Maverick Innovators and the Horses They Rode in on

“Innovate or die” is not a saying because it’s cute.

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Molly Cain speaking at GovernmentCIO Media's Silicon Valley Meets Uncle Sam March 15, 2018, event. Photo: GovernmentCIO Media

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Recently, I had the great honor to visit the J. Edgar Hoover FBI Headquarters building on Pennsylvania Avenue, and after a walking glimpse through its courtyard — not too unlike the lively courtyards in Silicon Valley, dare I say — I joined a small group for lunch in the cafeteria.

The small group, including myself, was there to attend and speak at the first-ever
FBI Innovation Summit. David Miller, chief of innovation at the Justice Department, convened us all to take part in this inaugural day. As part of that, we were graciously invited to join his team for lunch in between sessions. There wasn’t discomfort in the group, but there was clear uncertainty as I’m nearly sure we were mostly all new faces to each other. You don’t see or experience that very often in the small, “you gotta know somebody to be somebody” village that is Washington, D.C.

As we went around the table introducing ourselves, a trend emerged immediately — one I’ve never personally experienced in any of my job roles, and doubt I will ever again (though I’d love it!).

Here’s this guy, the first-ever head of innovation for the National Security Agency. This woman, joining us as one of the first innovation leads at the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency (representing the first-ever NGA chief of ventures). Here’s this guy over here, that’s Dave from AFWERX, the first-ever accelerator program for the Air Force. Obviously, the first-ever chief of innovation for the FBI, and myself, also bearing that same first-time position from Homeland Security. To top off the gathering, we were joined by C-level executives from Google, Amazon and David’s team, all who proudly carry the same spirit as the rest of us — being the first official staff of the first office of innovation here, in its home HQ.

So, you get the drift.

I have a hard time imagining I’m the only one at the table who realized how special the moment was to be gathered in that space in that moment with these people at this time in the state of modernization for our government. I hope I don’t have to tell you, that’s a lot of sweat, tears, frustration, failures, successes and out-of-the-box ideas poured into creating this moment that held this lunch group.

The week before, I had experienced something similar, having the rare but fantastic opportunity to sit on a three-women panel at NGA alongside two women I admire very much; the first-ever cyber innovation director for the Air Force and the first-ever chief of ventures for NGA. We’ve spent the last several months getting to know each other and comparing stories, difficulties and shared wins. That night, NGA asked us to speak at its HQ, for one of its regularly occurring staff get-togethers — nothing fancy, and nothing fancy needed — to discuss the stages of life for our programs, the outlook for innovation, what’s going right, and the comedy that
befalls each of us as we introduce new approaches to yesterday’s cultures being invaded by tomorrow’s challenges.

We also discussed what’s candidly going wrong or incapable of being started (at least right now) in the ecosystems we’re living in across the government. Something you’re not going to find in many federal offices, but it’s actually the most frequent talking point amongst this group of innovative federal minds. Similarly, it is the most discussed talking point in every startup ecosystem I’ve ever been in and around: Every startup founder knows if you’re not finding the glitches, someone else will. “Innovate or die” is not a saying because it’s cute — just ask Blockbuster.

Over the course of two weeks, I had several moments to take in and savor the experiences in a way I haven’t gotten to enjoy in my short time as a federal employee. I won’t forget these conversations, I won’t forget the candor, the kindness and the constant insecurity with unwavering willingness to keep trying, all wrapped up to make one incredibly fast-growing, viral (in a good way), tight-knit, exploratory, confused, clarity-fueled, aware, transparent, communicative, collaborative network that I’ve plugged into — perhaps ever — in a professional setting. A community proudly built around the juxtaposition and a question I’m sure they get as often as I do, “wait, the government is innovative?”

I was meeting a stunning group of very different, mission-focused and similar people . . . I realized I could put a name on it. These were federal entrepreneurs.

It’s an unbelievably difficult task — choosing or self-nominating to be the first of anything in a traditional organization is simply asking for punishment. Frequent bouts of self and culturally-poured doubt. Skeptics, everywhere. Backstabbing. Idea theft. Stealth mode. Open-sourcing great concepts just to see them live. Guerrilla warfare with traditionalists. I can’t list them all, the word count is limiting me here. But again, you get it.

It’s hard to start something. It’s even harder to start something here.

What I know most government and local industry organizations and companies don’t get is what innovation means to those of us who have passionately adopted this as our mission from the inside looking out. Whether formally assigned to take it on or not, innovation is woven into the DNA and architecture of these people. I assure you, no one wants to be the most hated, misunderstood, or “guy who gets told ‘no’ the most times in one month” in an organization. No one wants to battle a
vendor or their boss for their own idea. No one wants to spend 200+ days pushing through something that should have taken 30 minutes. No one wants to be perceived as someone who can’t get along with others. And certainly, no one wants constant coaching that they’re going against the flow, the culture, and the “way of doing.” No one wants to be told it’s impossible, or too hard, or been tried, or too expensive, and, and, and.

But there’s a reason corporate and federal colleagues think they can change something, and proceed one step further than the person who quits at the first sign of a pushback. Like the book “Limits of the Known” by David Roberts suggests, adventurers and explorers are hard-wired to see what’s beyond the existing boundary. It is simply impossible to hear another human, who hasn’t tried it, tell us something cannot be done. We’d still be wondering if there was a North Pole if that logic worked. We never would have discovered how tides turn. We’d wonder what the moon was truly like. We’d be tying our horses up outside this FBI headquarters if we hadn’t let that crazy guy, Karl Benz, do his thing to invent the first gasoline-powered car — but more specifically, what if the world didn’t move over in time for the business innovator, Henry Ford, to scale that car?

I imagine we’re all a little hesitant to thank Steve Jobs for his invention of the iPhone right now, but that doesn’t mean we’re not all carrying around a personal computer in our pockets. This was all crazy at one point. It certainly didn’t get suggested in a typical status meeting and get funding right away and all the collaborative support it could handle.

“Innovator” isn’t just a category in an awards ceremony. It’s a way of life for a select few people who can’t take a normal job, who can’t sit in maintenance mode, who can’t make heads or tails of decisions (or won’t rather), without trials tested, conversations had, or pilots explored. It’s not about disrupting, or being contrarian for the hell of it (though sometimes that’s an accidental result when we run into our favorite and annoying skeptics). No, it’s about “seeing holes,” as my friend Craig Dubitsky, founder of Hello Products says. And no, I didn’t get paid to plug that business.

A corporate innovator, or “change agent” doesn’t see things too differently than you do. We don’t think we’re special (OK, yes we do), but the difference, however, is that when a change agent sees a hole or an opportunity in a business system, they lock it in their sights. They cannot move on if they genuinely think they can change
it for the better. They don’t need a manager to tell them to work on it. They don’t need to fill out all the documentation to visualize the possible solution (and its 100 other solution friends). They honor hierarchy but not the people who use it to prevent the exploration of something that would serve an organization well. They’ll even work on it over the weekends if you tell them not to spend time at work — I can attest to receiving a number of whitepapers and problem statements from federal colleagues who tackle these things in their off time.

It’s pretty much the coolest email I ever had the honor of receiving... notes from mavericks. Especially the ones who make rule-following look easy — that’s because they’re figuring out the problems on their own time, they love it that much.

Being wired as a change agent doesn’t mean you can’t survive in a typical business setting, either. It doesn’t mean you’re disrupting the workplace at every turn, creating a mousetrap design to filter water differently from the fountain to the break room, or spending time designing a new, fancy way to process timesheets (though we really do need to get some robots to automate that process, come on now).

Corporate innovators spend every day seeing through a different lens. Figuring out not only what innovation means to our organizations, but also how to test it inexpensively, bend an idea, modify a suggestion, alleviate a system and apply a new best practice from the outside world. And different than someone who has lovingly committed their knowledge and career to research and development, the corporate innovator is considering how to apply that emerging tech, the process, the cultural change, the initiative, to a larger audience, to implement it. And figuring out if that item in question can, and should, be scaled.

Can we buy that solution for multiple groups and save money at one time? Can we combine these teams? Can we reduce the amounts of vendors we see so we can ensure our executives are giving time to the ones we might actually buy? How do we get the most value out of our colleagues attending hundreds of conferences in a week? Can we calculate the value add of a stand-up vs. an actual meeting? What’s the waste in costs on missed meetings, interrupted leaders, constant email flow, recurring meetings with no value? It’s not all tech driven, it’s culturally charged, it’s problem-centric. It’s everything. Corporate innovators are in every single office, every single agency, every contracting organization. We’re buying services to be more innovative because we think we need help... and yet, our innovation
ecosystem is alive and well. We just haven’t begun to see it in its entirety, much less kick its tires.

To be fair, I’m new here. Which means I’m the least likely to make sense. And I’ve surely never been accused of going with the flow, if the compass in my gut thinks the flow is going the wrong way. So, take it with a grain of salt, but I think we’re seeing a change.

Maverick innovators have existed in our government since the day it was born. This is not a new concept. I do believe that as the entity grew larger, the dissonant voice grew smaller. Worse still, like the wallpaper in your grandmother’s kitchen, the processes and procedures were layered on top of each other, for this reason or that, to create one heck of a mess when it came time for a remodel. And that’s where we’re at right now. We’re peeling off the layers, our digital transformation and our modernization efforts are requiring a remodel.

They’re coming off, but it’s slow. Acquisitions, the adoption and implementation of emerging tech, the analysis of the version 1.0 innovation initiatives that were great starters but need to uncomfortably receive a facelift, connections internal innovators are making among ourselves through social media, the willingness of executives from all corners of the government to visit top innovation ecosystems across the nation and actually buy into it.

These are layers of wallpaper that are peeling. There’s a new baseline bubbling up to the top. You can thank the corporate innovators (sometimes we call them the logical, bullheaded thinkers), for pushing status quo off the cliff and demanding it build a parachute on the way down. It’s not easy to lead into change, and that’s why most do not do it. But some are doing it. And now that I’ve met so many of them, I can confidently tell you if you’re seeing an innovation office, you’re seeing someone doing it.

I dare us to make “no innovation” a thing of the past, so we can begin to see “innovation as normalcy” sometime in the near future. In between, we’ll hopefully change some skeptics into believers, our loyalists and even outsiders into talented teammates, and we’ll do what I consider my own mission to be, “implement innovation.”

At times, I have to add a sub-bullet to that: “Before I have great-grandchildren.”
But you get it. I think we all get it. That’s why we’re ready to finally do it.

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