Tadd Willie and Ben Thurgood – Tacoma, WA

Challenges: Faced with a $60 million deficit, a lack of monitoring systems/practices, and very little strategic operations.

Innovations: Started monthly monitoring, went out of the way to hire a forward thinking thinkers and create an inviting workplace.

Focuses: Continuous improvement- hired 2 staff as consultants for other departments, a great deal of attention given to training.

Strategic foresight- Establishes a direction and tells a story about the future using data.

Hosted a foresight event with 40 attendees. Activities included developing a “Why” statement, creating a work plan, and a big sort activity using 38 real data trends.

Lynne Penke – Hennepin County, MN

Challenges: A city of 9,000 employees, half of which are eligible to retire in the next 14 years.

Innovations: Established employee research groups and created a futurist group. They put on a big sort activity with 100 people intended to strategize for the future and put some discipline around planning.

Focuses: The employee research groups major topics included people of color, the transgender community, and millennials.

Created an internal training program called Innovation by Design made up of 30-40 people. Three people are specifically assigned to a separate Strategy and Change Team.

Linda Harris – Decatur, GA

“A drinking town with a festival problem.”

Challenges: Citizen complaints of racial profiling.

Innovations: A one year long Better Together Initiative designed to foster a diverse and engaged community.

Focuses: Priorities of the initiative involved community outreach, expanding participation, housing affordability, maximizing the use of public spaces, low cost transportation, developing a welcoming retail environment,

Efforts received overwhelming interest from the community; 36 people applied for the Better Together advisory board, which supports city plans for equity and inclusion.
1. How do you navigate addressing diversity in a complex contentious environment?

Having a facilitator helps stay on topic, but difficult conversations are part of the process. Sharing things is tough, people need to learn to put aside their differences and listen. Everyone wants to be heard, it is possible to be empathetic to others and maintain a different opinion.

2. Addressing equity can be tricky because is embedded in so many areas. How did you avoid chasing rabbits and maintaining focus?

If this was easy, it would have been solved by now. Take things one step at a time, understand that this is an ongoing process and it needs to be thought about all of the time. People need to understand the related terms, sometimes adding definition to an ambiguous set of words can aid the learning process and reveal issue areas and solution opportunities. For example, a discussion on the difference between equality and equity could be a good beginning point. People often say “there’s no playbook for this” well let’s start creating one.

3. (Addressed to Ben and Tadd) Was your larger organization involved in the futuring event. Was wondering about organizational vs department involvement?

Those involved were key partners, people within the department, and people not necessarily involved in budget process but that historically would ask good questions and had good ideas. For the event they did not invite anyone outside of the organization.

4. What are weirdos? How are they beneficial?

Weirdos are those not directly involved in your area, but present thoughtful questions and insight to new ideas. It is helpful to have fresh eyes and engage people who ask questions. They push you to think and think about projects and issues in different ways. The more we think through an idea, the more attached we get to it. It is valuable to have outside feedback to help build out your ideas in complex valuable ways. Innovation specializes in weirdos.
5. (Addressed to Lynne) Innovation by Design initiative- how long does the training take? Does HR handle it?

There is currently a cohort of 20 people, and program internal staff can apply to join. They do workshops on things like empathy mapping and journey mapping. Each cohort takes a project idea unique to them and applies the tools they learn. The initiative offers coaching on this throughout the process.

6. What gave rise to all of these ideas?

At any given time, there are a million sparks of innovation all over the organization. When you get the bright spots to connect with one another, more people exchange ideas that they can run with. Lots of ideas come from informal conversation in social atmospheres- like in a bar. Ideas are like clay, they start in a shapeless blob, but they can become intricate sculpture works with aesthetic appeal and structural soundness.

What’s Next? What do you see coming in the future?

Ben- Relationships between local government and constituents will evolve. People are going to get more involved, and the way government performs will change to meet that increased participation. Tadd- Based on historical economic trends, we are past due for another recession. If that happens the first thing to go is investment in continuous improvement. We need to preserve our networks and maintain a commitment to innovation. Lynn- As the older generation retires, the younger generation is ready and eager to step up. She foresees that millennials will grow impatient at the slow pace of change in local government, and they will leave the sector. If that happens, work will have to be done to lay a new attractive groundwork for them to come back. Linda- Everyone has a sense of connection and community, we need to provide a place for building connections. As local government continues to grow, it is essential to have reliable platforms to expand and maintain our increasingly complex networks.