4 LESSONS FROM BOSTON'S OFFICE OF NEW URBAN MECHANICS

Nigel Jacob is Co-chair for the Mayor's Office of New Urban Mechanics, City of Boston – a "people-centered R&D lab, embedded into local government that's focused entirely on the needs of our residents."

Boston's Office of New Urban Mechanics was launched by Mayor Thomas Menino in 1993, who, according to Jacob, had "a particular vision around the role of local government and mayor, and especially leadership, with respect to driving change and innovation." When Menino's successor, Mayor Walsh, took over in 2014, he scaled the department up and it's now 14-people strong.

Jacob shared the four key lessons that the office has learned so far:

1. How you build is as important as what you build

How you surface the challenges you're going to work on – that process is as important as the end goal. The team has a three-stage model, explore, experiment and evaluate, which is an iterative approach based on prototyping and experimental solutions.

The team spends a lot of time looking for opportunities and challenges, by talking to the community, peer government agencies, researchers, startups, social entrepreneurs and others. It looks for projects that have the potential to impact people in the city and scale.

The team pushes these ideas hard. One of its mantras is, 'If we're not failing periodically then we are not trying hard enough." More often than not, failure is the middle path: In many cases, the experiment works to some degree but can't scale sufficiently.

The team found that it is important to stay involved in the scaling of projects to get them off the ground, instead of just handing them off to the department concerned.

In action

The office was asked to help create a lab to focus on middle-income housing in Boston. The city has lots of expensive luxury housing and a lot of subsidized housing but little to offer middle-income earners who often can't afford to live there.

The 'housing innovation lab' started by working to understand who middle-income earners are. They developed a series of personas, based on collaborative events, interviews in people's homes and other research. Through this people-centric design approach, the team was able to develop unique functional insight.

2. Build what people actually want

When confronted by a new challenge, local government tends to look at how issues have been addressed previously and redeploys some of those solutions. Boston is striving to change this.

In action

Until 2012 registering your child for school was a "horrible user experience". Parents had to read a complex document with information on all the available schools, then select their top three choices. This put many parents off and their children ended up in schools that weren't as good. So rather than assuming that if you give parents all the information they will make the right decision, the team set out to improve the user experience around the information. The team developed a platform called Discover to make the navigation of the school options easier, like TripAdvisor, allowing parents to compare schools.

> "The idea was to enable citizens to go out and do something directly, with support from the city."

Interestingly, the same complicated algorithm powered the new system — all the team did was hide the complexity and make it much easier to interact with the bureaucracy.

3. Use technology to build trust

Although many ongoing discussions focus on how to use technology and innovation to drive efficiency, which is critical, there is another level beyond the transactional way governments traditionally work. This is much more relational and is about developing real, working collaboration with residents based on trust.

From surveys, the team discovered the public's perception of government was as some faceless bureaucracy and looked at how it could use technology to facilitate more direct and human dialog between the residents and government.

In action

For example, via the city's BOS:311 app, citizens can report things that need fixing, like potholes or public lighting. Once fixed, the city worker responsible snaps a photo of the repair and sends it to whoever reported the

fault. Some include a team photo. The idea was that if the city administration could show citizens that there are real people fixing the problems, not robots, citizens would feel differently about the experience. This proved true.

When photos are included, it is more likely that citizens will report issues in future. This might not be exactly about trust, but it's part of the continuum of building a trust-based relationship between city and citizen, Jacob explained.

4. Be delightful

Civic engagement is often used to inform the public or to get the public to engage in decision-making, but this is missing the opportunity to rethink engagement. Rather than the citizens simply telling the city what they wanted, the idea was to enable them to go out and do something directly, with support from the city.

In action

The team launched an initiative called the Public Space Invitational and put out a call for creative designers to make public space more fun, delightful and approachable. This resulted in a "landslide of ideas". One of the projects was looking at Boston City Hall, which is often considered to be an ugly and forbidding building. The team was approached by an artist who suggested simply putting colored tape along the steps, which resulted in the Stairs of Fabulousness.

STAIRS OF FABULOUSNESS (2014 Winner)
Simple. Colorful. "Rainbow stairs will make City Hall 400% more fabulous."

This inexpensive solution resulted in people being naturally drawn up the stairs to an area that until that had been unused.

"We realized we had to do something with that [area], which took us on a whole new journey – based on something as simple as tape," Jacob concluded.