

THE COMMUNITY INNOVATION IMPERATIVE

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“Any intelligent fool can make things bigger and more complex... It takes a touch of genius and a lot of courage to move in the opposite direction.”

– Ernst F. Schumacher

Today, communities are facing an array of complex challenges that the proven programs we have created have been unable to impact in a significant way. In spite of the dedication and ingenuity of our non-profit community sector, those who have spent their careers within it know that new solutions are required and the results that are urgently needed cannot and will not be found by simply making incremental changes to our current approaches. Working harder alone is not enough. The breakthroughs that community change-makers seek require new approaches. Today’s current reality has created the conditions where innovation has become an imperative to effectively address our society’s most significant issues.

The Rockefeller Foundation defines innovation within the community context as, “a break from previous practice – either small or large – that has a significant positive impact¹. Their report, [Building the Capacity to Innovate: A Guide for Non-Profits](#), defines innovation as, “something distinct from, and more ambitious and uncertain than, continuous improvement” and outlines several different types, including innovations in: programs, products and services; processes; funding; organization; and, markets and systems². However, as Ric Young, President of E.Y.E, the social projects studio, cautions “innovation is not for the faint-of-heart.” This is because there are no simple formulas:

“Serious and significant social change necessarily involves recognizing and dealing with complex systems, which seem to operate with a logic and life of their own, are far from inert, and battle (like the living organisms with which we are more familiar) for their own preservation. But if you’re willing to open your mind to the nature of these systems, you will discover a world of possibilities.”³

Communities have a critical leadership role to play in generating the necessary innovations to address the challenges confronting Canada. In the article [On Not Letting A Crisis Go To Waste: An Innovation Agenda For Canada’s Community Sector](#), Tim Brodhead, former President and Chief Executive Officer of The J.W. McConnell Family Foundation, defined power as “the ability to act in common” and noted that

¹ Lanzerotti, Pike, & and Sahni, 2017, p. 5

² Lanzerotti, Pike, & and Sahni, 2017, p. 5

³ Westley, Zimmerman, & & Quinn Patton, 2007, p. ix

society is improved when “community organizations of all kinds, voluntary associations of citizens band together to pursue a cause, articulate a need, or help their fellow citizens.”⁴ This is the leadership our communities need.

WHAT IS COMMUNITY INNOVATION?

At Tamarack, we see community Innovation as a particular form of social innovation that is place-based, within the specific geography of a community. Canada has been a pioneer in the field of social innovation, defined as “both a destination – the resolution of complex social and environmental challenges – and a journey – devising new approaches that engage all stakeholders, leveraging their competencies and creativity to design novel solutions.”⁵ As dynamic ‘living labs’, communities offer the perfect container for innovation. Through our experience with community change, we have come to understand that to be effective, innovation requires an appreciation of both the issue one is hoping to address, as well as a deep understanding of the unique characteristics of the community – the place and the people within it – where the innovation will be implemented. Innovations that have proven successful in one community can, at best, serve as a source of inspiration for another, but must be adapted and modified if they are to maximize the strengths and assets of the community where they hope to be replicated.

This appreciation of community context acknowledges the observation of innovator Edwin Land, the inventor of the Polaroid camera, who commented that, “Every innovation has two parts: the first is the invention of the thing itself; the second is the preparation of expectations so that when the invention arrives it seems both surprising and familiar - something long awaited.”⁶

Community innovation is not just a lofty theoretical pursuit reserved solely for experts and academics. In his book *Six Patterns to Spread Your Social Innovation*, Al Etmanski reminds us that “humans’ ingenuity and creativity in the face of adversity is what defines us as a species” and that it is “an aspect of ourselves we can count on, not a specialty reserved for a few. So-called ordinary people are constantly inventing solutions most of us can’t see.”⁷ Our communities, the living labs for our innovation, are never empty vessels waiting to receive our innovation. In every community, ordinary citizens – individuals, neighbours and families – are constantly hard at work striving to make things better. These individuals, referred to by Etmanski as passionate amateurs, “are motivated by necessity and inspired by love. Someone or something they care about is vulnerable, under siege or in trouble and they have no choice but to respond.”⁸

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⁴ Brodhead, 2010, p. 11

⁵ Etmanski, 2015, p. 14

⁶ Westley, Zimmerman, & Quinn Patton, 2007, p. 210

⁷ Etmanski, 2015, p. 25

⁸ Etmanski, 2015, p. 8

Rarely however are “passionate amateurs” successful in advancing community innovation alone. It is only when these individuals join together in a movement and also team up with champions from a diversity of sectors that promising ideas evolve to have the kind of lasting impact that changes systems. The complex nature of our communities’ most intractable issues requires the wisdom and insights from multiple sectors, working together, in order to generate measurable and lasting change.

The work of innovation however is never guaranteed. Sometimes even when a powerful, interdependent group of innovators have come together, promising innovations can fail. When they do, it is most often because they have failed to link their innovation to something that ordinary people care deeply about. Successful innovations are the result of relationships and require ongoing relationships in order to thrive.⁹

Through his deep exploration of successfully scaled Canadian social innovations, Al Etmanski identifies three distinct types of innovators, each with their own skills, strengths and limitations. To achieve lasting systems change and long-term impact, all three of these innovation types are required. The three types of innovators are:

1. **Disruptive Innovators** – These are the individuals who challenge the current way of doing things. Passionate amateurs are the original disruptive innovators. Working alone however, these innovators can be perceived as a “threat to the system” and their ideas are often dismissed with hostility or ridicule.
2. **Bridging Innovators** – These are the individuals who link disruptive innovators to formal organizations and institutions. They are astute at spotting promising ideas and are willing to use their connection, reputation and resources to bring these ideas to life. They provide the disruptive innovator with the needed credibility to be recognized by the system. These individuals often play a critical, intermediary role in translating the ideas of the disruptive innovator in ways that it is more easily understood. They do this by helping people within institutions to understand the benefits and implications of innovations.
3. **Receptive Innovators** – These are innovators, typically within organizations, who have the knowledge and expertise to translate the promising ideas of the disruptive innovator into reality within the existing system. They are often described as “institutional entrepreneurs” who use their “insider knowledge” of the key levers needed to advance a promising innovation within the system. They are instrumental in stewarding innovations within organizations to ensure that they take hold.

Etmanski, 2015, pp. 17-18

⁹ Etmanski, 2015, p. 22

THE IMPORTANCE OF PLACE

Embracing a ‘place-based’ rather than ‘issue-based’ approach enables the work of innovation to unfold within the boundaries of a particular geography and generates results that are context specific to that particular place. Place-based development has been defined as “a holistic approach that utilizes and enhances the natural and human assets of a particular place to strengthen local capacity to adapt.”¹⁰

In *The Soul of Place: Re-imagining Leadership Through Nature, Art and Community*, Michael Jones notes that, “a powerful story of place both inspires and sustains us as we make the sometimes-difficult changes that transform our communities over time.”¹¹ A focus on place also aligns with a growing appreciation that some of the most promising solutions and strategies to many global issues can be found at the local level. A local focus provides a manageable scale where people can often see first-hand the impacts of their actions. In this way, it engages and excites people by demonstrating that change at this level is far-reaching, yet feasible.”¹²

In addition to serving as a source of inspiration for innovation, the unique characteristics of place are a critical factor in determining the best path forward to realize positive change. This is why it is the residents of a community who are the ones best positioned to provide the necessary leadership to any innovation effort. Experts from outside the community can be a source of valuable advice and support, but ultimately, it is those who are in the community who must own and champion any positive change effort if it is to be sustainable.

MAKING COMMUNITY INNOVATION A STRATEGIC PRIORITY

There is growing recognition of the need for and value in developing innovation capacity within the not-for-profit sector and within communities. Research conducted by the Rockefeller Foundation found that, “80% of non-profit leaders aspire to innovate, but only 40% say their organizations are well set up to do so.” At the same time, 50% of non-profit respondents reported that they are experiencing “destabilizing regulatory shocks and policy shifts, at the same time that they are confronting growing competition from other social sector organizations for funding, talent and influence.”¹³ It is these conditions that make a compelling case for investing in the development of innovation capacity.

The promise that innovation offers communities has recently been well articulated by Jean-Yves Duclos, Canada’s Minister of Families, Children and Social Development. He said, “To get better lives, economic development must be coupled with both sustainable development and inclusive development. If innovation is the driver of economic growth, then social innovation is the driver of inclusive development – of a Canada where all citizens are thriving and not just surviving.”¹⁴

But what does it really take to translate an aspiration for innovation into a reality? What infrastructure is needed to ignite the creativity and entrepreneurial spirit with our organizations and communities to develop the radically new approaches we need to solve the complex problems that now confront us?

¹⁰ Markey, 2010, p. 2

¹¹ Jones, 2014, p. 7

¹² The Resilient Neighbourhoods Project, 2013, p. 9

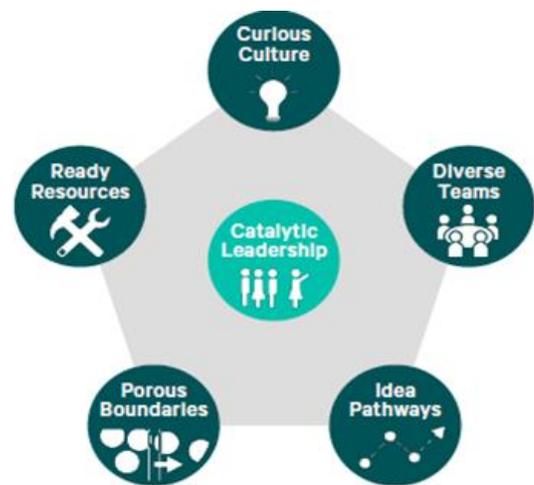
¹³ Lanzerotti, Pike, & and Sahni, 2017, p. 3

¹⁴ Schulman, 2017, p. 3

It is important that communities and organizations wishing to make innovation a priority recognize that “coordinating existing programs and services is different from producing novel solutions” and that “a coordinator is a different kind of human resource from an innovator. Instead of aligning diverse organizational (or community) interests, the innovator re-aligns systems and user interests.” This requires a “user-centred design methodology over and above convening stakeholders.”¹⁵

The Rockefeller Foundation has identified six specific elements that are important to building innovation capacity. These are:

- **Catalytic Leadership** – This leadership exists at all levels of an organization and requires executives, managers, and individual contributors to explore the limits of what might be possible – and of what they themselves are capable of – to take risks, and to tolerate uncertainty. Leaders throughout the organization demonstrate commitment to innovation, articulate a clear vision and set of priorities for it, and give others the inspiration, freedom, and support they need to innovate.
- **Curious Culture** – Creative individuals are necessary but not sufficient for organizations to sustain innovation and the idea of the lone genius innovator is a myth. Innovation capacity is fostered when staff are empowered to act autonomously, and the organization values and supports the questioning of assumptions, experimentation, smart risk-taking, and transparency.
- **Diverse Teams** – Teams are staffed and supported in ways that harness the power of diverse backgrounds, perspectives, and skills.
- **Idea Pathways** – Criteria, processes, and pathways for generating, prototyping, testing, developing, and scaling new ideas and innovation projects are clear, consistently applied, and effective.
- **Porous Boundaries** – Organizations with porous boundaries demonstrate a fluid, efficient and vibrant exchange of ideas and information between the organization and those it serves, other outside voices, and the broader world as well as within the organization itself.
- **Ready Resources** – Staff have access to the resources needed for innovation which include flexible funding, dedicated time, as well as access to innovation tools and techniques.¹⁶



Family & Children’s Services of Waterloo Region provides an excellent example of an organization that has made innovation a priority and embraced a commitment to research, create and prototype innovations in the care of that community’s children, youth and families in collaboration with an array of community partners. This commitment to innovation is articulated as a strategic priority through “the

¹⁵ Schulman, 2017, pp. 20-21

¹⁶ Lanzerotti, Pike, & and Sahni, 2017, p. 6

development of new practices and creative activities that are adaptive and sustainable.” This strategy is achieving demonstrated results. To date, in partnership with a diverse network of community partners, Family & Children’s Services of Waterloo Region has developed, prototyped and secured dedicated resources to support three service innovations with a fourth now in development.¹⁷

ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF A COMMUNITY INNOVATION INFRASTRUCTURE

In the article *Patterns, Principles and Practices in Social Innovation*, Stephen Huddart, President and CEO of the McConnell Family Foundation outlines 12 principles that can guide effective work in the field of innovation. These are:

1. **Work at scale requires long time lines and strategic intent.** With complex problems, balancing focus with adaptability is key to achieving results.
2. **Strategy is phase and scale dependent.** Early-stage innovation involves mapping systems, convening diverse partners, and prototyping and learning from new approaches. In later stages it is common to use influence and alliances to shift mindsets and redirect resources.
3. **“Listen to the system.”** As innovations unfold, “surprises” provide valuable clues as to where to place attention.
4. **Reflect.** When working on innovations, we are often operating outside the norms of conventional practice. Reflection is helpful in documenting decisions taken and linking current strategy to larger purpose.
5. **Trust is essential and is founded on shared commitment to the public good, transparency, and accountability.** This principle is one that oppositional groups must strive to achieve.
6. **Learn to work across sectors. Inter-sectoral collaboration is a rich source of innovation.** Like foreign countries, the community, private and public sectors have language and cultural differences that need to be considered for collaboration to be effective.
7. **Commit to social inclusion.** When we include vulnerable populations, including those for whom we are ostensibly working, solution sets are larger, and the results more enduring.
8. **Set minimum specifications** when working at multiple sites and multiple levels of scale, allowing partners freedom to adapt.
9. **Share information.** Being open and transparent allows unsuspected allies to find us and creates new connections. Working closely with academics links practice to research and accelerates learning and innovation.
10. **Work with diverse professionals.** Complex problems yield surprising information when we bring multiple lenses to bear on them. Artists and designers help us to imagine. Engineers can help with restructuring.

¹⁷ Family and Children's Services of Waterloo Region, 2017, p. 16

11. **Use media effectively** – Effective use of the media helps to set the public agenda, creates a shared sense of identity across different jurisdictions, and aids in the formulation of new mindsets and narratives.
12. **Acknowledge the personal dimension.** We cannot change any problem unless we accept our own role in it. Humanizing one’s adversaries is key to overcoming conflict and brings us closer to collaboration.¹⁸

Beyond principles, other essential elements to consider when developing an¹⁸ infrastructure that encourages and supports innovation include: mindsets, skills, tools, funding and structural elements. As the Rockefeller Foundation notes, “to generate impactful innovation over the long run, organizations (and communities) need to introduce just enough process and structure to provide clear pathways for developing new ideas and ensure that resources are put to the best use.” These pathways include “the channels, criteria, and processes that organizations agree to use to cultivate, assess, and develop new ideas. If well designed and carefully managed, the architecture these pathways provide can enhance the quality, relevance, and eventual impact of an organization’s innovation efforts.”¹⁹

FUNDING INNOVATION

The majority of funding available to support community innovation overwhelmingly emphasizes innovations to existing programs and services over the funding of more radical – and transformational – innovations.

Four significant issues in the funding of innovation efforts are:

1. **Many innovation grants fund too late in the R&D cycle** – Many innovation grant applications emphasize program outputs and expected results and measurement indicators. This approach negates the discovery, learning, and iterative nature of the innovation process. The work of innovation emphasizes problem definition and “testing if possible solutions actually solve problems for users and building systems and processes to respond to real needs.” For this reason, Sarah Schulman suggests that, innovation funding, “must be tied to iteration milestones” such as: the number and quality of shifts in strategy, partnerships and approach.”²⁰
2. **A bias towards service innovation** – Many innovation grants emphasize the paradigm of service innovation over transformational innovation. Innovation grants that focus on named deliverables are less suited for uncertain R&D processes. The short, one-year timeframes of many innovation grants actually “defeat the purpose of R&D and innovation, which are grounded in repeated inquiry, testing and refinement. Realistically, the only way organizations can deliver results within these limited timeframes is when the innovation focus is limited to enhancing or making small changes in existing approaches to service delivery.”²¹
3. **The recipient and the funder are distinct in community innovation** – Within the community sector, the ‘end-user’ and the ‘paying customer’ are most often two distinct groups. This adds to the complexity of innovating in a community context. Where in the private sector the customer and end-user are synonymous, the distinction between user and paying customer in the

¹⁸ Huddart, S. p. 230-231

¹⁹ Lanzerotti, Pike, & and Sahni, 2017, p. 39

²⁰ Schulman, 2017, p. 18

²¹ Schulman, 2017, p. 19

community sector creates a tension which is most obvious in the tension between a focus on mutual learning and prototyping and a focus on accountability and oversight.

4. **Investments are needed in both innovation initiatives and innovation infrastructure** – In order to successfully nurture a robust practice of community innovation, there is a need for funding and investment in both innovative projects AND a community innovation infrastructure. The majority of funding for community change is ear-marked for direct service delivery with little available for “indirect activities like ongoing research, network building, and new product design.”²²

PROMISING STRUCTURES TO FOSTER COMMUNITY INNOVATION

One promising structure to foster innovation within the community sector is the creation of subsidized membership-based collectives of social service providers, academics, designers, and technologists to address external social wellbeing threats. In this scenario the collective would: “invest in relevant data, hire teams capable of the R&D to innovation continuum, and sustain the cultural conditions for experimentation. While these collectives could be geographically based, or formed around a commonly felt challenge” they would share 3 defining features: They would be practitioner steered; boundary spanning; and, multi-level and multi-stage, emphasizing both incremental as well as radical innovations.²³

Another structural mechanism to stimulate innovation that has been proposed in *Develop and Deliver: The Case for Social R&D Infrastructure*, is the establishment of an innovation technical assistance infrastructure to support the necessary shifts in thinking and practice that are the hallmark of innovation. This technical assistance could include access to subject-matter expertise as well as knowledge and experience with an array of innovation methodologies. Grassroots community groups and community non-profits could apply for multi-year support as well as dedicated funding to support their group or organization’s innovation capacity. Organizations who prove their increased capacity could then be eligible to apply for funding to implement their innovation.²⁴

ESTABLISHING POLICY TO SPARK INNOVATION

In *Develop and Deliver: The Case for Social R&D Infrastructure*, a paper developed for Employment and Social Development Canada, author Dr. Sarah Schulman suggests that, “If Canada wants strong social and economic growth, then industry-focused innovation policy must be coupled with social-sector-focused innovation policy. This would be policy oriented towards social infrastructure, not social projects.” Beyond buildings and equipment, Schulman believes that this infrastructure also includes the human resources, data, communication channels, and social networks that underpin deliberative disruption and renewal.²⁵ The elements outlined above highlight some of the essential ingredients needed to move community innovation from the margins and establish it as a core practice in any lasting community change effort. While the list is not exhaustive, as a whole, it confirms that successful innovation isn’t something that happens by chance, but rather is the result of intentionally creating an enabling environment that

²² Schulman, 2017, p. 13

²³ Schulman, 2017, p. 23

²⁴ Schulman, 2017, p. 24

²⁵ Schulman, 2017, p. 22

encourages, and meaningfully invests in, experimentation to discover results that are truly transformational.

MEANINGFULLY ENGAGING BOTH CONTENT AND CONTEXT EXPERTS

The design of promising innovations to vexing community problems begins by shifting the relationship between those experiencing the problem and those who see it as their role to try and fix it. Investing time to build an evidence-informed view of the system that reflects a diversity of perspectives ensures that the issue – and not the proposed intervention – remains at the centre of thinking and action. This kind of cross-sectoral work often requires working across administrative silos and being willing and open to engaging government and unusual partners to reimagine what is needed and how best to do it. In her paper [The Context Experts](#), my colleague Lisa Attygalle, shared that Tamarack was first introduced to the term “context expert” by Brenda Zimmerman at Tamarack’s 2015 Collective Impact Summit and noted that it has now “become staple terminology in the field of community change.”²⁶ Zimmerman used these terms to describe two essential actors in the community change process:

- **Content Experts** – These are the professionals, staff in your organization, service providers, and leaders with formal power who have knowledge, tools, and resources to address the issue; and,
- **Context Experts** – These individuals are the people with lived experience of the situation, including children and youth. They are the people who experientially know about the issue.

Peter Block, author of *Community: The Structure of Belonging*, reminds us that, “Most sustainable improvements in community occur when citizens discover their own power to act...when citizens stop waiting for professionals or elected leadership to do something, and decide they can reclaim what they have delegated to others.”²⁷

Belgium’s Federal Public Service has long made it a key practice to include people living in poverty in the management of policies that concern them. In [Experts by Experience in Poverty and in Social Inclusion](#), the decision of the public sector to involve context experts is seen as an essential element of effective community change because of the unique form of knowledge they hold which is described as “knowledge based on personal experience of situations of poverty and of social exclusion” and which those embracing this approach have found accelerates the collective ability of the group to “identify the problems and needs of people in situations of poverty.” This collaborative approach between content and context experts has also been found to be mutually beneficial, as those with lived experience often leave such sessions with a great understanding and awareness of the logic and limitations of service provides as well.²⁸

²⁶ Attygalle, 2017, p. 3

²⁷ Block, 2008, p. 51

²⁸ Casman, Vranken, Dierckx, Deflandre, & Campaert, 2010, p. 9

The reality is that, with the best of intentions, too often efforts to meaningfully engage both content and context experts can fail to reach their full potential in terms of attracting, maintaining and meaningfully utilizing the knowledge and expertise of those with lived experience in ways that extend beyond tokenism.

Perhaps one of the most promising, and systemic approaches, to authentically engaging the perspective of ordinary citizens is [Exchange Inner City](#), that describes itself as an intermediary between policy makers and the local community. Established in November 2016 with funding from the City of Vancouver, its goal is to establish a formal entity to co-create The Community Economic Development strategy for the Downtown East Side Neighbourhood and provide support in its implementation. Membership in Exchange Inner City includes more than 50+ diverse members including low-income residents, the BIA, aboriginal organizations and a range of neighbourhood-based not-for-profit organizations focusing on health, employment, newcomer settlement and housing. The work of Inner City Exchange is focused in three areas:

- **Making Ends Meet & Working Well** – This focus area includes a community benefit agreements working group and a project focused on facilitating social procurement;
- **Being and Feeling Safe and Included** – This focus area is addressing the neighbourhood’s retail gentrification and promotes social inclusion through a voluntary Resident Card program where neighbourhood businesses offer low-cost services to residents; and,
- **Expressing Ourselves, Lifelong Learning and Cultivating Connections** – This focus area includes an advocacy table that increases the civic leadership and engagement of low-income residents.

The benefit of this formalized structure is that it provides citizens with the capacity-building and support they need to fully participate in civic engagement efforts and also creates a shared identity for its members that mitigates against the tokenism of context experts.²⁹

PROMISING PRACTICES TO UNLEASH COMMUNITY INNOVATION

As individuals eager to engage the promise offered by community innovation, the following four points, offered in *Getting to Maybe: How the World is Changed*, provide a useful orientation that is helpful in embracing the practice of innovation. They are:

1. **Questions are Key** – When working in complexity, there are no final answers however key questions can help to illuminate opportunities for innovation.
2. **Tensions and Ambiguities are Revealed Through Questioning** – The work of innovation both reveals AND creates tensions. The opportunity is to engage these tensions – not simply manage them – in the interests of amplifying the desired change.
3. **Relationships Are Key to Understanding and Engaging with the Complex Dynamics of Innovation** – Successful innovations require everyone – funders, policy-makers, innovators, volunteers and evaluators – involved to play a role. It is the interaction between different parts of the system that generate innovations -- “in the between” of relationships.

²⁹ Exchange Inner City, 2017

4. **A Certain Mindset is Crucial** – The mindset needed for innovation to thrive is one of inquiry rather than certainty. It’s one that’s willing to embrace paradoxes and tolerate the validity of multiple perspectives.”³⁰

There are also a number of promising practices – some old and some new – that have proven to be useful in encouraging diverse groups to think together as well as generate and support the testing and Implementation of promising innovations.

DESIGN THINKING

David Kelley, the President of IDEO and the founder of Human-Centred Design describes it as “a creative approach to problem-solving that starts with people and ends with innovative solutions that are tailored to suit their needs.” It offers a framework for ingenuity that generates new ideas for tackling tough issues.

Central to design thinking is the belief that all problems – even seemingly intractable ones – are solvable and that the people facing the problem are the ones who “hold the key” to finding solutions. Innovative solutions are created when they are rooted in people’s needs and are designed *with* communities. The human-centred design approach successfully generates solutions by: not knowing the answer; staying focused on the people that are being designed for; and, asking the right questions. After generating an array of creative possibilities, the design process zeros in on the possibilities that are most: desirable; feasible; and viable. The process of human-centred design involves a 5 step process which includes:

1. **Empathize** – The first step of the design process is to gain an empathetic understanding of the problem to be solved. Cultivating empathy “allows design thinkers to set aside his or her assumptions in order to gain insights into users and their needs.” This empathy is created by consulting experts, and by observing, engaging and empathizing with people
2. **Define** – In this stage of the human-centred design process, the information gathered through the empathize stage is synthesized to define the core problem to be solved.
3. **Ideate** – This is the stage of the design process when ideas begin to be generated. The objective during this stage is to “think outside the box” to generate new solutions and also explore alternative ways of viewing the problems.
4. **Prototype** – This is the experimental phase where the aim is to identify the best possible solution. During this phase, the design team produces and evaluates prototypes which are either accepted, improved or re-examined.
5. **Test** – During the final stage of the design process, alterations and refinements continue to be made to derive a deep understanding of the product and its users.³¹

While the design process appears to be linear, the five stages outlined above are not always sequential and in reality, the process can actually be quite flexible and often applied in a non-linear fashion and can also occur in parallel.

³⁰ Westley, Zimmerman, & & Quinn Patton, 2007, pp. 21-22

³¹ Dam & and Siang, 2017

CHANGE LABS

Geoff Mulgan, a well-known U.K. social innovator defines change labs as, “The process of experimentation in a safe space, with the goal of generating useful ideas that address social needs and demonstrating their effectiveness.”³² Change labs offer a new methodology that provides a “container” designed to enable participants of a system to see it, and themselves, from multiple angles and also better appreciate the experiences and insights of system users to identify and experiment with new ideas to address complex challenges. There are three types of change labs, and the potential for hybrids. The three types are:

- **Design Labs** – These are labs that seek to address concrete and manageable problems with a strong emphasis on organizing around the experience of citizens and/or clients;
- **Systems Labs** – These are labs that seek to change systems underlying complex issues. They rely on systems analyses, experimentation and deliberate “scaling-up” strategies; and,
- **Social Labs** – These are labs oriented to transformative systems change by helping participants “let go” of their paradigms and patterns and create new relationships with other actors in the system that are critical for collaborative work.

Joeri van den Steenhoven, founding Director of MaRS Solutions Lab in Toronto identifies the need to innovate three elements of a system. “In our view, real change that helps solve complex social challenges can only be achieved when three elements of a system are being innovated. The three elements are:

1. **Present solutions do not work and there is a need to develop new solutions.** To do this we need to experiment through prototyping. We know that one ‘magic bullet’ solution never exists. Rather, the goal of a lab is to develop an adaptive change strategy that tests multiple solutions, which together could solve the challenge.
2. **There is a need to innovate the way the system behaves.** This means changing how the system is being governed, funded and/or incentivized. It is about creating the conditions for new solutions to become accepted and replace the old ways. Building the support system around new solutions to make them sustainable and bring them to scale.
3. **The capacity of the people and organizations involved needs to be built.** Simply saying they need to change will not work. We need to build a movement, starting with the innovators that pioneer new solutions. They are deeply passionate, committed and willing to take risks. We need to also engage the early adopters, who see the need to innovation but require some guidance and a safety net. And beyond that, the early majority, the people who will only innovate when we can show evidence and offer support to help implement it.”³³

³² Cabaj, Mathias, Weinmann, & Leiren, 2014, p. 7

³³ Westley & Laban, Social Innovation Lab Guide, 2014, p. 7

Regardless of the model, to be successful, the design of the lab needs to ensure the following three conditions of success:

- **A Whole System Team** that is diverse, includes clients and citizens; involves individuals deeply interested in improving the issue; and, has the time, authority, energy and skills to participate in the process.
- **A Strong Container** – A convening group with the capability of effectively framing the nature of the challenge; the credibility to convene the right participants; and, the clout to encourage participants to sustain their participation; a specialized physical environment that includes spaces for creativity and that signals a departure from routine; and, a multi-disciplinary support team that coordinates the process and plays a lead role in providing research, facilitation and prototyping support for participants.
- **A Robust Process** – This includes: broad-based qualitative and quantitative research; opportunities for experiential learning; co-creation of solutions across sectors, silos and participants through rapid prototyping; and, an adaptive design that evolves to reflect participant needs and the demands of an emergent process.³⁴

SCALING PROMISING INNOVATIONS

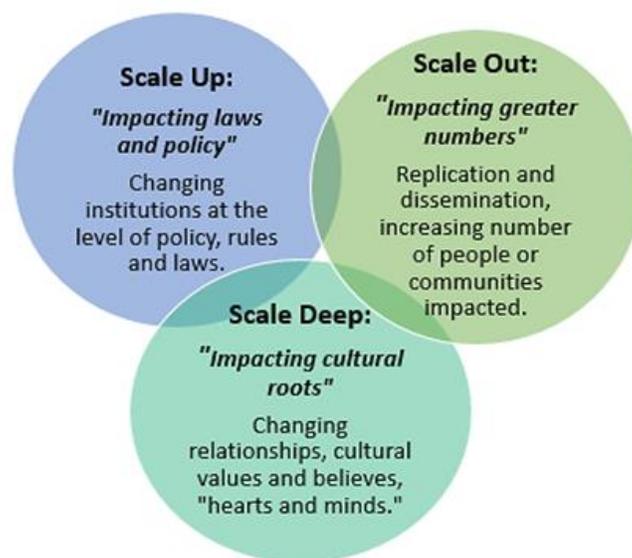
In the field of innovation, having a good idea that demonstrates promising results in addressing a complex social and/or ecological problem is only half of the challenge. The other half of the equation is determining how best to grow or spread the use of this good idea so that it can have greater impact. ‘Scale’ is the term used to describe this second dimension of social innovation work. It is the work that focuses on the best ways to expand and accelerate the use of a promising new solution so that it has greater impact.

The report [*Scaling Up, Scaling Out, Scaling Deep Strategies of Non-Profits in Advancing Systemic Social Innovation*](#) identified six successful strategies for scaling a promising innovation to broader, systemic impact. These strategies cut across three distinct types of scaling: scaling out, scaling up, and scaling deep. The three pathways are defined this way:

1. **Scaling Out** – This pathway emphasizes the replicating of successful initiatives in different jurisdictions in the hope that the initiative’s promising results can be spread to impact a growing number of people or communities. While this pathway can be effective in the short-term, it often fails to “address the deeper systems holding social problems in place

³⁴ Cabaj, Mathias, Weinmann, & Leiren, 2014, p. 9

2. **Scaling Up** – This pathway emphasizes changing the rules, policies and laws of institutions. Its focus is on “changing the rules of the game” to create a more enabling environment that make the old way of doing things more difficult and/or make it easier for new innovative approaches to thrive.
3. **Scaling Deep** – This pathway recognizes that durable, lasting change is only possible when people’s beliefs – their hearts and minds -- have been transformed and the quality of their relationships to one another and the issue are viewed in new ways. The focus of this pathway is on shifting culture.



Beyond the identification of these three pathways, a key lesson learned from practitioners who focused on scaling their social innovation for systems impact emphasized the importance of explicitly acknowledging this shift in focus, as it often required them, and their organizations, to clarify and or reframe their original purpose. This reframing of purpose typically included: 1) clearly articulating their shift in focus to emphasize the scaling their promising idea for greater impact; and, 2) Using systems thinking to examine – and affect – the root causes underling their innovation.

Specific strategies were employed to implement the various scaling pathways, however, which strategies were most effective, and how they unfolded, varied considerably depending on the pathway chosen as well as the unique context, assets and resources available in any particular situation.

Generally four sets of strategies were identified as effective in scaling up promising social innovations. These strategies are:

- **Strategies in the “Scaling Out” Pathway** – Strategies used in this pathway emphasize the dissemination of principles for implanting the innovation while allowing for local adaptation and supporting the early adopters to improve their effectiveness by sharing, and co-generating, their knowledge with one another.
- **Strategies in the “Scaling Deep” Pathway** – Strategies in this pathway include an emphasis on spreading big cultural ideas via the sharing of transformative stories; and an emphasis on learning and reframing; and, the establishment of Communities of Practice to support the translation of new beliefs into practice.
- **Cross-Cutting Strategies** – These strategies were used effectively regardless of the pathway for scaling a social innovation. They include: analyzing root causes, building networks and partnerships; seeking new resources; and, committing to regular evaluation and learning.

The clear identification of these distinct pathways and strategies to effectively grow promising innovations to have greater, system-wide impact provides an extremely valuable roadmap to accelerate the successful dissemination of proven innovations.

CREATING A CULTURE OF INNOVATION

Adam Kahane, a veteran of the design and implementation of processes to advance change in tremendously complex environments, articulates the uncertainty that is inherent in much of the innovator's journey: "If we represent the journey from an existing reality to a new one along a U-shaped innovation path, we cannot stand at the beginning of the process and see the end: it is around the corner. We have to step forward and meet the new reality along the way".³⁵

So, what kind of people are needed to undertake this kind of work? What are the skills and talents do these individuals and groups need to cultivate to increase the likelihood that they will be able to be catalysts of positive change? Those who are called to the work of transformative community change use their leadership to shift resources, foster and leverage constructive relationships and are able to navigate across different scales within the system. They also remain deeply committed to achieving the desired change, while simultaneously creative and adaptive in how that change is achieved.

Renowned researcher and social change expert, Frances Westley has long studied the dynamics of systems change which are at the heart of social and community innovation. Her paper, [*A Theory of Transformative Agency in Linked Social-Ecological Systems*](#) explores the role of change makers (individuals and groups) in influencing the transformation of complex systems. Westley calls these individuals and groups "institutional entrepreneurs" and she has identified nine skills that these change agents draw upon while serving as catalysts in the transformation of complex systems. The nine skills are:

1. **Facilitating Knowledge Building & Utilization** – This skill is best demonstrated by the ability to generate and integrate a diversity of ideas, viewpoints and solutions.
2. **Vision Building** – This skill includes the ability to synthesize a compelling, inspiring vision that unifies individual visions and attracts support
3. **Developing Social Networks** – This skill encompasses the building of multisector coalitions and the capacity to bridge across different actors and stakeholders across and within a variety of organizations and hierarchies
4. **Building Trust, Legitimacy and Social Capital** – This skill emphasizes the ability to recognize the contributions of formal authorities and bridge them with the emerging consensus of a diverse group of stakeholders
5. **Facilitating the Development of Innovations** – This skill emphasizes the ability to foster knowledge-building by bringing together different types of thinking as well as identifying and introducing new processes and products
6. **Mobilizing for Change** – This skill includes linking innovative ideas to existing funding opportunities as well as the ability to leverage both existing and new resources and funding to support promising innovations
7. **Recognizing Windows of Opportunity** – This skill involves the ability to sense, and capitalize on, the dynamics of the system one is operating within. This is demonstrated by the ability to identify and capitalize on emerging opportunities

³⁵ Kahane, 2010, p. 136 & 140

8. **Identifying Opportunities for “Small Wins”** – This skill highlights the ability to envision small, achievable projects that offer the promise of demonstrating the possibilities of systems change and innovation.
9. **Facilitating Conflict Resolution** – Conflict is often a natural and normal by-product when diverse perspectives attempt to work together on a common issue. This skill recognizes the that the ability to effectively surface and resolve tension when it emerges as critical to the long-term effectiveness of any system change effort.³⁶

EMBRACING AN INNOVATION MINDSET

An innovation mindset refers to the “attitudes and resulting behaviors that allow the tools and skills to be effective. The mindset is the fundamental operating system of the creative thinker and distinguishes those leaders who enable creative thinking and innovation from those who shut it down.” A key characteristic of community innovation is that it is often the result of “a hybridization of existing elements that are combined across boundaries in new ways to yield better solutions while also leaving healthier social relationships in their wake.”³⁷

A challenge with the innovation mindset is that it in several key ways it is fundamentally different from more traditional “business” thinking of which most of us are more familiar.

BUSINESS THINKING vs. INNOVATION THINKING	
Logical	Intuitive
Deductive/Inductive reasoning	Abductive reasoning
Requires proof to proceed	Asks what if?
Looks for precedents	Unconstrained by the past
Quick to decide	Holds multiple possibilities
There is right and wrong	There is always a better way
Uncomfortable with ambiguity	Relishes ambiguity
Wants results	Wants meaning

There are 3 essential building blocks that are essential to cultivating an innovation mindset. These are:

1. **Toolset** – The collection of tools and techniques used to generate new options, implement them in the organization, communicate direction, create alignment, and cause commitment.
2. **Skillset** – A framework that allows innovation leaders to use their knowledge and abilities to accomplish their goals. More than tools and techniques, it requires facility, practice, and mastery of processes.

³⁶ Westley F., 2012, p. 18

³⁷ Joseph, 2013

3. **Mindset** – The attitudes and resulting behaviors that allow the tools and skills to be effective. The mindset is the fundamental operating system of the creative thinker and distinguishes those leaders who enable creative thinking and innovation from those who shut it down.³⁸

It is important to be aware however that generating promising innovation is only part of the challenge. Disruptive innovations – those which represent a fundamentally new way of doing things – are rarely successfully implemented because, ironically, such innovations don't fit well into the dominant way things are currently done.

THE COURAGE TO FAIL

Thomas Edison said, "I have not failed, not once. I've discovered ten thousand ways that don't work." Mr. Edison's got the right attitude. When individuals and organizations experience failure, these experiences can often be the source of important learnings that may also lead to new hypotheses. More importantly, the willingness to learn from failure, strengthens one's capacity for innovation overtime.

Sadly, the dominant culture in most schools and organizations celebrates success and at best ignores failure and, at worst, is critical of it. Fortunately, there is a growing grassroots movement that now spans 252 cities in 80 countries which hosts monthly events – called [F**kup Nights](#) – that are monthly events where three or four people get up in front of a crowd to share their stories of professional failure. To date, these events have attracted close to 190,000 attendees and has also led to a new e-book featuring some of these stories and the insights that have come from failure. As one contributor noted, "Fear of failure condemns us to never take a risk and to lock ourselves in our round, calm, and perfect cage of inaction. Treat perfection for what it is: the ideal that encourages you to venture into action. But also take into account that error is a great teacher, and it can hold interesting surprises."³⁹

WHY COMMUNITY INNOVATION IS A CORE IDEA IN COMMUNITY CHANGE

Those of us working in communities recognize the need for greater innovation, and experimentation if we want to accelerate our ability to advance positive change in neighbourhoods, municipalities and regions. Whether the focus of our work is: citizen engagement, belonging, community safety, poverty-reduction, housing, or community economic development, there is a growing recognition that wiser and bolder approaches are needed to effectively meet the complex challenges before us.

Albert Einstein wisely observed that, "We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them." Innovation emphasizes the intentional cultivation of new ways of thinking and learning. The way that we think influences the options that we can see, which in turn determine the choices that we can make. The practice of community innovation requires us to learn how to think differently – together. It is about experimenting and learning as well as prototyping promising new approaches to determine which ones should be taken to a scale in order to generate lasting positive change within our systems and communities.

The practice of community innovation requires us to learn how to think differently – together.

³⁸ Magellan Horth & Vehear, 2014, p. 10

³⁹ Almada, Eaton, Flores, & al., 2015, p. 46

The catalyst for innovation is often a frustration or dissatisfaction with the status quo, a belief that the way things have always been is not good enough and that new possibilities are waiting to be discovered. As living systems, our communities are continually evolving and changing. The promise of community innovation is the belief that we do not need to remain a powerless recipient of the whims of change, but rather that, together, we are capable of shaping and guiding the changes unfolding around us in ways that help to orchestrate a better future for all.

ABOUT SYLVIA CHEUY

Sylvia is a Consulting Director of the Tamarack Institute's Collective Impact Idea Area and also supports Tamarack's Community Engagement Idea Area. She is passionate about community change and what becomes possible when residents and various sector leaders share an aspirational vision for their future. Sylvia believes that when the assets of residents and community are recognized and connected they become powerful drivers of community change. Sylvia is an internationally recognized community-builder and trainer. Over the past five years, much of Sylvia's work has focused on building awareness and capacity in the areas of Collective Impact and Community Engagement throughout North America.



Prior to joining Tamarack, Sylvia was the founding Executive Director to [Headwaters Communities in Action](#) (HCIA), a grassroots citizen initiative that fosters collaborative leadership and action in support of a long-term vision of well-being for Ontario's Headwaters region. This experience gives Sylvia practical knowledge and first-hand experience of what it takes to engage and mobilize positive community change. Her work with HCIA was published as a chapter entitled, *A Citizen-Led Approach to Enhancing Community Well-Being* in the newly published *Handbook of Community Well-Being Research*.

Sylvia completed her Masters Diploma in Social Innovation at the University of Waterloo in 2013 where she explored opportunities to create change within regional food systems. An active volunteer in her community, Sylvia serves as a member of HCIA's Leadership Council. She also served for nine years on the Board of Community Living Dufferin where she was instrumental in securing \$2.8 million in funding for CLD's shared home with Theatre Orangeville, the community's professional theatre company. Sylvia lives in Caledon, Ontario with her husband John Graham and their three children: Gabriella, Garrett and Sean.

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