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# Building a culture of customer experience across government

Lessons learned from two life experience projects.

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In recent years, the federal government has recognized the critical importance of [customer experience](#) in its interactions with the public. According to [Performance.gov](#) and the Office of Management and Budget, customer experience is defined as “the public’s perceptions of and overall satisfaction with interactions with any government agency, product, or service.” While this definition sets a clear goal, building a culture of customer experience within government agencies to consistently deliver positive experiences for the public remains a challenge.

Through the 2021 executive order on customer experience, the White House launched five inaugural interagency teams focused on improving customer experience during pivotal [life experiences](#). Each of these life experience teams is staffed by a diverse, interdisciplinary group and represents a significant shift from traditional government operations toward a more collaborative, [human-centered approach](#).

## Lesson 1. Fail forward

The government is known for being risk averse, and for good reason. It’s important that government projects are completed with care and due diligence to avoid failing to deliver core services or administering programs improperly or unfairly. However, risk aversion, no matter how well-intended, does not guarantee the success of a project. It can sometimes stagnate innovation and creative problem-solving, create psychologically unsafe teams, or ultimately stop us from best meeting the public’s needs.

In customer experience, because of its human-centric approach, teams need room to try new ideas, fail, and pivot to meet the ever evolving needs of beneficiaries. For example, within the Birth of a Child Life Experience Portfolio, the team launched an [Alumni Peer Navigator Services pilot](#) <sup>↗</sup>, which was originally designed to improve families’ access to Medicaid and the Women, Infants, and Children program.

After speaking with communities, the team learned that the communities’ needs went beyond these two federal benefits — including the need for resources and social-emotional support to address maternal mental health, a critical foundation for families’ success. So, the team embraced “the pivot” to meet the unique needs of their clients and designed a program that expanded the core service offerings to include other types of community resources that the team designated as high-priority in response to families’ and case workers’ feedback, in addition to other federal benefits.

## Lesson 2. Embrace partnerships

There can often be the assumption that change-work is the responsibility of the particular agency or team that is leading a project. This effort requires collaboration both across government and with external partners; it cannot be done by government alone. This looks like working across agency silos and also with partners outside of government, including the communities that are being impacted by the work.

On the [Facing a Financial Shock project](#), the core services targeted for improvement were state- and county-administered, so the federal agencies could not do the work alone. The federal team needed to engage state benefit agencies and nonprofits to surface pain points, common practices, and work on solutions for benefit delivery at the state level. The team did so through [working groups](#) <sup>↗</sup>, which provided a communication and co-design space to identify actions and collaborate on delivering them. Not only did this approach help produce and consolidate new strategies for states, but it also helped reduce silos across the industry.



Facing a Financial Shock

The [Birth of a Child Alumni Peer Navigator Services pilot](#) was developed in direct partnership with agency partners at the Health Resources and Services Administration, and community-based organizations that are grantees of the [Healthy Start](#) program. This meant that the pilot had buy-in and trust at the community level, and encouraged community ownership over the project. Strong agency and community partnerships are also critical for scaling and sustaining pilot work.

## Lesson 3. Keep the end user in mind

Finally, embodying a culture of customer experience means orienting teams around a single, steadfast goal: keeping the end user in mind. For government teams, that can mean supporting user research with funding, project design, and personnel (such as designers and product managers that advocate for users in their work).

The Birth of a Child team was able to prioritize in-person site visits to speak with communities in the creation of their Alumni Peer Navigator Services pilot. In addition, they also [invited community members to directly give input](#) into the team’s project artifacts — and participate in the design of the project as much as was feasible. Doing so allowed the team to accurately define and shape the problem they were trying to solve for, and give them relationships they could rely on for further feedback.



Having a Child and Early Childhood

Even in situations where teams cannot directly interface with users, there are ways to keep end users in mind:

- Contact community-based organizations as proxies for understanding customers’ pain points,
- Look at metrics for telling indicators about customer behavior
- Conduct desk research to understand public perceptions of a particular good or service on online forums
- Work with levels of government (state- or county-level) that might work closer with a target group of users (as in the Facing a Financial Shock working groups)

As public servants, our top priority is to serve the public. This means that every project in government is a customer experience project and every government employee is working in customer experience. Right now, there are special titles for customer experience projects and roles, but customer experience is not just a role or skill, it is a mindset — one that all government employees should adopt.

Projects come and go, but with this mindset and cultural shift, we can continue to improve processes and provide high quality government services that the public expects and deserves.

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