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***Survival Guide for the Federal Innovator***

“Passionate advocacy.” That’s a phrase my boss used to describe how I was working a particularly sticky issue during a meeting this week. When he said it, I wasn’t sure if he thought that was good or bad. In the past, other supervisors said something like that as a way of telling me to knock it off. I let the was-that-good-or-bad question roll around in my head for a couple days until we had our regular check-in meeting. That’s the question I asked him right after we sat down. Initially, he was surprised I asked. He quickly let me know it wasn't only good - he wished more people had it. In another meeting later, he used the phrase to acknowledge another member of our team. I suspect the phrase has entered our work lingo. And, that’s a good thing.

If you’re reading this, I’m betting that you’ve had an experience similar to this in some way. You are an innovator in public service. You want to make a difference, have an impact and do whatever you do better each and every day. You have a passion for public service, channeling that passion into finding ways to make our government work better and do more for our fellow citizens. You’re the person who asks the question “why?” when something that doesn’t make sense is accepted too easily. You ask “how do we know?” when a new initiative is touted as being the perfect solution. Sometimes these questions are welcomed and sometimes they aren’t. Sometimes you’re seen as the wrong person to be asking the question.

For me, I’m fortunate to be working somewhere that (generally) welcomes my ideas and with a boss that appreciates my passion and energy. That hasn’t come easy. And, it certainly doesn’t mean that I’ve achieved a panacea for all my frustrations as an innovator in the federal government. Even with a supportive boss, the potential impact I can make has limitations I must face. From a lack of resources available to office politics to inherent constraints of government agencies, the limitations can seem limitless - a contradiction in terms that you and I know too well . Through it all, here is what I remind myself and offer you to help balance the challenges we face with sustaining the passion for innovation and making a difference.

**Understand yourself and your organization.** There’s no point in charging forward without knowing what you’re really after, what the realities are within your organization, what the “rules” of the game are and what impact you can really make. To get at that, ask yourself these questions:

***Why is this important to you?*** To answer this, you need to know yourself and what drives you. If you’re motivated by status and money, you’re probably not a public servant. Most likely, your motivations are more intrinsic, based on an internal compass guided by your values and commitment to service. Pull out a piece of paper or sit down at a keyboard and list those motivations and values. Mull the list over and think about what that means to your role as a public servant and how it can help focus your passion as an innovator. If needed, will you be able to transcend your own interests to stick to those values? Knowing yourself, your motivations and your own limits of commitment will ground you, allowing you to be true to yourself and your values while being your honest authentic self with others.

***What are the realities in your organization?***  This question gets to knowing where everyone and everything fits. This is crucial to truly understanding your ability to impact change. You need to recognize the dynamics in the relationships between you and your supervisor, your supervisor up through director and the division to the organization as a whole. These dynamics will certainly have some element of “rules” guiding them. These rules could be relatively straight-forward government regulations or more complex, unwritten rules of behavior and organizational strata. Being an innovator, you’ll be tempted to ignore the rules and power through relationship dynamics to make things happen. Resist that temptation. You need to first understand the relationships and rules. Once you understand, you’ll find more success by deciding what rules to bend or ignore and how to power through to get things done.

**Connect with others and develop a network.**  Never underestimate the power of connecting and networking with others to grow your ideas while also sustaining you.

***Give your ideas an opportunity to collide with others’***. Both formal and informal connections are powerful in bringing together ideas, letting them bubble into something bigger and better. Author Steven Johnson hits the nail on the head in *Where Good Ideas Come From: The Natural History of Innovation*. Check out his book or just take a few minutes to get the [distilled version](https://youtu.be/NugRZGDbPFU) on YouTube where you can also appreciate the magic of graphic recording. In connecting your ideas with others’, you will contribute to “collisions” of ideas that can grow “slow hunches” into something bigger and more powerful.

***Feed and sustain yourself to avoid becoming cynical.*** Developing a network with others who share your drive and passion will sustain you when the the slow pace of change seems daunting. When you find that your ideas aren’t taking hold in your office, frustration can build all too easily. Redirect your ideas and energy towards these connections and networks where you will likely get positive feedback and support. At the same time, you’ll become a smarter innovator by learning from both peers and mentors, gaining skills in collaboration. When you’ve hit a wall at work, you can avoid a frustration death-spiral by seeing your ideas and energy take hold somewhere else. The change agent in you will not need to be suppressed while your office slowly moves in the direction you’re eager to jump towards. Cynicism can be kept at bay while you’re channeling your energy in a different direction. When the time is right for your office, you will be ready to help make things happen, having learned much and grown by being active in other outside groups and networks.

***Ride your network to get you where you want to be.*** Your network will help you get you where you want to be. Whether it’s moving up the ladder or moving into another organization, tapping your network will be key. Don’t be afraid to use it - most people will want to help you in some way. After all, you’d do it for them.

**Build your skills in advocating for and validating your ideas.** Your idea may be the best thing ever. But, if people aren’t listening, it will get nowhere. Expect skepticism and make sure you have a plan to counter it.

***Build social capital by sharing your ideas and listening to others.*** Knowing your ideas will likely be met with skepticism, avoid having a meeting being the first place people hear them. Reach out to peers and managers ahead of time. Listen to and acknowledge concerns. Adapt your ideas based on these discussions. The effort to collaborate and share will build the social capital needed for people to listen and be open to your ideas. You will find others echoing and supporting your message.

***Develop external validation alliances.*** Connect your ideas with some level of external validation to ensure your internal audience knows there are others that think or advocate for change the way you do. Seek out people who mean something to the people you’re trying to win over. If they need convincing, spend time to convince them. If they’re on board, seek their advice and ideas on how to “build your case.” Be prepared to let go of owning the idea. If this external validator can make your idea a reality, consider having that person put the idea on the table first. This could be a test for you to transcend your interest in getting credit in order to make something happen. Focus on why the idea is important and feel pride in doing what’s needed to see it through.

***Watch your language***. Know your audience and be aware of your messaging. If you’re speaking a different language, they won’t understand. If they aren’t hip to the latest technologies or jargon that come easily to you, be the liaison to translate for them and meet them where they are. Make accepting the idea easier by using their language, allowing their brain energy to go into understanding the idea rather than figuring out what in the world you’re talking about.

***Learn the art of the well-placed brag and know how to report failures.*** These two were suggested by a respected fellow federal innovator, Sarah Crane. The art of the well-placed brag is all about sharing your wins and bragging on others. Without highlighting successes, people will lose sight of the payoff to taking a risk. Both you and others need to celebrate the wins. The flipside is acknowledging failures and reporting them early. If you’re adopting methods to produce early, simple prototypes, early failure is a positive outcome, allowing you to adapt and pivot for improvements. You can also scrap a bad idea early rather than getting pulled into the bad dynamics of sunk costs that lead to bigger failures later. Don’t be afraid to fail and report a failure. Know that taking risks can lead to failures as well as great success. You need to acknowledge and, yes, appreciate both.

I ran into a former coworker the other day. We’re both in the same boat - balancing going back to school with work and kids. I was telling him that I’m struggling to keep up with it all, especially with the demands of my new job. I mentioned how it would have been smart to stay in my previous unchallenging job where I could have cruised through work while taking on the challenge of grad school. He interrupted me to say “But, that’s not who you are.” He’s right. And, that probably applies to you, too. The person who has the passion to be an innovator and a public servant won’t cruise through work. Although it can often be frustrating, it’s in our nature to make things happen. And, we can and we should. Keep the passion. Be resilient. Take it on. I promise your determination and dedication to being a federal innovator *will* make a difference. If you need someone to cheer you on, give me a call. I’m part of your network now.

AWESOME JOB!!! I simply love this piece. Succinct, deeply thoughtful, and practical.

Let me know if you need help getting people’s attention to this – I would love to see this published.

A+++++++!!!!!!!

Bibliography

Johnson, Steven. (2010). Where good ideas come from: The natural history of innovation. New York: Riverhead Books.

Johnson, Steven. "Where Good Ideas Come From by Steven Johnson." Online video clip of graphic recording. YouTube. YouTube, 17 Sept. 2010. Web. 5 Sept. 2015.