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The Best and the Brightest

By Brian Friel

Everything old is eventually new again, to borrow a phrase. In the 1990s, Vice President Al Gore's re-inventing government initiative

obsessed with the idea that great ideas were trapped on the front lines of the federal workforce. The re-inventors in his office tried a variety of ways to spin those ideas for improving operations into practice. Gore issued thousands of his signature Hammer Awards to recognize and encourage front-line individuals and teams to implement cost-saving and efficiency-boosting measures in their agencies. His team asked agency heads to approve employee requests for waivers from internal rules, and fostered several hundred "reinvention labs" throughout government that allowed front-line offices to experiment with new ways of doing business.

The Obama administration has revived the notion of front-line empowerment. The president announced in August that an "innovation competition" would take place at the Veterans Benefits Administration the agency that processes veterans' requests for disability payments. "We're going to fund the best ideas and put them into action, all with a simple mission: cut those backlogs, slash those wait times, deliver your benefits sooner," Obama said. Employees have been asked to submit ideas via a Web site by Veterans Day. The heads of VBA's 57 regional offices then will review the ideas and submit the ones they like the best to headquarters, where a review team led by VA's undersecretary for benefits will pick its favorites. The winners will get a pot of money to try out their ideas as pilot projects at the regional offices - much like Gore's reinvention labs did in the previous decade.

VBA is no stranger to such efforts. Indeed, Gore's very first Hammer Award went to the agency's New York regional office for a new way of doing business that the office's chief, Joe Thompson, had put in place. Instead of an assembly-line process, Thompson created a case management system that reduced paper shuffling and allowed veterans to keep track of their claims by talking to assigned service representatives. The office went on to rack up two more Hammer Awards for innovations. In 1997, Thompson was promoted to head VBA, on the strength of his record of improving employee and veteran satisfaction with the claims process. He pushed his new system across VBA, but fate was not kind to his reform efforts. After a change in federal law that required a new review of a host of old claims, the backlog of claims skyrocketed.

When the Bush administration took over in 2001, Thompson's successor undid the shift to a case management system and returned to an assembly-line process for most cases. Through both changes, the backlog has remained a concern. Regional VA managers have tried various ways to improve customer service and speed in the claims process - many of those ideas recommended by front-line workers. Administrations, Congress and commissions have done the same. Indeed, the problem at VBA doesn't appear to be a lack of ideas. It appears to be a failure of sustained commitment to a process. Unearthing innovation can be done through a competition of ideas submitted online. It also can be done by looking to the past at what's been tried before. History tends to repeat itself, even if it's packaged as innovation or reform.

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