

Boston College Center for Social Innovation

A Brief Overview of the Social Innovation Process

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Social Innovation Model

Innovation is a concept that has mainly been used in technology and the for-profit market. This concept has brought about many of the greatest inventions of all time—the automobile, airplanes, the computer, the wide array of Apple products, social media platforms, and the list goes on and on. More recently, social service agencies and social entrepreneurs began developing innovative ideas for social problems that once seemed impossible to solve. Social innovation is considered the solution to solving “wicked” problems (problems that are long-standing and require experienced strategists to tame) ¹. The solutions that result from socially innovative ideas are more creative and efficient than current solutions. For example, a group of students from Harvard developed Soccket ², a soccer ball that can power an LED lamp for three hours with just 30 minutes of play; Lifelens ³ was developed to detect malaria in children using a smartphone; and William Kamkwamba ⁴ developed wind power in his village in Malawi by reading books in the library and using scraps he found at the junkyard. Socially innovative ideas do not always have to include products and they do not have to be the most creative ideas in the field—they just need to address an issue in a way that is different than the norm for an organization. The characteristics for social innovation include thoughts (having a new vision, mission, or values), actions (new services, policies, or products), and structure (new ventures, organizations, work processes, approaches to resources, and new use of technology).

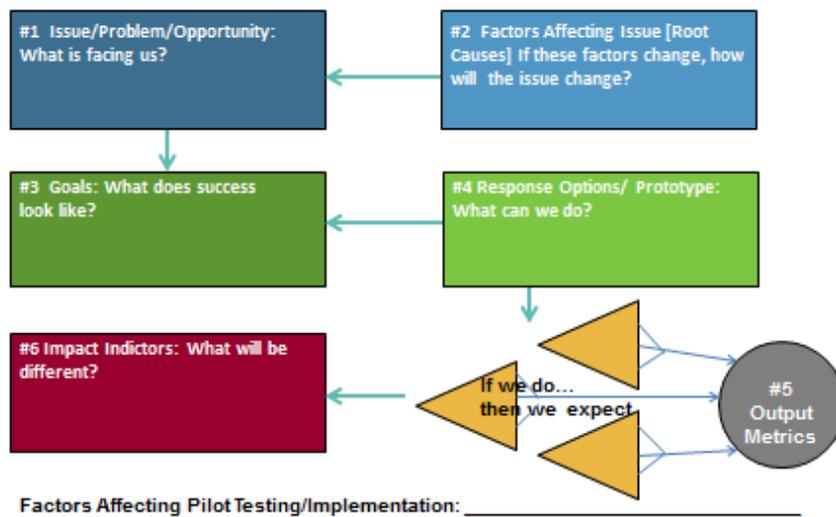


Characteristics for social innovation⁵

Through ideas like these and countless others, Boston College developed the BC Center for Social Innovation. The BC Center for Social Innovation adapted a process of design thinking developed by innovation firms like IDEO. Tim Brown, the CEO of IDEO, wrote *Change by Design* ⁶, which was used by the center to develop a step-by-step process helping other organizations develop innovative ideas. The activities are anchored in a process called rapid prototyping.

The process focuses on a problem or opportunity that is important to an agency. Agencies willing to participate in this process should have a strong team and a willingness to evaluate the current state of the organization and accept change. This process is not easy and many organizations are not prepared for it. The Team should include members from all stakeholder groups affected by the organization—board members, employees, community members, clients and customers, and field experts. This creates diversity and generates ideas from a myriad of experiences and knowledge. The team is considered a *virtuoso team* ⁷, which is comprised of elite experts in their particular fields, specifically convened for ambitious projects. The team is the backbone of the process and will be fundamental in creating and implementing the innovation.

The Lab Summary



Innovation Network, Inc. (n.d.). The logic model workbook. Innovation Network, Inc. Retrieved from http://www.innonet.org/client_docs/File/logic_model_workbook.pdf

move the organization closer to their goal. They will evaluate the prototype and determine measurements to gauge change. The lab summary is revisited and updated at the end of each session.

The BC Center for Social Innovation developed five basic stages to the social innovation process: Champion Orientation, Team Orientation, Rapid Prototyping, Transitioning to Pilot Testing, and Debriefing. The team orientation has two sessions and rapid prototyping has three. Each step sets the stage for the next and prepares the team for piloting their new prototype.

The social innovation process follows a format introduced by Innovation Network, Inc.⁸ known as the Lab Summary. The Lab Summary is used to keep the team on track and show the progression of the lab throughout each phase of the process. The summary begins with identifying the problem or opportunity, identifying the root causes, and establishing goals for successfully addressing the issue. The team then develops a prototype that will