ARTICLE | LIFTING THE BLINDERS ON INNOVATION

GALEN MACLUSKY

Taking the time to explore why we want to innovate helps us expose potential pitfalls that we might otherwise miss along the way. Innovation isn't inherently good, and challenging whether what we are doing is good or not is what helps us steer our efforts in the right direction.

WHAT DRIVES US CAN ALSO BLIND US

In a blog post earlier this year, I challenged all of us involved in Community Innovation to explore the underlying reasons why we decide to invest time, resources, and energy in the process of innovation. Our central motivations help galvanize our communities, determine what outcomes we look for, and provide guiderails for the work to be done. In addition, they are also accompanied by particular risks – blind spots that if left unchecked can derail the impact that we intend to have. In working with communities and organizations across Canada, I've observed three central reasons that drive many of us to innovate, as well as some of the specific risks that come hand-in-hand with them. Checking blind-spots isn't a one-time proposition. It should be a regular practice as part of any innovation effort. While this type of reflection will be unique to each innovation effort, there are some common questions that can help uncover where a focus on innovation may take you away from your goals.

THREE COMMON DRIVERS FOR INNOVATION:

A PERSISTANT SOCIAL ISSUE
- Risk 1.1: We don't actually understand what matters to those who are affected
- Risk 1.2: We focus on an inappropriate scale of innovation

STAYING COMPETITIVE OR SUSTAINABLE
- Risk 2.1: We lose sight of the impact we hope to achieve
- Risk 2.2: We lose sight of our assets

"BECAUSE WE NEED TO"
- Risk 3.1: We spin our wheels without ever moving forward
- Risk 3.2: We break what didn't need fixing

1.

COMMUNITY INNOVATION DRIVER #1:
A PERSISTENT SOCIAL ISSUE

Homelessness, poverty, inequity, racism, climate change, social isolation, and many more are still pressing issues in our communities. A persistent social issue is one of the most common and compelling reasons to innovate - refusing to accept the status quo is a main reason that many of us do the work that we do. We simply believe that tomorrow can be better than today. But, even though the intentions of this work are clear and compelling, this type of driver can lead us to unhelpful outcomes.

Risk 1.1: We don't actually understand what matters to those who are affected

Questions to Consider
- *Who else believes that the social issue as I have defined it is a problem?*
- *What do the people who are most impacted by this social issue think? How do I know this to be true?*
- *To what extent are context experts a part of the innovation effort and infrastructure?*

This blind spot is easy to spot everywhere *except in our own work*. In his book *The Anti-Politics Machine,* James Ferguson takes an extensive look at how The World Bank, CIDA, and FAO crucially misunderstood the experiences and needs of the people of the Thaba-Tseka district in Lesotho, and invested in a development infrastructure that failed to bring the desired change to the region while strengthening the position of those already in power. This happens in all scales of work towards social benefit. It happens when we impose our beliefs upon others; it happens when we believe that we understand what is needed more than context experts do; it happens when we forget to ask what people want, or when we ignore them when they speak up. This blind spot always exists wherever privilege does, but we can strive to mitigate it.

The argument here is not that we shouldn't strive to help others in our communities, but rather that we should strive to support those most affected in driving the change that they want to see. If we miss seeing this blind spot, we risk imposing an unwanted change on others or forever wondering why our initiative never took hold in our community.

Risk 1.2: We focus on an inappropriate scale of innovation

Questions to Consider
- *What scope of change do we hope to make? What people, places, and outcomes will we focus on?*
- *What would success look like next year? In five years?*
- *What capabilities and collaborators will we need to achieve our goals? To what extent are those already in place?*

TAMARACK INSTITUTE

Our social challenges are often systemic and deeply complex, and addressing them takes scale, effort, and patience. A common pitfall when working to address a compelling and persistent social issue is mismatching our capabilities with the scale of change that we hope to effect. As I've described in previous articles, many of the components of our social infrastructure that we take for granted today began as small grassroots innovations without grand aspirations. Efforts towards small changes by small groups are more easily managed and can provide a springboard into larger-scale efforts, and this fact can often get lost in our desire for wider, grander change. However, models like Collective Impact do provide a potential avenue to more directly affect systemic change, but the resources, time, and people required are exponentially greater. Taking the time to consider the scope of innovation can help you set up realistic objectives and gather the resources that you need.

2. COMMUNITY INNOVATION DRIVER #2: STAYING COMPETITIVE OR SUSTAINABLE

Perhaps the funding landscape is shifting under your feet, or maybe you're seeing disruption within the community that you serve? Is there a risk that the work you do will no longer be relevant in the future? This driver is commonly associated with the private sector, but many public and voluntary sector groups also feel the same pressure – the pressure to lead, to stay current, or to change simply to stay afloat. While this driver is also a compelling one, its blind spots emerge because the focus is less on a social problem and more on survival.

Risk 2.1: We lose sight of the impact we hope to achieve

Questions to Consider
- *How will innovating in this area help us deliver greater impact?*
- *What are the potential negative consequences that we should avoid?*

Most of us need to balance our attention between sustainability and impact. We need resources, people, time, and energy to achieve the goals that we hope for, and innovation driven in this way is often focused on how we get more of those things. But if the only things we measure are the extent to which we can garner funding or attention, we may find that innovating in this way takes us away from the goals we hoped to have. Staying true to the course and making sure that impact is also part of the innovation equation is a key challenge when our efforts are focused on staying sustainable.

Risk 2.2: We lose sight of our assets

Questions to Consider
- *What are our unique strengths and opportunities for impact?*
- *What are others doing that we shouldn't replicate, and why?*

- *Where should we lead, and how will that help us achieve our goals?*

Because this driver of innovation is highly outward-facing there's a tendency to focus our efforts on doing what others already are – on imitation rather than innovation. Focusing on new trends, methods, and tools can cause us to feel as though we're making forward progress, while straying away from the unique assets and abilities that we could be leveraging for our context. Focusing on keeping up with everyone else puts us in the position of being a follower, rather than a leader. Instead, we can intentionally seek ways to adapt to a changing landscape while preserving those things that make us innovative.

3. COMMUNITY INNOVATION DRIVER #3: "BECAUSE WE NEED TO"

'Innovation is good' is a dominant theme in our society today, so it is often an unchallenged assumption that innovation is needed for every space and place. It's not uncommon that organizations or communities have mandates for innovation without a clear sense of the change that is desired or how we will determine whether the change is beneficial or undesirable. The main risk of this type of undirected or scattershot approach to innovation is that we focus only on novelty: on experimentation and stories of innovation rather than the actual impacts that result.

This driver is particularly challenging for the people involved. If this is the dominant theme in your community or organization it can feel that there's an overwhelming amount of effort being spent without a clear goal, leading to burnout, infighting, and ultimately eroding our belief that better is possible.

Risk 3.1: We spin our wheels without ever moving forward

Questions to Consider
- *What are our goals, beyond novelty?*
- *Where should we be focusing our effort for the greatest impact?*
- *What kind of change and what kind of good do we want to see?*

Being able to have an uncomfortable conversation about the need for innovation, and what innovation in this context really means is a critical early step to help inspire and align a community effort. Because innovation itself can mean many different things while at the same time feeling almost universally desirable, it can be a challenge to voice that we're not sure what is meant when someone else says that we need to innovate, particularly if positions of power are involved.

Risk 3.2: We break what didn't need fixing

Questions to Consider
- *What isn't working and how do we know?*
- *What is working that we shouldn't disrupt?*

The other major risk with not questioning the need for innovation is that everything becomes fair game for disruption, even the systems and programs that were helping us achieve our goals. Without clear metrics for success it's hard to determine what is already being successful, what shouldn't be interfered with, or what should simply be amplified rather than redesigned. Focusing solely on novelty makes us blind to the potential for simply doing more of the things that are already working, doing less of those that aren't, so simply staying the course. Missing those opportunities and building something new that works less well would certainly be a waste of our time and resources.

WHAT DRIVES YOU?

Taking the time to reflect on what drives us to innovate can not only help us align our efforts, it can also help expose pitfalls and blind spots that we might otherwise miss. This practice of conscious reflection is critical to Community Innovation and the work of anyone who is working to introduce new practices for positive impact. With that in mind, to what end will you innovate?

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

Ferguson, James. The Anti-politics Machine "development", Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 2014. Print.

TAMARACK
INSTITUTE