

## Innovation

The next few pages on this website deal with issues at the heart of the delivery agenda, but they are also areas where civil servants face similar problems to many of their private and voluntary sector counterparts. In particular, why are we not more innovative? And how do we become better leaders and managers? In response, I offer the following advice, often taken from best practice in the private sector.

I begin with some thoughts in response to persistent criticism that the civil service too often fails to offer innovative solutions to policy problems. In order to tackle this problem, it is first necessary to understand the principal reasons why innovation might be difficult. Most analysts come up with variations on the following six key problems:

- 1 We work for politicians who in turn work in an adversarial and confrontational environment, under constant media scrutiny. It is the duty of the Opposition to oppose. New ideas are swiftly attacked, improvements are regarded as evidence of past failure, debates about the merits of particular proposals are seized upon as signs of divisions within Government, and mistakes are mercilessly exposed and criticised. Ministers do not like to be out-shone by exciting, achieving and innovative officials, and do not thank us for exposing them to criticism for some new idea which has not yet been properly thought through. Any potentially controversial idea which cannot be kept entirely secret is therefore best left well alone.
- 2 We are part of a profession, and cannot afford to alienate colleagues with whom we might have to work very closely for years to come. Also, our professional and financial rewards come mainly via promotion. It is therefore crucially important that we do not do anything which might upset a senior colleague, and in particular our manager and our Permanent Secretary. We therefore: do not encourage internal challenge; hesitate before saying anything which might be construed as foolish by any senior colleague – most of whom will be older than us; and are reluctant to draw attention to colleagues, or parts of a department, who are performing badly – and yet this is often a necessary pre-cursor to real change.
- 3 We work within quite distinct Government departments, with quite distinct budgets and for Ministers who are usually in competition with their colleagues in other departments. We develop a loyalty to the organisation, to our staff, to our budget and to our Ministers, which tends to inhibit free thinking.
- 4 It is a firm rule that the Treasury have to be consulted before we commit resources to anything 'novel or contentious'. And if that doesn't deter us, a colleague will soon remind us that our Permanent Secretary is directly accountable to Parliament for the way in which we spend public money. Mere suspicion that we might cause the Permanent Secretary to be asked questions will cause our judgement to be

questioned.

- 5 Common sense, bolstered by the doctrine of collective responsibility, means that it is necessary to consult, often quite widely, before becoming committed to any significant new policy. Colleagues will inevitably express various concerns and, although it might be possible to address each of them, the effort of doing so can be quite daunting.
- 6 Our work is dominated by major and apparently unquestionable policies, including those in manifestos. There are therefore significant limits to the extent to which we are permitted to think the unthinkable.

Against the above, let me make four important points.

- 1 Other organisations find it equally difficult to foster internal challenge and innovation. Indeed, variations on all the above problems, apart perhaps from the first and fourth, can be found in most other large professions and organisations.
- 2 There is nothing in our two key professional duties (to give independent, balanced advice, and to implement Ministers' decisions, even if we have advised against them) which stops us being innovative.
- 3 There is no suggestion that we should all become innovative or creative all the time. But those of us that are innovative – and when we are innovative – need to operate in a supportive environment.
- 4 Being innovative is not the same as being entrepreneurial. Whatever they may say, no-one, and least of all our Ministers, want us to treat public money as if it were our own, or do deals other than within clearly established boundaries.

I believe that there are lots of things we can do to overcome obstacles to innovation, including:

- planning,
- tackling departmentalitis,
- overcoming the fear of risk,
- working effectively with the media,
- encouraging our teams to be innovative.

These subjects are dealt with in other pages on this website.