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Stuart Conger

## Social Innovations in the Frontline

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## **Social Innovations in the Frontline**

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## Introduction

A few national governments, notably those of South Africa (Radebe 2009), Australia (Australian Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research 2009), Singapore (Prime minister's office 2009) and the United Kingdom (HM Government 2009) have introduced programs to encourage innovation by frontline workers on the assumption that the workers want change and have ideas how their work procedures or organization could be more effective but are not making their recommendations known because of peer or supervisory contentment with the status quo. Furthermore, the workers may be aware of others who did propose innovations and as a result were badly treated by the organization. Other countries, such as Canada, contract with independent local agencies to deliver services and allow, perhaps even encourage, some innovation in the process although the frontline innovations seldom become a part of the nation-wide service.

Ipsos Mori (2009: 12) conducted a survey of British public servants to gain their perceptions of innovating from the bottom up. Their report stated that

*“there was a strong perception across a number of sectors that while user-centred innovation was preferable, cost savings were a stronger driver to innovations being implemented and sustained. This was especially pronounced in health.*

*...In the police, there was a similar feeling regarding the staff suggestion scheme that was cited by a number of participants. The scheme is seen by as being a way of generating ideas to reducing costs, and therefore of less interest to frontline officers who may not have insight into how to make such savings. And in the civil service a similar note was struck regarding the initiation of cost reduction innovations.*

*...These perceptions point to a hierarchy of innovation outcomes where innovations leading to cost savings are privileged over those which improve conditions for service providers and users. Given the broad preference for user-focused innovations in teaching, health and policing, this ‘hierarchy of innovation outcomes’ has implications for frontline workers’ satisfaction with and interest in contributing innovations.”*

The faith of governments in the potential for acceptable and important innovation by frontline workers is indicative of their ignorance of their own staff. Many social workers, employment counsellors and other workers dealing with the public do not believe in the policies of their departments and frequently subvert them by not providing full entitlements to some clients, as has been well documented by Lipsky (1980). For example, employment counsellors in Canada Employment Centres had to refer unemployed clients to adult retraining programs to meet quotas even though they knew the trainees would drop out early in the program (the dropout rate was often as high as 30%). If these counsellors were to give suggestions for innovations their sensible recommendations for lower quotas and better screening would be received with accusations of their not believing in the mission of the department, when in fact their ideas could save significant dollars wrongly given in support of the adult retraining programs.

The disaffection of frontline workers with their jobs is suggested by an unpublished study of the attitudes of unemployed workers to the Canadian employment offices: the job seekers were more satisfied by the “service” if they simply looked at the job boards than if they spoke to a

staff member. Apparently staff were neither supportive nor encouraging, perhaps reflecting their disdain for their clients or their poor morale.

The disconnect between the frontline and policy makers is often based upon the ignorance on the part of the latter about the clients. The author witnessed a stunning example of this when the strategic planning division of the Canadian employment service anticipated an increasing level of unemployment and recommended that all government offices should be prepared to protect themselves from rioting unemployed workers. The economists had no idea that unemployed workers are depressed; blame themselves for not having got more education, for not having worked more diligently for their employers, and question whether they should have supported their unions in making certain demands over the years. Unemployed workers retreat into their homes and avoid the streets let alone engaging in activities that might be prejudicial to their later employment. To its credit the senior executive dismissed the economists' predictions and expanded the employment counselling service when it was informed of the actual attitudes of the unemployed.

## **1. Managers Responsible for the Implementation of Innovations**

Thus far, we have intimated that the opposition to the introduction of an innovation is based on group and individual perception of the possible threat posed by the innovation. Resistance to change is not solely the function of an individual's insecurity or indifference. The very nature of organization and the types of people found at each level represent unique challenges to the innovator. The following four characterizations of people who actually deliver services to the public and of their supervisors shed light on the task of the change agent.

### **1.1 Street level bureaucrats**

Lipsky (1980) examined what happens at the point where policy is translated into practice, in various human service bureaucracies such as schools, courts and welfare agencies. He argued that in the end policy implementation comes down to the people who actually implement it (e.g. teachers, lawyers, social workers). They are the 'street-level bureaucrats', and they exercise a large amount of influence over how public policy is actually carried out.

Lipsky discussed several pressures that determine the way in which street-level bureaucrats implement policies. These include the problem of limited resources, the continuous negotiation that is necessary in order to make it seem like one is meeting targets, and the relations with (non-voluntary) clients. Some of the patterns of practice that street-level bureaucrats adopt in order to cope with these pressures are different ways of rationing the services, and ways of 'processing' clients in a manageable manner.

The street-level bureaucrat decides what benefits, programs or services each client will receive in spite of the clients' entitlements. Their decisions are based on what they think of the policy or program and the extent to which they think each client is worthy of the program. They can cripple an innovation by denying it to some clients, or half-heartedly implementing it, or indeed in distorting the program. Thus, the street-level bureaucrat must be made a partner in the innovation, and the innovator must be ready to adapt the innovation to the realities as seen by the frontline worker.

Maccoby's (1978) description of three types of supervisors provides the basis for inferring the degree to which they would support innovations within their part of an organization. The immediate supervisors of the frontline workers tend to be either "craftspersons", "organization persons" or "games persons", as he called them.

### ***1.2 Craft person as supervisor***

The craftsperson as supervisor tends to be quiet, sincere, modest and practical and primarily interested in the work itself, the problem to be solved, and the challenge of doing quality work. They have a strong sense of self-worth based on knowledge, skill, discipline and self-reliance. They see others, workers as well as managers, in terms of whether they help or hinder them in doing good work. Rather than engaging and trying to master the system with the cooperation of others who share their values, the craftspersons tend to do their own thing and go along, sometimes reluctantly, toward goals they do not share, enjoying whatever opportunities they find for interesting work. These supervisors are likely to ignore any innovation except those that allow them to do their work more to their liking. I would suggest that at least 50% of supervisors fall into this category

### ***1.3 Organization person as supervisor***

The organization person as supervisor is primarily interested in the good of the total organization; they believe that their future is tied to that of the organization. At best, the organization person exhibits a concern for other people and emphasizes the human side of the organization. At their weakest, the organization person is fearful and submissive, concerned with security even more than success. Identifying with the organization, and seeking safety as part of the organization family, they are also overly sensitive to interpersonal undercurrents and may suffer severe anxiety about the security of their position. These supervisors are likely to see threats in any proposed changes. I would estimate that at least 40% of supervisors are in this category.

### ***1.4 Gamesperson as supervisor***

The type of supervisor who loves innovation (not necessarily for the merits of the innovation itself as perhaps for being perceived as forward thinking) is the "gamesperson". The gamesperson as a supervisor is a risk-taker whose main interest is in the challenge and whose main goal in life is to be a winner. As the label suggests, he or she views life and work as a game, is fascinated by technique and new methods, and takes delight in the tactics and strategies involved in the organization contest. The gamesperson tends to be interested in new developments, is likeable, engaging and gregarious enjoying autonomy. Their attitudes are liberal but more pragmatic than idealistic, and they are not convinced social reformers. The gamesperson is the best prospect to support an innovation, but risks having a short life as the opponents of change gang up on him or her. Would-be innovators want to work for them because gamespersons like new ideas and seem to be able to persuade their superior to provide the resources required to support the development of the new projects. I would suggest that no more than 5% of supervisors are gamespersons.

A further roadblock to workers passing suggestions up the line is found in the work relations between supervisor and worker as revealed in the reactions to the annual performance review. The typical performance review system requires the supervisor to describe the employee's performance over the past year and to recommend performance targets for the forthcoming year along with suggested developmental activities. This is reviewed by the supervisor's manager and then discussed with the worker. The reactions are surprising and dismaying: the employees discover how little their supervisors actually know of them and their work; the employees are terrified of even the slightest hint of criticism being put in their files; and, the managers discover that the supervisors are afraid to criticize a worker. This lack of trust and confidence between organizational levels is a severe impediment to a worker proposing an innovation to an insecure supervisor.

The Australian department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research (2009) recognized the difficulties faced by frontline innovators in trying to get their new methods known and accepted by the most senior executives for widespread adoption in the organization and proposed a ladder of innovation support agents to promote the ideas at each level of the organization from the bottom to the top of each department.

## **2. Innovation at high and low levels in a department**

What are the alternatives to frontline innovation? I would suggest that there are three options:

- a) Funding of external agencies to create innovations.
- b) A research and development centre connected to national headquarters.
- c) Brokers who would mentor external agencies trying to create new methods, help them make connections with similar agencies, and help them get the opportunity to demonstrate their products to senior policy and operations people at headquarters.

Horne (2008) saw the need for brokers and mentors (what he called intermediaries) that would be an agent to help local projects to get recognition and be funded to scale up their projects more widely in the department and have each other integrate their successful innovations to provide an even better service to clients. He listed the values of intermediaries as follows:

- a) Intermediaries support social networks of innovators who may collaborate on some things and compete on others, but all benefit from the connections they make, the exposure to ideas, and the access to unfamiliar knowledge.
- b) Innovation intermediaries in public services also broker relationships between policy makers and practitioner innovators. The purpose of brokering these relationships is to create new ideas for policy, and to create better conditions for an innovation to develop and grow in practice.
- c) They provide solutions to the particular innovation problems that their clients have.

- d) They transfer knowledge and learning from different organizations, sharing the lessons of innovations that have succeeded and failed elsewhere. There is an explicit role for intermediaries to help organizations look around the world and research the way others have tackled similar problems.
- e) They try to match potential partners who could best develop and spread an innovation by working together.
- f) They help organizations understand and define their needs for innovation.
- g) They help organizations to identify and engage with leading practice in other organizations, sectors and countries.
- h) They provide coaching, consultancy and training to organizations running innovation projects.

We might add to this list the following three capabilities that apply to intermediaries working with government departments: 1. Influencing policy is a role that public service intermediaries can play; 2. An advocate for the service user, and. 3. Provide a methodology for innovation, which explains how innovation occurs and provides tools and processes that can be used by the projects.

### **3. Efficiency experts as inadvertent brokers**

One would expect that efficiency experts and social innovators would have little in common in terms of values and interpretation of the mission of the organization. The Canadian employment service had a branch devoted to analyzing organization structure, systems and procedures to ensure the greatest productivity was achieved by departmental activities. Essentially, their goal was to find areas for cost cutting. Like many people in the employment service had doubts about the value of employment counselling and viewed it as a fuzzy area with staff that had difficulty articulating exactly what they were doing, and especially what the outcomes of counselling were.

I invited the director of that branch to do a study of employment counselling but he appeared to be reluctant because he did not see how it could be analyzed in any systematic way. When I reminded him that there were 2,500 counsellors on staff and if he could not find out what they were doing that he would be able to recommend discontinuing the function and thus saving the employment service many millions of dollars. He leapt at the opportunity.

To his amazement his staff discovered that there was a systematic architecture to the employment counselling process starting with an interview to clarify the client's employment problem and help him/her take ownership of certain aspects of the problem, assessing the client's scope for taking ameliorative action, preparing an action plan to which the client is committed and monitoring progress. Certain other methods are available to the client depending upon the need including occupational and labour market information, psychological tests, and training in job search techniques.



The methods improvement people were so surprised and pleased that they had “discovered” that employment counselling followed a systems approach that they prepared an audiovisual presentation that they showed at numerous meetings and became great propagandists for counselling. They had discarded their original aim of reducing the number of employment counsellors.

There are a number of significant differences to be considered if a decision is to be made whether to seek innovation at the frontline, by a contract organization such as a consultancy, a NGO, an incorporated society, or a semi-autonomous research centre. Innovations developed by the frontline or by a contract organization are most likely to be incremental in the changes that it effects and to be adopted only locally as they do not have the attention of senior decision makers whereas an invention centre attached to headquarters has the power of influencing major reforms.

I have had the privilege of being in charge of two social invention centres of the Canadian government. In the first case I was the executive director of a social invention centre (Saskatchewan NewStart Inc.) established as a nonprofit company financed entirely by the government of Canada but owned by the federal minister for employment, the provincial minister of education and a five person board of directors, of which I was chairman. This unusual arrangement was deemed necessary because the federal government wanted major changes in the training curriculum of unemployed workers but the design and delivery of such training was the constitutional responsibility of the provincial ministry of education, but these ministries were not interested in causing changes to be made. It was thought that such a company could be free of jurisdictional issues, union contracts binding governments to certain procedures, practices of the public service commissions and of the government procurement agencies. These freedoms were considered necessary to allow full flexibility and prompt action. Our budget was guaranteed for five years and the monies released on acceptance of an annual proposal containing concept papers describing our intended work.

In the second case I was a director general in the federal department responsible for the employment services. My staff of about 65 people were charged with: inventing new methods of career guidance for school children and for adults; creating new methods of job search for unemployed workers; developing and installing a competency-based professional level in-service training program for 2,500 employment counsellors; undertaking an overhaul of the Canadian Classification and Dictionary of Occupations; and, the creation and organizing of an annual national conference on career development. The projects required approval of the deputy and assistant deputy ministers on the basis of concept papers. My branch was not designated as an official innovation unit but became recognized as such because of the number and range of projects we took on over time.

As I look back over these two types of innovation centres I have come to the conclusion that independent invention centres have many advantages, and that the departmental invention centre requires very senior executives who are aware of the inadequacies of current procedures and have an appetite for innovation and risk-taking. The frontline efforts at innovation have merit for incremental changes but are unlikely to produce significant improvements in services.

Anyone who has tried to introduce innovations to frontline workers knows well the reluctance to adopt new ways. When, at the strong urging of the union representing employment counsellors in the Canadian employment service, a training program was introduced many of the counsellors took early retirement or asked for transfers to avoid being trained. Similarly, when the Canadian Revenue Agency tried to introduce computerization of tax returns and

information concerning tax regulations so many of the frontline workers objected that the government had to make the introduction voluntary. These two examples of frontline resistance to change are offered as indicators of the difficulty in getting workers to innovate, and indeed to show that those who might like to innovate might be actively discouraged by their peers.

#### **4. Are frontline agencies innovative?**

The author conducted a five-day workshop with members of Socialt Udviklingscenter SUS in Copenhagen on the creation of social inventions based upon his book (Conger 1974). Subsequently they held a social invention camp with 50 known leaders of social development projects in Denmark. The participants came up with 102 suggestions for new innovative projects but not one was deemed to be adequately conceptualized to be put into effect. The heads of small social organizations must spend a great deal of their time soliciting funding and do not have the time or resources to invent new processes.

The design of an innovative project takes months to prepare as it starts with a concept of what should be and what is to be done based upon a review of the nature of the problem area, attempted solutions to date, a review of the theoretical and research literature, a study of the requirements of the situation, and assessment of various theories and methods of intervention. The concept study results in preliminary specifications for the desired outcomes, identifying the skills or other factors required to achieve the outcomes, and designing the broad strategies to achieve these goals. It is not something that practitioners can do on short notice.

SUS, as an experienced and successful innovation center is in an ideal position to serve as a mentor to these other organizations, coaching them on preparing their concept papers and helping them make contacts with funding organizations. In some cases SUS might also help independent projects to join forces.

#### **5. Why a government department might fund a broker**

As the director general responsible for the assistance that the Canadian employment service gave job seekers I received many proposals from individuals and organizations to develop and conduct innovative counselling and placement services. Very few of these proposals were excellent, but most appeared to have the germ of a good idea but were inadequately developed and we often could not be sure just what, in reality, they would do if funded. I am sure we missed some very good ideas because the proponents were not used to drawing up budgets, stating goals in behavioral terms, and dealing with government. Even some who got money apparently never again looked at their proposal and the terms of their contract and did things that were completely unexpected and irrelevant. Had I thought of contracting with an organization that had made excellent proposals and conducted their projects satisfactorily to help these neophytes I would have done so. In addition, I would contract with such an organization to network with various contractors for the purpose of making proposals for next generation projects that would incorporate the best ideas from the isolated projects so we could have offered a better service to unemployed workers, and a more uniform service across the country so all citizens got the same quality service.

## 6. Positioning of a Social Invention Centre

Government departments representing health, agriculture, mining, and fisheries typically have extensive laboratories because they know that research is clearly important to furthering their policies, programs and services. The social departments, on the other hand, have generally not recognized the need to invent new methods of addressing the needs and problems of their clients. To a large extent they believe that adjusting policies and renaming programs will serve them adequately. The social departments do have a grants and contribution fund to support worthy and relevant projects but they do not exercise a follow-up function to learn from these projects. They need to have their own social invention centres to invent new methods that will make them more effective in achieving their goals.

I have come to the conclusion that independent invention centres have many advantages, if they have close connections to very senior executives who are aware of the inadequacies of current procedures and have an appetite for innovation and risk-taking. Saskatchewan NewStart was very lucky in this regard. As it was owned by federal and provincial ministers, the executive director has ready access to the deputy ministers. As the result of one of these meetings the federal deputy minister agreed to fund a national series of demonstration projects of the NewStart Life Skills program. The demonstration projects resulted in the Life Skills program being adopted not only in the national adult retraining program but also in many provincial social service programs.

Social invention centres reporting directly to senior management stand in sharp contrast to small local experimental projects that may take place in conjunction with one or two local offices. These projects may be funded in part by the department or, perhaps more frequently, by foundations and other well-wishers. Because they are so small and isolated from senior management their inventions seldom gain the attention of the policy-makers and therefore, regardless how stellar their results there is very little likelihood that any will be adopted by the department. This is a pity because there are many idealistic social innovators working in hand-to-mouth agencies hoping that their projects will be recognized and scaled up in the organization. The scope of a social invention centre would have the mandate to propose laws and to generate organizations and procedures that affect the ways that people relate to themselves individually or collectively.

There are a number of significant differences to be considered if a decision is to be made whether to seek innovation at the frontline, by a contract organization such as a consultancy, a NGO, an incorporated society, or a semi-autonomous research centre, these are discussed below. Innovations developed by the frontline or by a contract organization are most likely to be incremental in the changes that it effects whereas an invention centre may have the power of making major reforms. A comparison is presented in Table 1, below.

| <b>Characteristics</b>               | <b>Departmental Invention Centres</b>   | <b>Frontline Innovators</b>  | <b>Funded innovators</b>  |
|--------------------------------------|---|--|---|
| Principal function                   | To identify social needs and problems of clients and create practical and new ways to resolve them. To promote the adoption of the inventions by the department and other appropriate agencies.   | Identifies one or more problems with the implementation of policies, programs or procedures and make recommendations to align the work more in line with the intent, and within the limits of the jurisdiction of the unit as well as budget considerations.<br><br>Evaluates policies and programs against the needs and characteristics of clients and make recommendations. | Evaluates policies and programs against the needs and characteristics of clients and make recommendations to develop and implement new ways of achieving the intent of legislation or policies. |
| Access to decision makers            | A social invention centre constantly cultivates senior policy makers and administrators.  | The frontline innovator has no access to senior levels and gets no additional funding for dissemination work.  | Ready access to the branch of the department that awards the contracts.   |
| Isolation from non-productive events | Staff are free from such time-consuming events as meetings on operational issues, preparing responses to complaints, and preparing reports on operational matters.  | Frontline staff have such distractions from their work.  | No distractions except those imposed by the funding branch such as to make presentations, receive auditors, etc.  |
| Funding                              | Senior management provides support based on concept papers submitted by the centre. They top management usually do some monitoring but not second-guessing.   | Must select innovative ideas that fit within the budget of the operating unit.   | As contained in their contract. May also receive funding from other sources..   |
| Certainty of success                 | Uncertain, as the centre attempts to resolve an issue previously unsolved. Chances of success are increased by the thoroughness and originality of the concept paper, the quality of staff assigned to it, and the time at their disposal to do the necessary work. | High, as ideas are based in the immediate work of the unit.  | Moderate as the plan is for an experimental project, but determination and flexibility to change their procedures as they project proceeds.   |
| Territoriality or jurisdiction       | Centres are expected to ignore jurisdictions and find what works regardless.  | Projects respect the jurisdiction boundaries of the department and unit.   | As determined by the contract but usually has the freedom but not the authority to cross  |

| Characteristics                                      | Departmental Invention Centres  | Frontline Innovators  | Funded innovators  |
|--|---|---|--|
|  |   |   | boundaries if they deem it necessary.  |
| Department's tolerance of failure                    | High, as senior management is prepared to gamble that the Centre can do what it thinks it can do.   | Low, as the operating unit expects concrete results that can be accommodated within its regular budget.   | Relatively high as the department knows it can refuse future grants or contracts to the organization if they fail. |
| Promotion of adoption of the invention or innovation | <p>Fairly extensive activity required as the successful invention:</p> <p>(1) may have been prepared and tested with little or no involvement with frontline;</p> <p>(2) may not fit comfortably within the scope of programs, services and jurisdictions of the department;</p> <p>(3) advocacy may be required to get the department to adjust its regulations and terms of reference to accommodate the invention;</p> <p>(4) the invention may have value to other departments, and demonstration projects may be undertaken with them.</p> | <p>As the innovation has taken place in the frontline it may not have been visible to senior administrators and policy makers and in this case will require considerable and respectful advocacy at those levels to achieve widespread adoption. Typically the unit does not have money for advocacy.</p> | Keen to promote what they have done as a means of getting additional contracts.                                    |
| Interaction with potential adopters                  | Frequent and the staff are free to meet with potential adopters anywhere in the country.  | Seldom as innovators are limited by their jurisdiction and budget.  | Keen to promote their achievements with the hope of getting additional contracts.                                  |
| Resources  | Has ready access to libraries, experts, consultants, etc.   | Only the resources available to the unit.   | Typically they are more highly trained than frontline workers and have accessed best practices of other projects.  |
| Training of implementers and their supervisors       | A training program must be prepared and offered by the centre for offices that are going to adopt the program.  | A training manual may be required for other units if they adopt the innovation.   | They may get a contract to do this if their methods are to be implemented.   |

| <b>Characteristics</b>       | <b>Departmental Invention Centres</b>   | <b>Frontline Innovators</b>  | <b>Funded innovators</b>   |
|------------------------------|---|--|--|
| Follow-through activity      | Following the adoption by the department the Centre may monitor and promote the adoption of the innovation  | Senior levels of the department may not become aware of the innovation and no further activity will be taken.                    | Projects may get contracts or grants to do more.   |
| Evaluation                   | The measuring instruments may have to be invented.  | Value would be readily apparent to the unit management   | Important to have some form of evaluation so they do best possible job in the hopes of getting further contracts.                      |
| Return on investment         | In a few cases the invention may be copyrighted or patented and thereby bring revenue. More importantly, it should solve problems that were previously intractable and costly | Typically, there is no revenue source for the innovation but the innovation may realize operational efficiency or effectiveness. | In its evaluation the agency typically prepares a return on investment statement.  |
| Acceptance                   | Invention centres are protected from the enemies of change, as they are usually supported from the highest organization level   | Innovators typically encounter opponents to change who may try to sabotage their efforts. .                                      | Agencies may gain more and more acceptance as they provide improved services and keep the granting or contracting branch well informed |
| Culture of change            | Invention centres are mandated to create change and the workers of different projects support each other.   | Innovators are often lonely champions of their projects.   | Very strong  |
| Management                   | The manager of the centre is a convinced reformer and a great champion for the projects   | The manager has many operational issues to attend to and innovation is a sideline.   | Not always very good.  |
| Importance of the innovation | High  | Medium   | Low  |

Table1: Comparison of departmental innovation centres, frontline innovators and local grant receiving organization dedicated to innovation

## 7. Recommendations

There are but four governments that are known to be interested in promoting innovations in their own delivery of services, apart from the several that are keen to replace the human delivery of services with information technology. The programs aimed at generating innovations all call upon the frontline to initiate new ways of working. Creating a culture of innovation is a major challenge for the many reasons cited in this paper.

It is recommended that government departments establish at a senior level autonomous research centres to create new methods of designing and delivering the programs and services of the department. It is further recommended that these centres be established as not for profit companies or societies, possible in collaboration with other government departments, to enable them to work outside the restrictions imposed by one department's jurisdiction in order that they might create experimental programs that meet the needs of the population being addressed. The need for new integrated services is particularly evident in the very high rates of recidivism, but it is safe to assume that virtually all departments have similar, but less obvious, failures in their current programs.

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