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Torino: Open to ideas

Energy sensors to minimize power usage in public buildings; the adoption of virtual meetings to reduce staff travel time; and the establishment of a crack team to modernise local authority procurement methods. These were some of the winning ideas generated by local authority staff as part of Innova.TO, the city of Turin's recently completed innovation competition for staff.

For Aurelio Sarno, Head of Customer Service – Enel, Northwestern Italy, one of the competition's sponsors, the experience has been a revelation. As he explained to us, "We are in the business of changing mindsets, in relation to energy use. Everyone has a duty to think responsibly about their consumption. This is a great way to get that message across, and big public employers have a key role to play in that shift."

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Getting innovation off the ground

There are lots of things about the Innova.TO story that we admire. But maybe most of all it's the guerilla-like nature of the campaign. In one of our current workstreams we're examining the key question about social innovation leadership in cities. Where does it come from? In some of our stellar global examples – Medellin and Seoul for example – it's pretty top down. But in Turin it's coming from deep within the organisation.

This is the story of two young employees committed to innovation and city change. Part of this enthusiasm is channeled into one of our URBACT projects, My Generation at Work , where Turin is focusing on providing shared spaces for social innovation and enterprise amongst young people. Working with innovative cities like lead partner Rotterdam, they picked up ideas about stimulating fresh thinking back at the ranch, amongst their own colleagues. Quite simply, their pitch was to hold a competition for public employees to come up with new ideas to improve services, through cutting waste and improving efficiencies. Perhaps naively, they thought this would be welcomed with open arms –but few people initially embraced the concept with open arms. That's when the guerilla tactics came to hand.

Turin's innovation pedigree

Turin has a strong history of innovation and design. Two of Italy's industrial giants, Fiat and Olivetti, are rooted there and more recently the city has been active in the Smart Cities agenda, particularly in relation to eco-initiatives. The city authority has established good working relationships with the private sector around this agenda, and it was these connections that helped give Innova:To its initial traction.

The concept developers arranged meetings with some of these sponsors – amongst them ENEL, Huawei, Unicredit and Carsharing Torino – to test out their enthusiasm for the competition idea. Soon, an attractive list of awards – electric bikes, smartphones and car sharing vouchers – was assembled. But more importantly, this external private sector support gave them a couple of aces in their ongoing negotiations with internal colleagues.

Getting the first backer is always the hardest part

Business people will tell you that getting the first backer for your new idea is often the hardest step. Once someone signs up, you have a bit of momentum and credibility which can make the next pitch that little bit easier. That's especially so when your backers are blue-chip corporates or a young deputy mayor. Step by step, they began to get green lights in their journey to pilot the competition. And in May 2014 Innova.TO was launched with a 6 week deadline for city authority staff to reply.

What did we expect?

Innova.TO was launched on a hunch. It was based on the assumption that those closest to the workings of the local authority, its employees, were perfectly placed to identify service shortcomings and troubleshoot solutions. But would they respond? Why would they bother to use their own time to submit business improvement ideas to their employer? In other contexts, large local authorities pay managers and consultants to conduct such work. Turin was asking its

staff to do this in their own time in return for the chance to win an electric bike.

Without any precedent, it was hard to predict the response. So when the contest closed and they had received 71 projects involving 111 employees, the team was delighted. Through September a judging panel sifted the proposals and in the end awarded prizes to 19 shortlisted projects. These were chosen on the basis of their implementability and impact, covering a wide range of themes from energy-saving proposals to improvements of child care facilities for the children of employees. The next step is to prioritise and implement the proposals, and the city has already committed to repeat the Innova:TO process in 2015.

For Pietro Fassino, Mayor of Turin, what we see here is the evolution of the Smart City concept. Initially quite narrow and technologically focused, this is now widening, to embrace environmental and social issues. In his view, "This cultural leap, the shift from 'smart' to 'intelligent' city, rests on the twin concepts of interactivity and participation, and processes like this are key to this evolution."

What are the take aways for Turin, and for other cities?

Reflecting on the pilot experience with stakeholders in Turin, we see five important lessons emerging for cities.

1. Public employees can innovate. Innova:To shows that, given the opportunity and encouragement, public employees will come forward with ideas. As Enzo La Volta, Deputy Mayor with responsibility for innovation, points out. "This confirms that our employees are citizens too, with concerns about how public money is spent as well as with the environmental impact of our work. It also debunks the myth that the private sector is the sole reservoir of innovative thinking. Given the opportunity, public employees will come forward with ground-breaking ideas of their own"

2. The value of 'safe zones' to think and experiment. One of the Innova:To winners spoke about the importance of having a green light to experiment and to potentially make mistakes. He also referred to the liberating experience of taking a step back from his daily role to consider the wider aspects of the organisation's functions. It's also interesting to note that a big proportion of winners proposed ideas for optimizing processes (instead of generating new services). This optimization very often implies a radical change in the way public authorities are internally organized (e.g. creating a transversal team for innovative public procurement, re-organising the

flow of communication among civil servants, breaking silos among offices). These important messages about structures and work culture come from these 'reflective spaces', and the encouragement to think beyond their day job.

3. Providing a framework for ideas is important: Together with service users, public service staff are best placed to reflect on ways to drive service improvements. But how to frame and structure their participation is often the key question. Turin shows that challenges can be a powerful way to do this, and some of the city stakeholders – including sponsors – would like to see the process widened beyond staff to include all stakeholders, including citizens. So the next iteration of Innova:To might borrow some of the open innovation techniques developed in York and now being transferred to other cities via the Genius Open project (<http://urbact.eu/en/projects/innovation-creativity/genius-open/homepage/>).

4. Innovation leadership takes many forms: There is also an important message here about leadership and inspiration. The Turin story shows that this can come from many sources. When it is bottom-up, it can flourish where there is high-level support. And even where that high-level support is initially lukewarm, it can be secured in other ways, provided senior staff are open-minded and listening. And here we see the streetwise and savvy civil servants coming to the fore, being prepared to persevere after initial disappointments. There is much talk nowadays about the multi-faceted nature of civic leadership, and this is one example of it in action.

5. Sustainable results matter – maybe more than leading edge innovation: You might conclude that the Innova:To winning shortlist is not earth shattering in terms of innovation levels. But we would argue that as this is about changing attitudes and mindsets there is no problem. This is the start of a change process – a profound and potentially lengthy one – aimed at stimulating innovative and enterprising attitudes within public administrations.

Bearing this in mind, the key to its success at this stage relies less about innovation levels, and more about lasting visible results. The city authority's support for these winning ideas is important for the credibility of the process amongst employees. City leaders will be looking for impact, as justification for their ongoing commitment. So, what happens next matters a great deal, and across Europe cities will watch Innova:To's progress with interest.

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