

Working Effectively with People in Government on Open Source Projects

<http://jden.us/talk-2014-osbridge>

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why government?

- Governments have a lot of users
- Governments have an obligation to serve everybody – it's a great place to put your skills to work around accessibility and user-centered design
- They have a lot of fun data
- They directly affect our daily lives
- When civic hackers and governments work together, we accomplish more than either could do alone

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i have a background in public policy, and like many of you, i spend an inordinate amount of time on the internet

CODE *for* AMERICA

. i'm also currently a Fellow at Code for America, a non-profit which works to bring communities and governments together by design and technology. I'll share some things I've learned at Code for America as well as previously, but in this talk I'm speaking for myself, not for Code for America. And for the sake of full disclosure, the application period for next year's Fellowship class is currently open, and if you're thinking about applying, I'd be happy to speak with you more after

civic hacking

I'm going to be using a term you may or may not have heard before - civic hacking & civic hacker. I want to define what I mean by this.



hack

a hack is any improvement on an existing system. it may not have been designed or envisioned originally, but it's a change that makes life better for someone.

I hold a fundamentally positive definition of "hack" and "to hack"



systems are
fundamentally hackable

A hacker holds a world view that systems are fundamentally hackable, that is, amenable to change. hackers keep an eye out for things which could be made better.

A civic hacker, then, is someone who sees cities and communities as just another system to hack.

“civic hacker”

a civic hacker doesn't have to have any particular skill set, and a hack doesn't have to be particularly out of the ordinary. active, engaged citizens, then, could be seen as civic hackers. the key to being a hacker, in my definition, is the attitude, the inclination to want to participate in making things better.

you might *already* be a civic hacker

you might be a civic hacker if, when you see a problem, you work to fix it, instead of just complaining about it

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-James Madison
System Architect, 1787

I. hacking with *humility*

still ahead: II. what the hall?

so this is really two talks in one. the first part i'm calling "hack with humility," which is mostly about communication and awareness. The second part will be called "what the hall?" and we'll address the bureaucracy head-on

why hack?

- we want to make things better
- there are a lot of things which could be better
- for me, it starts with the phrase “life’s not fair”
- well, why not?
- so in all of my work, an underlying theme is I want to make things a little more fair.

why be humble?

- we, the attendees of this conference and conferences like this, possess an impressive array of skills and technical mastery. we can do things it seems those around us can't.
- it's easy to get stuck being impressed with our own skills and knowledge and solid logic
- it's all in our heads. if we want to do good, we have to play well with others.
- we are all profoundly ignorant, and we would do well to listen to others

how might we be humble?

- know and appreciate others' work
- be open to new ideas and suggestions

how might we be humble?

- inclusivity

- know and appreciate others' work
- be open to new ideas and suggestions

“routing around the damage”

- have you ever heard that the best solution to a problem is just not to have that problem?
- this is secession, breaking away. while this can be a valid strategy in some cases, such as building redundant networks, it's not to be taken lightly in group interaction
- it's a power play, and end-run. you might get to ship faster, but you'll be starting from scratch next time and you're not likely to make many allies

no one likes to be called
damaged goods

"if you want to go fast,
go alone.

If you want to go far,
go together"

- organizery aphorism

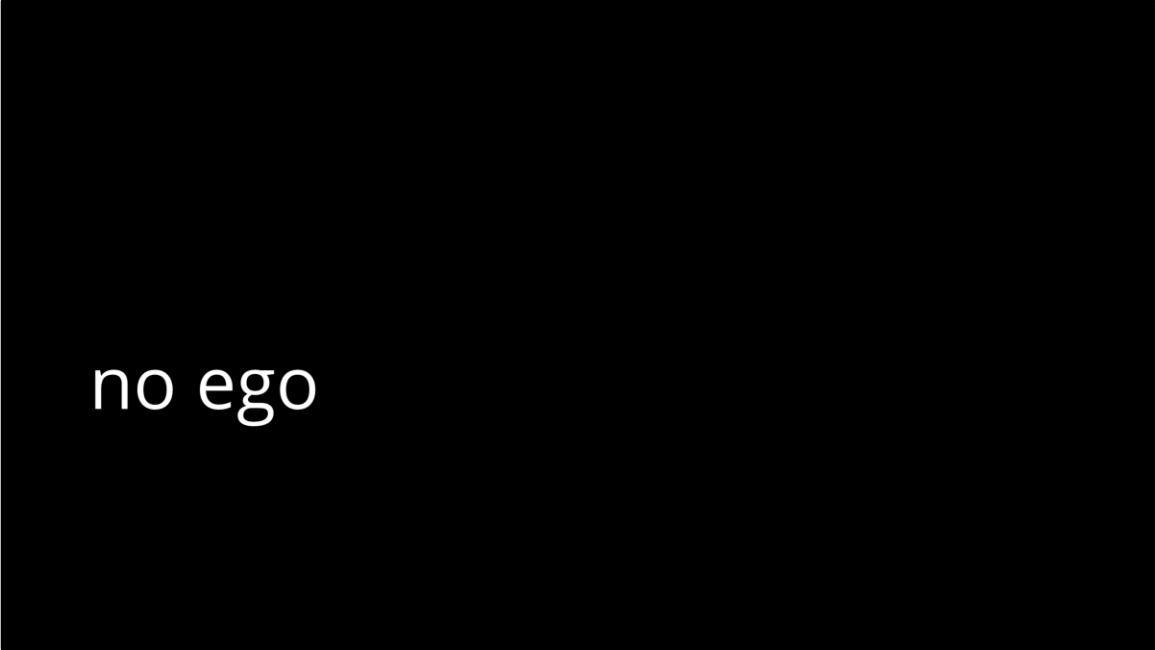
how might we be humble?

- inclusivity
- communication

- know and appreciate others' work
- be open to new ideas and suggestions

communicate!

- communicate your goals, your needs, and your wants
- be open to new suggestions about how to actually get there



no ego

- this isn't a talk about logical fallacies or communications anti-patterns.
- has anyone read "crucial conversations"?
- I want to credit Isaac Schuler of npm, inc for introducing me to another book called non-violent communication.

when I see \$observation
I feel \$emotion
because I need \$need
could you please \$request

- Isaac Schuler, slide 31, <http://bit.ly/1pchusv>

- here's that book as a madlib. this slide is lifted directly from Isaacs' presentation at NodeconfEU last year. Notice that this pattern focuses on making your own internal thought process clear and using it as the rationale to ask for a change in behavior from someone else.

- What it doesn't do it assign blame or motives, and it doesn't put words in people's mouths

Speak plainly

- this means in non-technical language. every group ends up with some jargon; make a conscious effort to avoid introducing your own and to offer explanations when you otherwise can't avoid it
- be willing to translate technical language coming from other places that your group might encounter
- help adapt technical definitions to what is meaningful in a new context
- others often will not speak plainly, and you can always ask clarifying questions

existing words

- in a group you'll come across a lot of things, including existing words
- as a rule, don't try to redefine or replace existing words, even if it sounds strange or wrong to you
- unless it's something critical. then raise it as an issue and propose a change in terminology with your reasoning
- sometimes it matters. often it's just pedantic and derailing

negotiation

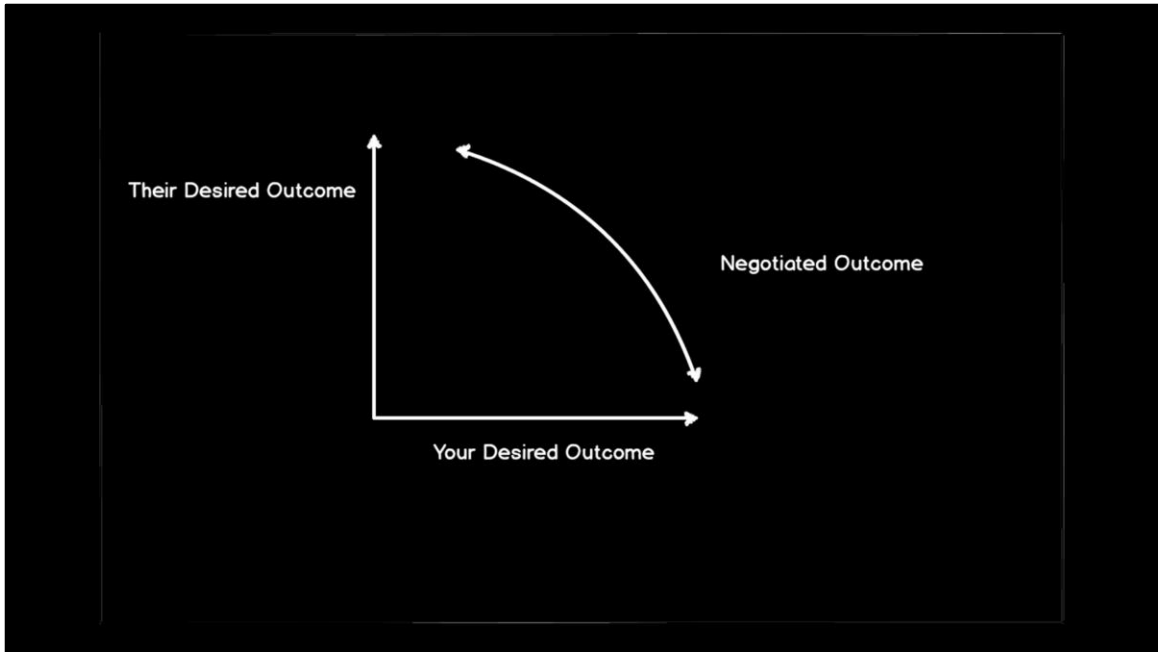
- this is **not** about just getting your way
- negotiation is about finding shared value and reaching consensus

negotiation: prepare

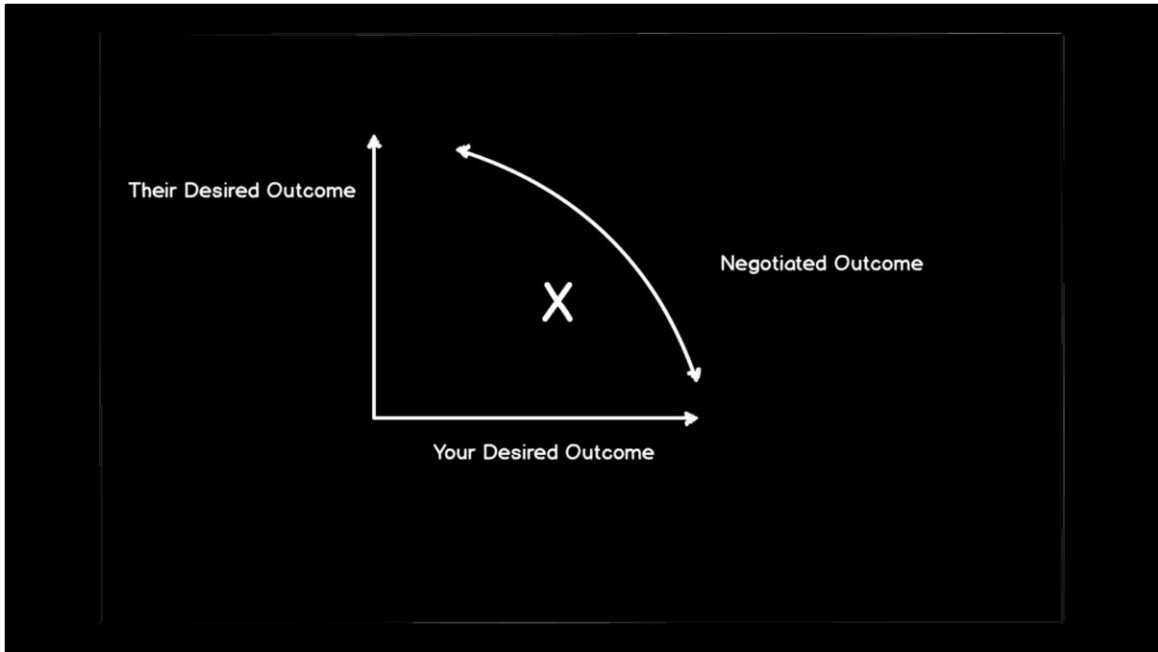
- this is a skill where planning and talking it out ahead of time is really crucial- get a buddy or a mentor to go over your plan with you
- don't let the other party derail you – always go in knowing your alternatives. what's the cost to you of walking away? what's the cost to them?

negotiation: be open

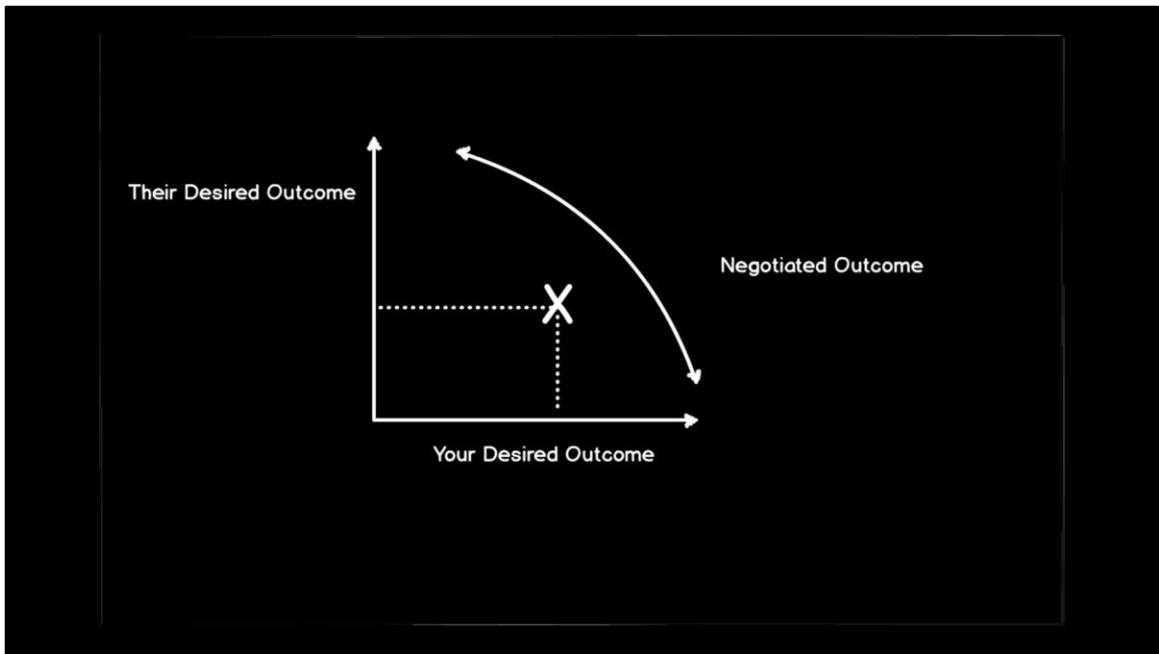
- it's not about tricks or being heavy handed.
- understand the other person's objectives, understand and communicate your own objectives. don't be coy or dishonest. raise possible objections or deal-breakers proactively and in good faith to see if a mutually-agreeable solution can be met.



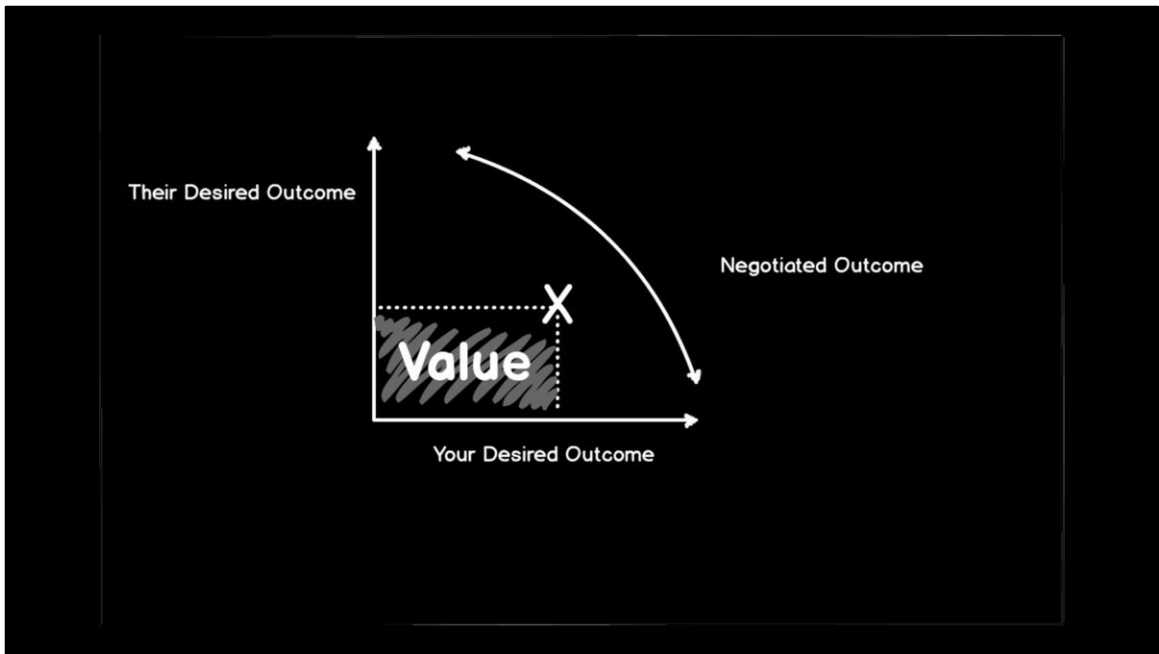
- let's look at a visual model.
- the vertical axis is the range of the other party's desired outcomes
- the horizontal axis is your desired outcomes.
- anywhere in the middle, let's say is a possible agreement



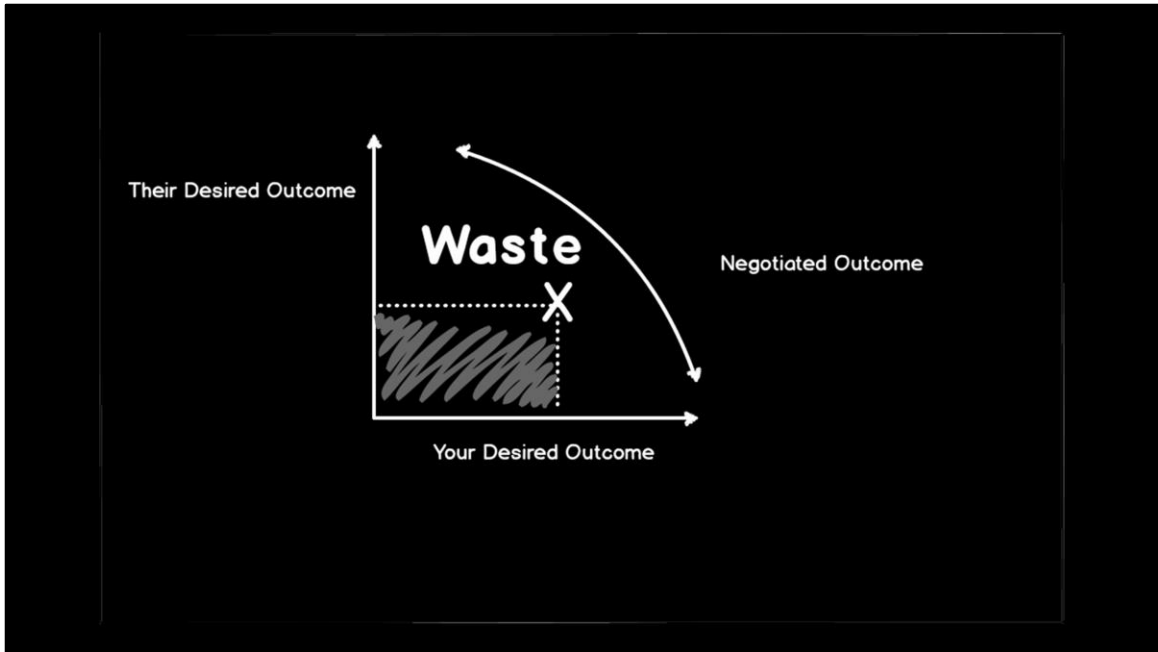
- imagine that this x is the first thing we asked for. we go in, tell them what we want, and they more or less come back and say okay.
- we're done, right?
- we "got to yes!"



let's see. we got better than halfway towards getting what we want, and a little under half way for what they want.



this area out to here is the value that we were able to negotiate in this deal



- but all of this area outside under this curve is waste! we left stuff on the table
- we even left off some value that was more favorable to both parties!
- how might we communicate within a negotiation to capture more of that value and minimize waste?



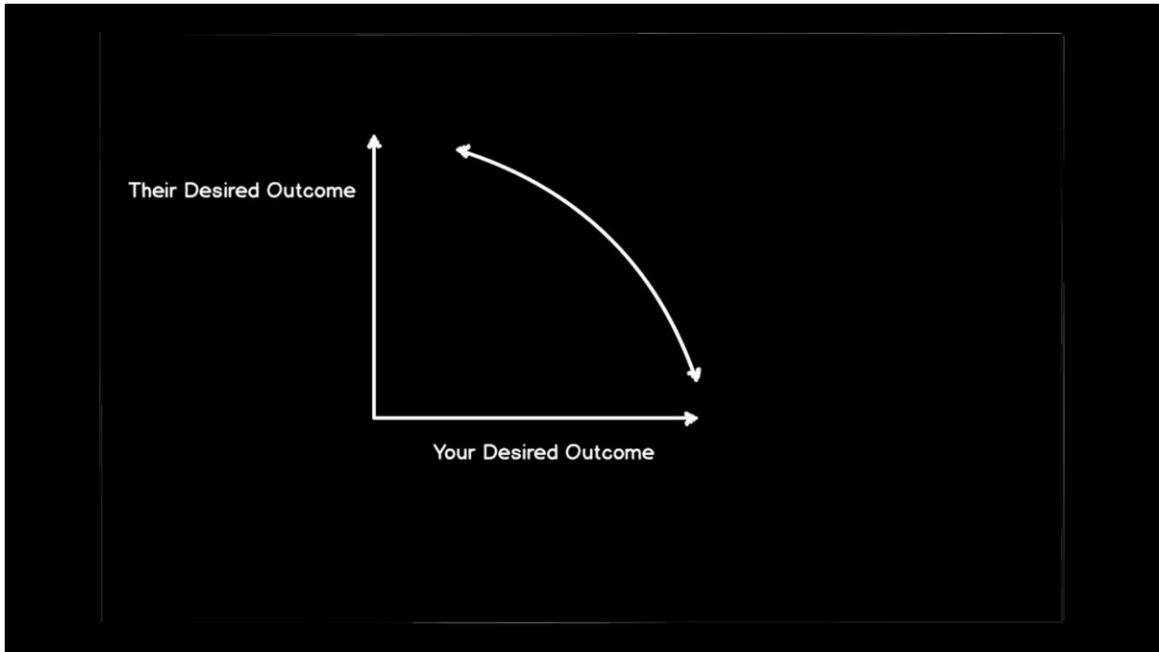
of course, we don't always have clear visibility of the axes of the decision space. it can feel like a shot in the dark.

we can start by being clear about our own desired outcomes and disclosing those to the other party.



from here, we can make tentative proposals and ask questions to learn more about the outcome axis desired by the other party.

again, the key is to be transparent about your motivations, confident in your requests, and honest in how you frame the negotiation



when the landscape is clearer, we can be more straightforward about the tradeoffs, build trust, and help everyone be more happy with the outcomes and – potentially – more willing to compromise and reach a consensus

this bit about negotiation is based on the assumptions that your interactions with people are a repeat game – that is, relationship-based rather than transactional-based. this is a good assumption, especially when working in fixed geographic communities.

build trust

negotiating fairly and communicating openly and honestly builds trust. this makes it easier to work over time towards larger and more ambitious goals. shared work experience also builds trust. but this all is hard work. thinking critically, is this all just early optimization? is this another example of waterfall processes and big design up front?

delivery as a strategy

open source is well suited to continuous delivery. when decisions are made and rationale is documented in the open, and code and design changes are discussed and reviewed in public, we can move more quickly and ship more frequently. delivering smaller chunks more often is a good way to turn a single-project engagement into a relationship-based interaction. this can build trust by showing reliability and commitment on your part, but it can also create more interest and engagement from your other stakeholders by helping them become more comfortable with uncertainty inherent in many technology projects, and with the inherent feeling of lack of control. shipping in small and documented increments can help close the loop between cause and effect in a project's development and help other stakeholders feel in control.

share credit

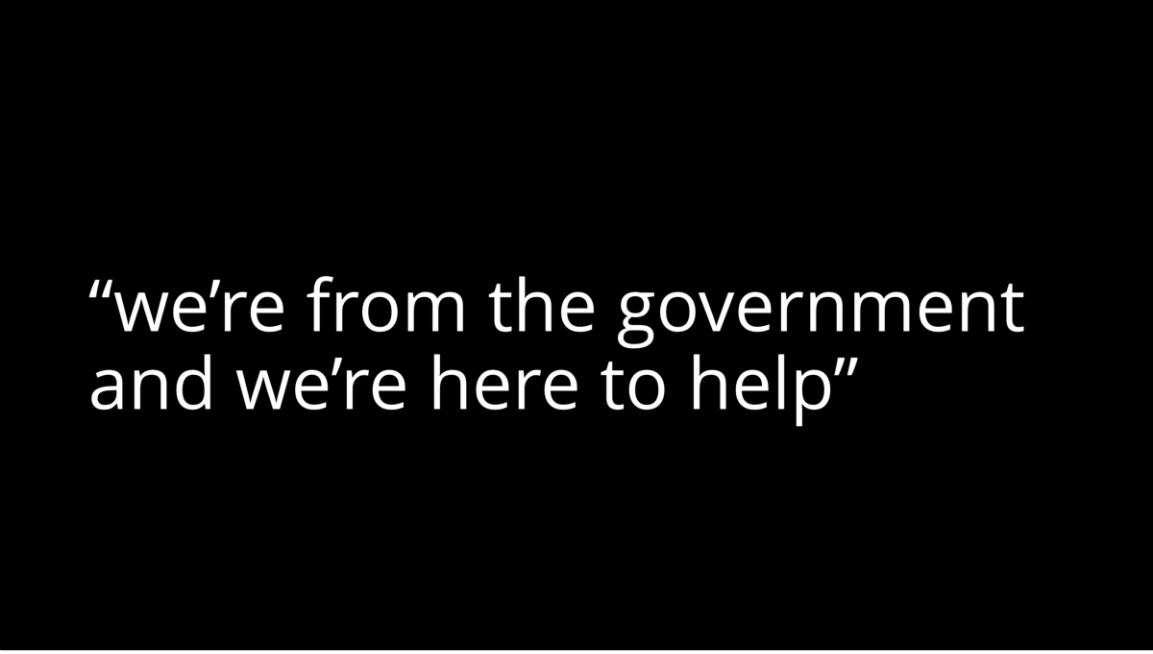
everyone wants to look good. find opportunities to acknowledge contributions from non-technical stakeholders and learn from their expertise. this is all part of being humble and is good for the health and emotional well-being of the project team.

II. what the *hall*?

bureaucracy is hard to spell but it's not a bad word

in part 1 we talked about being humble in service to the project team. it could really be applied to all sorts of open source projects and general coalition-based organizing

what's special about governments? when you think about environments where you find hacking and creativity, government bureaucracies might not be the first places which come to mind



“we’re from the government
and we’re here to help”

government employees are people too!

despite stereotypes of lazy or corrupt officials, people in the government are fundamentally smart, well-meaning, and dedicated public servants who operate within a specific structure. let’s explore some of the organizational psychology, incentive structures, and management approaches in government.

follow the \$

follow the variable. the most important piece of policy in any government is the annual budget. this determines what money gets spent and how; which projects are started, expanded, or killed. reading the budget reveals a government's priorities.

budgets also set the annual pulse of the government. just as you might time interactions with the press around their deadlines and publishing schedules, it helps to be aware of the timing of the annual budget cycle.

department heads especially are preoccupied in the months leading up to the budget setting process. if the project you're working on needs money to be appropriated, it's super important to prepare ahead of time. if it's smaller in scope and you just need some time from government officials, this might be a harder time to get ahold of them. plan accordingly.

elections

elections, especially changes in administration (that is, the mayor or city manager), have a big influence on the priorities and ambitions of department heads.

during a heated election – or in an unpopular administration – people will be less willing to take risks.

towards the end of an administration, people will be less willing to take on new projects no matter how safe.

and at the beginning of a new administration, new ideas – as long as they match up with the publically stated priorities – may be more likely to gain traction

regardless of the timing, matching projects you want to pursue with others' priorities makes it more likely people will pay attention and return your calls and emails.

appointed? classified?

know who you're working with

in governments, people are generally either appointed by a political process or hired into a classified position with a generically defined job description. as you might imagine, this affects their motivations. appointees generally have much more leeway, and serve at the pleasure of whoever appointed them. their tenure often matches that of the elected administration.

classified employees are the front-line employees who make an agency work. they work in well-defined positions and are most often career-track. they may have seen many administrations and many different policy directions. they may be less likely to get on board if they think you'll make their job harder without any tangible benefit to them, or they may simply think you're a flash in the pan and can outlast you.

but classified employees also offer staying power – if you can involve them and make them happy, you can tap into the actual operations of a government agency and potentially have a much bigger – and more long-lasting – change with your project.

any project that wants to make the front-line citizen experience better will probably involve front-line agency employees.

classified refers to the job descriptions. these are rigidly defined and may restrict the ability of employees to take on new tasks. "not in my job description" may be a source of frustration to a hacker used to taking on everything, but it's a protection to employees to keep them from getting assigned too much additional work without being compensated for it.

employee pay in bureaucracies is determined by a formula to prevent graft, corruption, and illegal political discrimination.

keep following the \$

procurement and purchasing

a lot of the frustration you might feel in government technology projects comes from the way governments buy goods and services.

again, for reasons of preventing graft, fraud, and abuse of public funds, purchasing is controlled through a series of well-defined procedures and rules.

unfortunately, these rules don't exactly match up with how software – especially open source software – is built.

it's also one of the reasons many government employees don't have experience interacting with open source project teams. vendor contracts are often structured in ways that create very siloed development.

operations & sustainability

identify and address operational challenges around your project. where will the app run? who will maintain it? will city IT be involved? who will be responsible and accountable for security and privacy issues around your app?

address these proactively.

context is key

Who are the people and groups in your community who care about this issue? Who would benefit from the proposed changes? Who might be disadvantaged or hurt by them? Who has already been doing work in this area? What has been tried in the past? A good afternoon of research can give you a great basis for talking in an informed manner about your project and its context, and can also lead you to improving your idea or avoiding a lot of duplicated or wasted effort.

it's also a good idea to RTFM and read the source. In government, this is the law and regulations. You don't have to be a lawyer to understand what's being said. Fortunately, most states and other governments make their laws and rules available online. Having some knowledge of the existing rules and regulations can go a long way in demonstrating your level of interest to partners in government (and other organizations!) - even if it's just enough to be able to ask an intelligent question or two. It shows you've done research and you understand some of the basic operating parameters and constraints.

Thank you

- Questions, comments, feedback
 - @_jden (that's an underscore) / jason@denizac.org
- Slides, etc
 - <http://jden.us/talk-2014-osbridge>