I believe the times demand new invention, innovation, imagination, decision,” John F. Kennedy said in his Democratic acceptance speech in 1960. Fifty-five years later, innovation continues to be a perennially hot topic in public policy circles, as state legislatures seek fresh ideas for leveraging scarce resources and better serving the public in a rapidly shifting world.

“A changing society requires a changing legislature,” says Mary Quaid, executive director of House Legislative Services in Louisiana. “And change—particularly cost-effective change—requires great creativity.”

Legislative staff, in particular, are often called upon to use their creativity to improve the policymaking process. Every day, staff across the country encounter thorny problems that need creative solutions—whether it’s how to draft an effective bill, balance new technologies with rich traditions, attract talented young people into legislative careers or condense mountains of research into something clear and engaging.

“To me, creativity in the legislative environment means enhancing the process so that it is more open and transparent to the public,” says Susan Schaar, clerk of the Virginia Senate. “As legislative staff and the people who deal with the process on a day-to-day basis, it’s up to us to look for better ways to make it work.”

To spark valuable new ideas, staff leaders are working to encourage creativity within their own walls—not as a rare miracle of inspiration, but as an everyday skill that anyone can develop.

“It’s a bunch of little things you can do, not just a big wave of the wand, that will help spark creativity among legislative staff,” says Jim Tamburro, human resources administrator for Connecticut’s Office of Legislative Management. “But you’ve got to be committed to it. You can’t just go through the motions.”

By taking some of these simple steps to nurture creativity, legislative institutions can boost their chances of achieving key insights, smart solutions and, yes, innovation.

1. **Plan time for creativity.**

In hectic legislative settings, one of the biggest steps toward encouraging creativity can be just setting aside the time and space for it to happen. Good legislative staff are by nature creative, Quaid says. “So to encourage creativity in the legislative environment simply requires the encouragement of staff members and their ideas.”

“We spend time in our meetings where the staff talk about projects they’re working on and I’ll say, ‘What do you think is a better way to do it?’” Schaar says. “It’s got to come from the top down. You’ve got to allow people time to collaborate with each other, and review, and bounce ideas off each other.”

Making time for creativity doesn’t have to involve a big change. In Connecticut, for example, staff now discuss new ideas at the start of their weekly meetings, when minds are fresh, rather than at the end. “I definitely see the change in how we talk about things because of that little tweak,” says Tamburro.

In Virginia, Schaar says, the interim between sessions offers downtime to reflect on what happened during the last session and what improvements could be made for the next one. She and her staff ask themselves: “Are we missing the boat? Are we doing that because it’s the way it’s always been done?”

“For us, the best time is when we actually have time to sit and talk about the things we encountered during the session,” she says.
2. Make it safe to offer new ideas.

Encouraging staff to be creative “implies listening to their ideas,” Quaid says. “Hopefully, age and experience have helped me become a better listener.”

Some staff are more eager than others to participate in creative problem-solving, says Schaar. “Some hesitate, they don’t want to get in trouble.” So Schaar tries to create an accepting atmosphere that encourages staff to pursue their ideas even when she doesn’t agree with them.

“If you want people to grow and step out of their comfort zone,” Tamburro adds, “you have to encourage them to take their ideas a little further, so they feel that it’s OK to try something.”

Similarly, conducting “safe” brainstorming sessions, where staff are encouraged to generate lots of suggestions without immediately critiquing them, can bring out some of the most innovative solutions.

“It’s important to keep the door open,” Schaar says. “Provide an open atmosphere for discussion and suggestions, and encourage people to come forward with those ideas. If we want to attract young, bright people, we need to produce that kind of atmosphere.”

3. Seek a variety of viewpoints.

If you’re stuck in a rut, creativity can be sparked by getting a fresh point of view. “I have encouraged my staff to take advantage, every time they have a chance, to talk to their counterparts in other states and get ideas,” Schaar says. Bringing in guest speakers, going on field trips, role-playing with experienced colleagues, asking staff to answer “what if” and “why” questions and attending trainings and conferences also can help.

Exchange programs are another resource. In Virginia, Schaar has sent more than half her staff on trips arranged by the American Society of Legislative Clerks and Secretaries to observe another state’s legislature for a week. One came back from Delaware with the idea of using iPads instead of bill books. “We were able to eliminate six positions during the session and save between $30,000 and $40,000,” Schaar says. And the staffer who brought back the idea? “He was excited!”

Don’t forget about the perspectives that can come from within your own staff. In Connecticut, the legislature’s long-standing staff training program has spurred creativity by bringing together staff who have different roles and skill sets. “Meeting with people from outside your usual work environment, who have a different perspective, can get you thinking in a new direction,” says Tamburro. “It also helps,” notes Quaid, “to have a diverse staff, one with different backgrounds, interests and abilities, and to embrace their differences.”

4. Embrace and learn from mistakes.

Laszlo Bock, head of Google’s people operations, urges leaders to “reward thoughtful failure.” Leadership expert Kevin Cashman says that “being willing to risk failure for the sake of learning” is integral to innovation. And in his book “Creativity, Inc.,” Pixar co-founder and president Ed Catmull warns, “If you aren’t experiencing failure, then you are making a far worse mistake: You are being driven by the desire to avoid it.”

“If you don’t have people taking risks, that’s a roadblock to creativity,” Tamburro says. “So we try to create an environment where staff feel comfortable trying different approaches to things and where they know it’s OK if they fail. The more staff feel supported, the more creative they can become.”

Encouraging creativity can be especially important when an idea fails, as it presents an opportunity to learn from what went wrong. One staff project just “didn’t flow smoothly,” Schaar says. “But they went back to the drawing board and said, ‘OK, this didn’t work, so how can we make it work?’ and came up with an alternative solution. And that’s what I think is important.”

5. Praise successes, reward taking risks.

Celebrating the success of creative solutions is a great way to both honor staff and recognize the worth of innovation. In Virginia, Schaar says, legislators acknowledge when staff creativity helps the lawmaking process and when staff receive national awards for their leadership.

Whether it’s a formal honor or a simple “shout-out” in a staff meeting, showing appreciation for creativity can go a long way toward inspiring it.