Practical Innovation
in Government

HOW FRONT-LINE LEADERS ARE TRANSFORMING PUBLIC-SECTOR ORGANIZATIONS

ALAN G. ROBINSON   **DEAN M. SCHROEDER**

CONTENTS

PART 4   WHEN GOVERNMENT LEADS THE WAY: PUSHING THE
BOUNDARIES OF INNOVATION AND IMPROVEMENT

PREFACE

We never set out to write a book about improving government operations. We were drawn in slowly as we learned more and as the potential of what we were discovering became increasingly apparent. Throughout our careers, our work has centered on high-performance organizations. Until recently this meant that we studied and worked primarily with private-sector companies.

But a few years ago, we became aware of some impressive improvement efforts in public-sector organizations. Fascinated, we started to visit them and look into what they were doing. Gradually, as we identified and visited more such organizations, it became clear that the highest performers were using approaches that, although rare in the private sector, were proving astonishingly effective in a government setting. In fact, some of these organizations had attained levels of efficiency and service that rivalled the best private-sector companies anywhere.

For decades, most books on improving government operations have assumed that the only way to do this is to make sweeping changes, such as dismantling bureaucracy, privatizing services, reengineering budgeting and purchasing processes, or eliminating cumbersome rules and policies. Underlying this line of thinking is that in order to be more efficient, government needs to be run more like a business. Unfortunately, this approach merely replaces old problems with new ones.

What we discovered in our research was compelling. The organizations we studied had dramatically improved their performance

within existing government constraints. In other words, their methods accepted government on its own terms, with its needed checks and balances, its complex public mission, its inherent political character, its diverse stakeholder demands, and with its operating goals that transcend narrow financial concerns. And the interest in improvement came from across the political spectrum—there was *no* pattern associating the improvement initiatives with any particular political orientation. What we were seeing was practical innovation in government.

In the beginning, we had expected to find that successful improvement and innovation efforts in the public sector would look very much like they did in well-run private-sector companies, perhaps with some contextual adjustments. But we found these initiatives using a fundamentally different approach, and it was a game-changer. Rather than most improvement efforts being driven by middle and upper managers, as is typical in the private sector, the primary champions of change in the high-performing government organizations were low-level managers and front-line employees.

As we learned more, what had begun as a personal curiosity turned into a book that simply had to be written. Written for front-line supervisors and managers interested in dramatically improving the performance of their units by creating an engaged workforce. Written for higher-level government managers and elected officials looking for a practical way to transform the operations of a large department, a city, or even an entire state. Written for the professionals, senior staff, and thinkers about government who have the ear of public-sector leaders and managers. And finally, written for students of public administration, who are the future of government.

The book's stories and insights are drawn from extensive field research and interviews with people at all levels of the organizations we studied. Our goal is to demonstrate the enormous potential of front-line–driven improvement for you and your organization, to inspire you to try it yourself, and to provide you with a well-grounded

and realistic guide to help you succeed in improving your own part of government.

   We hope you find *Practical Innovation in Government* both useful and enjoyable.

INTRODUCTION
The Practical Secret
to High-Performing
Government Operations

Whether people want more government or less government, they all want *efficient* government. Unfortunately, public-sector organizations are generally not known for their operational excellence. Recently, however, a small but growing number of public-sector organizations around the world have demonstrated that it is possible to dramatically improve performance in a government setting. We spent six years studying improvement efforts in over seventy government organizations—ranging from small departments to entire states—in five countries. Some were struggling or had already failed. Others were just getting started or had made limited progress in specific areas. But a handful of high performers had developed truly world-class levels of efficiency and service. Our intent was to discover how these high performers had succeeded in transforming themselves when so much of government has not.

To get a sense for the kind of transformation we will be talking about, consider what happened in the Department of Excise and Licenses in the city of Denver.

On a hot August day, Stacie Loucks walked into the department and immediately knew she had her work cut out for her. The waiting area was crammed with hot and irritated customers, so many that the air conditioning system could not get the temperature below eighty-five degrees. Loucks had just been appointed by Mayor Michael Hancock to head the department, whose thirty-nine employees issued some forty-eight thousand licenses each year. The approximately eighty different types of licenses, most of which required annual renewals, included everything from individual licenses for taxi drivers and merchant (security) guards to business licenses for restaurants and liquor stores.

Loucks knew that if nothing was done, the long waits were going to get much worse. The city's booming economy meant that the number of business licenses being issued was expected to double in the next three years. Furthermore, voters had recently legalized the recreational use of marijuana, and the city was going to have to figure out how to license all aspects of its growth, testing, distribution, and sales. And since Colorado was the first state to legalize recreational marijuana, there were no models to follow. There was also talk of developing licensing requirements for short-term private lodging rentals (think Airbnb), and for drivers working for ridesharing companies such as Uber and Lyft.

Fortunately, Loucks had a place to go for help. She called Brian Elms, Director of Peak Academy, the city's continuous improvement office. He assigned one of his improvement experts, Melissa Wiley, to the department for six months to help Loucks get things started.

Although the problem seemed obvious, Wiley quickly discovered that no one had any data on actual wait times, nor had specific causes of the delays been identified. Consequently, her first action was to set up a system to measure and track various aspects of the service process in order to better understand the issues involved. It turned out that the average wait time to see a license technician was one hour and forty minutes, with peak times of over five hours.

While Wiley was gathering data, Loucks began to mobilize her unit for a serious improvement effort. Over the next eighteen months, she and her employees came up with many improvement ideas, most of which they could implement themselves. Wait times for licenses were cut to seven minutes, and peak wait times to less than fifteen minutes. As the staff were no longer serving hostile customers who had been waiting for hours, their work became less stressful and unpleasant. Morale increased and employee turnover declined dramatically. And despite the dramatic increase in license volume, Loucks was the only department head in the entire city government who did not ask for more staff or resources in the next budgeting cycle.

On a follow-up visit to Denver Licensing several years later, the first thing we noticed was that *no one* was waiting to be served. And as we shall see, the reduction in wait times was only the beginning of the department's transformation.

Rethinking Improvement in Government Operations

There is a long history of attempts to eliminate waste in the public sector. Over the years, a number of prominent national-level commissions have recommended sweeping reorganizations and dramatic policy changes aimed at streamlining operations and saving money. (More on these in the next chapter.) Although these one-off efforts did make some progress, they fell far short of what was possible.

Countless initiatives in state and local governments have attempted to create some form of ongoing improvement capability, typically drawing on the popular improvement methodologies of the day.[1] Unfortunately, most of these programs produced only limited results. They rarely succeeded in creating the culture and systems needed to engage employees at all levels in sustained and broad-based *continuous* improvement (CI).

Throughout our careers, our main interest has been operational improvement. We have studied its history, and have even been drawn

into our own historical studies, conducting direct archival research on topics ranging from the earliest suggestion systems at the Arsenal in medieval Venice to the emergence of what would become the modern CI movement during and after WWII in the United States and Japan. We studied best practices wherever we could find them in the world and brought much of what we learned to our corporate clients who were seeking to upgrade their own CI efforts. Our primary goal was to learn more about the facets of leadership and organizational structure that energize, or retard, ongoing performance improvement. And the field of CI has never stopped evolving and expanding into new areas.

Most of our work has been in the private sector, where interest in operational improvement has always been strong. But several years ago, we experienced a marked increase of interest in our research and consulting help from government managers. They were dissatisfied with the results of their CI initiatives and wanted to know how to do better. We had previously worked with CI efforts in public-sector organizations, but we had often left thinking that our efforts should have had more impact than they did. Clearly, we were missing something.

The renewed interest in CI started us thinking. Neither of us was aware of any public-sector CI initiatives that came anywhere near the high-performing ones we had studied or worked with in the private sector. Was there something different about government organizations that made CI more challenging for them?

We began searching for examples of public-sector organizations with good CI programs, seeking help from academic colleagues, friends in the government consulting world, and our contacts in government. Early on, many of the programs we visited were marginal or in their early stages. Gradually, we began to find more organizations with strong improvement cultures. Ultimately, as we mentioned, we studied over seventy organizations in five countries. Of these, we classified fifteen as exceptionally high performers, with work environments like Denver Licensing, where fully engaged

employees were regularly solving problems and making improvements. A handful of these high performers were operating at levels of efficiency and service on a par with the best companies we had seen in the private sector.

The high-performing public-sector organizations were operating at levels of efficiency and service that rivalled the best private-sector companies anywhere.

In hindsight, the reason for the initial scarcity of effective programs was that we had begun our search just as a new generation of improvement initiatives was emerging. Many of the high-performing initiatives described in this book were still in their early stages, and several did not yet exist. Our fortuitous timing offered a rare opportunity to study the development of these programs as they grew from their earliest stages into instruments of transformative change. We interviewed over a thousand people, from front-line staff to top political leaders, and compared the characteristics of our sample of high-performing programs with those that were limping along or delivering limited results. Our goal was to discover the success factors for CI in government and to understand their implications for managers at all levels. Our methodology was loosely what academics would refer to as a "grounded theory" approach—probing, testing, and refining our thinking with each new interview or case.

The high performers were achieving their impressive levels of efficiency and service in a surprising way. We had expected to find most improvement being driven in a top-down fashion, perhaps by middle or upper managers, as is generally the case in the business world. Although we did find plenty of examples of management-driven programs, they were the marginal and low performers—their performance was spotty and their lifespans were often short. Some

were so short-lived that we were unable to study them directly. Much of our information about them came from postmortems. We found ourselves interviewing, and commiserating with, the people involved after their programs had been terminated.

The successful CI efforts we studied were quite different. What stood out was that the lion's share of the improvement activity was taking place on the front lines. The primary champions of change were low-level managers and supervisors. They had created units with strong local cultures of improvement. Bit by bit, through large numbers of small, highly targeted ideas, their units relentlessly increased performance. These *front-line leaders*, not their higher-level managers, were the real heroes of their organizations' innovation stories.

The more we studied this front-line–driven improvement, the more we realized how uniquely suited it is to a government context. This book distills the collective experiences of the leaders we studied and the lessons they learned. Our goal is to lay out what is different about CI in public-sector organizations—what *works*, what *doesn't*, and *why*.

But before we get into our findings, it will be helpful to get a better understanding of what front-line–driven improvement actually looks like. To do this, let us take a closer look at what Stacie Loucks did to transform Denver Licensing.

Transformative Improvement at Denver Licensing

When Loucks took over as department head, one of the first things she needed to do was to figure out why the lines were so long. So she asked Melissa Wiley (the expert loaned to her from Peak Academy) to dissect and measure the different aspects of the problem. In the process, Wiley discovered some startling contributing factors. A huge one was the fact that 40 percent of the people who finally made it to the service counter were turned away because their applications were incomplete or they had filled out the wrong forms. Each license

typically required five to eight different forms, and it was easy to confuse them or miss one entirely. The applicants would then have to leave the line, get the correct documentation, and in many cases, get in line all over again.

While Wiley was busy analyzing the long lines, Loucks was looking for ways to free up some time for her overwhelmed service technicians to participate in improvement activity. She scheduled a meeting with the city's budget director to get permission to convert two open (but unneeded) "enforcement officer" positions into licensing technician positions. On her way to the meeting, she received a text from Wiley informing her that the wait time had just reached eight hours! Armed with this additional information, Loucks had little difficulty convincing the budget director to allow her to convert the positions.

As soon as she could, Loucks began sending her entire staff of thirty-nine people to Peak Academy for training. Over several months, her front-line employees were given "green belt" training, a one-day workshop on the basic tools of CI, and her supervisors and managers received a more extensive five-day "black belt" course.

To encourage front-line staff to put their training to use as soon as they got back to the office, Loucks asked each employee to identify at least one improvement by the end of the year, then several months away. The improvement had to help reduce customer wait times and be one that the employee could implement without a great deal of help. As an additional spur, these ideas would be taken into account in the employees' annual performance reviews.

Most of the ideas involved relatively small changes that were simple to implement. For example,

- A licensing technician came up with an idea to address the problem of applicants who filled out the wrong forms. This mistake was easy to make, because a lot of the forms looked similar and applications typically required five to eight different forms, many of which were used for several different licenses. The merchant guard license application, for example, required an application form, a letter of hire,

a medical history form, a criminal history form, a criminal background check, copies of photo-identification documents, and three character references. One day an applicant for this license came in with a nicely organized packet of forms. When the technician complemented him on his organizational skills, he remarked that the packet was simply the way his new boss had handed him the forms. Thinking about this, the technician realized that while all the necessary forms were available in the lobby, they were organized by form, rather than by license. This meant that the applicants had to assemble the correct set of forms for whatever license they were seeking. The technician decided to create preassembled packets of forms for the five most popular licenses. As a result, for these licenses the problem of applicants filling out the incorrect forms was eliminated.

- The office had a single centralized printer/copier/scanner for everyone's use. This arrangement was intended to save money and space, but it meant that whenever technicians had to print a document, make a copy, or scan an applicant's ID or other documentation, they would have to get up, leave their customer, and walk across the office to the shared machine. And with the entire office using the machine, there was often a queue. To eliminate this wasted time, a technician suggested equipping each customer service counter with its own desktop printer/copier/scanner. After a quick analysis, Loucks ordered the printers.

- A computer and printer had been set up in the lobby so that applicants needing to submit criminal background checks could conduct and print these checks themselves. The problem was that the specialized software was not user-friendly. Customers were constantly getting stuck and having to ask a licensing technician for help. On

average this happened thirty-six times a day, with each incident taking about five minutes of a technician's time. The improvement idea was to create a simple instruction manual with screen shots and arrows to walk applicants through the process step by step. It saved three hours in technician time per day.

■ When applicants submitted their forms, the technicians had to enter their information into the computer. The problem was that the input screens were set up differently than the forms, requiring technicians to constantly flip pages back and forth to locate the right information. Not only was this irritating and time-consuming, but it led to input errors. A technician suggested that the application forms be redesigned to match the computer screens.

While most front-line ideas could be handled with little or no help from managers, occasionally a larger idea came up that needed Loucks's involvement. For example, a license technician proposed that the department digitize its licensing records. Historically, license records had been kept on paper and filed in boxes on shelves. When a file was needed by a licensing technician or requested by someone in another city department, such as a police officer checking into a business, it would take a technician ten to fifteen minutes of searching to retrieve it—if the file was where it was supposed to be. If the record had been misfiled or taken out by someone else, the technician would usually abandon the search after thirty minutes or so and send out an all-office email to try to locate it. Retrieving records was a major source of delay and frustration.

The more we studied front-line–driven improvement, the more we realized how uniquely suited it is to a government context.

Loucks procured the equipment and IT support the employee needed for the digitalization process, and she also freed time for her and a colleague to work through the files. Over the next several months, as time was available, the pair culled old documents according to the city's document retention protocol and digitized the rest. The digitization project not only eliminated a lot of wasted time searching for files, but it made license information available online to any city employee who needed it. The project also freed up a large area in the center of the main office where the paper files had been stored.

A number of other significant problems also required Loucks's personal involvement. Early on, to check on how telephone inquiries were being handled, Loucks called the public phone number for Denver Licensing. Her call was not answered, and the voice mailbox was full. By accessing the mailbox and listening to some of the messages, Loucks discovered that many people were calling with simple questions and then calling back two or three times after getting no response. Eventually, they were forced to come in and join the line in the service center. It turned out that although the staff was aware of the voice mailbox, no one had responsibility to check it and return calls. Loucks had no data on how many calls had been received, but she did discover fourteen thousand open inquiries that had been forwarded to her department from calls made to 311, Denver's non-emergency phone number. She realized that the ignored phone calls were contributing to the long wait times.

Loucks discussed the problem with the head of the city's 311 service, who was under some pressure to improve his unit's first-call resolution rate, and he was eager to work with her. Together, he and Loucks developed a list of answers to frequently asked questions (FAQs) and incorporated it into a short training session for the city's 311 operators. This allowed them to answer approximately half of the questions about licenses, and it gave a big boost to their first-call resolution rate. Loucks also established a standard procedure to manage the voice mailbox, creating a schedule for service technicians to review messages and respond to them.

As we mentioned earlier, within eighteen months, wait times at Denver Licensing dropped from an average of one hour and forty minutes to seven minutes. Peak wait times dropped from over five hours to fifteen minutes. And not long afterward, wait times were all but eliminated.

As soon as the wait-time problem was solved, Loucks turned her department's CI focus to streamlining the service experience once customers got to the technicians. And when Loucks's successor, Ashley Kilroy, stepped into the leadership role without the pressure of the long lines and service issues, she and the staff were able to take on higher-order issues and challenge some longstanding norms. They worked with the mayor and city council to reexamine a number of the licensing rules. The application processes for many licenses were put online, and the need for several other licenses was eliminated. For example, taxi drivers required licenses, but ridesharing drivers did not. Naturally, the taxi drivers were upset. After some study and discussion, rather than adding the requirement that rideshare drivers be licensed, the licensing requirements for taxi drivers were reduced.

The Emergence of the Front-Line Leader

Loucks's success in dramatically improving performance at Denver Licensing required a great deal of leadership on her part. She had to plan the change, inspire her staff to get involved in improvement activity, create the time to get them trained, secure help from Peak Academy and permission from the city's budget office, and then lead her people through the actual transformation effort. All the high-performing programs we studied were characterized by such extraordinary leadership at the front-line level.

In most organizations, the lower managers are in the hierarchy, the less they need to demonstrate leadership. Their primary tasks are to coordinate, supervise, direct, and control, based on procedures and policies established by managers higher up the chain of

command. Building a unit driven by front-line improvement requires more leadership at a lower level than is the norm.

A strong front-line–driven CI component turned out to be the primary difference between successful CI initiatives in public-sector organizations and those in their private-sector counterparts. It took us a while to figure out why.

The Challenges of Management-Driven Improvement in Government

It seems obvious: most improvement must be driven by top and middle managers. After all, they are the ones with authority and access to resources. And management-driven CI is indeed the dominant paradigm in the private sector. So why did our study find it delivering such limited results in government, and why was most of the effective improvement activity taking place on the front lines?

In the private sector, changes are generally less complicated to execute. If top or middle managers want to make a change, they usually have the power to do so. But government is not a business. When government managers want to create change, they typically face a host of political, regulatory, and bureaucratic hurdles that can make the process painfully slow, inordinately time consuming, and even professionally risky.

> Building a front-line–driven unit requires
> substantially more leadership from lower-level
> managers and supervisors than is the norm.

Public-sector organizations have many checks and balances. Some are in the form of divided authority, but most are embedded in policies and rules that were put in place to ensure consistency, fairness, openness, due process, or ethical behavior. Over time,

successive managers add their own interpretations to these policies and rules, and these interpretations can gradually become considered part of the policies and rules as well. The result is that managers trying to make even modest improvements must contend with a bureaucratic haze of uncertainty in which it is not always clear what is allowable. All this makes it more complex and riskier for them to make changes.

Harry Kenworthy, a consultant who conducted many Rapid Improvement Events (RIEs) in the public sector (more on RIEs in Chapter 9), used to insist that before a team he was working with started one, it should examine all the policies and rules that might get in the way of any potential changes. The CI department of one Midwestern state we studied had a team of five lawyers attached to it whose primary task was to make sure that improvements did not violate any existing laws or regulations. Their secondary task was to convince the legislature to modify specific laws in ways that would allow increases in efficiency while not impacting the laws' intent.

In addition, most management-driven improvements are large enough to have budget implications. The public-sector budgeting process often involves political wrangling, horse-trading, and compromise in a zero-sum game where constituencies with different agendas vie for limited resources. Funding an improvement project often means not funding something else.

Another factor is the nature of top leadership in government. As the city manager of Borås, a community in Southwest Sweden noted for its CI initiative, pointed out to us, "Democratic government is one of the few places where the leaders generally know far less about how their organizations work than the people who report to them." This can make management-driven change challenging. When managers propose an improvement that needs top-level support, they often find themselves trying to make their case to leaders who lack the background and contextual understanding needed to make an informed decision. And when elected officials start imposing "improvements" themselves, the results can be extremely disruptive.

One local Canadian school official told us that every time a new Provincial education minister takes office, the central ministry sends out a new set of educational "experts" to introduce the latest teaching "innovations" to her schools and teachers. Since these outsiders have little understanding of local realities, their "improvements" invariably create more problems than they solve.

Given the unique challenges faced by management-driven improvement in the public sector, CI initiatives designed around it are hobbled from the outset. Front-line–driven improvement, however, largely avoids these drawbacks. Moreover, it is an unexpectedly powerful force for change.

Why Front-Line–Driven Improvement Is So Effective

Although the front-line ideas implemented at Denver Licensing were generally small and inexpensive, cumulatively they all but eliminated the long lines. At the same time, each individual idea went largely unnoticed by customers, colleagues from other departments, and higher-level managers. In short, they were invisible to outsiders. And even if outsiders had become aware of one of these ideas, where would any potential objection to it have come from?

Without the countervailing forces faced by higher-level managers, front-line leaders and staff can implement large numbers of small improvements with little interference. And when ideas do need to involve other functions, front-line leaders can often work directly with their counterparts in other departments—much as Loucks did with her 311 colleague.

In spite of being so small that they are "under the radar," front-line ideas are an amazingly powerful source of improvement. Research has shown that some 80 percent of any organization's improvement potential lies in the creativity and initiative of its front-line staff.[2] (The other 20 percent comes from the ideas of consultants and managers, new technology, improved equipment, etc.) We have come to call this phenomenon "The 80/20 Principle of Improvement." There are many

reasons behind it. For one thing, front-line staff are in positions to see a lot of problems that their managers do not and, as we saw in the Denver Licensing examples, they have intimate, process-specific knowledge that allows them to come up with practical, low-cost improvements. There are also a lot more front-line employees than managers.

> Despite being so small that they are "under the radar," front-line ideas are an amazingly powerful source of improvement. Front-line leaders and staff are able to implement large numbers of them with little interference.

Additionally, many "small" front-line ideas are much bigger than their apparent "face value," because they apply to activities that are repeated, sometimes thousands or even tens of thousands of times a year. Take, for example, the case of Denver Licensing's clearer manual for applicants generating their own background checks. The new manual saved the technicians some 36 interruptions per day, or more than 9,300 interruptions per year. At 5 minutes per interruption, this translated to 3 hours per day, which is 15 hours per week, or 750 hours per year. And this was just a single idea! With the sheer quantity of ideas that front-line–driven improvement can generate, the benefits quickly accumulate into astonishing performance improvement. But no one, even the front-line employees themselves, ever sees the full impact of individual ideas. Each small idea quickly disappears into normal work routines and is forgotten. All anyone sees is a well-run department.

Given the near invisibility of individual front-line ideas, it is not surprising that so many managers are unaware of the 80/20 Principle of Improvement. And even when it is explained to them, many simply don't believe it. We remember being challenged when introducing the concept during a training session at a large US Naval base. When

we brought up the 80/20 Principle, one of the improvement experts taking the class abruptly got up and left the room. He returned a while later and apologized. Not believing us, he had gone to run the numbers to refute our point. He had realized that the improvement data kept by the base could be separated by source—management or the front lines. But the results of his analysis confirmed that almost exactly 80 percent of the overall improvement that had taken place on the base in the previous year had been front-line initiated!

When it became clear to us that the dominant factor distinguishing the high performers in our study was front-line–driven improvement, we were surprised, yet not surprised. Surprised, because we were simply not expecting to see its singular importance in the government context. Not surprised, because in the relatively few cases of true front-line–driven improvement in the private sector, it also produces extremely high rates of performance improvement.

Organization-Wide Front-Line–Driven Improvement

Part 1 of this book is designed to provide front-line managers with what they need to know to create a front-line–driven unit, much of which is counterintuitive. Part 2—Chapters 5 to 7—shifts the perspective to higher-level leaders who want to deploy front-line–driven improvement across a large department, city, state, or national-level agency.

We identified and tracked eight successful organization-wide CI initiatives, observing the strategies the leaders used to transform their organizations and how each strategy played out.

The successful strategies all followed a similar pattern. The top leaders began by working to convince their senior leadership teams of the benefits of front-line–driven improvement. Once they felt that there was an adequate level of support for the concept, the leaders began installing the instruments of change in their organizations. They started by appointing someone to lead the transformation—someone with deep CI expertise, solid change-management skills, and a good measure of institutional intelligence.

These CI champions were responsible for designing and setting up the infrastructure needed for the improvement initiative. Their first step was to assemble a small group of experts who could act as trainers, coaches, and facilitators during the rollout and ongoing development of CI throughout the organization.

To launch their CI initiatives, many of the leaders used some version of what Denver's Brian Elms termed "building a coalition of the willing." Rather than wasting their efforts on reluctant managers, the leaders invested time and resources only in the managers who already wanted to get involved. This is markedly different from how CI initiatives are typically launched in the private sector, where top management simply mandates participation. While dictating the use of CI can generate rapid compliance and gets the initiative off to a fast start, it also tends to generate resentment rather than the high levels of engagement needed for front-line–driven improvement. Engagement does not come from conscripts; it comes from *volunteers*.

Engagement does not come from conscripts;
it comes from volunteers.

Over time, as evidence of the benefits of front-line–driven improvement mounts, the coalition of the willing expands as more managers become convinced of its merits. And as CI becomes more accepted, the leaders begin ratcheting up accountability for it by including improvement performance in annual reviews and decisions on raises and promotions.

Improvement in the Interconnected World of Problems and Opportunities

Every organization faces a spectrum of problems and opportunities. These come in different sizes and complexities, need to be addressed

at different levels of analysis, and are often part of an interrelated nesting of issues. The effective CI programs in our study assembled a complete set of problem-solving techniques that could address the range and types of issues their organizations typically encountered. In Part 3—Chapters 8 through 11—we discuss the three main categories of problems and some of the more frequently used methods to deal with them.

Our goal is not to teach or advocate for any particular technique. Many books, classes, consultants, and online resources are available to help with that. Rather, we introduce and describe the power of various problem-solving methods, demonstrate why a full set of them is needed, and use numerous stories to illustrate them. For example, we show how

- the front-line idea system at the Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT) significantly increased productivity, reduced costs, improved the road system, and made the highway crews' jobs easier and much safer;

- a Rapid Improvement Event (RIE) in the city of Denton, Texas, cut 25 days out of its hiring process and saved 688 staff hours per year;

- a K–8 school in New Brunswick, Canada, used Lean Six Sigma to boost the percentage of students reading at the appropriate age level from 22 percent to 78 percent; and

- the State of Washington used the A3 process to deal with a very complex and politically charged problem involving twenty-four state and federal agencies, as well as four Native American tribes.

We end our discussion of CI methods with a description of the system at the Royal Mint, whose full spectrum of improvement tools (including several clever techniques developed in-house) have made it highly efficient and capable of minting the most difficult coins in the world to counterfeit.

Innovative Approaches to
Improvement in the Public Sector

The first three parts of this book explain how an increasing number of public-sector organizations are attaining very high performance, mostly by borrowing CI concepts developed in the private sector. The fourth and final part—Chapters 12 through 15—reverses this pattern. It describes how a handful of innovative government organizations are pushing the boundaries of CI in ways that even the best private-sector companies could learn from.

> Some of the organizations in our study had pioneered some innovative approaches to CI that even the best-managed private-sector companies could learn from.


We describe how

- the York Region of Ontario, Canada, developed creative approaches to engage large numbers of front-line staff in solving problems that are normally the exclusive domain of management;

- Highways England, the authority responsible for all major motorways in England, created an innovative supply chain and saved hundreds of millions of pounds;

- the city of Denver, the first major US city to legalize recreational marijuana, developed a fast-reaction CI system to respond to the highly fluid, rapidly emerging, and potentially dangerous cannabis ecosystem; and

- Denmark's MindLab, its governmental innovation unit, pioneered a process to expose high-level policymakers to front-line realities and help them create much more effective laws and policies.

A Final Note

Armed with the right knowledge and mindset, we believe that almost any manager, including a front-line supervisor, can create a local culture of highly engaged employees who are constantly improving their unit's performance. It requires persistence, and it will not happen overnight. For those who choose to make their part of government better, we hope the lessons we were able to distill from the successful leaders in our study will prove invaluable.

We hope that you enjoyed this excerpt from *Practical Innovation in Government* by Alan G. Robinson and Dean M. Schroeder
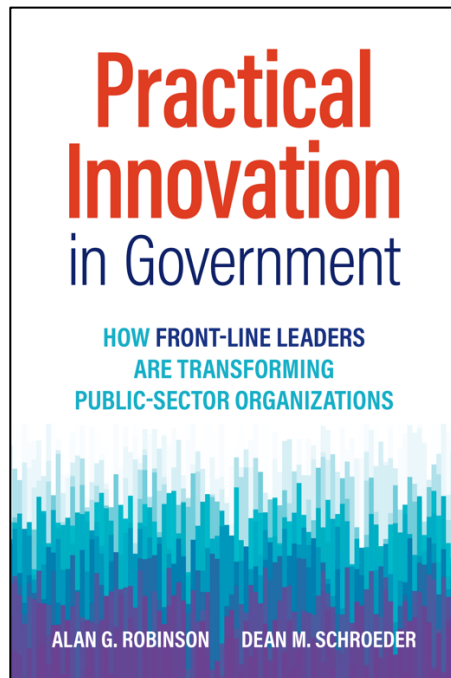
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