

The Future Of Innovation ... Is About Making Paradoxes Work

Re-imagine the role of civil service leadership for an innovative society

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The future of innovation – what does this mean with respect to government administrations and the civil service? Innovation in the public sector needs a different perspective, because of the long-term implications of its measures on the whole of the society and the economy.

It is a crucial task for any government administration to have the ability to identify and implement new, better, more effective and more efficient solutions, in other words: to meet the challenge of being a permanent social innovations designer.

A globalized and flat world means to a certain extent the end of sovereignty and decisionmaking-processes as we have known it for the last 200 years. Governments still might be the most influential single player on the ground as we can observe in the current economic crisis, but even then it has to act within governance structures rather than in a mono-dimensional and hierarchical way. This has been described in literature as a shift from government to governance. Probably metagovernance might be the more appropriate term – which means the sovereign use of all the three types of ruling: hierarchy, market and network.

What does this mean for leadership in the civil service? The crucial question is: how to innovate the mindset of the civil service? What should be the mental maps of an innovative civil service in government? Mental maps that guide beyond limitations in various perspectives.

1. The Balancing Map – balancing innovation and stability

Leadership in a government administration is more challenging than in any other organization, because it cannot focus on one single interest only. A permanent re-thinking capacity is necessary as well as the ability to design and implement new and innovative elements within a legal framework guaranteeing reliability and stability. Thus an Innovative administration has the task to be “a living paradox”. Examples for this are:

- stabilize the staff (-identity) to promote innovation and change
- stabilize the organization under uncertainty but prepare it to adopt innovations at the same time
- stabilize government institutions whereas they are undergoing change itself and initiate social innovations in the society at the same time.

2. The Beyond Boundary Map – not being bound but being both

An innovative government administration is a multi-perspective corpus. It is going beyond, but is bound to one strong purpose: the public good. An innovative civil service has the capacities to

- combine inside and outside perspectives
- combine today and tomorrow perspectives
- combine symmetric and asymmetric collaborative skills

3. The Oscillodox-Map – choosing the appropriate side of a paradox

An innovative government administration creates and brings into practice new solutions by oscillating between contrasts. Such as:

- stability and innovation
- commanding and cooperating
- transforming and observing

An innovative government is and always will be accountable to and responsible for their citizens, therefore it has to be a government which initiates as well as stabilizes passages to the future in a world of uncertainty – a government mastering passages.

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