



# 4 Common Obstacles to Innovation and How to Overcome Them

Obviously, most people are not opposed to innovation on principle, but that doesn't mean they're eager to embrace it in practice. Perhaps a new approach or technology would make a process or system more effective or efficient, but it might require a lot of effort for minimal gain, and who needs that, right?

At a recent GovLoop virtual event, thought leaders from government and industry discussed tactics for getting buy-in from agency leaders and other stakeholders and driving good ideas forward. Here are highlights from that discussion.



**THE SPEAKERS**

**Jeremy Ames**, Director of Stakeholder Engagement and Data Analytics, Office of Field Policy and Management, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)

**Jerry Hingtgen**, Innovation Hub Chief, Chief Technology Officer, Office of the Chief Information Officer, U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)

**Jesse McKernan**, Senior Account Executive for Defense, IdeaScale

**Drew Zachary**, Deputy Innovation Chief, Census Bureau

**PROBLEM**

**A Quick 'No' From Leadership**

Sometimes an innovative idea gets derailed when a higher-up doesn't embrace it or even pushes back. It's tempting to take that initial resistance as the final answer and let the matter drop, said Jerry Hingtgen with USDA. "You may be intimidated, thinking, 'Oh, I don't know if I should ask this or say that,'" Hingtgen said.

**SOLUTION**

**Be Bold, Start a Conversation**

"I say, throw that aside and be bold because the question that's not asked is a question that is not going to get answered," Hingtgen said.

Start a conversation by asking more about leaders' concerns, he said, so they feel heard and so you can factor those concerns into your pitch. Then, "be bold in saying, 'Look, I understand your concern, but if we were to move forward on this, what would be the process to do that? Who would need to buy into this? Who else do we need to get as a major stakeholder?'" he said.

Hingtgen said he knows this can seem challenging, "but if you're reaching out with genuine openness to just have a dialogue ... it's always worked in my experience."

## PROBLEM

### Tolerance for the Status Quo

Resistance to change often seems predicated on an intuitive calculation: How difficult will it be to adopt a new process or approach vs. just putting up with how things are? If they can get their work done, people tend to tolerate everyday problems, said Drew Zachary with the Census Bureau.

## SOLUTION

### Find Your Biggest Pain Points

The people most likely to embrace innovation are those with problems that are truly disruptive and defy simple workarounds. Zachary said someone at the U.S. General Services Administration put it this way: “You need to go to the edge of the problem — that’s where you’re going to find the people most receptive to ideas of innovation and ideas of change.”

Once you show how you can solve those problems, you might find other people more willing to hear you out, he said.

## PROBLEM

### Your Experts Are Obstacles

New projects can run into trouble if one team comes up with an innovative idea and hands it off to operations for execution. That’s because the operational team might not be sold on the idea just yet, especially if it hasn’t had the opportunity to provide substantive input, said Jeremy Ames of HUD.

## SOLUTION

### Co-opt Your Critics

Early in the development process, the innovation team should recruit someone from operations to help shape the initiative, Ames said. “If you can get the curmudgeon, the person you know is going to be the biggest barrier early on, [on board], that really helps,” he said.

When Ames used that tactic in a previous job, the process started slower than usual, because of all the subject-matter expert’s concerns. But “the handoff was very easy ... because then everyone was comfortable that we had thought this through,” Ames said.

## PROBLEM

### No Time for Problem-Solving

In many cases, people don’t resist innovation. They’re just so caught up in their day-to-day operations that they don’t have time to think about problems until they can’t be avoided, said Jesse McKernan with IdeaScale, which provides an innovation management platform. “The whole goal is, how can we be more proactive rather than reactive to the point where we can understand what’s coming next and how to solve those challenges,” he said.

## SOLUTION

### Crowdsourcing and Collaboration

A crowdsourcing platform provides a way to get deeper insights into your operations, McKernan said. For example, the U.S. Coast Guard uses IdeaScale’s platform to solicit input from people across the fleet — whether that’s a short-term campaign to get feedback on a specific issue or a longer-term one around a broader problem set.

Whatever the use case, the platform provides tools that help organizations break down communications barriers and gather insights at scale. It also makes it easier to manage that process and to foster collaboration around the most innovative ideas, McKernan said.

“We help you gain insights from your stakeholders, employees and partners, so that you can work toward your mission goal,” he said.

***To learn more about how to overcome obstacles to innovation, watch the full session on demand.***