

Creating a Culture of Innovation Within an Agency



Image courtesy of Indiana DOT

At Indiana DOT, an entire wall near the agency's entrance is covered with a variety of terms to encourage a culture of innovation within the workplace.

SCAN FOCUS

Innovative ideas and solutions have the potential to increase transportation efficiency and make better, safer and more cost-effective products and processes. A culture of innovation can benefit transportation agency staff by improving employee morale, retention and development. However, creating and maintaining such a culture is not simple. To learn from agencies that have internal cultures that support and encourage innovation, Domestic Scan 23-04 sought to identify their characteristics, variations in culture and successful practices.

PERSON-TO-PERSON RESEARCH

The scan team invited transportation agencies from eight states and the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) to participate in a 40-hour virtual workshop in April 2024. The team examined agencies with successful cultures of innovation to learn and document their initiatives, programs and implementation strategies. The scan members then synthesized the themes and findings from the workshop to provide recommendations to other states seeking to strengthen their cultures of innovation.

NEXT STEPS Put It into Practice

EXPLORE NEW IDEAS

The strategies that have worked well for other public and private organizations may suit your agency's needs as well.

GET INVOLVED

Help problem-solve with AASHTO's Innovation Management Committee at transportation.org/innovation-management/.

READ MORE

The full Scan 23-04 report is available at domesticscan.org/scans/23-04.

SUGGEST FUTURE SCANS

What topic do you have for an NCHRP Domestic Scan? See domesticscan.org/.

FINDINGS

This scan identified six major building blocks at the heart of every successful innovation program: (1) leadership that establishes innovation as a core value throughout the agency; (2) empowerment, giving employees the knowledge needed to spur innovative approaches and thinking; (3) communication that's creative and practical to highlight the value of innovative ideas; (4) recognition to motivate employees to be innovative; (5) measurements to track and communicate innovation impacts; and (6) collaboration among all staff so that innovative discussions and problem solving can take place.



Image courtesy of Utah DOT

The scan team noted that awards that incentive staff can also benefit the agency as a whole.

PUTTING IT TO WORK

The team identified several recommendations to develop and implement stronger innovative cultures. Some of these include:

- Integrate innovation into agency values, goals and vision, and the appoint an innovation champion at the executive level.
- Create innovation committees to promote and recognize innovation.
- Recognize innovative efforts with praise and, if feasible, with rewards.
- Measure and track innovation progress and report the benefits.
- Conduct a culture assessment with survey tools to determine status.

SHARING THE RESULTS

This project was featured during the 2025 Annual Meeting of the Transportation Research Board. Scan team members have also shared their findings at a variety of state, regional and national gatherings of transportation professionals, and additional presentations are scheduled for later in 2025.

ABOUT THE PROGRAM: The NCHRP U.S. Domestic Scan Program (NCHRP Project 20-68, domesticscan.org) recognizes the value of firsthand sharing of new technologies and practices. Launched in 2006, the program typically sponsors two or three scans per year, putting state and federal DOT practitioners who need solutions in touch with innovative peers around the country, speeding the transfer of technology and know-how. During the intense experience of the scan (typically one to two weeks), participants see how a new technology or practice works in the real world. They also develop close professional relationships that remain readily available to them years later.

SCAN PARTICIPANTS



Image courtesy of Missouri DOT

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