

What is a Reinvention Lab?

At the forefront of reinvention are the national Reinvention Laboratories -- 325 as of February 1998. Labs are federal government organizations and activities across the United States that have volunteered and been recognized to lead the transformation of government into the next century. At the first Reinvention Lab Conference at Hunt Valley, Maryland, in October 1993, a Reinvention Lab was defined as:

... a place that cuts through "red tape," exceeds customer expectations, and unleashes innovations for improvements from its employees.

That definition remains true even today. The Reinvention Labs are pushing the envelope of change. They are designated to lead the way and set the pace of change. They are asked to experiment with new processes and new ways of doing business. They are called upon to be creative and innovative, and radically improve service and performance. They are expected to show all of us, government and non-government alike, the way to a future, common sense government that serves the public efficiently and effectively.

Why Become a Lab?

Why do organizations seek to become Reinvention Labs? There are essentially two reasons.

- First, organizations and activities that are designated as a national Reinvention Laboratories gain additional leverage and utility to help reinvent. The importance of the Reinvention Labs to the Vice President, the commitment received from top leadership, and the high visibility of Lab initiatives all offer added leverage to help overcome barriers, obstacles, and organizational resistance that are normally experienced as part of significant change efforts. In essence, the Reinvention Labs are empowered.
- Second, designation as a Reinvention Laboratory fulfills the need to be a pace setter for the rest of government -- to be a leader and show the rest of government how "good government" is accomplished.

Expanded Definition

These points are illustrated in a slightly expanded, more descriptive definition of Reinvention Labs offered by the National Partnership for Reinventing Government (formerly National Performance Review) Task Force:

Reinvention Laboratories are innovative organizations or activities that are established to test or prototype new "reinventing government" initiatives. The reinvention laboratories are empowered to begin experimenting with radical new ways of doing business, and share their ideas, successes and lessons across government.

The role of the Reinvention Labs is critical as we create a government that works better and costs less. At the Reinvention Revolution Conference in March 1996, Vice President Gore said:

"Your role as reinvention labs is absolutely critical as we move forward. You are on the front lines. You are learning the most valuable lesson and passing on the answers to everyone else. You deal directly with customers and taxpayers, providing assistance and carrying out critical government responsibilities."

The Reinvention Labs create an environment where Federal workers and their partners have the freedom to experiment, and can showcase innovation and results. At this same Conference, Vice President Gore referred to the Reinvention Labs as our "beacons" who will guide the rest of us to a new, reinvented, common-sense government.

When Labs Began

The concept of the Reinvention Labs was born at the very beginning of the National Performance Review reform initiative. In an April 1, 1993 letter, Vice President Gore asked the heads of heads of each federal department and agency to "designate two or three programs or units to be laboratories for reinventing government." He said that the:

"... point is to pick a few places where we can immediately unshackle our workers so they can re-engineer their work processes to fully accomplish their missions -- places where we can fully delegate authority and responsibility, replace regulations with incentives, and measure our success by customer satisfaction."

In response to this request, according to NPR Task Force officials, the federal departments and agencies designated more than 100 Reinvention Laboratories across the country. The Labs encompassed a wide variety of government programs, processes, systems and concepts to be reinvented. They began with the full and explicit support of top leadership in each department and agency. The Labs were to be empowered to lead the process of change in the agencies. For the most part the Labs were front-line organizations who worked directly with their customers, understood their requirements, could quickly see the problems in service delivery, and were in the best position to find and experiment with solutions to those problems.

Addressing these initial Labs at the Hunt Valley Reinvention Lab Conference, the Vice President said,

"I see the Reinvention Labs as setting the pace for their agencies, for their departments -- constantly striving to find new and better ways of doing things, scanning the horizon for ways to do jobs better and faster and with the same or even fewer resources."

And those of you working in these labs will have a special role to play too. You will need to continue pushing the envelope. You will need to continue thinking boldly and taking risks. Perhaps, most importantly, you'll have to encourage others to take those leaps with you."

The Vice President asked the Labs to break down barriers that stand in the way of getting the job done, to identify and drive out rules and regulations that no longer make sense, and to listen to customers to find out their needs and requirements of government.

Lab Principles

The Hunt Valley Conference identified a number of principles that were projected to be key to the success of the Reinvention Labs:

- Promote leadership in action. It is vital to the Lab that the agency head take a direct and influential role in leading or supporting the lab. The agency head must have a sense of ownership, with the Lab treated as an area of special importance to the future of the department and Agency. Moreover, the "process owner" must buy in. A Lab will be successful only to the extent that the belief and enthusiasm of the person in charge of the Labs activities is certain. Also, every member of the Lab must get involved as a valued and enthusiastic contributor.
- Create a "win/win" environment. Risk taking has to be encouraged, and a "safe harbor" for innovation established. Only by taking risks and seeking opportunities can the Reinvention Lab learn and succeed. Also, the Labs need to challenge cumbersome and needless rules, regulations, procedures and traditions that stand in the way of superior performance and results.
- Celebrate and publicize successes. Spotlight heroes and let people tell their stories. This is not only for recognition and publicity, and allows other reinventing organizations and activities learn and progress from their experiences, successes, and failures.
- Maximize "doing" and minimize "reporting". Let the Labs spend their time reinventing instead of continually reporting on what they are doing. Although the Labs have a responsibility to share their experiences, endless progress reporting will detract from the reinvention that has to take place.
- Adopt a strategy for long-term change. We need to cross-fertilize and apply Lab lessons and innovations within other parts of the department or agency, as well as across the rest of government.

What Makes a Lab Different from Other Change Activities?

What makes a Reinvention Lab different from other change activities that occur in an organization? The answer is that the Reinvention Lab leverages its support of key leadership and its visibility to help reinvent, to open doors that are normally closed, to get people to listen and negotiate who, before, wouldn't let the reinventors into the room. It accomplishes this by:

- obtaining unrelenting leadership commitment.
- obtaining endorsement and support throughout the entire chain of command.
- becoming an identifiable rallying point for employees, managers, customers and stakeholders.

- linking clearly to the principles and themes of reinvention.
- describing, in clearly understandable terms, visions and plans for radical change.
- assuring the vision is mission-driven and customer-focused.
- creating an environment that unleashes the innovations of its employees.
- setting goals and measuring accomplishments for all to see.
- challenging unnecessary rules and regulations.
- forming partnerships at every available opportunity.
- taking and accepting prudent risks, and moderating fear of failure.
- spending energy reinventing, not reporting.
- telling its story and sharing experiences, innovations, successes, and lessons.
- learning from its lessons and persevering.
- highlights successes and recognizes the people responsible.

"Reinvention Is My Responsibility"

As reinvention and the transformation of the federal government is about people, so are the Reinvention Labs. The dedicated women and men who make up the Labs have all committed to pledges similar to that signed at the Reinvention Revolution Conference:

Reinvention is my responsibility, and I am going to do something about it.

Being a Reinvention Lab is not easy. It's hard work. As a Lab, cooperation and support are not handed to you on a silver spoon. The Red Sea of Bureaucracy does not part at your command. The success in being a Lab means you have to research well the changes you propose, lay out the issues in an objective manner, communicate your vision in clear and understandable terms, make your requirements known, be willing to negotiate and find "win/win" solutions, and persevere through the setbacks, resistance and frustrations you will encounter. Formulate, communicate, implement, measure, and improve! Only if you work, champion and persevere, is

meaningful change possible. It can happen, and in the case of the Reinvention Labs, it is beginning to happen.

GAO Evaluation

In a March 1996 evaluation of the Reinvention Laboratories, the General Accounting Office said,

"... the reinvention lab effort has produced hundreds of ideas to reengineer work processes and improve agencies' performance -- ideas drawn from employees with hands-on experience in operating government programs. Many of the labs are addressing issues that are at the cutting edge of government management ... more innovations are possible in these and other areas as agencies review and rethink their existing work process." (Management Reform: Status of Agency Reinvention Lab Efforts, GAO/GGD-96-69)

The Reinvention Laboratories are at the forefront of reinvention and new governance. They have been given the unprecedented opportunity to lead change within the federal government. And as duly noted by Vice President Gore, they are succeeding.

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