

A Guide to Crowdsourcing for State and Local Government

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If you've ever asked for feedback on pending regulations, participated in a brainstorming session, or attended a city council meeting, you've already taken part in crowdsourcing. The government has long since used crowdsourcing to gather input from its citizens and residents. It allows them to reduce friction, minimize costs, and give ownership to those they serve. So why is this method of collaborative information being formalized and growing at an ever-increasing rate? It's simple:

Two heads are better than one

What if you could go further than that? What if you could use the expertise of a city, country, or even the world? Crowdsourcing allows you to do exactly that; Through the power of the internet and social media, answers to questions can be discovered quickly and at scale. Reaching beyond your usual go-to knowledge base allows you to give your citizens a voice and access to more information than ever.

Crowdsourcing in government goes way back. In 1714 the British government was looking for a foolproof way to measure longitude at sea. They offered a 20,000 pound prize (3 million in today's money) that went to watchmaker, John Harrison.

Excuse me, do you work here?

Due to the size of government agencies, many employees will have never interacted with each other. Employees may be on different teams or floors, different cities, or even countries. Crowdsourcing sparks new relationships and strengthens existing ones by setting challenges with a common goal and inviting all staff to share their knowledge. These challenges pave the way for serendipitous outcomes, with a community that feels valued and part of something.

“Community is much more than belonging to something;
it's about doing something together that makes belonging matter.”

Brian Solis, Digital analyst, speaker, and author



Somebody already knows the answer

To find out who, you just need to ask. The people who know a product best are the people who use it and the employees who talk to them. Employees are the frontline of your agency or organization and are in the ideal position to discover new fantastic ideas. Crowdsourcing provides an opportunity to tap into existing knowledge already in the minds of your team. Engage with team members, and you might reveal ideas to increase efficiency, build trust, and even reduce costs.

Crowdsourcing provides you with different perspectives

When organizational challenges arise, they are often solved with little or no input from employees or citizens. But if you crowdsource, it helps get solutions and invites new people to be part of the process. Do it right, and you'll gain insights and ideas from diverse individuals to help solve big and small problems.

Investing in people means invested people

When people are part of building a solution, they'll continue to invest in it, simply because they were a part of creating it. Asking for input in the challenges you face makes people feel appreciated, especially when they see their ideas implemented.

“When people are financially invested, they want a return. When people are emotionally invested, they want to contribute.”

Simon Sinek, speaker and author

The resistance

These are wonderful reasons for why the government should crowdsource ideas, but there is always a naysayer or two in an organization. Naysayers are systemic as society and individuals are programmed to resist change. This is particularly true because there is a base instinct of those in authority not to listen to people's ideas in their communities and organizations. They prefer to rely on comparatively small groups of individuals that receive the task of 'innovation'.



The inherent resistance to listening

In offices all around the world, workers are frustrated because their bosses won't listen to their ideas, or because the pathway they might take to offer their ideas is vague or undefined. In many cases, management may lean towards not risking changes to long-standing processes.

In many school districts, the worst case scenario is that teachers get frustrated because their senior administrators won't listen to ideas that might have a positive impact on their students' education. Too often, ideas might be "offered" but the system lacks a manageable forum or pathway to drive ideas to strategy, and action. Because of this, Teachers often, keep teaching the same way because they are told to "teach to the test," and the risks associated with changing practices can be perceived to be too high.

Somewhere, there's an individual getting angry because they've been kept on hold for an hour with their state's unemployment office trying to determine why their benefit was rejected. When they eventually get

through, they may not feel heard or receive a solution in a timely manner.

There is a new employee, sitting in a cubicle, with great ideas, but they haven't fully articulated or tested these ideas, or perhaps they are too introverted, so no one will risk trying them.

Somewhere, a single mother finishes a ream of paperwork to receive funds for after-school care, only to find out the only facility with space is 30 minutes away, and there is no transportation available.

Buried deep within every agency and community, there are potentially transformational ideas – that never see the light of day. So why is that? Because society is wired this way.

Doing as we're told

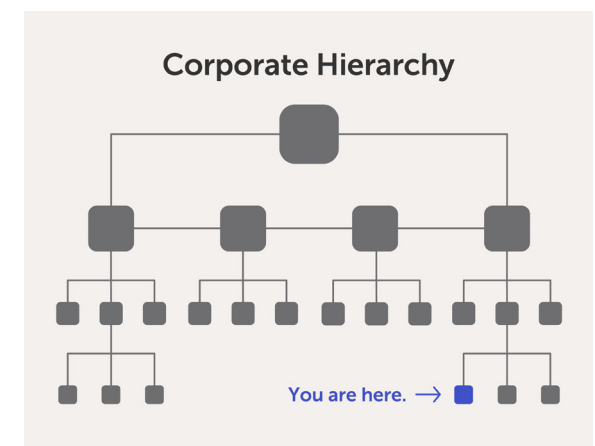
Over 2000 years ago, the ancient Greeks were good at engaging their population. They held public forums

called Agoras, where citizens could meet to share and debate ideas and vote on them. These ideas led to improvements in transport, housing, and public health and wellbeing. But then this democratic

civilization disappeared into the dust, and a feudal system emerged and dominated around the world. The kings ruled over everyone for the next 2000 years. The courts of the kings turned into the administration of government. Over time, corporations adopted this hierarchy when running their business.

We're just too busy!

We're all running so hard that we haven't got time to stand still and think about new ways of doing things. We're programmed to be resistant to change. So how do we change the way we're wired? You introduce the crowdsourcing of ideas into the heart of what the agency does.



“Crowdsourcing is a great way to approach creation because in any given point there’s always somebody on the Internet who knows something better than you do.”

—Guy Kawasaki

What works?

So what do you need to do to drive a successful crowdsourced innovation program?

There are three basic rules:

Keep it simple

Have clear objectives

Give feedback to users

That is a good foundation but after nine years of working with organizations of all sizes and sectors around the world, several best practices have become evident. Whether you're running an innovation competition, looking for ways to feed the hungry in your community, or determining how to run a University when 75% of the professors are in a high-risk health group, considering the following points will increase your chances of success.

1. Mean it!

Set out with the right intentions from the beginning. There's a difference between asking for ideas to satisfy a commitment that you made to your HR team to engage employees and looking to make a positive change by seriously considering those ideas shared by employees to drive innovation.

2. Set out the process that you're going to follow and identify your goals.

This way, participants know what they're getting into and are clear on the investment requested of their time and energy. This also allows them to plan and structure when to share and participate in their already hectic lives.

3. Select the right crowd.

To get the best out of your open innovation program, you need to select the participants with the proper knowledge and experience to address your questions.

4. Frame and ask the right question.

Short, concise questions usually get the best responses. A couple of our favorite ones to date of customers using the Crowdicity idea management platform? 'What do you want for your Olympic legacy?', asked by Eduardo Paes the mayor of Rio, and 'how can we reduce the amount of email in our organization, from Paul Sly, CEO of Dorset HealthCare University NHS Foundation Trust.

5. Get the person with the highest authority, or a member of the leadership team, to ask the first question.

People are often cynical (see point 1), but if they know the leadership of their organization is taking the lead (see point 4), they're more likely to invest their valuable time and energy in participating.

6. Do something with the ideas that you receive. David Simoes-Brown, the CEO of 100% Open sums it up well: 'Ideas are worthless! There's no Innovation in Open Innovation until you do something with – and achieve value from – ideas that you gather'.

7. Provide feedback.

Participants need to know that investing their time and energy is worth it. Even if nothing comes of their contribution, they'd rather know this and receive useful feedback than hear nothing. People need to feel their input is valued and that their ideas aren't disappearing into a vacuum. Once an agency reaches this level of acknowledgment and trust, cultural improvements become real along with attendant business efficiencies and effectiveness.

8. People want appreciation for giving their time and effort, so provide incentives and rewards.

The private industry has offered everything from a gift voucher to a \$50,000 prize. Prizes don't have to be high value or even have any monetary value at all.

A few unique rewards might be:

- Providing opportunities for personal or professional development to help follow their idea through
- Awarding a badge or plaque
- Naming the program after the "innovator"
- Giving the "innovators" department a lunch
- A day off
- A chance to attend a conference
- Public recognition
- Recognition at a peer event
- News coverage



9. Keep going.

For crowdsourced innovation to be most effective, you must maintain momentum after your first success or failure. Creating a culture of change depends on driving continuous engagement and participation.



Final thoughts

Crowdsourcing is an excellent way to engage with anyone crucial to your organization. Employees and clients are the lifeblood of any enterprise, so hearing their voices and using their knowledge is invaluable. Whether it's to create or improve a community or gather information – the question isn't 'Why should you crowdsource?' but 'Why aren't you?'