



Creative Instruction

Q&A with Udaya Patnaik

As a founder and principal of Jump Associates, a California-based corporate strategy consulting firm, Udaya Patnaik has helped executives from companies like FedEx and Target tackle leadership challenges. Patnaik identifies three pieces of advice he gives to all of his clients, one book you should read, and a mayor you should emulate.



As an innovation consultant, you've worked with some of the biggest companies and best-known brands in the United States. Have you ever done any work for cities?

I used to do community and economic development throughout the Pacific Northwest, so I'm pretty familiar with that world.

What kind of economic development projects did you work on?

We did a lot of stuff through the Economic Assessment Initiative, recovery after the timber and salmon industries collapsed in the late '80s and early '90s, drinking water and wastewater systems, community visioning around economic development...

Did you work with anybody in Washington State?

At the state level, what was then the Department of Community, Trade and Economic Development (now Commerce), the Department of Health, Department of Ecology. At the federal level, the EPA and USDA – specifically, its Rural Development initiative.

Tell me about Jump Associates. How long has the firm been around, and what do you do?

We started in 1998, and we specifically work with corporations, governments, foundations, and nonprofits to help them grow the kind of

impact they can have. We're a strategy firm. If you took the analysis and rigor of a McKinsey and brought it together with the synthetic ideas of a creative agency, that'd be Jump.

You yourself have worked with HP, Target, Harley-Davidson, P&G...

I've also worked with FedEx and General Electric, and foundations like the Kellogg Foundation and different nonprofit groups.

In this issue of the magazine, there's an article about a Washington mayor who's applied Toyota's Lean manufacturing principle to governing.

It's great that he's doing the Lean initiative there, and I think there are a lot of lessons cities can learn from corporations.

But what can go wrong?

One of the biggest problems is that we often don't take the time to tweak the model of corporate efficiency programs for the local community context. We often take something like Lean and say, "Government needs to run more efficiently." Well, that's a true statement, but it's not the whole story.

What is the whole story?

Government does a lot of stuff that's really right, and we need to be sure that it continues to run right. Lean, for example, doesn't address the mind-set of: How do you take care of a populace? How do you have a long view of what growth and management mean for a town? You can say, "Well, we're not going to offer that particular service because it's just costing too much money," which is an entirely feasible alternative under Lean. But if you're a local government leader, you can't always do that. You have issues of public safety; you have issues of economic well-being; you have issues of community spirit. And all of those have to be taken into account whenever you are making decisions.

What do your corporate clients typically ask you to do for them?

"How do we grow revenue and profits? How do we actually make something that really connects with people?"

Those questions also apply to local government. What's your answer?

Fundamentally, the prescription remains the same. There are three components. If you do these things right, your ability to deliver is much higher.

What's the first step?

A deep sense of empathy. You really need to walk in customers' shoes to be able to have an intuitive understanding of what's keeping them up at night and how you can best help their situation. In a corporate context, being empathic is critical.

And from a local government perspective?

Government leaders who don't have a decent sense of empathy for the citizens they serve are at a loss, because they don't know what the real priority needs of the community are. Those that have it are able to make better policy decisions. They're able to spot problems that other people don't spot. They're able to understand what people really care about and not just what they say they care about.

What's the second piece?

A sense of creativity. The idea that the solutions you create are not necessarily going to be the things that you thought about before. About the act of creation, people often say, "Oh, you just have to get crazy! You gotta get wacky!" And that's not true. It's a discipline. There's an art to it, but there is also a structure.

What if you're not a creative thinker by nature?

There are things you can do to improve your creativity. Having a social network to exchange ideas with, organizations like AWC where you can connect with other leaders and share ideas, is tremendous.

What else?

It also means that you need to get outside your sphere of expertise to solve a multidimensional problem. Local leaders confront issues that are quite literally all over the map. You have to deal with everything from education to public safety to health care. And that sometimes requires that you have solutions that are imported from one area into another.

What do you mean?

Say we really want to solve issues around public safety. What can we learn from education and parks and recreation?

What do those things have to do with public safety?

Here's a perfect example. We now have reams of data that show that if you have midnight basketball leagues, gang violence goes down. Why? Because kids have something to do. When you're teaching them values, when you're using things like sports leagues and after-school programs to be able to mentor kids, teach them values, and keep them out of trouble, the chances that they're going to be up to no good and that you're going to have a gang problem in your community are much less.

OK, empathy and creativity make sense. What's the third component?

Execution. It's all about: How do you reliably get things done? How do you get it rolled out the door? Really understanding the financial impacts of your decision-making is part of the process of generating the ideas you have. Rollout and implementation are really part of the act of conceiving of policies and programs. Too often people say, "That's a great idea," but then when it comes to implementation it was poorly executed. That's an executional problem.

What's one way to remedy that?

Empower people to be part of the process so that it's not "Thou shalt!" but "Let's do." If you're in local government and you're not bringing different voices to the table and including them in the rollout, don't be surprised if programs don't stick. It's often an issue of enrollment. It's also about funding what you believe in.

What do you mean by that?

There are a lot of folks who say, "Well, we can't do that without raising taxes." Well, you have to if it's important to you. If you don't want to do it, then we won't raise taxes. But if you want to do it, this is what it takes. You have to consider financial issues and enrollment issues as you design policy, as you're governing, as you're implementing your program.

What's the greatest challenge facing elected officials.

That democracy can't always make everybody happy. The successful leaders are able to learn where they can compromise, where they can form consensus, where they need to actually spend time learning from other people and not pushing their own agenda.

But at some point, you've got to stop asking for input and just make a decision.

That's a very important point. People like to have a sense of where the bus is going. To the extent that you can, lay out not just a short view but a long view. What is your vision of the way your community should look if you are successful as a leader? And then to be able to back that up and say, "Now these are the steps that we need to take to get there, and some of the steps are going to be significant, and some will be simply little things we need to do." You'll get more alignment on that vision if you're not just able to paint that picture but can talk about how you're going to get from here to there.

When it comes to leadership and decision-making, what's another key idea?

Authenticity. How do you actually demonstrate to people that you're not simply reactive? That you are willing to hear other perspectives, and that you are genuinely interested in dialogue and committed to proper governance? You can't say that you're willing to compromise and then not act that way. The public sees right through that.

What's a corporate conundrum you're often asked to solve that applies to local government?

We're often asked these big front-end questions, like, "How are we going to reinvent health care? And what will our involvement be in the new health care ecosystem?" More than anything, the big lesson to take away is that governing doesn't stop at the city limits.

Great leaders of local government – elected officials, administrators, and managers – all of them have an obligation to think regionally, about who the other groups are that you need to be connecting with; they may not exist within your community. And to recognize the power of that ecosystem to make great change happen. It's not just an individual acting on its own, or a town acting on its own: you've got to acknowledge that we're all in this together. A perfect example of this is something like air quality. If you want to solve your air quality problem, chances are you don't want to look at just your community, because the wind blew things in from someplace.

You can make that same analogy on the economic side as well. If we're having a problem with jobs in our community, why? Where are they going? When you take a regional picture and connect with the people you need to connect with, your chances of success are much higher.

What's one book every local elected official needs to read?

The Coming Jobs War, by Jim Clifton.

Why is that book a must-read?

It acknowledges the absolute interdependence of community development, economic development, government, private corporations, individual citizens, and education systems. And how the problems that we're trying to solve are much more ambiguous and harder to solve than they ever have been.

We've already taken care of all of the little stuff. Now we're on to the hard stuff. It's harder to be a local leader today than it was 50 years ago, than it was 100 years ago. There's a different scale and intricacy of problems. And therefore the solutions also have to be different, as do the mindset we need to have and the culture that needs to be in place – all need to be different.

When people look at things like water rights issues or job creation or affordable housing, there are so many different folks who should be involved or can be tapped and have ideas that we need to be using that larger ecosystem.

Because the problems are more complex?

I would draw a distinction between complexity and ambiguity. Complexity is like you can teach a computer to solve it, like chess. There are only so many squares, and you can only move so many spaces at a time, and each piece has its own rules of how it can move, and there's only one objective: capture your opponent's king. A lot of what local governments are doing consists of very ambiguous problems.

You don't even know what the end looks like. You don't even know what question to ask in the beginning, let alone the path between here and there that you need to follow. It's a much harder problem to solve if you're a local leader. If someone comes to you and says, "What should we do about solid waste disposal?" It's a much bigger issue than saying, "OK, we'll just build another landfill." Uh-uh. Can't do that anymore. There are more constraints on the system.

The degrees of freedom are fewer. Regulations, some smart and others not so smart, have made it harder to make decisions, even harder to make quick decisions. This is where things like efficiency programs can come in nicely. The Lean stuff works quite well with complex problems because there are known beginnings and ends to them.

Do you have an example?

Take what the City of Tacoma did years ago on permit approvals. They promised a very quick turnaround: two weeks for residential, eight weeks for multifamily/ commercial building permits, and a one-day turnaround on simple residential remodels. That was unheard of in local government, where usually the response is, "That's not nearly enough time for everybody to weigh in, for everybody to do the right reviews." Tacoma did it.

And again, it's not a party issue. This is nothing other than people saying, "This a commitment we have to the citizens who live here. We want to set a tone, create a cadence, for what change looks like in our community." Sometimes these small changes we make can

have a very profound effect. They can really significantly change the way we think.

Kind of like what Rudy Giuliani did with addressing quality-of-life issues in New York City back in the 1990s.

Exactly. Clean up the graffiti and watch crime in the subway go down. You have to make that part of the overall strategy. They also busted people for petty crimes like jumping turnstiles.

You have to ask, "What are the little things we are going to do to keep our system running well? We'll create an overall sense of responsibility, a sense of stewardship, a community where people feel empowered and want to take the initiative to take action themselves to make things happen." Not just a mayor, or a city councilperson, saying, "I need to lead people through the wilderness to the promised land."

It's often figuring out a way to get really motivated people in my community to want to take leadership, stewardship, seriously themselves. As a leader, we have to ask: "What can I do to inspire people to do that?"

Who's one local leader you admire?

Cory Booker, the mayor of Newark, New Jersey.

Why?

A couple years ago, when the snowstorms hit New York and the Tri-State area, Newark was paralyzed just like everybody else; it was very hard for them to get their plows out to get the streets cleared in time.

So what did Booker do? He put on a hat and gloves, grabbed a shovel, and Tweeted everybody

and said, "I am shoveling this particular road right now." It inspired people: "I'll shovel my own neighborhood as well."

When times are tough, people have to stick together like that. When a leader acts like that, he demonstrates to everybody in the community that it's not just one person's job. It's all of our jobs. He may be the mayor, but more than anything, he's a citizen of Newark. He cares about his community. That's great execution.

What's the lesson learned?

He acts on things. He goes beyond the traditional notion of what a solution might be. He has empathy. How does he know what's going on? He's got a constant conversation going on, using live meetings and social media, asking people where the problems are so there's a dialogue. He doesn't live in a mayor's mansion. He lives in public housing. If you want to be able to govern and say you want to be held accountable, you should live with the consequences of your actions.

Government isn't "them." It's all of us.

Exactly. He leads by example. He sets the standard that inspires people to want to take action themselves.

You sure you don't want to relocate to Washington and run for local office?

I lived in Tumwater and worked in Lacey for five years, and I loved it. Washington is a wonderful state, but for my job, I gotta do what I gotta do here.