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Small is the new big.
by Richard McPherson

If you like innovation you'll love Todd Park, the Chief Technology Officer at the US Department of Health and Human Services because he has plenty to teach our sector. His job is simple – help Americans take control of their own health care using technology. Seriously. Some of Park's stunning successes earned him lots of attention - just visit HealthCare.gov, like 5.7 million others have done, and ask a few questions about your health coverage. It turns out that the guy who shook up a federal bureaucracy has five rules to teach us about innovating...

Downsize your idea.

Bummer. I really like big ideas and believe they attract big support. But Park says an effective innovation project should have the potential to have significant impact...but should be small enough to be executed by five people. A fundraiser, for example, might want to innovate to “generate more revenue from donors.” Park would probably tell you to downsize until you reached something like “make it easier to renew annual support.”

Form small teams.

“You just cannot get more than five people to think like a single brain.” Certainly your next fundraising innovation may require the support of writers, designers, tech geeks or others. But five who relentlessly stick to one question (How can we make it easier for donors to renew?) can come up with an actionable, measurable plan.

Spend time with your customers (donors).

Obvious? Not so much, according to Park. He scorns focus groups and other formal research because they can only measure reaction to existing services, not to what Park calls “inarticulate preference.” Translation: people can't tell you what they don't yet know they really want. (Think Steve Jobs) Just talk directly to people you're trying to motivate and ask them basic questions about what they like or don't about dealing with your organization. Then fashion solutions. A focus group, Park observes, “would never have come up with the Internet or e-mail.”

Define the minimum viable activity.

Park says the odds that your first idea is the right one are “incredibly low.” Big initial ideas may be where the innovation discussion starts, but scaling them back is the magic that gives innovation focus and makes it doable. In our example of increasing donor support, the first reaction might be to re-create every donor touch point, redesign every communication, provide fundraising challenges and add lots of YouTube-ish video. More realistic might be to have every

online fundraising form and phone pledge confirmation e-mail totally pre-populated, offering a previously used credit card as a first payment option. Much easier, measurable payoff.

Impose deadlines of 90-days – or less.

Whew! No wonder he wants small teams and tight focus. If a team is measured by fierce deadlines, distractions get swept away and bite-sized progress is possible. If you have an innovative step you can't achieve in 90 days, Park would say go back to step one and downsize your ambitions further. Speed is everything because it maintains momentum. Better a modest breakthrough done swiftly than a bigger idea that dies the death of a thousand meetings.

So don't worry if "innovation" seems vague, risky or tough to measure. Just follow Park's five rules and you'll take your program to a higher level.

And don't worry if your idea seems small. In innovation, small is the new big.

Want to know more? Read Carleen Hawn's brilliant article about Todd Park ("Government 2.0") in the Fall 2011 Stanford Social Innovation Review, on which these observations were based.

http://www.ssireview.org/articles/entry/government_2.0