

Innovation's Three Rs

Sandford F. Borins, ed. 2008. *Innovations in Government: Research, Recognition, and Replication*.

Washington: Brookings Institution Press. 231 pp.

I began my review of this book with great anticipation. As a professor/practitioner of public management and teacher of a course on management innovation, I am always looking for a fresh, new book about helping organizations change for the better. This collection of articles, edited by Sanford Borins, is particularly interesting to me because it focuses on the Innovations in American Government Awards Program at the Harvard University Kennedy School's Ash Institute. The program makes a substantial contribution to improving the performance and reputation of government and public servants in the United States and more recently in Brazil, Chile, China, Kenya, Mexico, Peru, the Philippines, and South Africa. The book is definitely worth reading—some of the articles are truly excellent.

In the editor's own words, the book is very much a *Festschrift*, a tribute volume to the Innovations program and its proud and productive 23-year history. The introduction presents the requisite academic criticism of best-practice research—self-reported claims are not verified, success today can fail tomorrow, and best-practice looks only at the best and does not compare it to the worst. As Borins correctly notes, the Kennedy Innovations program deals with such criticisms effectively, with its rigorous application and independent site visitor verification process, requiring applicants to present a five-year track of success, and requiring applicants to describe the obstacles they had to overcome to achieve success. According to Borins, the unanswered questions are whether these innovations are replicable, how, why, and why not. The authors seek to answer these questions from a variety of different perspectives—historical, academic, purpose, international, personal, and looking forward. Sometimes the authors are successful. Sometimes they are not.

The collection starts on a high note with an enthralling history of the Innovation program by Jonathan Walters, an expert on performance management and columnist for *Governing* magazine. Walters sees the program as a response to the anti-government rhetoric of Ronald Reagan, shaped from a vision formed at the Ford Foundation and hammered into a practical, sustainable institution by Graham Allison, Pete Zimmerman, Mark Moore, and Walter Broadnax at the Kennedy School. Walters charts the development of the program from its early, modest profile through the fateful decision in the early 1990s to seek to attract a much larger applicant pool and to recognize programs with “a little more immediate heft.” (p. 22) Awards to Wisconsin's welfare-to-work initiative, New York City's Compstat crime fighting system, and Vermont's Restorative Justice early alternative sentencing program connected the Innovations Award to breakthrough programs that were reinventing American government. But even after securing endowments from the Ford Foundation and Roy L. Ash, Walters argues some observers in academia, and government are disappointed that the program is not more broadly recognized. He suggests that this shortfall in recognition and replication could be connected to the lack of resources for academic research on the award winners.

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The second article, by Steven Kelman, explores this perceived research gap. Kelman credits the Kennedy School and its scholars with achieving a high profile in innovation research, particularly through the work of Mark Moore and Michael Barzelay. Yet he criticizes the “Kennedy School of Research” on innovation as being “remarkably self-referential.” (p. 34) The author then proceeds to examine the modern literature on innovation, organizational change, and performance in American government without discussing or referencing E.S. Savas and the privatization movement or David Osborne and the reinventing government movement. Kelman also touches on public entrepreneurship without referencing H. George Frederickson and concludes by referencing his own work (p. 49).

Those who decide to read on are rewarded with an excellent article by Archon Fung focused on innovations that “build bridges between governments and the citizens they serve.” (p. 52) Fung identifies several important methods of public participation including social cooperation, communication and understanding, and civic mobilization. He then connects these methods to some extraordinarily successful innovation award winners: the San Francisco Sheriff’s Department Resolve to Stop the Violence Program; the Washington, DC, Police Department’s Gay and Lesbian Liaison Unit; and the Grassroots Conservation Program of the US Fish and Wildlife Service. Fung establishes that the truly innovative public manager can improve performance and deepen democracy at the same time.

Three chapters provide interesting case studies—one on the innovation program in Brazil; another looks at Beacon Scheme, a UK governance awards program; and the third examines the culture of innovation at the US Department of Labor under the leadership of Secretary of Labor Robert B. Reich. For US professors seeking to bring an international aspect to their management courses, the article by Marta Ferreira, Santos Farah and Peter Spink provides an excellent introduction to state and local government innovation in South America’s largest economy, whereas Jean Hartley’s article assesses innovation as a means to improve public service in the United Kingdom. Hartley also provides a useful comparative analysis of the UK’s Beacon Scheme and the Kennedy School’s American awards program. John Donahue’s look at Reich’s commitment to innovation at the Labor Department during the Clinton Administration is a very useful study of the role of leadership in the innovation process.

An article by Bob Behn analyzes replication on a conceptual level. It should really be the concluding chapter of the book. Behn helps the reader understand how innovation happens and what an innovator needs to do when attempting to transport an effective new methodology to a different culture or service area. He illustrates the challenge beautifully, comparing the many successful replications of New York City’s Compstat crime fighting system with less successful attempts to replicate Baltimore’s Citistat innovation (itself a replication of Compstat).

Chapters by editor Sanford Borins bookend the volume. The introduction simply summarizes the contents, whereas the final chapter celebrates what the Innovations program has accomplished and then lays out a research agenda for the future. A chapter by Eugene Bardach on interagency collaborative capacity is interesting but only remotely connected to other chapters. Gowher Rizvi, director of the Ash Institute which houses the awards program, focuses his chapter on the contributions of the awards program and the Ash Institute. He concludes that government innovation is useful only to the extent that it enhances the quality of life, justice, and democracy for the citizens being served.

This book certainly has value as a supplemental text for a graduate course on public management or management innovation. The three case chapters could be used as class assignments or to stimulate class discussions on replicability, organizational culture, cultural context, accountability, performance versus participation, and the challenge of organizational change. The articles by Bob Behn and Archon Fung help put the cases in perspective and would aid the students in drawing lessons from the cases.

The chapters by Walters, Rizvi, and Borins tell a story of the Innovations in American Government Awards that graduate students of public policy and management should know. Popular literature on government is overwhelmingly negative. Many of the textbooks used in public policy and administration courses focus on the constraints facing public managers and offer little encouragement for innovation or change for the better. The Kennedy awards process represents one of the few opportunities for effective public managers to attract some positive public attention and, it is good for public policy students to know about this very important program.

What is disappointing about the book is that it pays so little attention to the reinventing government movement and the important writings of David Osborne and H. George Frederickson. *Reinventing Government* (Osborne and Gaebler 1992) inspired President Bill Clinton and Vice President Al Gore to launch the National Performance Review, one of the few federal government reform initiatives to produce sustainable, positive changes in government agencies through doing more, not just spending less. *Reinventing Government's* follow-up, *Banishing Bureaucracy* (Osborne and Plastrik 1998), helped encourage and sustain innovators around the world, including former Mayor Stephen Goldsmith in Indianapolis and Mayor Rudy Giuliani in New York City. These high-profile reinvention era Innovations Award winners propelled the award program from relative obscurity to its current high profile, as Jonathan Walters describes in his chapter (22–4).

Not every application of the reinvention tool kit produced positive outcomes. H. George Frederickson (1997) most eloquently voiced its dangers in *The Spirit of Public Administration*. Public entrepreneurship, trying to run government like a business, can lead public agencies to ignore due process, equal access, public participation, and negative externalities. The apparent efficiencies of self-certification and self-regulation can lead to credit default swaps and catastrophic disruptions in the housing, banking, and credit markets, as we have seen.

There is nothing wrong with government innovators seeking to adapt best practices from the private sector to more efficiently meet the needs of their public sector customers. However, as Frederickson points out, public sector customers are also citizens and public agencies must do more than provide customer service. Mayor Goldsmith's initial commitment to privatization transformed into an award winning competition program as he came to better understand the complexities of public services and the constraints facing truly committed and talented public servants. In fact, it could be argued that Goldsmith's innovation had as much to do with creative labor relations and performance incentives as it did with using the market to improve public services.

The reinvention model incorporates market principles such as competition, leverage and earning rather than spending and customer focus; however, the majority of the 10 core strategies involve innovations accomplished by government workers working more effectively and efficiently, often by working more closely with communities and individuals they serve. As Don Kettl sees it:

Management reform for the twenty-first century will require the instinct for reform to become hardwired into the practice of government. Ultimately, this strategy means coupling the reform impulse with governance—government's increasingly important relationship with civil society and the institutions that shape modern life. (2005, 90)

When you read the chapter by Gowher Rizvi about the future of the Kennedy Innovations program, he seems to be channeling Kettl. Couple this strategy with a board that currently includes skilled practitioner/thinkers such as David Gergen, Kathleen Kennedy Townsend, David Osborne, and Ellen Schall and we have good reason to be optimistic about the future of the Innovations in American Government Awards program. If you agree with me that the program plays an important role in encouraging innovative public managers, then you should read *Innovations in Government: Research, Recognition and Replication*.

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