# Case Study

Public Sector
Embracing Digital Transformation

# Inspiring IT Cultural Change

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Darren W Pulsipher & Amy Tong – Aug 26, 2021

## How is your organization adjusting during these uncertain COVID times? Amy Tong CIO of California, gives her insight into cultural change.

On this episode, Darren talks to Amy Tong, CIO of the state of California, about inspiring cultural change in the wake of the COVID pandemic.

**Video**: Youtube Channel
**Podcast**: SoundCloud

For over five years, Amy has served as the state CIO, appointed by Governor Brown and continuing under Governor Newsom. She worked as a technologist in the public sector for twenty years in a variety of areas from environmental science to CalPERS, to health and human services before being appointed CIO.

On March 13, 2020, Amy was hosting a meeting discussing, ironically, the need to accelerate the goal of broadband service for all Californians, when the COVID shutdown was ordered. Immediately after that, the state had to transition over 200,000 state employees to telework and implement distance learning. Overnight, the broadband issue became an urgent matter in dealing with day-to-day business. The state started with 5% capability for telework and got up to 92% capability within a month.

This was the biggest operational hurdle of the pandemic. People had to get used to working remotely and there was a shortage of supplies, which made it even more difficult. The whole change, however, happened relatively smoothly. People were understanding and flexible and allowed continuous improvement to happen.

This is a process that would normally take years to accomplish. The difference is that people didn't think twice to say "this is what needs to be done" and got moving instead of overanalyzing everything. Everyone just made things happen, even though it wasn't perfect.

Cybersecurity was also a hurdle, as people working from home had to use the same good practices as if they were in the office, and that took a bit of a cultural change.

One surprising change was that the desire for using an evidence-based decision making process also accelerated overnight. It sounds a bit like an oxymoron in that everything couldn't be overanalyzed, but on the other hand, the focus narrowed on those critical decisions that required evidence-based support. The unimportant things got pushed aside because there wasn't enough bandwidth to do everything.

The state is still learning what the workforce will look like moving forward. Telework remains for the foreseeable future, and some might become permanent because there has been an increase in productivity. In addition, positions that don't work well with telework need to come back to a safe environment. Employees' well being is also a factor in the new dynamic.

Government and other organizations need to keep a balance between the highly tactical last 18 months and strategic planning for the future. Amy keeps the strategic view in the state 2023 plan as the "North Star," but also focuses on current incremental improvements to deliver

services. There is an environment of understanding that things aren't going to be perfect as the state returns to a new normal.

Amy has two cultural goals for her department stemming from the pandemic: People in support positions need to be able to connect their work to the positive changes and impacts to keep up morale, and the environment should become more visionary, reminding workers of the strategic North Stars.

To maintain a positive cultural shift, leaders must model the way and take into account employees' well being in their decisions. This includes being flexible with how they work best and giving them the confidence to make decisions to feel fulfilled and empowered. And if things don't go perfectly, dust it off and move on.

Amy's advice for other state CIOs would be to do a lot of proof of concept work, rolling up sleeves and trying things out, and be open to different ways of solving a problem. The outcomes of proof of concept better informs leaders in decision making than just trying to analyze things.

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