Recipe for Delivery-Driven GOVERNMENT

Peace Corps Values + Code for America Innovation

Peace Corps volunteers can be found in some of the world's most far-flung locations—the highland jungles of Peru, the mud huts of Malawi, and the staid office cubicles of Marin County, California. What would Peace Corps founder John F. Kennedy have thought of the organization being in Marin County, one of the wealthiest counties in the United States?

Well, JFK doesn't have to roll over in his grave after all, because it is the spirit, values, and approach of the Peace Corps and not the organization itself that are taking root in Marin's largest city, San Rafael.

As city manager, my secret sauce recipe for governance has been one heaping teaspoon of the lessons I learned as a Peace Corps trainee in a tiny village in Guinea Bissau, West Africa. I combine this with a heathy sprinkling of the latest thinking from the government innovators at Code for America, which is a nonpartisan organization that uses digital age methods to improve how government serves the public and how the public improves government.

These seemingly different ingredients actually smell and taste quite similar and complement each other perfectly.

Trust and Expectations

Why do we need such a recipe? Because local government is in transition, which is a nice way of saying in trouble. Public trust in government is down, way down. The public now trusts government about as much as they trust they are going to strike it rich by wiring money to a Nigerian prince.

At the same time, there is no shortage of high expectations. According to a 2016 Accenture survey, 85 percent of Americans expect the same or higher quality from government digital services as they would get from a private company.

In other words, residents want to order up government services the same way they buy a birthday present on Amazon. Would you like two-day shipping or drone delivery of your building permit?

The problem is, local governments weren't designed to be as nimble and flexible as today's changing technologies and community expectations demand. To the government staffer, it is starting to feel like we need to reinvent ourselves every time a new iPhone is released. The old government ways of bureaucratic silos filled with experts now seem archaic and irrelevant.

The Peace Corps Way

The more I think about local government trying to stay relevant in the digital age, the more I think of my Peace Corps experience. In the broadest sense, my view of what the Peace Corps does is: Find out what the community wants and help it succeed. To me, that should be the mission for all local governments.

This doesn't mean staff is taking direction or getting assignments directly from the community, nor does it mean everything is up for a vote. It is designing services so they are effective for the users. To do that, you must know what the community wants and needs.

Peace Corps recruiter Barbara Smith says volunteers need "a willingness to integrate in a community. We recognize that cultural integration is not easy, and it takes time to develop relationships and build mutual trust and respect."

All Peace Corps volunteers, at some point during their service, hear some variation of a story that illustrates the opposite philosophy of the Peace »

BY JIM
SCHUTZ

Corps. It goes like this: A group of paid international workers come over from [insert smug European country name here] and attempt to solve the village's problem with some technology-driven solution.

They install the equipment, drink all night celebrating themselves, and leave. The equipment is not embraced by the village, residents were not trained how to repair it, and it inevitably breaks and becomes a symbol of failed international assistance.

In contrast, the Peace Corps volunteer works side by side with the villagers over a long period of time learning their culture, abilities, and insights. They learn from each other and find solutions to the village's problems that actually work, are repairable with local resources, and stand the test of time.

The moral of the story is that Peace Corps is not about some new technology as savior, it is about the unique needs of the community and working in partnership to find lasting solutions appropriate for the culture.

Delivery-Driven Government

Code for America devotees tend to see technology not as a savior, but as an enabler. It is absolutely crucial for local governments to take advantage of powerful new technology tools in the digital age, but the culture and process of co-creating solutions to community challenges needs to be in place for technology to be effective.

In other words, technology does not equal innovation. Adding new technology when we don't have a deep understanding of the problem we are trying to solve or we have a poor process in place, just makes for a more expensive poor process.

Code for America Executive Director Jennifer Pahlka suggests the term "delivery-driven government." The three main principles are: 1) understand and meet user needs; 2) get real-time user data, not years-old estimates; and 3) iterate every step of the way from intention through implementation.

If we truly care about outcomes, it is not enough to just provide a service. We must design the delivery of services so they work from the community's perspective and thus, that government works for everyone.

Pahlka notes, "You don't have to be a Steve Jobs figure in a black turtleneck to do innovation in government, you just have to have the guts to apply a different playbook."

Evolving a New Local Government

In San Rafael, we talk about how the pervasive government structure we see today was largely designed in the nineteenth century and uses twentieth century technology to try to solve twenty-first century problems. As a local government employee, those words sting.

We got into this business to help make the world a better place by doing meaningful work for and with our communities. Yet, the structure we find ourselves in was built for another time and for purposes

San Rafael, California

that are no longer relevant.

In response, we have been inspired by values taught by the Peace Corps and Code for America to form "Together San Rafael," which is our name for how we are evolving a new local government in the twenty-first century that uses twenty-first century tools to solve twenty-first century problems.

It has been freeing to see how easily we can wipe away the spider webs of bureaucracy and build something that matches our passion for innovation, mutual learning, and community focus.

We began by forming a cross-departmental advisory committee representing all levels of the organization. It provides guidance to these subgroups: communications and storytelling, employee events, employee recognition and engagement, and innovation education and learning.

One of the first tasks was to create guiding principles. A diverse employee subgroup burned through many ideas and landed on six. One was to start with community needs, which includes cultivating trust and co-creating services with customers.

Another is to reimagine the status quo, which includes finding the root problem, asking why we do it this way, trying new approaches, learning, and trying again. The principles are the threads woven into recruitment, performance evaluation, recognition, appreciation, and employee life.

With the innovation and engagement firm CivicMakers, we created learning labs for cross-departmental cohorts of employees to learn human-centered design, how to prototype and iterate based on community input, and how to solve real-time city problems collaboratively.

We celebrate each cohort with a demo day at San Rafael's downtown theater so teams can show off their new skills and solutions. Problems tackled include: permitting process, illegal dumping, new employee on-boarding, obsolete and onerous regulations, fire threats from homeless encampments, and more.

Some learning lab solutions have incorporated new technologies while others have not. One group had a goal of improving civic engagement in a neighborhood that is largely under-represented and lower income, and functions as a gateway for immigrants. Coming to city hall for lengthy government meetings was not high on the priority list for most.

The team started collecting data. While use of the social network Nextdoor was quite low, Facebook Live events the city did in Spanish with a nonprofit partner were highly viewed. A multimodal strategy was necessary.

The team investigated what the community most wanted to hear about and how. One simple idea was a multilanguage informational kiosk to "meet people where they are" at a public park next to the community center.

We have also made, and will make more, strategic changes to our organizational structure. We ask, "How would you design your department if you could create it today rather than when it was created decades ago?"

In this vein, we are elevating and expanding our former division of information technology into a new department called digital service and open government. Technology will leave its functional silo and become an enabler of solutions.

The new group will help departments design better services, informed by data and with a focus on the user experience.

Looking at the changing role of libraries in the digital age, we are in the process of uniting our community services (parks and recreation) department with our library department into a new department focused on community enrichment and lifelong learning. These few Together San Rafael examples show a path to delivery-driven government.

Bring the Peace Corps to Your Community

Most of us have seen a leader bring a new initiative to an organization only to see it fade away right after that leader moves on. That is why Together San Rafael is not about the city manager, or an elected official, or any one individual.

It is a ground-up, employee-driven effort to evolve and meet the changing needs of the community, as Bryan Walker and Sarah Soule write in their *Harvard Business Review* article, "Changing Company Culture Requires a Movement, Not a Mandate."

We think of every San Rafael employee as having the word "innovation" in his or her title. Ours is a whole-organization effort to be a twenty-first century government that is unique to our community.

There are other models out there, including creating an innovation team or putting a focus on data and technology and becoming a smart city. No matter what the right fit is for your community, at the very core should be the Peace Corps-inspired approach of finding out what the community wants and then helping them achieve it.

Your role as the chief executive is to give permission to operate differently. Code for America has found that permission is the main driver of success and not the specific team structure that you use. Patience is also important.

It took many decades to create the current situation of bureaucratic silos and low public trust in government. Dramatically changing how we do local government isn't going to happen overnight. But if you give the permission for change, and channel your inner Peace Corps volunteer, you'll be amazed at the results. **PM**

RESIDENTS WANT TO ORDER UP GOVERNMENT SERVICES THE SAME WAY THEY BUY A BIRTHDAY PRESENT ON AMAZON. WOULD YOU LIKE TWO-DAY SHIPPING OR DRONE DELIVERY OF YOUR BUILDING PERMIT?

Jim Schutz is city manager, San Rafael, California (Jim.Schutz@cityofsanrafael.org). Author retains copyright to this article.