



# ARTICLE | THE POWER OF PROTOTYPING

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To create change we need not have all the answers up front. Instead, the act of creating prototypes and testing them in real-world conditions can help us learn the answers we need along the way, as illustrated by how Grameen bank grew from nothing to an organization that today serves nearly 9 million borrowers.

## WHAT IS A PROTOTYPE?

According to the Interaction Design Foundation, a prototype is, “a simple experimental model of a proposed solution used to test or validate ideas, design assumptions and other aspects of its conceptualisation quickly and cheaply, so that the designer/s involved can make appropriate refinements or possible changes in direction.” [from Dam and Siang]

For community changemakers, a more useful definition might be that **a prototype is an idea made real with the intent to learn and improve**. A sketch can be a prototype, as can a fully-functioning community service. There are limitless ways to prototype an idea – what matters is that prototyping helps us to move our ideas forward without trying to get everything right the first time.

Unfortunately, prototyping is not a standard practice in the social and community sector. We spend most of our lives unlearning the process of prototyping. In both academic and professional contexts, it is the final deliverable (the exam, the essay, the project) that counts. We spend all of our effort making sure that things are ‘perfect’ before they are released into the real world because we fear the judgement that comes from imperfection. The process of prototyping challenges that notion. **You don’t need to have all the answers when prototyping**, because the purpose is not to get it ‘right’, but to try something and learn from it. This process acknowledges that we can never develop a complete solution to a social problem through analysis alone – we need to try things, create things, and learn from how our community reacts. The act of consciously prototyping can help us much more quickly scale an idea to impact as seen in the story of Grameen Bank.

## PROTOTYPING POVERTY REDUCTION WITH GRAMEEN

At the end of 2017, the international microcredit organization Grameen Bank had 8.93 million

borrowers and provided services in 81,400 villages (over 97 percent of the total villages in Bangladesh). Since its inception, Grameen has disbursed \$24 billion in collateral-free loans, and its success has demonstrated that microfinance is a promising model for poverty alleviation for the world's poor. [from Grameen]

But Muhammad Yunus didn't begin with nearly such a lofty goal. As he describes in his book *Banker to the Poor*, as the head of the Economics Department at Chittagong University in the middle of a famine he was frustrated by his inability to help the region's poor. This frustration prompted him to spend time with villagers; to hear their aspirations and understand – from their perspectives – what was holding them back from prosperity. In these initial conversations, he was shocked to find the families he spoke to were trapped in a cycle of high-interest debt to traders and moneylenders. So, Yunus started what would eventually become Grameen Bank with a personal loan of \$27 to 42 families, borne not of careful analysis and calculation but by an overriding frustration that so much misery was caused by a lack of so little.

This simple act was a prototype. In giving these loans, Yunus took an idea (that loaning a small amount of money would help break the cycle of poverty) and took action on it. As Grameen grew it would build many more prototypes to refine and expand the model, treating both successes and setbacks as opportunities for learning. The process of finding a bank loan so that he could offer finance to more families was a prototype, as was Grameen's efforts to find ways to support women whose husbands did not want them to get loans. As the idea grew, new and unanticipated problems emerged, and as prototypes and tests addressed these problems a model for microfinance was developed and refined. The story of Grameen is not just a story of microfinance, it is also a story of how taking action, learning from the result, and then taking action again can help take a simple idea to international scale and impact.

## OVERCOMING BARRIERS TO PROTOTYPING

Many things hold us back from prototyping. The systems we work within often reward following established practices and rules rather than trying something new. We worry about making situation worse or harming someone through the unintended consequences of a prototype. We worry about our careers and jobs, because trying something new often threatens established norms.

One way to circumvent the barrier of risk is to create safe places for experimentation. In the beginning, Yunus worked with willing villagers and represented only himself – he didn't pose a risk to any broader organization or system. For very early ideas, this informal form of prototyping is often safest, and the lessons learned here both guide and provide evidence for a slightly larger scale of prototype (in Yunus' case, providing loans to a larger group of people).

But, what do you do if you don't have the resources you need for the change you hope to enact? Imagine if Yunus had started by trying to prototype what Grameen eventually became – a national microlending organization that impacted millions. The resources needed for a

prototype on this scale are astounding and finding a group of supporters willing to move this idea forward would be a monumental task indeed. Instead, Yunus started with an extremely small prototype that was totally within his reach. As he began to see success, he used those successes to build support for larger and larger prototypes. Similarly, those who are interested in prototyping change should find ways to start that are within their means. Starting from these places not only helps refine your ideas, it gives you momentum to build from. **What is the essence of your idea, and how can you build it with the resources and assets that you have at your disposal?** Starting with this question allows us to focus on possibilities to move forward, rather than constraints which can stop us from ever moving idea to action.

## WHY YOU SHOULD PROTOTYPE, TOO

There are good reasons to find ways to create prototypes as often as possible, whether they are as simple as a sketch or as complex as a fully-functioning service. First, prototyping can help break a conceptual block known as ‘analysis paralysis.’ When creating something new, the number of uncertainties and unknowns can paralyze changemakers from ever taking action. How do you know which features or decisions are most important? The essence of prototyping is that you won’t know until you build something. Forcing yourself to make an idea real, a process which involves making all sorts of imperfect decisions, can help you work through this paralysis.

Second, a good prototype can help you learn more about what works and what doesn’t when you allow real people an opportunity to use your prototype. Online advertisers experiment with all sorts of different approaches to see which ones create the most interest. Organizations like Google are constantly developing and testing new tools and features and putting them in our hands to play with. What is holding you back from trying new things in your communities to see what works?

Prototyping is possible for everyone. While we absolutely need more infrastructure to support Social R&D, we also need passionate people to take action. If there is a challenge you’ve been fixated on in your community, or a change that you would like to see, ask yourself: **what can I do with my assets to build and test the essence of that change?**

## GOING DEEPER

We will continue to explore the different types of prototyping for social change, and how changemakers are using these approaches to build and scale new ideas. In the meantime, the following two books give great examples of frameworks for prototyping and scaling ideas:

- [Sprint](#) by Jake Knapp describes Google Ventures’ approach to testing ideas under tight constraints. What could you do if you only had 5 days to build and test an idea?
- [The Lean Startup](#) by Eric Ries is focused on a framework for entrepreneurs to build and test ideas and has many lessons that social entrepreneurs can also draw upon.

## ABOUT GALEN MACLUSKY

Galen is a Consulting Director of the Tamarack Institute's Community Innovation Idea Area. He is passionate about working with community organizations to help build and scale new ideas that deepen their impact. An experienced design, innovation, and co-creation consultant, at the core of his work are approaches that help organizations engage with those who are impacted by their services and test new programs and services with minimal investment.



## REFERENCES

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