

Failing Forward in County Government

Program Overview

What is the Fail Forward program?

A year-long program where a cohort of 5-7 counties will participate in a series of four workshops where they will build and implement action plans with the goal of creating organizational culture that promotes innovation, responsible risk taking and experimentation, and learning from failure.

Why now?

The series of concurrent challenges facing county governments - a global pandemic, fiscal crises, and demands for racial justice - have made it clear that innovation in government - the ability to quickly identify and solve problems - is not a “nice-to-have,” but rather a critical competency. These complex challenges and the demands from citizens for action present not only a challenge, but also an opportunity for county executives to invest in the organizational changes necessary to become more innovative. Typically, when governments seek to become more innovative, they focus on building core skills, such as human-centered design and adopting new technologies. Indeed, CPI has trained over 80 local governments on these topics. However, through this work we’ve learned firsthand that without a corresponding culture of innovation, it’s incredibly difficult for new capabilities and resulting solutions to “stick.”

How will this program work?

Each participating county will recruit three departments to participate in **quarterly workshops** that will bring together department staff at all levels of seniority. In each workshop, department teams will diagnose internal challenges to failing forward, and develop three action plans to break down those barriers. Between each workshop, as the teams seek to implement these action plans, CPI will offer hands-on support during monthly check-ins with staff. The participating departments will form a cohort of diverse counties that will have the opportunity to engage and learn from each other over the course of a year.

In parallel, it’s important to recognize that culture change **must** start at the leadership level. County executives set the tone from the top and provide political cover to department/agency leaders so they can take the risks necessary to innovate. As such, county executives and administrators will participate in **quarterly executive masterclasses**, where they will learn from renowned guest speakers with topical expertise in innovation and learning from failure, and have the opportunity to engage with peers in other counties.

What impact can participating counties expect to get out of this program?

The overall goal of this program is for participating counties to develop cultures of innovation that allow departments to better identify and solve problems within government and for the residents they serve. In the short term, participating counties can expect see significant improvements in the mindsets and beliefs critical for innovation to thrive (e.g. believing that identifying and fixing failures is everyone’s job regardless of hierarchy), implementation of key systems and processes that facilitate learning from failure, and better collaboration within departments in service of solving problems. In the long term, if departments continue to work at building a culture of innovation, counties can expect their organizational culture to be characterized by continuous learning, leading to improved government effectiveness and ultimately increased legitimacy in the eyes of residents.

What is the link between innovation and ‘failure’?

The innovation process always begins with failure. Most often, innovation is viewed as the output of some complex experiment or pilot. We define it a bit differently and believe that innovation is the process of making things better. Regardless of the degree of complexity, the innovation process begins when an individual or team notices things are not going according to plan (a failure) and tests out different ideas to address the problem. Learning from failures through trial and error (failing forward) is key to finding the best solutions. This program is rooted in CPI’s [Failing Forward Framework](#), which lays out an approach to building cultures that cultivate innovation, and is based on a year-long research initiative in partnership with six local governments, 20+ departments, and 150+ public servants.

Who is eligible to participate?

Our goal is to recruit a diverse cohort of 5-7 counties. We consider cohort diversity across a range of factors, including: population size, geography, ethnic and racial makeup, and the county’s socio-economic status.

What is the cost to counties?

The program will cost \$50k per county. This fee includes participation of 3-4 departments from each county in four workshops and monthly hands-on support over 12 months, as well as participation by county executives in masterclass webinars.

Who is running this program?

The Centre for Public (CPI) is a global not-for-profit, founded by Boston Consulting Group (BCG), with the mission to reimagine government to work better for everyone. In early 2020, CPI partnered with the Aspen Institute Center for Urban Innovation to explore why it’s so difficult to learn from failure in the public sector and what public servants can do about it. The bulk of our findings were informed by the six local governments, 20 departments, and over 150 public servants who participated in our workshops. The program resulted in a report summarizing the team’s findings: [How to Fail \(Forward\): A Framework for Fostering Innovation in the Public Sector](#). In addition, CPI has successfully designed and managed large, cohort-based innovation programs and learning networks such as Bloomberg Philanthropies’ [Mayors Challenge](#) and the Bloomberg-Harvard City Leadership Initiative [Innovation Track](#).

What are the next steps?

CPI is seeking to secure participation from up to seven counties by March 24. We will not be able to take on more than seven counties at once. If you are interested, please email josh@centreforpublicimpact.org and andi@centreforpublicimpact.org to set up a follow up meeting to discuss participation and details.

Frequently Asked Questions

Question: Is CPI bringing a one-size-fits-all approach that each county should implement?

Answer: No. We're bringing a framework, backed by research, and an infrastructure for collaboration that each county department can use to create their own action plans. We believe each county department operates in a unique context and it would be a mistake to apply a boilerplate approach across different agencies. CPI considers itself the "process" and facilitation expert, while we consider you the expert of your own organization.

Question: Is this program encouraging county government to "fail" more?

Answer: No. We recognize that there are large consequences for the citizens you serve when governments fail, and therefore it is essential that governments mitigate major risks and associated failures. However, in a complex system, failure is simply inevitable, and the myriad programs and services that county governments manage are about as complex as it gets. So while we are *not* encouraging governments to fail more, what we *are* saying is that small and large failures are *already* happening in county governments. We believe that not proactively addressing those failures *is* a failure in and of itself. This program encourages county governments to proactively identify, assess, and do something about those failures (i.e. failing forward) instead of sweeping them under the rug.

Question: Why do the workshops involve individuals at all levels of seniority? Shouldn't the responsibility of innovation be siloed in an "innovation team"?

Answer: Good ideas can (and do) come from anywhere and anyone. But when innovation is narrowly defined as the development of "breakthrough solutions" or when only a select group of people are designated as innovators ("innovation teams"), it sends the message that innovation is "someone else's job" and implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) devalues and shuts out the innovation that can and should come from individuals at all levels of seniority, including and especially workers on the frontlines. In addition, innovation does not occur in isolation. Rather the true nature of innovation is cumulative (many little improvements built on over time), collective (involving the continuous input and refinement from individuals at all seniority levels), and often originating from unexpected places (outside the view of those at the top of the government hierarchy).