Romoto Tavani/Shutterstock

FOSTER CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT

For agencies to truly engage with citizens requires not only technology, but a culture of empathy

Technology has helped agencies transform how they deliver services and information to their citizens—from applying for a job or benefits to getting a question answered. However, tools and technology are just a means to an end. For citizen engagement to truly succeed, agencies must create a culture and adopt a mindset that fosters a user-centric approach.

Agencies have already begun to recognize the importance of having a culture that values user input in creating digital services, according to government and industry experts speaking at a Feb. 22 Citizen Engagement Summit. This attitude shift itself represents a success, but like any good relationship, citizen engagement takes dedication, long-term commitment and a willingness to listen.

BUILD EMPATHY

The good news is agencies are not alone on this journey. They have turned to each other for support. They have also enlisted the help of industry, unique government start-ups such as the White House's U.S. Digital Service,

and government design-centered innovation labs. The result is citizen engagement has taken hold over the past few years. The programs that have been successful are the ones that were developed from the viewpoint of the person actually using the system.

Building empathy through "human centered design with a leader who has an appetite for change" is really key to engaging with customers, says Matthew Dingee, Lead UX Designer, USAJOBS, Office of Personnel Management.

There are lots of designers in government doing great work, says Dingee said, but the process is less important than walking "a mile in the shoes of those interacting with your system."

Agencies should not only use the software they develop, but also speak with the actual customers who will use it, says Tom Cochran, Chief Digital Strategist and VP of Public Sector at Acquia. Never make assumptions about what might work best for a user when building applications.

For example, when redesigning its web portal, the City of Boston took the perspective of the citizen, instead of the city employee. As a result, they designed the site based

on what questions a person would want answered, says Cochran, not a government organizational chart.

Deliver services and information that suits the citizens, says Cochran, adding that sometimes the format may change as new technology emerges. "We need to figure out how citizens want their information and deliver it in that format."

To ensure customers are happy, it's essential for agencies to remain in contact. That means before, during, and after a developing a service or application. And constantly solicit feedback. For example, the Department of Labor tweaked its Veterans.gov portal design last year, after feedback from users suggested it was too difficult to find employment information and apply for a job, says Mika Cross, Director of Strategic Communications, Digital and Public Engagement for the Veterans Employment and Training Service, at DOL.

When an agency is disjointed, isolated and lacks integration, says Bouier, it will struggle to provide quality services. Agencies should bring in experts on human centered design and communications. Make it easier to use and share software developed by the government. Even engage with the community such as sponsoring a "hackathon."

Convince your employees it makes sense to change the culture, he says, but don't actually "tell them you're trying to change the culture." Instead, develop prototype apps and demonstrate why a particular solution has value and solves a particular problem they are encountering.

In fact, prototypes are a great way to show people the benefits of a particular solution, says Dingee, because fear of failure plays a big role in government. Shifting away from an "I can't" mentality toward an "I can" mentality is important for successful digital services.

> ## "THERE ARE REALLY GOOD PEOPLE OUT THERE TRYING TO FIND WAYS TO MAKE IT WORK, AND MAKE THINGS MORE AGILE."
> *—Tom Cochran, Chief Digital Strategist and VP of Public Sector, Acquia*

Likewise, the Defense Department revamped a system after an onsite visit to a base in Kabul to see how soldiers were using it. That trip disproved many assumptions the department had made about how it would be used, said Brandon Bouier, Engineer, Defense Digital Service, Pentagon. "Being there in person is different," says Bouier.

Keeping the lines of communication open is essential, regardless of where the users are located, says Bouier. Agencies must use software that increases communication between citizens and agencies, and leveraging open source platforms can help.

GROWTH AREAS

Despite progress made in improving citizen engagement, there are often still complicated procurement processes and a risk-averse government culture. Agencies can't be reluctant to try new things, as that can impact an agency's momentum. Certain strategies can help, including empowering employees, working with industry, and embracing the art of the possible.

Focusing citizen engagement strategies on internal customers can help enhance any external project on which an agency is working, says Cross. An agency's own employees are a valuable source of insight to bolster outward facing services. "Let them feel empowered" to bring new technology and ideas into the workplace.

Give employees a space to be heard and the confidence to test new ideas.

"There an ethos now in the private sector of not just designing for users, but designing with your users," he said. "That is going to be key for government to get right."

Get creative with procurement as well, says Cross. Offer employees prizes and challenges for software development. Consider crowdsourcing solutions and invite citizens to participate and encourage suggestions for improvements. Take advantage of cross-agency opportunities that departments can "collectively leverage."

For example, it might make sense for the DOL to tap into the same vendor services used across the VA and SBA if they are all trying to reach the same community of users.

Work with contracting officers and agency procurement shops to navigate the complicated acquisition process, says Cochran. "There are plenty of negatives about government procurement, but there are really good people out there trying to find ways to make it work, and make things more agile."

At the end of the day, remember to listen to the people. Understand the problems they are trying to solve. "Have empathy. Don't be afraid of risk," he says. "And make sure people have the right tools and technologies to do their jobs."