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# Supporting innovation in peer networks

## Disclaimer

This briefing is a summary of various resources. You should not take the information provided here as a given: the concepts and theories we found useful may or may not apply to your network. We also acknowledge that similar theories and concepts appear in systems change, community organising and social change literature.

**If you find yourself disagreeing with or questioning some of the points in this briefing, please make a note of it, as there will be an opportunity to discuss during our online session.**

## How to use this resource

Reading this document front-to-back may be a bit of an information overload. It might be easier to dip in and out of it according to your interests and current network issues. If you would rather read the whole thing one go - that's also great!

This resource aims to:

- Provide background for the next session on 11th October
- Support you in learning about supporting innovation in peer networks

Below is a table of contents that will help you navigate this briefing. Each section gives an overview of the topic and then poses some questions that you may want to think about in relation to your own network.

**We hope you find this useful, happy reading!**

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# 1 Introducing innovation

## 1.1 What do we mean by innovation?

Innovation is best thought of as a **process** rather than an event. It starts with an idea, which is recognised and developed into a more systemic change – new services, technologies, activities, products or ways of doing things.

*Innovation is about responding to change in a creative way; generating new ideas, conducting R&D, improving processes or revamping products and services. It's also a mindset in your business.*  
Business Development Company

*The process of translating an idea or invention into a good or service that creates value or for which customers will pay.*  
Business Dictionary

A spectrum of definitions

*Technically, "innovation" is defined merely as "introducing something new;" there are no qualifiers of how groundbreaking or world-shattering that something needs to be only that it needs to be better than what was there before.*  
Business Week

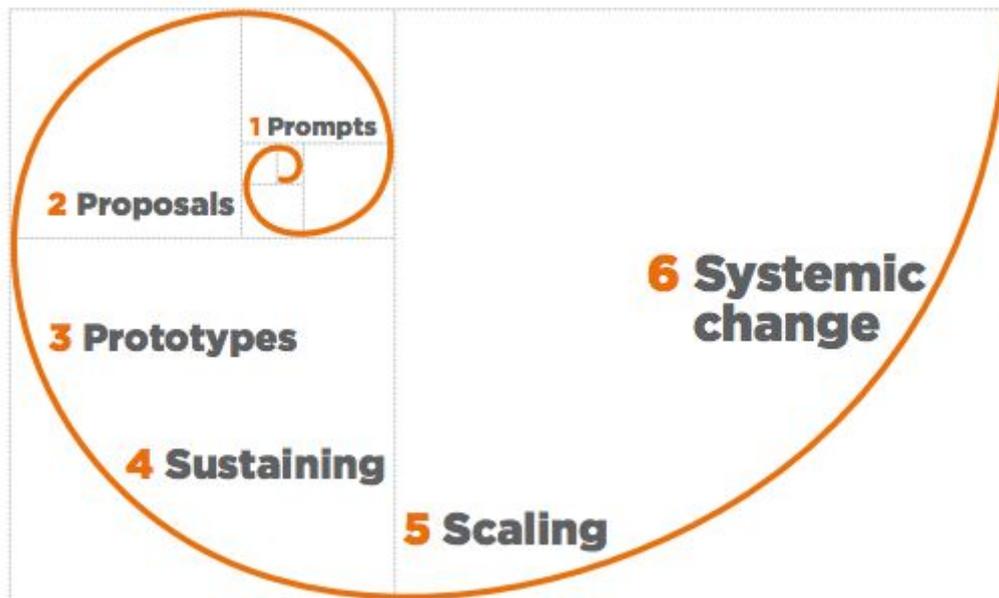
*Innovation: a creation (a new device or process) resulting from study and experimentation; introducing something new.*  
Wordnet

Innovation is about creativity and problem solving: finding new and useful ways to do things. It can help us do what we are already doing more effectively or help us solve important social issues that aren't being solved by the existing approach.

**Q1:** How do you think innovation is relevant to your network?

## 1.2 The six stages of innovation

There are number of common stages in the process of innovation.



- **Prompts or inspiration:** these may include crisis, public spending cuts, poor performance, creative imagination, funding or new evidence
- **Proposals or ideas:** this is the stage of ideas generation
- **Prototypes or experiments:** where an idea gets tested in practice
- **Sustaining:** an idea gets honed and improved so it can be used in day to day practice
- **Scaling:** when an idea moves from local application to wider implementation
- **Systemic change:** where an idea moves into mainstream implementation and acceptance and results in widespread change

## 1.3 Supporting innovation

*“Too many executives focus on ideas, but to generate powerful and effective solutions, they ought to instead focus on behaviors and culture—fostering teams that ask questions, experiment, refine, and collaborate.”*

From David Aycan, Managing Director, IDEO products

A process for innovation provides structure, and structure can help to foster creativity as well as helping to capture and spread new ideas.

Following a process for innovation can also help us become aware of the steps that we do well and which steps we're not so good at. This gives us the information we need to react, remove the obstacles, and change the culture to enable network members to collaborate to develop and implement ideas - and sometimes to fail. It can also focus our efforts to avoid a scatter-gun approach to idea generation and give us a clear method for evaluation.

In this way, we can avoid bad investments of time and resources and head off unproductive debates about quick fixes that might seem superficially attractive but won't create lasting change.

A process allows us to identify and hone ideas that have impact, are sustainable and have potential for scaling and creating systemic change.

## 2 Supporting innovation in networks

*“If I have been able to see farther, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants”*

Isaac Newton

The process of innovation is often a collaborative one as people recognise, support and build on the work of others. It very rarely works without a strong network of people to feed into the process, and develop ideas out of each point of the spiral.

In this section we'll look at how the different stages of innovation can be activated or engaged.

To find out more, check out [The Open Book on Social Innovation](#) from the Young Foundation and [Nesta's paper on how to better innovate](#).

## 2.1 Supporting the different stages of innovation

### (i) Prompts or inspiration

This is the stage of identifying the *challenge* or issue you wish to address.

It can be useful to establish the purpose of the innovation process and may include:

- **Framing the question:** A well-framed problem or challenge, in particular one that doesn't prescribe a certain outcome.
- **Triggers and inspirations:** A crisis, imposed efficiency savings, new evidence, or new technologies, can provide a starting point and some building blocks to work with.
- **Recognising problems:** Data from research, feedback or the media can help to identify and frame a problem.
- **Moving from symptom to cause** Diagnosing the problem and framing the question in such a way that the root causes of the problem, not just its symptoms, will be tackled.

The identification of a prompt or inspiration may come from a member of the network or from the hub or backbone organisation.

It may be a specific formal or informal 'horizon scanning' role within a network to take this forward look, or it may happen collectively in online or face to face forums.

### (ii) Proposals or ideas

This is the stage of idea generation. These may include examples of things people are already doing that could be applied differently, or entirely new ideas and approaches.

Insights occur when we see how we could do things differently, for example we might:

- See previously hidden assumptions we've made and learn from errors
- Find new ways to organise our work
- Become aware of connections we didn't see before among elements in the system
- Identify leverage points
- Combine two elements of something we've done before

There is a wide range of methods for collective idea generation, such as brainstorming, [brainstorming](#), and building an [empathy map](#).

However many innovations, especially in peer to peer learning, happen organically, for instance when different people or organisations involved in tackling similar issues compare their approaches and generate new ideas or knowledge as a result of that interaction.

Again, working collectively, either face to face or online, can help to identify and share ideas, and who might be interested in testing or applying them.

## Q2: How do issues and new ideas get identified in your network?

### (iii) Prototypes or experiments

This is where ideas get tested in practice. Testing can provide useful information about what works in the real world - and what doesn't! It is therefore important to having mechanisms in place to:

- observe
- get feedback and
- evaluate.

A network of peers can provide opportunities to try a range of different ideas - or the same idea in range of circumstances - and compare the results.

Some organisations or individuals are more confident about trying new approaches than others, so testing an idea within a network can enable only those who are comfortable or able to try a new approach to get involved at this stage. Others will be more comfortable to pick it up later when it is more proven.

Testing a new approach can bring risks and costs. It may be the role of the coordinator, hub or backbone organisation, or another network member, to help reduce the risks by applying for grant funding to test the ideas, or by undertaking the role of gathering and analysing evidence or the impact of the innovation. Testing an innovation across several network members also allows peer learning between those testing it out which can help tweak ideas and identify and iron out issues.

Check out this ['prototyping framework'](#) from Nesta for examples and ideas.

### (iv) Sustaining

This is where the prototyped idea is honed and improved so that it becomes ready to be used in everyday practice. It is also where income streams are identified so that the idea is carried forward. This can be particularly important if a grant has supported the initial testing of the idea.

By testing across a network different approach to sustainability may emerge depending on the size, scale and circumstances of different network members.

## Q3: How do new ideas get tested and evaluated in your network?

## **(v) Scale**

When an innovation spreads from a local application to become widely implemented.

This may happen through:

- **Scaling out** to spread to other organisations or communities
- **Scaling up** when an organisation takes advantage of the innovation to move into new areas or markets or - more often in the social sector - the innovation moves to another level, where for instance, new support structures are created to support it

Scaling out can happen through simple diffusion - the idea is shared with and picked up by others who implement it themselves with little assistance. Alternatively its spread may be supported by the introduction of training or site visits, or the production of resources, guides and toolkits.

You can read more about scaling innovation in [this thought guide](#) produced by Shared Assets.

Within a network the scaling may be led by the innovators themselves, or by others who have a particular role of codifying, sharing and spreading good practice.

Issues may arise over who 'owns' an idea or, if there is value created from

The extent to which members of the network are competitive or collaborative with regard to the spread of innovations they have been involved in developing may depend on the needs of the organisation, the culture of the organisation, the extent to which the idea is aligned with the identity or purpose of the network, or how the idea was generated.

## **(vi) Systemic change**

Systemic change may occur when an innovation is widely adopted. It may become 'the way we do things' in your network, or it may be adopted much more widely by mainstream providers, or result in changes to policy or public attitudes.

Within your network there may be members whose role it is to advocate for change and who can use the evidence and example of the innovation to make the case for changes to funding, commissioning, policy or practice.

**Q4** In your network, do you have a process for innovation?

**Q5** If not, which bits of the process do you currently engage in and how?

## 2.2 Fostering a culture of innovation

*“If failure is not an option, then neither is success”*

From Seth Godin, The Network Weaver Handbook

From hack days, to challenge prizes there is a wide range of techniques you can implement in your network to foster innovation. However, underpinning it all is a collection of behaviours that can help create the environment for innovative thinking and processes to take root.

Below are some notes on the key ingredients to help innovation happen in your network.

Create a playful culture :

- **Squint** at a new idea to see if there’s potential in it and focus on how it could be progressed, rather than pointing out the seven reasons why it won’t work.
- **Experiment** and prototype ideas to get quick realisations about what works and what doesn’t when ideas are still young
- **Include the community** and people who aren’t experts to get feedback that’s easier to take, questions you wouldn’t have thought of, and an outsider’s perspective
- **Embrace failure** by focusing on the learning of why it didn’t work so you can improve the next idea
- **Create diverse teams** to bring together with different disciplines and strengths

A network coordinator or organiser can enable innovation by identifying and supporting three types of people in the network or organisation:

People who are always on the lookout for new ideas. Champion this activity by giving them time and a platform to spread ideas and roll out the learnings.

People who are coming up with new ideas. Make sure they’ve got collaborators, resources and expertise. Create a network of support for them.

People who have power and influence. Connect them to the seekers and innovators

It’s also useful to document what assets you have that enable innovation (people, services, programs and policies), that way people will know what’s available to support them.

You can read more about the roles that a leader can play to support innovation [here](#).

## 2.3 How to kill creativity and stifle innovation

Here are some of the tips we've gathered from [Harvard Business Review](#) on what to watch out for that may be getting in the way of innovation or any part of the process in your network.

- **Standardising processes:** There is often a trade off between standardising operations and innovating. It's a delicate balance to strike between ways of working which lend themselves to creativity and management practices that promote quality and scale.
- **Overstretching or mismatching people to the task:** One of the most common ways to kill creativity is by not making the right connections between people and tasks. Instead, something of a shotgun wedding occurs with the most available people being involved. Often, the results are predictably unsatisfactory for all involved.
- **Homogenous teams:** If everyone is alike, then everyone comes to the table with a similar mind-set and leave with the same. New or radical approaches don't appear.

*"Innovation is fostered by information gathered from new connections; from insights gained by journeys into other disciplines or places; from active, collegial networks and fluid, open boundaries. Innovation arises from ongoing circles of exchange, where information is not just accumulated or stored, but created. Knowledge is generated anew from connections that weren't there before"*

From Margaret J. Wheatley, [Helix Innovation](#)

- **Poorly defined goals or moving targets:** It is difficult, if not impossible, to work creatively toward a target if it keeps moving. Within that framework however people need freedom in how they approach the task.
- **Shooting down ideas immediately:** People will not bring new ideas if they think they will be immediately pulled apart. Alternatively they bring an idea at a later stage when are more confident in it but may be less open to tweaking and changing it.
- **Negative treatment of failure:** Knowing what doesn't work can be as useful as knowing what does.
- **Politicking:** Network politics can create distrust which erodes the supportive environment needed to evolve an idea to become a successful innovation.

**Q6: Have you come across these issues? How have you overcome them?**

## 3 Conclusion

Innovation is not just the action of coming up with new ideas. It can also be thought of as a process that can be consciously harnessed and supported to ensure that the innovation happening within your networks is relevant, recognised, evaluated, and sustainable, and that it is supported to scale and spread. It can also be harnessed to deliver wider systemic change in line with your network's objectives.

In order to harness and support innovation in this way you need to be clear on a number of questions.

- What is the purpose of innovation within your network?

*It may be new ways of delivering services, building stronger and more sustainable organisations within the network, or contributing to the delivery of your wider social mission by tackling the root causes of a social, economic or environmental problem.*

- How do you stimulate innovation, or identify it when it arises, in your network?

*What processes or opportunities can you put in place for people to share ideas or to challenge network members to think about specific issues?*

- How do you decide which ideas to take forward to test and prioritise them?

*This is where clarity about the purpose of innovation in your network can be helpful.*

- How can you support the testing and prototyping of ideas in your network?

*Can you help to reduce the risk of people trying new things by providing resources, support, peer learning opportunities, or by undertaking monitoring and evaluation for network members involved in testing and prototyping a new idea and making it sustainable?*

- What are the processes for spreading and scaling innovations in your network?

*How is this usually done and is it effective? How can peer learning help to support the scaling of innovations? How is the value created from the innovation captured and shared?*

- How does innovation lead to systemic change in your network?

*How does innovation in your network get applied to delivering your wider purpose?  
Are you trying to create an alternative or influence the mainstream by changing wider practice in the sector or effect policy change?*

- Who does what?

*For each stage of the process you need different roles to support each stage of the process. These may be held within a hub or backbone organisation or dispersed across the network, but to be effective they need to be clear about how their role supports the overall process.*

**Q7:** How could innovation be useful to your cause - and your network?

**Q8:** What needs to change to support more innovation in your network?

## 4 Further resources

- [Stanford Social Innovation Review - Design Thinking](#)
- [The YoungFoundation - The Open Book on Social Innovation](#)
- [Tom Kelley on Creative Confidence](#)
- [IDEO's site Design Kit](#) for toolkits and resources for running workshops
- [Courses on Acumen](#)
- [Scaling Social Innovation](#) - case studies, thought-guide and toolkit - Shared Assets

