Cultivating Innovation: Growing Leadership and Expanding Perspectives

“Some problems are so complex that you have to be highly intelligent and well informed just to be undecided about them.” - Lawrence J. Peter

Have you ever encountered a problem that seems just too big to tackle? How do you change a system that is filled with tradition, complicated programs, union contracts, and a government culture that has not shifted in many years? It is easier to maintain the status quo but we are seeing changes in Minnesota counties.

About eight years ago, the Association of Minnesota Counties (AMC) wanted to create a program that would lead to increased dialog among county leaders about ways to improve county government and prepare it for future challenges. There was a belief that if county leaders expanded their perspectives on innovative management techniques and if there was a place for sharing new ways of doing work, there could be a shift in the local government culture. This would not be abrupt change but rather sustainable change that brought innovation, efficiencies and increased engagement of employees and citizens into the change process.

A program entitled FUTURES was thus created at AMC in 2004 and the evolution of this leadership effort reflects the culture shift occurring in how county leaders make change happen locally. There is a belief that local leaders, working hand in hand with employees and county citizens can improve local government and prepare for the changes that will occur because of demographic shifts and fiscal constraints. Innovation cannot and should not be just a string of on-going debates with state government about mandates. That is a component of change but it is about owning the change process locally, expanding the leadership efforts of county leaders and making improvements that enhance service and efficiency for the benefit of citizens.

FUTURES was involved with the development of the MINNESOTA REDESIGN Project, an attempt by AMC to significantly improve efficiency, governance, transparency and outcomes for Minnesota's local governments. The branding of the term REDESIGN has taken on a life of its own since the beginning: State government started their own redesign committees, Twin Cities Public Television (tpt) is now conducting a MN Redesign documentary series, and newspapers and blogs write continually about how redesign should occur in government. AMC did start the REDESIGN movement, but who really cares who uses the phrase as long as county leaders work
together to make change happen? The whole point of AMC’s REDESIGN effort is that it would catch on all over the state, in all levels of government, because it was the right thing for the future of Minnesota.

AMC’s FUTURES advanced leadership academy is still strong at AMC and continues to offer programs three times a year that are focused on three core objectives: enhancing skills development, expanding leadership role models and exploring redesign efforts that may be duplicated in other parts of the state.

There have been multiple program spin offs for counties that began as an idea at an AMC FUTURES meeting. As a place where county leaders can explore new ideas without feeling threatened that they will be attacked in the media or among their own employees for considering new ideas and approaches, FUTURES discussions become an incubator for new models of innovation in Minnesota. These new models have included:

- A Statewide Leadership Cohort Program for County Employees
- The Minnesota Accountable Government Innovation & Collaboration (MAGIC) Act
- Human Services Redesign Efforts throughout the State
- LEAN Training Programs for County Employees
- New Models for County Governance and Increased Engagement of Leaders to Explore Redesign Opportunities Locally.

If you are interested in learning more about the AMC FUTURES program, visit the FUTURES website or contact Toni Smith at tsmith@mncounties.org. We are always looking for great ideas that will help develop the solutions we need today to ensure a better tomorrow.