effect, we become less motivated. One of the three conditions for creativity is personal motivation toward the task.

As a leader, you have an immense capacity to positively influence the creative efforts of your direct reports. Have a frank discussion that identifies what processes and procedures you will use to drive innovation, how you will work together, how you will manage ideas, how you will deal with "miss-takes" in an environment that is engaged in "more experimentation and better implementation," and where your tolerance for uncertainty, risk and ambiguity lies.

**Focus on developing a creative climate first.** It is a creative climate that fosters a culture of innovation. Playfulness and humour, idea time, idea support, dynamism and liveliness, freedom, challenge, trust and openness, risk taking, as well as mechanisms to productively manage debate and deal with conflict characterize creative climates.

Here are five things to get you on the

right track: 1) an innovation strategy that explicitly focuses on the development and implementation of new "products" or services; 2) an organizational structure, which includes variables such as flexibility, freedom and cooperative teams; 3) organization support mechanisms such as reward and recognition programs, as well as availability of resources (time, information technology, creative people); 4) behavior that encourages innovation, consisting of a productive response to failure, idea generation, spirit of continuous learning, risk-taking, competitiveness, support for change and conflict management; 5) open communication.

**Know what it takes to lead innovation.** Leading innovation is about defining problems, structuring creative problem solving, and managing idea development. The diagram above illustrates the core functional requirements leaders typically engage in to support innovation.

**Use the Creative Problem Solving process as the standard operating procedure to drive innovation.** Originally developed by Alex Osborn (1953), Creative Problem Solving (CPS) is one of the most widely adopted and thoroughly researched creative process models in the world. CPS acts as a process map with creative and critical thinking tools that support the discovery and resolution of open-ended

predicaments and opportunities. It includes processes to clarify the problem or opportunity (Clarify), generate ideas (Ideation), develop solutions (Development) and plan for action (Implementation). CPS is an easy to learn and fully repeatable process that closely parallels the stages included in individuals' natural creative process efforts.

**Delight in the byproducts, improved strategic thinking and engagement.**

When teams start using CPS, strategic thinking becomes second nature and employee engagement improves. Teams that apply CPS to challenges and opportunities report increased productivity and effectiveness at individual, group and organizational levels; increased confidence in problem solving, generating and evaluating ideas; and collaboration. Common comments from teams using the process include "I actually feel like I've been heard" and "the process creates a more positive environment because no one has to worry about being shot down."

Fostering a culture of innovation means changing your culture. Pay attention to the processes you employ and develop an innovation strategy that explicitly spells out what you're doing, why and how. Make sure the strategy includes learning and applying the Creative Problem Solving process and delight in a more enjoyable work climate, an increased capacity for strategic thinking and improved employee engagement. ©