

Dear Senior Fellows and Friends,

Since our dinner conversation with Brian Elms, Director of Denver Peak Academy & Analytics last week, I've been puzzling over reasons why more federal employees weren't in the room. I'm chalking it up to combined anxiety, fatigue, and maybe even the thought that this topic wasn't relevant (more on that below). The people who did come, a fresh combination of the interesting and impactful, were glued to their chairs for a couple of hours. Here is what I took away, and why I think it is relevant to every public sector workplace, if not beyond.

Five Ws and One H

Who. Brian Elms, Director of Peak Academy & Analytics, City and County of Denver, Colorado. Brian's work is housed in the Department of Finance's Office of Budget and Management. If you'd like to see what roles this local government plays in the lives of its 683,000 residents, start [here](#). Then go [here](#) for Peak Academy stories and photos.

When. June 28th, 6:30-8:30 PM, with relaxed networking from 5:30-6:30 PM.

Where. Graduate School USA training space at 7th and D Streets SW, Washington, DC.

What. Brian – and J.B. Wogan, the Governing reporter who helped him write an exceptional little [book](#) that's been featured on ASPA Book Talks and is averaging 4.9 out of 5 stars in reader reviews on Amazon – showed up to tell the riveting story of the ups and downs of rooting and cultivating a method of continuously improving government performance *without*:

more money
more people
more technology

What? How is that even believable, or possible? Well, it's *believable* based on documented total savings of \$20M in the first five years. It's *possible* in that the techniques and tools that are transmitted to the departments that decide to invite Peak Academy in (since Brian discovered that forcing or imposing doesn't work) are based on "teaching employees to take control of everything they have and make it better." The average savings per innovation is currently \$13,000, meaning that a lot of the big improvements may already have been made – and that those who've been trained are still finding new ways to benefit residents.

Why. The points I managed to capture were as follows. They shed light, not only the Why, but on the How:

1. Deliver value to residents when they want it.
2. Small changes over time have a big impact.
3. We've created a culture that really values basic work.*

4. Saturate the whole organization in technique and break through low morale.
5. We try to make you the best employee you can be.
6. Behind every star player is another player waiting to be a star.
7. Learn how to say no to the Mayor, and accept that some days you'll suck and other days you'll rock.
8. Sometimes you need to get a running start and jump.
9. Never ask permission. Always do it to benefit someone.
10. The [Serenity Prayer](#) helps.
11. We answered the question, "Does the innovating continue when the champion of change leaves?" after 75% of Licensing & Inspection employees turned over in the last year to go make more money in the marijuana industry. Subsequent activity in that office showed us that yes, the process improvement mindset was sustainable. (This made me think of bullet 4.)

**Brian also uses the term "standard work." See [this page](#) as an example of the context in which this technical term is used.*

This was a two-hour tutorial in how to get reluctant employees to climb on board, how to experiment alongside other team members using proven methods, how to get everyone to keep going and try again when a prospective innovation has unintended consequences that make things worse instead of better, and how to manage oneself as a leader over the long haul. Think about it – on what work planet are those four things not relevant?

By the way, the Harvard Kennedy School Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation's page on [employee-driven process improvement](#) notes that, "After initially focusing just on the academy participants, Peak Academy now supports department managers with leadership skills so that academy graduates come back to an environment that is hospitable to and supportive of innovation. This reinforces the motto, 'Innovate. Elevate. Repeat.'"

Why might this matter to the rest of us?

While much of the process improvement at the federal level will necessarily involve the modernization of information technology, anyone who has ever waited for the system rollout that will "solve our problems" or who has experienced the reality of "Culture eats strategy for breakfast" knows that employee involvement is central to the successful realization of projected benefits. The agile IT development + design thinking trend that's beginning to mature in government will take us a long way. However, any advance that does not meaningfully integrate continuous participation of the non-IT workforce risks leaving continuous improvement and employee engagement on the table.

Take another look at bullets 5 and 6 – they were said in the context of improving government performance by learning and applying new tools to make small improvements that deliver value to residents. Ask yourself how many of the current efforts to improve employee engagement are that meaningful.

John Hagel [wrote](#) in January about research that the Deloitte Center for the Edge was beginning: "...we suspect that the most successful institutions of the future will be the ones that focus on 'business practice redesign' – seeking to cultivate the practices specifically designed to accelerate performance improvement and learning on the front-line." Denver Peak Academy is operating in that vein now. In fact, I would venture to say that the quality of thinking and acting its training promotes will go a long way toward making its graduates employable under any future scenario.

Participant affiliations

American Society for Public Administration
Baltimore City Department of Social Services
City and County of Denver, Colorado
Development professional
Governing magazine
GPS Leadership Solutions
Graduate School USA
iLead Strategies
Monster Government Solutions
Montgomery County, MD / CountyStat
Self-Employed
U.S. Department of Education
U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development
U.S. Department of the Interior
U.S. General Services Administration
U.S. Government Accountability Office
U.S. Office of Personnel Management

Two participant reactions

"If people hear these stories, they'll go, 'I can do it too.'"

--Said by a midcareer leader after the June 8th planning conversation four of us had with Brian by video

"I'm so happy that I attended the Peak Academy event/conversation. Thank you so much for organizing the evening. What Brian Elms said made so much sense--his approach to continuous improvement was so useful. I hope to use it myself."

--Feedback from a retired colleague who's beginning the next chapter

That's all for now. Good luck this year.

Sincerely,

Kitty Wooley
[Senior Fellows and Friends](#)
Colorado Springs, CO

This recap is dedicated to Paul Posner, former government employee, public administration university dean, and NAPA Fellow who passed away this week. As ASPA President Janice LaChance said to members on July 6th, "Paul embodied what we all strive for: He was a bridge between practitioner and academic, among individual organizations, among working groups. He harnessed the best at the organizations he touched for the betterment of public service, and we are all better off because we got to be a part of it."