

Case studies in Innovative thinking from New Zealand's public sector

Case study #7: NZ Defence Force prizes innovation

From soldiers serving in the Sinai to clerical staff at Wellington's Defence House, defence force personnel are using an online innovation forum to directly shape the way the military works.



Cdr C. Bruce, Lt Cdr D. Tiller, Mr H. Cameron and Mr B. Neville (Bat) teamed together to build a synthetic training system reducing OJT requirements by 40-50% and achieving an estimated \$1.4m in savings per annum.

The New Zealand Defence Force introduced an intranet scheme in 2009 to encourage personnel from all ranks, services and locations to submit ideas for doing things better, faster or more efficiently. It invites those at the 'frontline' to have a direct voice in the way the armed forces operate because, says Major Robert Te Moana, Capability Manager – Force Protection, "the people who are most innovative are those who are actually doing it."¹

Two years later, around two-thirds of the nearly one hundred ideas forwarded to the Army alone have been implemented or are under active investigation. Many of the adopted proposals have been modest in scope: all cost below \$50,000 and many far less. But cumulatively, they have generated cost savings of around \$5 million – significant in light of the Government's expectation that NZDF reallocate some \$300 million by 2014/15 to strengthening frontline capabilities.²

¹ Author's interview with Major Te Moana and Brendon Fraher (Colonel retired), 9 August 2011. Unless stated otherwise, all quotations are from this source.
² Defence White Paper 2010, p13, available at http://admin.beehive.govt.nz/sites/all/files/White_Paper_Executive_Summary.pdf, accessed 10 August 2011

However, Major Te Moana says that innovative ideas are valued not only for the efficiencies and cost savings they deliver, but because they help the armed forces "to protect the lives of our troops – our number one resource."

Small changes, big impact

Any defence force personnel with a good idea for reducing costs, using resources better, generating revenue or improving efficiency can submit their idea via the intranet or email. After an initial assessment, the originator of the idea is matched up with a subject matter expert who assesses its feasibility and potential value.

If the idea is considered worthy of further investigation, it may be handled in several ways depending on its nature and costs. Those over a certain threshold require a business case to be prepared and must go through the formal A-Gates assessment process. Ideas with implications for NZDF policy are dealt with by a tri-service committee.

But all other viable ideas go forward for more investigation, trialling, and, if successful, implementation – usually within a year. The idea's originator remains involved throughout, and a record of all ideas is retained on the intranet to stimulate more creative thinking. Each year, the best ideas generated through the online scheme are recognised at the NZDF Innovation and Efficiency Awards.

According to Brendon Fraher (Colonel retired), Staff Officer Army Initiative Management, many of the ideas put forward over the last two years have been very simple solutions to complex problems. They range from process improvements (such as the introduction of an organisation-wide system for reporting vehicle incidents) to clever 'widgets' (like the more durable strap for securing air filters in light operational vehicles that has saved an estimated \$19,000 in maintenance costs).

Some apply to operations (modifications to field kit are often suggested by soldiers on operations), some to training (a computer-aided learning management system has enabled personnel to train faster, anywhere and at any time). Others focus on logistics improvements (a refillable system for aerosol cans has resulted in each army workshop using 100-400 fewer cans a year) or back office efficiencies (a collaborative initiative with a printer supplier to reuse printer cartridges).

"Each one may seem like a very small change to the private or corporal who initiates it, but they have a substantial impact if progressed across the whole organisation,"

Innovation nothing new for defence forces

Although the intranet-based forum is relatively recent, innovative thinking has long been valued by New Zealand's Defence Force.

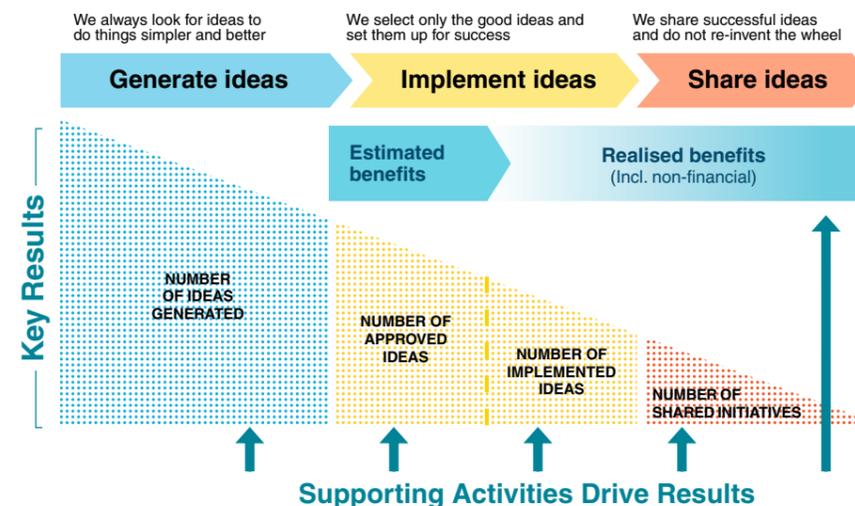
"The website has only been going for two years, but this is not new to Defence at all," says Brendon Fraher. "There are of course times when things get really tight, and it's a case of following drills and procedures. You don't have a discussion when an IED [improvised explosive device] goes off – you know the drill and you do it. But the rest of the time, a soldier has the opportunity to question. We do expect the 'why' question, and if we can't answer it, there's something wrong with us."

Major Te Moana, who has served in Angola and two tours to East Timor, agrees, pointing out that the capacity to innovate is one of the defining qualities of the New Zealand armed forces.

"Overseas, our soldiers are always coming up with innovative ideas when they're on operations or training. Often, it comes from sharing ideas and ways of working with counterparts from other countries. Why reinvent the wheel when your closest allies have already invented it?"

"Establishing an intranet to allow ideas to be progressed has really just formalised what was already an innovation culture within the defence forces – the No 8 wire mentality." ■

NZDF's Value-driven Innovation Framework



Lac Lyle Wooller designed a refillable/resuable aerosol system to reduce 100-400 cans a year per workshop.

"Each [idea] may seem like a very small change to the private or corporal who initiates it, but they have a substantial impact if progressed across the whole organisation"

Source: Major Robert Te Moana, Capability Manager – Force Protection