THE INTERSECTOR PROJECT

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RESEARCH TO PRACTICE

Achieving collaborative innovation to address unruly problems

The United States faces a host of complex problems on which government leaders and public agencies at all levels strive to make marked progress, from poverty to climate change to public health. As citizens are becoming increasingly accustomed to experiencing inventive solutions in other parts of their lives, there are greater public expectations of government to create innovative, effective solutions to solve these wicked problems. But there are several roadblocks to public innovation, including bureaucratic processes and rules and a tendency to rely on in-house approaches to addressing public challenges.

Some individuals who work in government are able to overcome these challenges and achieve public innovation, leading their colleagues to see old problems in new ways, developing untried, creative ideas, and discovering what works through

experimentation and no-blame feedback loops. Authors Barbara Crosby, Associate Professor at the Humphrey School of Public Affairs at the University of Minnesota, Paul 't Hart, Professor of Public Administration at Utrecht University School of Governance, and Jacob Torfing, Professor in Politics and Institutions at the Roskilde School of Governance, discuss this phenomenon in their recent *Public Management Review* article, "Public value creation through collaborative innovation" (http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14719037.2016.1192165).

But "banking on 'lone ranger' innovation heroes from within public services organizations is risky," they warn, since these individuals often lack a comprehensive understanding of the problem they're aiming to address or, if elected or serving an elected official, may not be in their role long enough to see the solutions through. The authors suggest that innovation can be more consistently achieved "through dispersed efforts and distributed leadership," looking to "the role of networks and partnerships as venues where public innovation emerges."

In this type of collaborative model, public managers may not be fully leading innovation, but they still play a key role in making it happen, through convening partners and garnering support for the co-created innovative solutions in the institutionalized arenas where actual policy change can occur, the authors note. The authors studied several successful examples of public manager-driven innovation, such as Heading Home Hennepin, the collaboratively created city-county initiative to end homelessness in Minneapolis and Hennepin County, and highlight the importance of "distributive, integrative, and catalysing" public leadership for collaborative innovation. The takeaways below, which relate to the authors' findings on levers for propelling talk-centric collaboration into action, will be of interest to public managers and other leaders interested in convening, managing, and catalyzing cross-sector creation of solutions to public challenges.

# TAKEAWAYS FOR PRACTITIONERS

ENGAGE CIVIC SECTOR ENTITIES IN REFRAMING PUBLIC CHALLENGES.

The authors found that social entrepreneurs, community organizations, and social justice movements, for example, are particularly effective in leading partners to consider complex problems as a set of issues that can indeed be solved, constructively disrupting established government routines, and leading the collaboration to "think outside the box."

- In conversation with the Intersector Project, Crosby shared the example of Juxtaposition Arts (juxtapositionarts.org/), a non-profit that collaborates with academic partners and government agencies in city planning, urban design, and policy fields. Juxtaposition Arts, for example, innovatively reframed the idea of "successful" design from generating increased housing and rental costs to improving communities for current residents, a case study (juxtapositionarts.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/BushPrize_CaseStudy_JXTA.pdf) on the non-profit notes.

USE A PROCESS MAP TO BUILD A TIMEFRAME FOR COLLABORATIVE WORK TO APPEAL TO POTENTIAL PARTNERS WHO ARE DIFFICULT TO PIN DOWN.
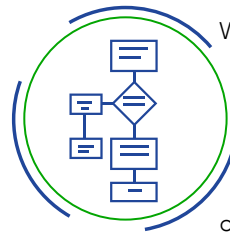
While there is no magic number of days that collaborative work should last, it can be helpful to provide a clear timeframe when trying to get a particularly busy partner involved. A timeframe also allows partners to plan for their involvement in the collaboration, which will invariably require their time and resources. For example, managers can present a schedule of six meetings, with work to be completed in 100 days. It can also be helpful to align collaboration timelines to junctures natural for partners, such as budget cycles or board meetings. Limiting the number of days or meetings can help participants move away from endless talk and push them toward action, which can be key in collaborative innovation. It's also important to remember that not all partners need to be involved in all aspects of a collaboration.

- A process map provides a visual representation of the progress of the collaboration's meetings and other activities. For more on process maps, see this example (intersector.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Process-map.pdf)

- For further discussion of process maps, or graphic road maps, as well as a case study of their use in the Newark Collaboration Process, see the chapter "Designing a Consensus Building Process Using a Graphic Road Map" (cbuilding.org/sites/default/files/StrausCHAPT%2003.pdf) in David Strauss' book *The Consensus Building Handbook: A Comprehensive Guide to Reaching Agreement* (sk.sagepub.com/reference/the-consensus-building-handbook).

TAKEAWAYS FOR
PRACTITIONERS (CONT.)

USE ROUGH CONSENSUS TO MOVE THE COLLABORATION'S WORK FORWARD.

Total consensus can be the enemy of innovation, the authors explain. Rough consensus requires deliberation, summing up discussions, and asking if participants can live with the outcomes. It does not entail formal voting. Using rough consensus can heighten the sense of urgency of the issue at hand, as collaborative partners can expect that they "won't talk this to death," Crosby shared. After the convener delivers a summary of information, he or she asks the group about its acceptability. The convener will gauge the room's reaction, looking for head nodding in agreement, head-shaking in disagreement, or other visual cues. The convener will ask the individuals not in agreement to share their issues with the decision, then work to see if that point can be changed to make it acceptable.

⁞ See "A Short Guide to Consensus Building" (web.mit.edu/publicdisputes/practice/cbh_ch1.html) from *The Consensus Building Handbook: A Comprehensive Guide to Reaching Agreement* for guidance on deliberating, deciding, recording decisions, and handling conflict in consensus-oriented decision-making — which it also does not equate with unanimity — in multi-stakeholder contexts.

PROTOTYPE INNOVATIVE SOLUTIONS AS "PATH-FINDER PROJECTS."
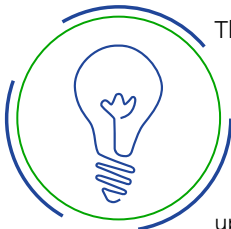
Through adapting approaches to local contexts, collaboration members find their "own path to new and innovative solutions," Torfing shared, and these new solutions, once backed by rough consensus, must be tested and redesigned in daily practice. The valuable outcome of doing so is fast learning for both civic and public partners and lowered "risk for major blunders when upscaling."

⁞ See the Office of Adolescent Health and Administration on Children, Youth and Families Grantees' Tips and Recommendations for Successfully Pilot Testing Your Program (hhs.gov/ash/oah/oah-initiatives/teen_pregnancy/training/tip_sheets/pilot-testing-508.pdf) for practical guidance on how to implement a small-scale version of your project. (Path-finder projects and pilot projects both put theory into action, but the distinction between them lies in path-finder projects' being designed by stakeholders, as opposed to external experts.)

TAKEAWAYS FOR PRACTITIONERS (CONT.)

CREATE CLEAR AND CREDIBLE BENCHMARKS THAT ALLOW THE COLLABORATION TO DEMONSTRATE SUCCESS TO PARTNERS AND OTHER STAKEHOLDERS.

Setting and meeting benchmarks — points of reference to gauge the collaborative's progress — helps communicate progress, which instills confidence and commitment in a new approach. Demonstrating success of a collaboratively derived innovation by illustrating its met benchmarks can also encourage adoption of future innovative solutions. For example, the success of Heading Home Hennepin at a city-county level led to its adoption at the state level. Collaborations can also use interim indicators to assess whether the collaboration is on track to accomplish its goals or requires a strategy shift. This also provides an opportunity for experiential learning.

- For an example of benchmarks used in Heading Home Hennepin, see page 13 of Heading Home Hennepin: The Ten-Year Plan to End Homelessness in Minneapolis and Hennepin County (endhomelessness.org/page/-/files/1564_file_hennepin.pdf).

- See the discussion of Milestones and Critical Events on pp. 31-33 of the University of Wisconsin - Cooperative Extension's "Evaluating Collaboratives: Reaching the Potential" (learningstore.uwex.edu/assets/pdfs/G3658-8.PDF) for guidance and checklists for identifying milestones to be celebrated as signs of collaboratives' progress. Also see discussion of Levels of Outcomes on pp. 113-117, for an explanation of interim or precursor outcomes and the role of these in both communicating progress externally and ensuring the collaboration is on track.

- See Adaptive Planning Measures & Metrics (sparkpolicy.com/tools/overview/adaptive-planning-measures-metrics/) in Spark Policy Institute's "Adaptive Planning Toolkit" for discussion of monitoring progress of adaptive plans, which encourages continuous learning and an openness to shifting strategy over the course of a project.

FOR FURTHER READING

From Intersector Insights:

∷ Innovation in Public-Private Partnerships (intersector.com/researcher-insights-what-drives-innovation-in-public-private-partnerships/)

Other Resources:

∷ Collaborative Innovation in the Public Sector (press.georgetown.edu/book/georgetown/collaborative-innovation-public-sector)

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