

# MIT GOV/LAB

## PODCAST SERIES: POWER TO THE WHO

### Episode 3: Luana Faria, Founder and Head of La-BORA!gov

#### Carlos 00:06

What is the future of governance? How do governments innovate with citizens not just for citizens? Power to the Who built on our recent work at the Innovation Initiative of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Governance Lab. At the lab, we work with reformers, public service leaders, technologists and designers at the heart of governance innovation, where new solutions tackle complex problems to improve the relationship between citizens, government and civil society. I'm Carlos Centeno, your host and Associate Director of Innovation at the MIT GOV/LAB. And this is Power to the Who. One of the recurring challenges that we hear from civil servants who want to innovate is the lack of time and space to do so. How do we create that space? How do we manage to transform the way civil servants view their work so that they can see opportunities for change? Can a tiny lab inside the Brazilian national government be the answer? We talk with Luana Faria, a psychologist by training, who leads La-BORA! gov, a different kind of public sector innovation lab, one that is changing the way civil servants innovate rather than designing or making things. It all started with a big fat rejection. Much like the rejection civil servants who want to innovate feel when they're not heard.

#### Luana 01:26

La-BORA! gov doesn't start with a successful story. Actually, it began with a significant setback, when I had the plan to establish a line of vision lab to enhance employee experience at the federal public sector, I thought it was a fantastic idea at first, but then when I shared my idea I got a big nope - it was met with resistance, fear of change, lack of support from leaders, bureaucratic obstacles. But I also took responsibility because I didn't sell my idea properly. I had no data to support the idea. I had no network and especially, I had no team. And this is why we had this as our first big innovation, because of scarcity. And this is an important thing to say. Six months later, as I dived into reality, the reality to gather data, to gather evidence, I found the right people to do the job. And I found that public employees were really eager to go to La-BORA! gov. But again, I found a big challenge. In the public administration in Brazil, it's really hard to move the public servant from one place to another - there are many bureaucratic obstacles. And there is another challenge that comes along with this. There are many public servants that just sit at a desk passing up decisions up the chain, feeling inadequate and uncomfortable in their traditional work models. Then I thought, what if we had cross functional task teams to solve these challenging public problems and shifted functional hierarchies to be more people-centric and fluid. This is how we created a neat initiative called Free-LA. Free-LA in Brazil is being collated with many other public organizations, who are working now with these Free-LAs. And it works like this; public servants voluntarily fill out a form or read a registration form and can be selected to work at the lab, in a project or in a specific public challenge, according to their skills and interest, but they keep their employment ties to the original working place. We don't have to move them. And it

innovates because it scales opportunities for public employees, it fosters learning, networking, and especially meaning at work. So we achieved our goal of breaking the silos and using these different activities to open opportunities for flexible work. Now there are more than 230 different public servants from many public organizations that are Free-LAs, that work as Free-LAs, and we were able to build a team without having to move people from one place to another. About scarcity, it's nice because it proves that innovation is not only about this advanced and fancy and expensive technologies, like many people think. Since the beginning of La-BORA! gov, we never had any large investment or extra funding. But it never posed an impossible barrier to overcome. This initiative, Free-LAs, was created because of the scarce environment that we face.

**Carlos1** 05:32

And that's what a lot of governments that we talked to face as well, you know, a shortage of funds, shortage of time, and well, no shortage of pressure. And this sounds really interesting, because you're not actually moving the silver servants. One of the things that we hear a lot when we're working with public sector officials is they don't really have the space, physically, but also mentally to think a little bit different. They're on the public time, basically, which is different from the private sector, and La-BORA! gov, through Free-LAs, seems to give this space. So one question I have, I'm putting myself in the position of, you know, a minister or someone whose employees are going and working in La-BORA! gov while staying to work with me as a minister. How do you make sure that the the leadership of these civil servants are giving them this space to thrive in La-BORA! gov while still working in let's say, the ministries?

**Luana** 06:39

That's a question that everybody does when they hear about Free-LA. What about the leaders? Yeah, it works as a bridge. Because when these public servants work at a space like La-BORA! gov where we have psychological safety, we trust each other, we can take risks, for example, to innovate. They learn new tools, new ways to solve problems. And they put these new abilities they develop into practice at their original working places. So we help in building the bridge with these people, these Free-LAs, they help build the bridge from La-BORA! gov, that is an innovative space, to these places that are beginning to work with innovation. And many people believe that to innovate, we need the best moment to innovate, the best condition, as you said, the fiscal space, maybe the best solution, we cannot implement until we have the best solution that we can develop. But they learn that very fast, that there is no best solution, that there are many solutions for the problems we face in the government. They are very complex. And there is no best moment to innovate. Innovation is not something that only labs can do. It's not exclusive to certain roles, sure, labs, or to innovation departments, but rather is a potential for all public servants. So when leaders understand that these spaces help the employees to feel more engaged, to be more productive, I never, ever had a no. When we say, "oh, we selected this person to be part of our project as a Free-LA, it's going to be for example, six months of work, two days a week for example, I never had no for an answer. But I use a little bit of nudging to help these leaders to make their decisions too.

**Carlos** 09:12

What do you do to get them to agree?

**Luana 09:16**

Yea, at first, I say that "I never had a no, are you going to be the first to say no?." I also showed them the problems that we face. And the government is for everyone, is it not? If you're a public employee, for example, you work for the government, you don't work for this unit, you work for the government, it's not like you have to work only for your unit. And when a public servant has the chance to prosper at something that they really connect with, they can find ways to find opportunities in the challenge. I think this is something that leaders can relate to. You have many challenges. If this public employee that works in your area comes to La-BORA! gov and finds new tools, they can change their behavior, their mindset, because this is the real challenge. There is no lack of tool. We have had a recent research and one of the findings that is truly important for us is that there is no lack of innovation competencies. Public companies in Brazil are highly... they have a lot of knowledge. We are very qualified, highly qualified, comparing to other countries, for example, but there is no lack of these kinds of knowledge, there is no lack of tools, we have many tools to innovate, many tools.

**Carlos 10:58**

What's missing?

**Luana 11:00**

What's missing is trusting environments where you can put this into practice. The problem I had when I got into public service, and I get the chills when I talk about it, because it's the same problem I had 10 years ago. This is what the research showed us, the main insight. So what can we do as a lab to make another toolkit? No, this is not the opportunity that the research is showing us. This is not the way, the ways is we need to help organizations help public employees to find and construct and build spaces where they can work, where we can prosper as public servants, and put our abilities into practice. We have a lot of courses in Brazil, we have an app, which is the school for public administration. They have amazing courses. We learn, for example, behavior insights, we learn how to unlock our creativity, for example, we learned design thinking, or human centered design. This is not the problem. The problem is not a shortage of courses. But what is it worth to make all these courses, to have all the training, and just go to your computer, press the button all day long, and don't have any way where you can really put these abilities into practice?

**Carlos 12:35**

And so, for people who don't know the project, the La-BORA! gov, if I'm a civil servant and I go to La-BORA! gov and say yes, I want to be a Free-LA, what is an example that you remember of a project or something that they did that explains this reflection you had from the research? That is not the courses, not the skills, you have all that. So what is it like for a civil servant to be involved in Free-LA?

**Luana 13:05**

There are many examples, but I'll give you one. For example, recently, we have had a research, we partnered with People Lab from Oxford, people in a government lab, and we had the research during the pandemics. So we started how to use behavioral insights to improve well-being and productivity during teleworking. And we had a team that was committed to it. In the end, we had an event, after one year and a half of research, we released a report. And we had Free-LAs working with us all the way through. And in the event, the final event, there was a Free-LA that made a speech, and it was very

emotional for everyone that was listening. All the leaders were there, our leaders in the ministry. And she's she said that it was the first time that she really saw the impact of her work, because she had the feedback. She saw, she heard, and we collected information on all the project because for us, it's very important to collect data to have in the paper so that we know where was the failures and where we succeeded. And she said she saw for the first time what she had to improve, what was great about her, she found out that she was very interested in some things that she never tested before. And something is important about being a Free-LA. We never ask people to be experts in what they're supposed to do as Free-LAs. We say you, we want you to have the interest, we want you to see something, see a project, and say, "this is what I want, I don't have the skills yet, but this is what I want you to do, this is something that really challenges me." And we help them to develop these skills while doing the work. This is important because this is the bridge. And this is something that we use to make the leaders to approve your work to help these people to develop. We don't want only experts actually.

**Carlos** 15:47

So it's like being a civil servant in a Ministry of Health and you have this big project you want to do, and you don't have the space - mental space, time - and you tell your boss, "listen, I'm going to do this, and it's like an incubator, kind of." And so they propose the project to you, or how does it work?

**Luana** 16:12

No, we have projects. For example, they fill out a form, a registration form to be a Free-LA. And in this form, we ask them, "these are our projects, these are the topics that we work with, for example, we work with strategic planning, with what we call adaptive strategic planning. There's something that we work with behavioral insights, for example, researchers, workshops, from all of these lists, what's the projects, the themes, the topics that you want to work with." This is what we ask. And they then when we have a project, we choose the Free-LAs by looking at this form. And we select the ones that fit that project. And these Free-LAs help us. This is why we only have six people in our team. And people get really amazed when they say we're only six people, because actually you're not only six people, we're more than 300 people because we have more than 300 Free-LAs.

**Carlos** 17:21

So the Free-LAs get exposed to the projects that you have. And then it's almost like getting their feet wet in innovative work, which, as you mentioned could be behavioral insights, could be some other kind of research, and then they bring that mindset back to their office. And what is the ultimate goal beyond that one person, or for La-BORA! gov for that space where they work, what is the ultimate goal?

**Luana** 17:50

It's difficult to say the ultimate, ultimate goal. But one thing that we really value is the diversity of perspectives. If you're only six people working at a lab, closed doors, how are you going to innovate, this is not innovation. Even when we base everything we do on research, even then, when we're going to create the solutions, six people only is not enough. We're going to have the solutions that are obvious solutions. It's really hard to innovate when we're a locked in a group. So with the Free-LAs, our team is diverse in backgrounds, perspectives, experiences, personality types. So some people are more introvert, more analytical, some people are more communicative, extroverts. We don't judge these people by their personality types, we don't value only those who speak more, for example. We

believe that this diversity helps us to be more innovative, more inclusive. And it also encourages open and constructive questioning and collaboration. I think this is the ultimate goal. We really embrace diversity, inclusion and new approaches to public service.

**Carlos** 19:14

And they bring that to your team. And they also bring that to their team, you think?

**Luana** 19:19

Yes, yes.

**Carlos** 19:19

Is there an exercise you do so they more intentionally bring it to their team?

**Luana** 19:25

Yes, sometimes we ask them when there is an evaluation survey. So after they go back, we ask them, "Did you implement? What was the implementation you had? What changed in your experience, in your day-to-day work?" We understand that we help people. It's not our job to go there and innovate for them. No, that's not what we do. We're going to help them build these bridges, build the space, not the physical space necessarily but the safe space to take risk. And we have now, it's amazing. It's something that, sometimes I get embarrassed to say because it doesn't look real. Not even for me. But 99% of people give us positive feedbacks from the services. So 28% are good. And 71%, excellent. So only 1% regular are bad. This is amazing for us. And this is what we ask, how did this experience change your mind your behavior at your original working place?

**Carlos** 20:41

And do you have outreach to the senior leadership? You were commenting that, you know, of course, you tried to bring in the civil servants and make that bridge. But do you have outreach specifically for senior leadership who are not necessarily the day-to-day of operations in designing public services, but they might want to be part of this somehow and then they just don't have the time to be Free-LAs for example.

**Luana** 21:10

No, they don't. But we have many workshops, and many events that we have, for example, courses and lectures. They are designed for senior leadership because without them, the solutions we develop are not going to be implemented. This is something we have to have in mind, we need to build the bridge from the people that work, public employees that are here working every day in front of the computer to solve problem problems, and the senior leadership that is there, that is not always connected or can't be always connected because of shortage of time and lots of pressure. I'm very empathetic with this senior leadership because they really don't have the time today. It's not that they don't care. Sometimes they don't. Sometimes they do, but they don't have the time. So we designed these experiences for them. They're usually more intense, but very low in hours, like maybe one hour per week, for example, but directly for these kinds of leadership.

**Carlos** 22:25

And for other governments that might be listening from other countries, when you talk about innovation, might be something for even inside Brazil, like you were saying it might be something for the rural area or it's something else for Sao Paulo, when you talk about innovation, what is that in the ministry where you work?

**Luana 22:49**

Innovation is about people. It's about people. It's something that sounds a little bit... everybody says that, oh, it's all about people, we need to focus on people. It's more important to understand how, how, it's every day, it's an everyday job, innovation is an everyday job. It's not something that you're going to conquer at the end of the project. No, only after implementation, successful implementation. No, you can innovate when you have mistakes, when you have shortage of resources, when you have big challenges and small challenges too. You need to think of innovation as something that is no longer a choice, it's an imperative for governments. This is how we need to think about innovation. And it's not for labs, it's not for the departments that have innovation in their name. So now there are many departments that put innovation in their names. But it's not about that, how are you going to transform the value of innovation into behaviors, into everyday behaviors? So how are you going to innovate if you're not listening, for example, if you're not connected to the user, if you're not trying to make things simpler for people, simple, simplicity is a very important thing is when we're talking about innovation, not for the team that is working with innovation, but for the user. Sometimes it's not simple for us public companies, but for the user of the innovation of the solution, it has to be simple. We can't think of innovation as the solution that is cool. It's only innovation if it creates value for people, for the users, not for the people in the hierarchy, but for the users themselves.

**Carlos 24:55**

And is there a challenge in particular, now that there's a new administration, is there a time challenge in particular that you could tell us about that you're really trying to address in an innovative way. So as you're saying, you know, innovation is not the flashy stuff, it's people and being able to listen. What challenge are you applying these things to going forward?

**Luana 25:15**

Well, we have a big challenge in Brazil, which actually many countries have, which is the polarized political climate that lowers trust in government institutions, and this is something that we need to work with. And this is exactly well where La-BORA! gov steps in and this is exactly why this work is so important, because the role of public servants becomes even more crucial. People who are the core of innovation and civil servants are at every stage, every stage. And this is why the management of government employees comes into focus. So we need to focus on HR, for example, but not thinking about HR as a place where you give fields where you have the perfect solutions that are very creative sometimes, but they don't tackle the problem, the real problem, they tackle the symptoms, for example, we need to think broader.

**Carlos 26:29**

And how with a polarization theme, which is very well relevant at the moment everywhere in the world, right? And we have to imagine how you're trying to solve that. How does that work in the real space, people, if we want it to imagine how you're trying to address that?

**Luana 26:55**

First thing is that involving the users, the public servants in the creation of the solutions increase success. If you don't involve the people, they're going to be scared. If you involve these people, it is possible to alleviate the fear of change, the fear of the polarization, the top leaders, for example, sometimes, it's more difficult for people to not only believe but also understand. Because the speeches, sometimes they're very beautiful, but people think "this is not what's happening, this is just a speech, it doesn't connect to reality." So people often find messages more trustworthy when they come from those with firsthand experience, for example, a colleague. So we focus on bringing people that understand this reality, more than outside experts, or authorities, for example. When we remove the formality, the hierarchy, it's easier to focus on what truly matters, to focus on feelings, for example, this is why, for example, we removed opening speeches and these kinds of formalities from everything we do.

**Carlos 28:22**

And when you say you remove speeches from let's say the protocol that you have, is that because you think that this is a way that politicians should maybe do to involve more people, make it more accessible. I understand when you try and do it internally, but do you have an ideal of what you would like to see outside of La-BORA! gov?

**Luana 28:49**

Well, we removed these speeches especially because people don't want to waste time. People think this is a waste of time. Every time we have this kind of speeches, in the evaluation, people say "the first part shouldn't have existed, we need we need to spend our time focusing on what really matters, remove this part." We have this feedback from the users. When we ask why, many people say that it doesn't connect because people go there, the high leaders, for example, senior leaders, they go there, they make speeches, and people say that it doesn't connect with the actual work that we need to do, that, for example, when they're designing a solution for a problem, we have a really beautiful speech, but it's all about success. It doesn't talk about failure at all. It doesn't connect to the hearts of people. It doesn't touch people.

**Carlos 30:00**

And that's a piece of, well, at least I'm remembering from design engineering, the storytelling piece of both the problem that you've identified, as you said before that, you know, you might see the symptom of the problem, but not the real problem. And then storytelling, to tell others what this problem means to you, and what this problem could mean to them. And sharing the collective story is super important in design. There's a lot of focus on storytelling for the solution, also known as the pitch and like why it's important to you a solution like this. But I'm curious as to how you think about problems and storytelling.

**Luana 30:43**

Remember, in the beginning of our conversation, I said that I thought I had the best idea of all, when I thought about implementing a lab that was focused on public and on employee experience. I thought it was the best idea anyone could have. But after three years, I found out that it was a good idea, of course it was a good idea, but millions of other great ideas of projects, innovative ideas, creative ideas,

maybe bad ideas, why not, they die every day without being said, without being mentioned. People don't have the environments where they can say these ideas, they can put these ideas to the world. So these ideas just die. We help - this is another thing we I love at La-BORA! gov - we help the public employees to sell their ideas, to show their ideas, their projects, with the storytelling. We show them not only tools, but we put this into practice, we walk the talk every time we address public servants, we use storytelling, even in emails, for example, and plain language, because it's very usual in Brazil to talk to anyone, even with a colleague, with very formal and rigid words and texts that no one reads, no one wants you to waste time reading or listening. This is high on another justification for removing speeches. So with storytelling, we can help people to sell their ideas and to show that even the ideas that don't sound so good at first, they can be good for people to listen and to say no, let's remove this part. Let's only take this part and add this to this other idea. And then we create really innovative ideas.

**Carlos 33:01**

So I'm curious, because there's a level of where you have to sort of reality check a few years later where you are. Is this where you thought you would be? And where do you think you should be in two more years, what's like an interesting project that you're thinking about that you haven't even put on paper.

**Luana 33:21**

Something that I really, not only me, but the thing we want to do is reach out to public servants that don't have the same opportunities that we do. This is not only our job, but our obligation as public servants. Because we got here, we understand that we are more privileged than most public employees. We have the support from our leaders, for example, this is rare. We work in a psychological safe environment, this is rare. We can see very clearly the impact of our work. We have the tools, we have transparency, we have an environment of trust. We give feedback. We listen. We trained to be good listeners. We have been doing this for example with Free-LAs but we want to go further. Many people think, many public employees are just tired, they think this is not for them. Now I don't work in an environment with postdates on the walls. I don't ride a bike to work so I can't innovate. And obviously innovation has nothing to do with this. Anyone has, not only can, but must innovate in their everyday work routine. So this is something that we really really want to do in the next few years.

**Carlos 34:53**

The ones less connected to the work that you're doing, you were mentioning that you would like to reach those people in government that don't have the support of their leaders, don't have a safe psychological space. How do you plan to reach them?

**Luana 35:07**

Yes, were they designing the services based on their necessity? So we asked the public employees that we reach out now. And how are we going to do this? We'll never do anything alone. So how are we going to do this? One way is to expand the Free-LAs, for example. Not only Free-LAs for La-BORA! gov but we want to have Free-LAs in other public organizations. We already have experiences, that other public organizations have also had Free-LAs, this is really good. But we want to have these as politic in Brazil, to have Free-LAs, because it's very expensive, for example, to hire more public employees. If we have Free-LAs, there are many people that are feeling not too valued in their jobs,



that they could be doing more, so why don't we have these people working in projects that they really connect with. So this is a way we can reach out to other public servants. And the online services also help us because with the pandemic, we were able to reach out to more people, because we started to work online. So with people, for example, on the other states in Brazil, for other federal states in Brazil, people that never heard about La-BORA! gov before, I love it, when I go places and I ask, "have you ever heard of La-BORA! gov" and nobody says they heard, I love it. Because this is the public I want. I don't want to be talking so that people that already know about us already know how to innovate, already understand the tools is part of this innovation network, already.

**Carlos 37:13**

Have you heard of any countries or cities outside of Brazil that are doing something similar or that are interested in copying?

**Luana 37:23**

Yes, actually, after we had Free-LAs, we discovered that Canada has a similar, it's not the same, but it's similar, somehow similar. Um, but I forgot the name of the initiative. I'm sorry. But Canada already has that as something similar to the Free-LAs. Also Portugal, but they don't have a name, but they have a strategy. If they don't have a name for the initiative, but it's on the strategy in the government that they have that look like Free-LA. And we're trying to expand this idea. Because there are many prizes that we won with this initiative, because we have data to show the importance of it. So for example, we wanted the Global Government Excellence Award in Dubai at the World Government Summit, like one two months ago with this initiative. And this is a way to show other countries and inspire other countries too.

**Carlos 38:28**

is there anything that you see yourself, without revealing maybe too much, that you see yourself doing outside of LaBORA!gov that you've been wanting to do? And now maybe because of LaBORA!gov you can do it? What's in the future for Luana?

**Luana 38:46**

Wow. Yeah, I love my job. I love it. But I also love challenges. So I'm always looking for challenges. But at La-BORA! gov, one thing that I found out is that we can have challenges in our everyday routine as public servants. It's not a work that we have to look at the screen and imitate robots. This is not being a public servant. So I find challenges everyday in my routine. But something that I really want to do is to work with behavior science, a little bit more, to use behavior science as a way to improve employee experience, to create effective interventions that can improve well-being, engagement, for productivity. This is something that is lacking in the Brazilian government, not only at La-BORA! gov but also in the Brazilian government and outside of the Brazilian government. This is something that we need to work with. This is something that changes what really matters, which is behavior. Behavior is something that we really need to focus. And it's hard. But with science, we can make it happen.

**Carlos 40:08**

And do you think that this application of behavioral insights in the work that you're doing, is that where you see La-BORA! gov going or it's a key part of where La-BORA! gov is going. Because you're

addressing some of the challenges that are intrinsic to the work of civil servants. And, you know, motivations and behaviors are a big part of that. So that's why I asked, some other governments use behavioral insights to plan for policy. But for La-BORA! gov, it's interesting because it's directly tied to, you know, HR or the experience of the civil servant.

**Luana** 40:47

Yes, we need to use behavioral science to redefine the relationship between government and employees. This is something we need to do. It's, again, it's an imperative, something that we need to focus on. As an innovation lab, we need to innovate, even with our tools. We already use behavioral science, but we need to use it with collecting data. We don't do it yet. This is something I see for the future. This is something that is aligned with our strategic planning, using behavioral science, collecting data to understand the effectiveness of the interventions that we're doing. Because by now, we're using interventions where we're not collecting the data. So for example, with language, we use behavioral science to communicate, but we don't know exactly if it's really being effective. We only know because it's working. But it's not enough.

**Carlos** 41:57

Join us for our next episode of this series as we continue to talk with the people trying to make exponential change happen around the world. To learn more about our work, visit our website at [innovation.MITgovlab.org](http://innovation.MITgovlab.org) and find MIT GOV/LAB on Twitter and LinkedIn.