

SENIOR FELLOWS AND FRIENDS

Alert. Relaxed. Collegial.



Recap of 2/21/24 Session with Geoff Abbott: Huge Public Sector Innovation Opportunities Amidst Chaos and Uncertainty

Dear Senior Fellows and Friends,

The other night, our friend Geoff Abbott shared his current thinking, which has evolved as he has written articles for the ACT-IAC bimonthly Innovation newsletter over the past four years. Geoff, who has taught leadership at the Securities & Exchange Commission for the past decade, served as the commanding officer of the U.S. Coast Guard's R&D Center during 9/11 and chaired the Commandant's Innovation Council during its start-up. He's seen ingenious initiatives and solutions come from federal innovators. It's clear that Geoff grasps the essence of the phrase, "the art of the possible."

Geoff began by cataloguing factors that contribute to the uncertainty and confusion that could stifle government's ability to innovate, such as political gridlock, global conflict, pandemic, Return to Office pressure, Continuing Resolutions, and vacancies in key political & career senior level positions. He thinks these factors may not matter that much to determined innovators, since agency missions largely persist through political and world events and are driven by effectiveness and efficiency (particularly cost-efficiency and cost avoidance). "It's difficult for others to criticize your initiative if it improves service to the American public, is cost-efficient and/or avoids costs."

Geoff then told the stories of numerous successful innovations, most of which he had a hand in. They seemed to hinge on conversation, finding paths through objections, and negotiating who would be responsible for what in order to execute on ideas that were too good to pass up. For example:

New uses for underutilized assets/personnel

Great Lakes buoy tenders and icebreakers performing lighthouse restoration during non-icebreaking season – making seasonal assets available beyond their 'busy season'.

Addressing excess federal office space:

Post-COVID, the Patent & Trademark Office expanded telework for most of its staff and excessed/sold its primary campus saving millions of dollars.

The SEC consolidated space at its headquarters, reducing space requirements by a third and saving \$14M/year.

Use of geographically limited resources beyond their traditional operating areas

A Gulf of Mexico construction tender transited up the Mississippi River to do badly needed navigation aid construction on the Illinois River – well outside its normal operation area.

A Great Lakes cable boat traveled to Chesapeake Bay during the ice season to install \$2M of submarine cable for ten new range light structures for deep draft vessels transiting to Baltimore. (A GS-11 led this initiative!)

Maine Lighthouse transfer

(I think of this as the “lighthouse adoption story” - it’s my personal favorite.) Ownership of 28 Maine lighthouses was transferred to local communities and nonprofits who would maintain the grounds and light structures while the Coast Guard maintained the light and fog signal equipment – saving taxpayers millions of dollars in maintenance and security costs. A GS-12 led this effort, partnering with a non-profit organization and the State of Maine.

That GS-12 was an attorney before he joined USCG and he drove a corvette to work. He wouldn’t quit on this idea until it happened. Sometimes we forget that people don’t come in as blank slates: do you know about your people what Geoff knew about him?

National Graduate School Quality Systems Masters Program

A Coast Guard lieutenant led an initiative for personnel to earn experiential learning Masters degrees in QSM while working on agency process improvement processes. She initiated action in partnership with an academic institution and headquarters staff, leveraging tuition assistance and innovation scholarship funds so that the cost was only \$3,500-4,500 per student for this 1-yr program. Over seven years, 700 personnel earned masters degrees while implementing process improvements valued at \$500 million.

Geoff then shared his Tips for Creating Innovation Space: “PAY, as in Pay it Forward!”

Problem-solving/Potential Opportunities

Jump on new problems/opportunities early – Pressure + Pain for the agency create problem-solving opportunities. Productivity increases/process improvements/cost avoidance result in efficiency gains that can be ‘recycled’ back into new agency initiatives.

Benchmark, plagiarize, copy the best in the industry/federal government in your area of interest – it saves time and you can learn from others’ experiences.

Asset/Resource Usage

New uses for underutilized assets and personnel (discussed previously – seasonal assets, real property/vacant office space,...)

Non-traditional uses of staff, funds, assets – NGS tuition assistance.

Year-End Procurements

Prepare for wise use of year-end funds. Be ready to spend other people’s money (Civil Engineering Unit’s Cleveland/Providence spending CEU Miami’s unexecutable funds).

Spend unexecutable fourth quarter funds on first quarter needs (especially when Continuing Resolutions seem to be an annual event). Can take financial pressure off Q1 operations during CR’s.

Build in flexible expansion opportunities – for example, Geoff rank-ordered the SEC’s Excellence in Government Fellows alternates so that they could be quickly added to the cohort if late year funds became available. In similar fashion, options can be built into contracts.

Observation

Sometimes vacant leadership positions can create indecision and, for lack of a better term, ‘power vacuums’. Fill the space with your ideas and innovation initiatives that will advance the agency.

“P” words associated with innovation

Pressure	Pain	Problem-solving	Process Improvement
Partnerships	People	Productivity	Prevention
Persistence	Pilot-Test		

Finally, if anyone would like to inquire about the ACT-IAC articles or receive the eBook version of his useful book, Unauthorized Progress – Leading ‘from the Middle’, please email Geoff directly at AbbottGL@aol.com.

One of the small delights at the beginning was a new participant’s elegant 3-sentence self-introduction. We may have to deconstruct that when he returns!

This session was jam-packed with content. That innovation is “in the Coast Guard’s DNA” came up more than once – as did a former senior leader’s observation, based on his tenure at four other agencies, that if you want innovation, “you let people go free.”

One of the Partnership for Public Service's former research directors asked a question that ought to come up before the innovation conversation, "Who are you willing to hear from"? She told a couple of stories and referred us to seminal reports that are on the Partnership's site, *#ConnectedGov: Engaging Stakeholders in the Digital Age* and *Leading Innovation in Government*, in which her research team and the Hay Group shared the "Attributes of Innovation Leaders" resulting from a global survey of leaders – something the Hay Group (acquired by Korn Ferry in 2015) did rigorously for decades and is still known for.

Although we had less time for discussion than usual, it worked because Geoff is relaxed and agile, and his advanced skills in presentation & facilitation enable him to roll with questions as they come up. Observing that was part of this event's tacit knowledge transfer.


Participant affiliations

ASPA National Capital Area Chapter
Charlestown, RI Town Council, retired
Department of Education/Federal Student Aid
Department of Education, retired
GAO Center for Audit Excellence
National Academy of Public Administration
Securities and Exchange Commission
United States Coast Guard, retired

People joined from Rhode Island, Colorado, and the Washington, DC Metro Area.

Each time, we begin with a round of introductions to warm up the space. Afterward, participants are sent a "Who was in the room" message to facilitate ongoing connection. Please consider joining us in the future.

Sincerely,
Kitty Wooley



HOW WILL YOU CONTRIBUTE?

Cooperating freely, learning on the fly, empowering ourselves, and navigating unknown waters beyond the edge of the comfort zone are the name of the game. We began our public leadership journey in calm harbors, and now we're surrounded by the white water of constant change. Business as usual isn't working well enough. We choose to gather our strengths and lead from wherever we are, applying our best efforts to the challenges of our time. Are you coming?