

# **San Francisco Human Services Agency's Innovation Office: Leading the Way on Quality and Process Improvement in Local Government**

**Fawna L. Ruth**

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

In recent years, many government agencies have worked to implement efforts in quality improvement for employee and customer experience and service delivery. One such effort in San Francisco County's Human Services Agency (HSA) is the Innovation Office, where Lean Process Improvement and Human Centered Design come together to improve employee morale, communication, and customer service. Napa County's Health and Human Services Agency (HHSA) has also implemented several efforts in this area, one of which is HHSA's Quality and Excellence Support Team (QuEST). While QuEST seeks to work in a similar way to the HSA Innovation Office, HHSA would benefit greatly from the implementation of a full-time position dedicated to these efforts exclusively, further implementing and ingraining innovation and quality improvement into the culture at HHSA.

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## **Introduction**

Recent years have seen a shift in local government agencies focusing more on customer service and experience, while still balancing state and federal mandates, stewardship, and employee retention efforts. Many of the new approaches to local government service improvement involve staff at all levels, and most management teams recognize the value of soliciting feedback and ideas from staff that are in direct contact with the processes and customers in question every day.

Napa County Health & Human Services Agency (HHS) has implemented several efforts around innovation and service delivery improvements over the last four years. Efforts to improve employee and customer experience include:

- Mutual Learning, which seeks to change mindsets and improve communication of all staff with one another and external customers;
- Collaborative Management, which changes the approach of top-down management to one of collaboration, transparency, and knowledge sharing; and,
- The Quality and Excellence Support Team (QuEST), a committee comprised of members from each division focused on quality and process improvement throughout the agency.

Each of these endeavors hopes to improve employee satisfaction and morale, as well as service delivery and customer service.

The Innovation Office of San Francisco County Human Services Agency (HSA) embodies the very spirit of each of these innovative improvement efforts and has become a staple in the culture of the HSA. Lessons learned from the Innovation Office can assist in HHSA by improving and continuing its current efforts around employee morale and customer experience.

## **The HSA Innovation Office**

### The Birth of the HSA Innovation Office

In 2013 HSA partnered with Code for America on a project to conduct CalFresh outreach to Medi-Cal recipients, and Marc Hébert was brought on through a fellowship. Code for America is an organization that partners with government agencies in order to help streamline and improve services utilizing service design and technology. The project sent various CalFresh outreach text messages to Medi-Cal recipients and tracked response. Behavioral Economics was used to design messaging and services around how customers reacted and responded to the various messages.

The Code for America project, and the tools it utilized, was considered to be so valuable by the HSA management team that in 2014 the Innovation Office was created with one exempt, temporary Senior Business Analyst at the helm. In 2015 the position was made permanent and the Innovation Office was there to stay.

The Innovation Office was met with many challenges and struggles during its first six months in 2014. Attempted projects were non-starters and were met with resistance and push-back. It was not long until the Innovation Office changed its approach to project selection. There was a shift to focusing on ‘pain-points’, or areas where staff or customers felt pains in service delivery and

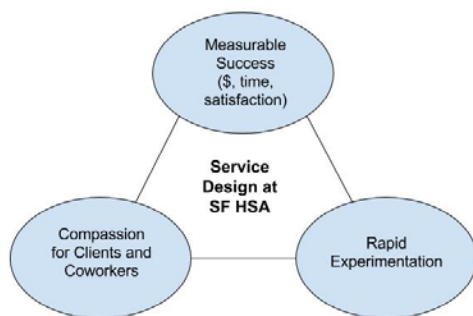
where staff would be on board with participating and engaging in innovation efforts. It was quickly discovered that any improvement efforts were felt by staff to be “add-ons” to the daily requirements of the job and they would not have the support and energy required to move them forward. Focusing on these ‘pain-points’ shifted innovation efforts from the “add-on” feeling in the daily work to integral to the daily work, promoting a higher level of engagement, enthusiasm, and follow through.

### **Innovation Office Tools and Approach**

The approach of the Innovation Office is if staff are encouraged to have a mindset around innovation, and are given a toolkit to approach innovation, then they will have the skill set to improve service delivery at all levels, with or without the Innovation Office involved in their projects. The Innovation Office teaches participants to focus on and improve the systems in place, not the individuals involved in those systems. It seeks to do this by utilizing Behavioral Economics, Human Centered Design, and Lean Process Improvement.

### **Behavioral Economics**

Behavioral Economics explores how people act and react to services, and how services might be designed around that. It explores and tracks human response and reactions to the systems in place to determine if the response is the desired one, or if system changes need to be implemented in order to elicit a different response from the recipient or customer.



## **Human Centered Design**

Human Centered Design, as pioneered by the Stanford d.School, is a creative approach to service design that begins with, and includes along the way, the individual one is designing for. Human Centered Design focuses on the customers' 'pain points', emotions, needs, and feedback to intentionally design an experience within the systems and processes. The Innovation Office uses this approach to work with staff in order to improve services to external customers and employee satisfaction and morale.

## **Lean Process Improvement**

Created by Toyota in Japan and modified for government agencies in the US by the City of Denver's Peak Academy, Lean Process Improvement is a methodology that seeks to identify and eliminate waste in systems and processes, such as backlog, unnecessary movement, wait times, and interruptions. At the core of Lean, one finds a methodology that involves looking at processes step-by-step with subject matter experts: those on the ground involved in the day to day operations who can offer insights and ideas for improvement, regardless of position and title.

## **The Premortem**

A premortem is a helpful and expedient thought experiment to conduct prior to rolling out a proposal or improvement. First you imagine a future in which your project was an epic failure, and think about why that may have happened. Second, you imagine a future in which your project was a wild success, and why. Third, you determine what can be done today to prevent failure and promote success of the project.

## **Rapid Improvement Event (RIE)**

A Rapid Improvement Event is a one to five day workshop that involves an agreed upon project or issue to tackle and begins with a brainstorming session composed of key players at all levels in the proposed project. The list of ideas generated is whittled down by feasibility and the key players are asked to take ownership of the ideas, ensuring engagement and completion. RIEs flip the top-down approach to process improvement, granting staff at all levels permission and flexibility to generate, create, and assume responsibility for ideas to streamline and improve systems and processes that affect them directly.

### **Lessons Learned and Strategies for Success**

The first three years of the Innovation Office's endeavors have provided Mr. Hébert with many valuable insights, and the Innovation Office is ever-evolving and shifting to meet the needs and styles of the HSA staff and the projects worked on. The lessons learned in the first three years include:

- Urgency can crowd out priority. The day to day work of HSA employees does not halt while service improvement projects are undertaken. When a task (process improvement) appears to be an “add-on”, and the value is not immediately apparent, staff will lack buy-in and long-lasting effects will not take root. Focusing on ‘pain-points’ will make the innovation process integral to the daily work of staff and will create an ecosystem that supports the effort.
- The communication structure of an organization does not always, and perhaps should not, directly mirror its hierarchical structure. Information should flow in all directions and staff should be encouraged and supported to share ideas with each other and with management.

- Track and refer to data regularly and use it with empathy. Democratize and visualize data and use it to celebrate successes and the employees involved in those successes.
- Employees must receive the skill set, structure, and support needed to innovate when attempting to improve systems.
- While some innovation projects may appear less urgent, staff will still learn a lot, team build, and have fun.
- Rather than trying to teach staff how to do process improvement and then setting them out to do it, teach and do simultaneously.
- An ally/sponsor is critical to project success. This must be someone with the position to approve changes proposed and give staff the courage and safety to make mistakes.
- Define the team's "North Star," or common purpose, that is understood and shared by all involved. Recruit and gather employees who have a demonstrated alignment with the "North Star" in order to champion the project.
- Prototype solutions: rapidly implement and experiment with proposals, getting feedback and making tweaks as needed, in order to avoid "analysis paralysis."

### **The Future of the Innovation Office**

The Innovation Office has led groups from various departments in the last three years and saw improvement in multiple areas, such as employee morale, staff communication and paperwork flows, and improving customer wait times both in service center lobbies and on the phone. The Innovation Office currently serves approximately 2,200 HSA employees across four divisions, and its services have been in such high demand throughout the agency that Marc Hébert has had

to triage projects, many waiting in line for time and manpower. The Innovation Office has recently received approval for and is currently recruiting for two additional full-time employees.

Both the executive management team and the middle managers who have worked with the Innovation Office fully support the mission and values of the Innovation Office and strive for a culture of innovation and improvement. The Innovation Office's mission and purpose is shared with all new HSA hires at on-boarding, and the vision is that some day staff from all departments will have participated in Innovation Office projects and received training in process improvement in order to empower them to champion change within their respective departments with or without the aid of the Innovation Office. One such group of staff now comprises the Above and Beyond Committee in the CalWORKs office. This committee was born of the original CalWORK's Service Center Improvement Project participants and seeks to improve processes and employee morale in the CalWORKs office on a regular basis, occasionally seeking feedback from the Innovation Office. As the Innovation Office reaches out, trains, and works with more departments throughout the agency, it is likely more committees like the Above and Beyond Committee will grow in a self-sustaining manner, further promoting a culture of innovation within the HSA.

### **Recommendations for Napa County HHSA**

Napa County HHSA's QuEST Team, composed of representatives from each HHSA department, is new to taking on projects and has only recently defined itself and its position within the agency. But it already emulates the Innovation Office in many ways. The purpose of the QuEST Team is to provide support and leadership on quality improvement projects throughout the agency. The goal is to train staff within divisions to work on quality improvement projects with



only QuEST oversight in the future. Once a project has been selected, a QuEST facilitator from within the requesting division assembles a team of subject matter experts from all levels in order to have a multi-faceted and comprehensive view and approach to the problem at hand. This team meets regularly in order to map out the process or flow being examined and explores areas for improvement and streamlining. QuEST currently has three projects in process; yet, there are none completed yet.

While QuEST has great potential to make great improvements in process flows and service delivery throughout the agency, it is highly recommended that HHSa invest in one full-time employee (FTE) dedicated to process improvement and service design within HHSa. There are three things of great value the Design Anthropologist and the Innovation Office bring to the table at the San Francisco HSA:

1. a safe, creative space dedicated to service design and process improvement,
2. a neutral, “third party” consultant who reports to a Deputy Director and not to the particular divisions requesting process improvement, and
3. an individual whose sole responsibility it is to stay trained and focused on process improvement tools and methodology, bringing this knowledge and learning to the teams he works with.

While QuEST committee members may come and go, as is natural with most committees, a dedicated FTE would serve as the spearhead to the ongoing process and quality improvement efforts. Most QuEST members have had no formal training in Lean or other process improvement methodologies. This individual would be responsible for training QuEST members and individual project members on tools and methodology, including Human Centered Design

and Lean Process Improvement. He/she would act as a facilitator, offering an “outsider’s” perspective on each division’s internal flows and processes as projects are proposed and taken on. An individual dedicated to quality improvement and service design at HHSa would serve as a beacon for improving customer experience and employee satisfaction, as well as further ingraining service and quality improvement into the culture at HHSa.

### **Acknowledgements**

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