



Building the co-created city

Lessons from Next City's Vanguard in New Orleans



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The Next City Vanguard Conference is an annual experiential leadership gathering of top young urban innovators from around the globe, working to improve cities across sectors, including urban planning, community development, government, architecture, design, art, media, transportation, and sustainability.

This year, the 44 Vanguard Fellows – all selected through a competitive application process – met in New Orleans, Louisiana and participated in a series of sessions, including neighbourhood tours with staff from the Albert and Tina Small Centre for Collaborative Design (Tulane School of Architecture); discussions centring on equitable access to fresh food and combating New Orleans' food deserts; presentations from the Port of New Orleans CEO and The Data Center, examining the city's relationship with the Mississippi River; and New Orleans' Tricentennial Prosperity Index and keynote speaker Brandan 'Bmike' Odums, discussing his art and activism. The conference brought many voices and perspectives together to highlight, dissect, and provide a snapshot of the current landscape in New Orleans.

The gathering culminated in the Big Idea Workshop, focused on New Orleans' Clairborne Corridor Cultural Innovation District (CID), a 25-block vision for the area under the elevated I-10 expressway along Clairborne Avenue. The Vanguards were presented with a series of challenges facing the CID, such as housing affordability, economic development, cultural preservation, transportation choice and access, environmental sustainability, and safe and healthy neighbourhoods.

Vanguards of differing expertise were grouped together to collaborate on each of these challenges and were asked to design solutions that were equitable, realistic, and easy to implement. They also

met with neighbourhood ambassadors to hear about work done to date, ask questions, and hear firsthand accounts of how residents have been impacted by these issues.

The ability to collaborate and attack these challenges using a cross-functional team not only yielded rich discussions, but also educated team members about different subject areas, as well as providing a wealth of ideas to shape into solutions to present to the community. Ideas ranged from pop-up Holistic Health Stops along the Clairborne Avenue bus route (a primary form of transportation for CID residents) to provide access to health education and local resources, to proposals to create an incentive program that will encourage local businesses and residents to transform impermeable surfaces on their property to permeable, green solutions that will mitigate flooding and beautify the streetscape.

Like New Orleans, municipalities across Canada are dealing with similar issues prevalent in the CID and are seeking solutions to build resilient, equitable, sustainable, and prosperous cities for the future. To achieve this, it is imperative that municipalities act now to encourage a work culture of cross-functional collaboration (similar to the Vanguard Big Idea Workshop model) to co-create solutions.

Creating a Collaborative Workforce Culture

What can municipalities do to encourage and integrate such a collaborative culture into their workforce to best serve the public?

Municipal leaders might begin by developing workplans with their staff that accommodate and support cross-functional assignments and secondments to other service areas. In doing so,



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it is important that such work is not stigmatized by leaders as extra work outside of core job duties; instead, it should be integrated and valued as an equal workplan component to best serve the needs of the community. It is also necessary that this approach to workforce planning is applied consistently across all departments and staff levels within a municipality to reinforce the importance of cross-functional collaboration among all those in the public service – not just a select few.

Such collaborative work planning provides an opportunity for staff to learn from peers and experts in other service areas within their municipality and embraces a less rigid command/control management structure that can sometimes hinder innovation, cross-functionality, and creative problem solving. It also sets the foundation for municipalities to develop a nimbler, more engaged, and more dynamic workforce that can effectively respond to new civic challenges and political will.

One example of what could result from implementing this type of workforce planning currently exists in the Canada Free Agents program. Launched in 2016 by the Government of Canada, the program “proposes a new model for workforce mobilization. It offers public servants the freedom to select work that matches their skills and interests, and allows them to make a contribution that they find meaningful. It also supports managers looking to rapidly and easily acquire top talent with emerging and core skills in order to support their short-term project needs. Free Agents are screened for attributes that are beneficial for solving problems and skills that are in demand.”¹

In this model, federal public servants apply to become free agents and are selected based on demonstrating attributes such as creativity, curiosity, resilience, empathy, and being action oriented. Once accepted, Free Agents can review project proposals submitted by management from across the entire federal public service and select the projects they wish to work on. They retain their permanent federal employee status and benefits within the

1 <https://www.linkedin.com/company/free-agents-agentslibres/>.

organization and are held to the same code of conduct as all federal employees. Once the project is completed, they have the option to remain in the program and select another project to work on.

This program is currently comprised of 60 agents and includes talent managers who oversee the program and provide coaching and career guidance to the agents. The program continues to expand in the hope that it will build agility within the federal public service, and result in happier and more engaged employees, since they are empowered to work on projects that inspire them. Other benefits to the public service include developing a more skilled workforce that will ideally influence the way the federal public service works.

Encouraging Cross-Functional Collaboration

In many ways, this Canada Free Agent pool is like the Vanguard Fellowship. After collaborating in the Big Idea Workshop, Vanguards are invited to return to the conference each year (on a separate alumni track) to learn about the issues facing the host city, to bring their expertise forth to design solutions, and to deepen their knowledge and skills while tackling the problem. With over 400 Vanguard Fellows representing various organizations and governments across the globe, the fellowship’s collaborative, co-created solution environment provides learnings that can be brought back to these workplaces and makes for a successful and inspiring model that can be emulated in municipal public service.

In addition to leveraging secondments and cross-functional assignments internally across the municipality, leaders may also encourage their staff to share their project challenges externally with members of their community – outside of the formal public consultation process – as part of their ongoing work duties to build relationships and co-create solutions.

This can be accomplished by having staff collaborate with local innovation hubs and labs with mandates to bring together community, academic, non-profit, and civic partners to develop and design solutions in response to current issues.

In the absence of having such labs or hubs in the community, a good first step for municipal leaders might be to look at ways to foster the creation of

local hubs, and inviting them into a process of collaboration with city staff in support of clearly defined goals in today's challenging social and political climate.

Implementing work-related volunteerism that places municipal employees within the organizations and community segments they serve is also a means to build stronger stakeholder relationships. It helps to put faces to the names of those delivering public services, as well as nurtures trust – all of which is foundational in building the partnerships needed to co-create resilient, equitable, sustainable, and prosperous cities.

Finally, municipal leaders can support staff in their leadership and

education pursuits, particularly ones that expose them to collaboration models and problem-solving opportunities. Municipal budgets allocated to conferences, training, and tuition reimbursements are often usually the first to be cut in a budget crunch. In the absence of covering registration and tuition costs, leaders can leverage other compensation models, such as paid time off, to allow staff to complete such training as part of their ongoing development. Leaders can also be vocal in their encouragement and support of employees participating in leadership and education opportunities. For example, programs that develop critical thinking, creative

problem solving, and leadership skills are essential. And, future workforces will need to develop such skills in order to thrive, be adaptable, and be comfortable with innovation – to meet the changing needs of public service in the 21st century.

Cross-collaboration is key to solving problems and building healthy cities. When applied to the municipal public service, leaders who encourage a work culture of cross-functional collaboration and take steps now to integrate such a culture into their workforce are setting themselves up for future efficiency, higher employee engagement, and overall success in building co-created, resilient, and sustainable cities. **MW**

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