

HOUSTON, WE HAVE... LIFT-OFF:

building a launch pad for innovation in the public sector

As Denmark's MindLab Manager Christian Bason explains it, innovation has always been a part of the public sector, but too often it is fragmented, incremental and is dependent on a few "fire souls" to drive it. He and others suggest there is another way and that innovation across the public sector is imperative if we are to successfully grapple with the major issues that face us today.

"In the private sector if you don't innovate you're out of business, innovation is essential to survive," says Bason. "Public organisations, however, can survive sometimes even thrive without being innovative."

Bason says there are a number of barriers to the public sector moving to a more innovative approach. Institutional frameworks, changing politics, media exposure, public opinion and intense finan-



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cial scrutiny can all lead public managers to be risk averse.

"If the goal is really to better meet the needs of citizens then it is important that managers work through these issues," he adds. "Our work as public servants at MindLab is to promote innovation as part of the public management

ethic – to make it a natural part of how the public service operates."

MindLab is publicly funded and represents three ministries – the Ministry of Economic and Business Affairs, the Ministry of Taxation and the Ministry of Employment. Their role is to work cross-government and across the public and private sector to directly benefit Denmark's citizens.

"As the Permanent Secretary of Economic and Business Affairs said at a re-launch of MindLab two years ago, we have license to be the loyal opposition. We have been tasked with being constructive critics within the system and to work from a citizen-centred framework," Bason says.

"What we have seen in Denmark and other European countries in the recent past is a focus on solutions within internal administration to run more efficiently. This is important work, but in a way that's been easier than having an external focus and looking at ways to create value for citizens.

"In dealing with external issues, even in small pilot programmes or just workshops where very little is being risked, within government there is often a lack of willingness to explore 'wild' ideas and very little energy is spent on looking at new ways to solve problems. Innovation often only occurs when individual fire souls show major feats of leadership and accomplish things in spite of the barriers. Our goal is to make creative thinking and innovative solutions standard operating procedure."

Bason is hopeful for the future though. He notes that what he is seeing in places like the United Kingdom, the United States and



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Denmark is a growing momentum about innovation in the public sector. He says part of this change is coming as public servants step outside of their silos and collaboratively work to solve problems. In Denmark, MindLab fosters these new innovative approaches. For example, in a recent cross-government meeting held at MindLab on climate change, a large chunk of melting ice was set in the middle of the meeting room to serve as a reminder of what was at issue.

"The point is, when public servants come together to discuss and make decisions regarding these issues they are not just representing their ministry, they are representing the country and its citizens. A big part of our work is to bring citizens and their perspective into the process.

"One of the concerns we hear from public servants who we work with is that by increasing citizen participation we may be falsely raising expectations. It's a legitimate concern, but what we've found is that citizens are savvier than public servants give them credit for. Citizens willingly contribute to public processes and they do it with a clear understanding that they are adding to a wider dialogue."

INNOVATION IN NEW ZEALAND

Centre for Social Innovation Chief Executive Justine Munro suggests that here in New Zealand we need to build new approaches to developing and testing potentially transformative ideas.

"Governments everywhere, not just in New Zealand, have often approached the piloting of new programmes in a way which stymies, rather than supports, innovation. Delivering better outcomes on a large scale is not just about coming up with a great idea. It's about testing and refining that idea in an ongoing conversation with the people who are going to use it and the people who are going to fund and support it.

"Far too often, governments treat pilots as new programmes that need short-term funding. Typically there is little money set aside for evaluation, little ongoing collaboration between funders and innovators, and little sense of how the programme will be sustained and scaled up if it proves effective. We tend to lock programmes into their initial form, and treat changes, particularly significant ones, as evidence of failure. We should instead be celebrating them as evidence of learning."

Munro adds that often these pilot programmes languish, never quite getting rolled out beyond their initial sphere of influence. They frequently die quiet and slow deaths as funds dry up and programmes are no longer the flavour of the month.

"We can do better," Munro adds. "Governments around the world are now starting actively to draw from the worlds of technology and design in developing and

testing new social solutions. They are exploring rapid prototyping, experimental zones, incubators, pathfinders, beta testing, and co-design methods. They're asking 'What can we learn from companies like Google and Phillips Design, or, in New Zealand, Air New Zealand or Formway, about working with people to understand their needs, test solutions, and move products out into the world of users?'"

She points to projects in New Zealand like SKIP and asTTLe, which have involved significant user input and co-creation, along with the work of organisations such as the Young Foundation and Participle in the United Kingdom, MindLab in Denmark and Kennisland in the Netherlands, as showing the way forward.

While Munro agrees that true innovation can be a risky endeavour for the public sector, she says that establishing protected spaces for innovation, such as incubators, can be a useful approach. One of the other ways to reduce the risk is to truly collaborate on projects with the people who will be implementing, benefitting from and potentially funding the programme. "It's no good having a 'gold-plated' solution if you haven't bothered to bring anyone along for the ride."

SOCIAL INNOVATION IN ACTION

SKIP (Strategies for Kids, Information for Parents) might have become one of those languishing pilot programmes Munro refers to when the programme was moved from Child, Youth and Family to the Ministry of Social Development with a budget, but no programme design and staff under pressure to deliver. But as Synergia consultant Philip Gandar wrote about SKIP in 2005, "This inadvertently created the space and conditions for innovation wherein a project team combining policy



MSD's Gael Surgenor, Victoria Parsons and Lorraine Tarrant discuss resources for SKIP.

expertise with people from NGO backgrounds were able to utilise their experience and network relationships to initiate a rapid parallel policy and operational design process with high levels of informal sector involvement."

The target group for SKIP is parents and caregivers of children from birth to five years. The programme has operated under the premise that parenting is complex and not a linear process. To effect fundamental changes, SKIP has been set up to offer options and strategies, as opposed to solutions. In 2006, SKIP was recognised for its contributions toward social change to parenting in New Zealand and was given ongoing funding.

SKIP Manager Gael Surgenor says, "We really used a social innovation approach for SKIP where we had a very clear vision – that all children growing up in New Zealand are raised in a positive way with parents who feel confident about managing children's behaviour as part of a loving, nurturing relationship. At the same time we were very open about how we were going to go about achieving that vision.

"From the beginning we have worked alongside both national partners like Barnados, Plunket, REAP and Parents' Centre, as well

as a number of partners at the local level to develop a programme that has been informed by both research and first-hand experience and knowledge."

These partnerships, while contractual, have been relationship-based as opposed to transactional. This has led to a "renew, review, revoke and revise" approach that has been heralded as one of the lynchpins of innovation.

As one national partner said during an evaluation of the programme, "We now take SKIP into places we are not contracted to, as the SKIP message is now our message".

The benefits of SKIP have been quantitatively and qualitatively documented, but

Surgenor and SKIP team members know there are still too many New Zealand children at risk of violence in the home. A point that was underscored in August when Children's Commissioner John Angus said that violence against children is unlikely to drop over the next three years and that violence is "endemic in too many families, schools and other settings in which children live".

This is the challenge of innovation – to be in it for the long haul and to stay on course with a clear and strategic vision while recognising that we live in a complex and dynamic society where there is also a need to be flexible and adjust to the circumstances.

It's a challenge that SKIP has risen to. As one community worker said in a recent evaluation of the programme, "We could feel weary. We could feel like we have a long way to go. In actual fact we feel part of something bigger – we feel part of changing the ways parent's parent in New Zealand. We feel like we are part of a social transformation that is bigger than us." ■

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