Civic Things Handbook

How local governments can serve people better through effective communications and digital services.

Department of Civic Things

Civic things

'Things'

> 'Thing' or 'ting': a Norse form of local, democratic governing. The people of a village would gather to discuss matters and everyone could voice their opinions.

Civic things

Civic things are elements of our communities that we need and love:

- **Services and programs** (protection, permits, classes)
- **Amenities and infrastructure** (streets, parks, benches, art, pipes, signs)
- **Ideas and governance** (elections, civic engagement, equity)

We believe these things should work for everyone in the community. As the needs of a community change over time, so must civic things.

The challenge

Small, local government budgets and employees are stretched thin. They are often forced to be reactive rather than strategic in their service delivery. The Great Recession, coronavirus pandemic, and rising pension costs have made balancing a budget hard. The cuts typically result in decreased resident satisfaction and employee morale.

Asked to "do more with less," public servants are wearing more hats than ever. They provide critical public services but often lack the tools and methods to provide good digital services.

This can lead to inefficient or inequitable services, frustration, and decreased public trust. Without trust, tax measures fail. Elected officials rotate through like a revolving door and satisfaction levels continue to drop.

The solution

What does the solution to these problems look like? Local government services are easy to use, both by the public and public servants. People can easily find them through an internet search or on your website. They understand the information without a high level of education or training. They can complete forms and transactions without friction.

Employees are empowered to improve digital services and information over time. They don't need a lot of training to use the tools. They have the space, permission, and support to make improvements.

People have helpful and timely information so they can stay safe during emergencies. They know how to get the services they need. They don't dread dealing with their local government. Instead, their experience of government services is good. They feel good that their tax dollars are well-spent. Budgets get easier to balance due to efficiency gains.

This results in increased levels of satisfaction with and trust in local government.

Foster a service-minded culture

Context

The under-resourced nature of local government often leads to a deprioritization of workplace culture, while it also adds pressure to increase efficiency. The "do more with less" mantra has turned into the equivalent of tired nails on a chalkboard to most public servants.

Work culture is made up of several elements including:
- Purpose (this inspires and motivates us to improve things)
- Technology and equipment (we need this to be productive and do good work)
- Support (we need this to grow and feel appreciated)

It's common to see a separation between employee engagement programs and efforts to streamline or improve services. It's important however to recognize the intersection between the employee experience of government and the community experience.

By linking engagement programs with efforts to improve service delivery, the potential within public servants will create a domino effect of creative thinking. Rather than do more with less, do the right things with less.

It takes leaders at all levels for work culture to be authentic and sustained. It requires openness, inclusiveness, adaptability, and collaboration.

In San Rafael, California, we built a culture initiative called [Together San Rafael](#) that was co-created by employees over the course of several years (and it continues to evolve). Together San Rafael includes learning opportunities, recognition programs, and cross-departmental teams created to work on the City's most pressing challenges: homelessness, technology modernization, housing, and more.

In addition to the large, complex challenges, this service-minded work culture also encourages improvement of day-to-day operations and services. It turns all employees into culture builders, regardless of their rank.

Baking culture-building into the day-to-day means iterative change and stewardship of service delivery. Every day is a good day to make a form less confusing, eliminate an unnecessary step from a process, and update information on a website so it's more helpful.

Components of a service-minded culture

- Co-creation (all levels can participate and shape)
- Inclusivity (open to anyone in the organization)
- Outcomes-driven focus (making things better)
- Storytelling (recognize, celebrate, reinforce)

Checklist

- ☐ Co-create guiding principles with a diverse group of employees.
- ☐ Create cross-departmental teams for solving shared challenges in your organization.
- ☐ Create team working agreements.
- ☐ Shape recognition programs around guiding principles.
- ☐ Appoint a storytelling team responsible for sharing successes and socializing the guiding principles.
- ☐ Offer a diverse range of training opportunities that align with the culture you are building, like book clubs, lunchtime lectures, and workshops.

Questions to ask

- What's blocking people from participating in culture-building and cross-departmental work?
- Is the work culture being regularly discussed by management?

Resources

Guides

- [A government leadership guide to culture change](#)

Tools

- [The open organization maturity model](#)

Media (articles, podcasts, videos)

- [San Rafael's employee-driven effort focuses on meeting the community's changing needs](#)
- [Together San Rafael innovation "Learning Lab"](#)
- [Innovating local government from the inside out](#)
- [How to get your organization to fly together](#)

Empower the product (service) owner

Context

Product management empowers public servants to solve everyday problems, big or small. This people-first, build-better-services mindset results in services that are easy to use and work for people. It creates government service experiences that are enjoyable, easy, and not things people dread or avoid doing.

The phases in the product management lifecycle are:

- Product framing: identify the problem, create a vision, and define success.
- Research: learn from people about their needs and values.
- Design: synthesize the vision, ideas, and research into a prototype or pilot.
- Pilot: test solutions in real-time, with real people.
- Launch: offer your product to the public.
- Measure: use metrics and data to measure success and plan improvements.

Digital services (including websites) are products provided to a community so they can find information, engage with government, and get things done. For these to be effective, it's important for a public servant to be both accountable and empowered to ensure the information and service delivery is working well for the people who need it.

Government products

- Accessing services or information on a website
- Paying a parking ticket
- Getting a building permit
- Filing a police report
- Viewing a public document
- Borrowing a book
- Getting your street swept
- Applying for a job
- And many, many more!

The government product owner

A government product owner ensures that a service or program is effective and meets people's needs. This role is different from a project manager; their job is to make sure a project gets done on time and on budget. The product owner is accountable for whether the service is any good.

In large organizations, product owners are actual job titles. While small organizations don't have that luxury, it's still an important role. This person acts as an advocate for the needs of people who depend on or want a service.

For example, the product owner of a street sweeping program would ensure information is up-to-date on the website and communicated to residents in a timely manner. They would also work with the street sweeping division to improve operations based on feedback from residents and businesses.

Checklist

- ☐ Appoint a product owner for a service.

- Give them as much authority as possible to make decisions about changes/improvements.
- Create a clear process for decisions outside of their authority.
- Provide product owners with training and support to improve services.
- Set measurable goals and hold product owners accountable.

Questions to ask

- Does each service have a clear product owner?
- For each product/service, what is the problem you are solving and is your solution good?
- Does the product owner have enough resources (time/budget/training) to improve the service?

Resources

Guides

- [ProudCity's product owner guide](#)
- [San Rafael's product playbook](#)

Tools

- [Good services scale](#)

Media (articles, podcasts, videos)

- [Govlaunch podcast: 5 tips for creating a more "open government"](#)

Design with and for real people

Context

Government cannot choose its customers; it needs to work for everyone. For services to work for people, they must be designed with their needs at the forefront and communicated so they know what they are and how to use them.

Public servants are internal experts when it comes to information and services for their communities. They know the rules, guidance, pain points, ins and outs of the services their agency provides to the public. They also know their customers and are on the front lines of the joys and frustrations people have with services.

This expertise is important, but only part of the equation. Often we rely on our own experiences and this bias prevents us from fully understanding the needs of others. It's important for public servants to remember: "You are not the user." While their experience and expertise provides insights, they also need to listen, observe, and learn from actual users of government services.

A key element to good service design is the use of plain language. Content that is clear, concise, and free of government jargon saves people time and helps build trust with constituents.

Checklist

- ☐ Get feedback from real users through interviews, observations, and surveys.
- ☐ Use plain language.
- ☐ Make sure your content and services are accessible to people with disabilities.
- ☐ Test your ideas/prototypes with real users early and often.

Questions to ask

- Are members of vulnerable populations able to access the services they need?
- Are you getting feedback from a diverse sample of people?

Resources

Guides

- [Federal plain language guidelines](#)
- [15 principles of good service design](#)

- [Readability guidelines](#)

Tools

- [18F stakeholder and user interview checklist](#)
- [Usability testing: how to & tools](#)

Media (articles, podcasts, videos)

- [Explainer: what is human-centered design](#)
- [Human-centered design for government](#)
- [Finding the human in human-centered design](#)
- [Marin Martin: innovating inside the lines](#)

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About

Helping local governments serve people better through effective communications and digital services.

Services

Strategy

- Content and communications
- Software procurements
- Technology services and support

Culture

- Team working agreements
- Guiding principles and purpose
- Change management

Implementation

- Design, test, launch, and promote new websites and services
- Content audit and creation

Training & coaching

- Content design and writing (websites, press releases, staff reports, and more)
- Product management and continuous improvement

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