

Making a Difference: A New Model for Civic Innovation

HOW EMPOWERED, LOCALLY BASED PROBLEM SOLVERS CAN
CHANGE THEIR WORLD.

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Why Innovation

We live in a remarkable time, where significant breakthroughs, particularly in medical science, are becoming commonplace. In 2020, we witnessed something that had never been done. Vaccines can take years, if not decades, to become commercially available. Still, we developed, tested, and delivered millions of vaccine doses for a novel virus in less than a year. Over the last few decades, we have seen pockets of innovation worldwide that helped reduce poverty and disease and enabled living standards to rise. We have also seen amazing innovations in technology with the proliferation of smartphones, artificial intelligence, and robotics during this time.

We've seen innovation work. We understand it is essential as it gives us a better chance to figure out what works, increasing the likelihood that our efforts and investments will deliver greater impact. But innovation can be elusive and not easily replicable, particularly in the civic arena.

We still struggle with poverty, affordable healthcare, housing, education, and climate change in our communities, making little progress in many areas. We need to explore whether there is a new model for innovation specifically designed for the civic space and focused on the people and issues in our local communities.

We envision a new model for civic innovation that combines innovation within local government with an active social entrepreneurial environment that together creates a thriving ecosystem capable of sustaining meaningful change. At the Center for Civic Innovation, we've dedicated ourselves to figuring out this new model that will deliver long-term, measurable impact in our community.

Cultivating Fertile Ground

Author Walter Issacson talks about how “innovation occurs when ripe seeds fall on fertile ground.”ⁱ But, historically, fertile ground has not been evenly distributed. In the past five years, almost half (40%) of venture capital investment has gone to firms in one region in the U.S., Silicon Valley.ⁱⁱ Other regions are gaining ground, but clearly, the Bay Area and other tech hubs (Seattle, New York, Boston) have created the conditions for innovation to flourish.ⁱⁱⁱ

The fundamental challenge we face in the civic space is replicating that level of innovation, aware that there are different incentives and constraints in the public sector. We need to understand the conditions under which innovation flourishes and look for universal principles to apply to the unique and varied conditions we find in our local communities.

We believe the first step is to focus locally, which gives us the best chance to understand how our “fertile soil” might be different from others. Next, we need to find and cultivate the “ripe

seeds” in the form of effective problem solvers with viable ideas that will have a meaningful impact.

Facing Unique Challenges

Local governments are on the front line of the battle to solve some of our biggest challenges. And, for many reasons, they struggle with effectively dealing with issues like affordable housing, better educational outcomes, reliable/adequate public transportation, access to quality healthcare, improved public safety, eliminating poverty, and addressing climate change.

They are resource-constrained, faced with tackling these complex issues on their own, struggling to maintain services for a growing and diverse population. Yet, throughout our history, we’ve seen remarkable innovations in science, medicine, and information technology that involved some level of public/private sector collaborations that have been catalysts for profound change.

We believe that civic innovation can have a similar impact by deliberately connecting people from public and private organizations to share ideas and experiences to determine what works and what doesn’t. This collision of ideas and perspectives has been the hallmark of innovation in a variety of contexts and is a key element of creating the “fertile ground” that will produce measurable progress.^{iv} With this civic innovation model, the emphasis is more bottom-up than top-down. It’s more focused on fostering individual relationships (the “ripe seeds”) across stakeholder groups, than the traditional public/private partnerships of the past. It’s less centrally controlled and directed, more spontaneous and organic, designed to build trust through long-term, personal engagement. Trust is the essential ingredient for increasing acceptance of new ideas and obtaining buy-in and commitment across groups.

Role of Civic Institutions

Removing Barriers to Innovation

Innovation in the civic space is particularly challenging as our most intractable problems involve large numbers of people and cut across organizations, geographic boundaries, demographics, and areas of expertise. No organization exclusively “owns” a problem, nor do they have the resources necessary to solve the problems on their own. Moreover, problems are complex, and people can be deeply divided on the best path forward, making it more challenging to experiment and test new ideas.

Dedicated social entrepreneurs with great ideas often run headlong into this morass of complexity that can impede progress, derail their efforts, and demoralize the team. Locally based institutions dedicated to civic innovation can help “de-complexify” the environment by pre-establishing stakeholder relationships through active coalition-building and nurturing a

culture of innovation and collaboration that helps remove barriers and creates clear “on-ramps” for new solutions. It’s important to note that we include “intrapreneurs,” those working within established organizations, in this model, supporting the idea that solutions can emerge from inside or outside existing organizations, whether public sector, private, or non-profit.

Creating a Thriving Ecosystem

Startup incubators and impact investors have played an important role in funding social entrepreneurs dedicated to making a difference. To build on these efforts, we need to create locally based civic institutions dedicated to understanding how innovation works, and actively engaging local stakeholders in building a thriving innovation ecosystem.

Simply put, innovation is creative problem-solving, and we need to create the conditions for civic-minded problem solvers to thrive. The proper conditions include creating a culture that rewards risk-taking, seeks multiple perspectives, challenges conventional wisdom, and takes a long-term view resulting in sustained effort and investment over time. Additionally, having a physical space to meet and interact is essential to building trusting relationships and constructive dialog.

Developing Innovation Mindsets

Innovation is more than a set of activities or processes but also includes mindsets that drive specific behaviors. Solving complex challenges requires seeing problems clearly, acting collaboratively, and scaling effectively. These are the characteristics of someone with a problem-solving mindset. Effective problem solvers demonstrate a way of thinking and acting that sees opportunities and constraints with equal clarity, absent self-delusional optimism, or self-defeating pessimism. They balance these extremes, but they don't do it alone. Instead, they have collaborators that challenge and encourage, operating in an environment that promotes risk-taking and experimentation, where being wrong is synonymous with learning, not an invitation for ridicule.

Seeing problems clearly, or “what is,” also means admitting that uncertainty exists, that there are simply things we don't know, for which we don't have very good explanations. Humans struggle to cope with uncertainty; we seek certainty and are not satisfied with ambiguity or unknowns, often seeing doubt as a weakness. Science offers some guidance on how to counteract this tendency. Nobel physicist Richard Feynman noted that “It is imperative in science to doubt; it is absolutely necessary, for progress in science, to have uncertainty as a fundamental part of your inner nature.” He further stated, “To make progress in understanding, we must remain modest and allow that we do not know.”

Organizations dedicated to civic innovation can create the fertile ground for exploration, building an environment for problem solvers to thrive, ideas for flourish, and progress to occur. But, like any sustainable ecosystem, innovation needs the right conditions to thrive. We need to commit to understanding these conditions and put in place the methods, tools, and resources

to sustain and grow this ecosystem. A key objective is defining what it means to be a good problem solver; the mindsets and skillsets required.

A Path Forward

To build a critical mass of effective problem solvers requires dedicated, long-term effort; it is not a part-time thing. Therefore, we need to have organizations focused on creating and sustaining this type of ecosystem, accessible to the entire community, that brings together diverse groups aligned around the idea that they can be effective problem solvers. This is our mission at the Center for Civic Innovation.

Becoming Better Problem Solvers

In the past, civic innovation has focused on cultivating community volunteers who engage in problem-solving part-time. While we have seen high levels of engagement, our problems are too large and complex to rely solely on this method. Instead, we need to harness the talent and creative energy of the volunteer force and more tightly integrate them with organizations and institutions, including local government and non-profits, that are dedicated full-time to solving our biggest challenges. We also need to draw people from within these institutions to actively engage in this innovation ecosystem to bring a variety of perspectives and experiences.

Aligning various stakeholders with the idea of becoming collaborative problem solvers is no small task. It's hard because people are complicated, problems are complex, and issues can be contentious. Therefore, we must be intentional about committing to a set of principles and practices that help temper the natural human tendencies that can lead to conflict, helping to transform passionate beliefs into creative problem-solving.

In their book, *Humility is the New Smart*, researchers Edward Hess and Katherine Ludwig talk about how our instincts for fight, flight, or freeze can get in the way. They found in the scientific research that two big inhibitors of quality thinking, learning, and emotionally engaging with others are our ego and our fears. We've seen in countless situations where egos can cause people to adopt intractable positions even when presented with new information or fall prey to their fears that lead to mistrust. What's needed is the physical space for people to connect and interact in a low-risk, low-conflict atmosphere and the tools to help develop a shared understanding of problems using a common language and methods.

It's important to note that when we talk about people becoming better problem solvers, it doesn't imply that someone is giving up a part of themselves or rejecting who they are, their identity, or what they've done in the past. On the contrary, for the ecosystem to thrive, it's essential that everyone bring their experience and perspective with the understanding that others will perhaps have a different point of view. A properly functioning innovation ecosystem creates an environment that respects differences while working toward a common objective.

Core Elements of an Innovation Ecosystem

For change to happen, people need to believe that change is possible. To sustain optimism, we need to create an environment or ecosystem where passionate dedication combines with sound methods that produce tangible outcomes. We believe there are four foundational elements essential to creating a thriving innovation ecosystem, these include:

1. **Creating lasting coalitions** – We need to align around *common objectives* tied to specific outcomes. Innovation is a collaborative process that works best when multiple perspectives are included. It also works better when all parties assume good faith, or charitable intent, giving others the benefit of the doubt irrespective of past actions or affiliations. Coalition building focuses on establishing relationships across groups, engendering trust long before potentially contentious issues arise. These are the necessary preconditions for lively, passionate, respectful, and productive dialog that will help us find solutions that work.
2. **Understanding problems using data** – We need to develop a *common understanding* of problems driven by readily available data, not opinions or beliefs. Establishing a clear picture of our problems, intently focusing on “what is” is an essential part of problem solving.^v Our internal biases can often present a distorted picture of how things are, and we tend to interpret situations as we wish them to be. By committing to using data to understand issues, we can overcome these biases and foster a mindset where people change their minds based on new information—and this is recognized within the community as characteristic of good problem solvers.
3. **Applying consistent processes and methods** – We need to work using a *common approach* based on proven problem-solving practices. Learning and applying established methods such as design thinking and system thinking will help build the structure necessary for forward progress while allowing for and harnessing the creativity that produces breakthrough ideas. Having consistent problem-solving methods will also help maintain momentum over time as new stakeholders get involved.
4. **Cultivating problem-solver mindsets** – We need to develop a *common language* for problem-solving that aligns stakeholders and reinforces a culture of innovation. Mindsets help people think clearly and prioritize effectively by aligning their values with decisions and behaviors. For example, being “customer-focused” is a mindset that places the customer’s needs foremost in decision making. Another example is “long-term thinking,” which allows organizations to make difficult, short-term sacrifices (i.e., funding risky projects) with an eye towards longer-term results. Mindsets, and the habits they produce, provide the mental reinforcement that makes confronting complex problems less daunting.

The Center for Civic Innovation

At the Center for Civic Innovation (CCI), we see our role as both convener and catalyst. We understand that existing organizations -- local government, non-profits, and funders -- have dedicated their lives to serving their fellow citizens. The experience they have gained is an invaluable asset for the community. Additionally, forward-thinking social entrepreneurs and grassroots innovators bring fresh perspectives and new ideas fueled by technology and data that produce solutions that can have a breakthrough impact.

As **conveners**, we bring together various stakeholders to encourage constructive dialog, idea generation, and problem-solving. We do this through fellowship programs that draw individuals from multiple stakeholder groups, using experiential learning methods to teach problem-solving practices. Ongoing educational programs, open to all community members, provide opportunities to learn, connect, and network across groups that in the past were unlikely to be in the same room. Additionally, we are developing coaching and mentoring networks to support ongoing dialog and relationship building.

As **catalysts**, we create an "innovation ecosystem" that turns ideas into measurable impact. This starts with putting the citizen first by clearly understanding their needs. To do this, we provide community outreach services for local government and social entrepreneurs to allow the citizen's voices to be heard. Our research found that gathering citizen feedback was one of the biggest challenges for these groups and one of the essential methods for understanding problems. Next, you need data to inform your understanding of the problem. We are building data repositories across all major issues that will be accessible to all stakeholders, supported by data literacy education and consulting. Finally, CCI is exploring alternative funding arrangements that would encourage public/private partnerships and take advantage of advances in Fintech and cryptocurrency that can accelerate impact.

Making a Difference

Civic Innovation means delivering a significant impact -- being able to positively impact large numbers of lives. It means incremental progress towards big successes, making bets on solutions that scale. It means making difficult choices, identifying what works, and focusing intently for years to make success a reality. That's what effective problem solvers do.

We believe civic innovation can deliver extraordinary results by cultivating the "ripe seeds" and creating the "fertile soil" for motivated problems solvers. It's time to get started.

Notes

ⁱ *The Innovators: How a Group of Hackers, Geniuses, and Geeks Created the Digital Revolution*, 2014. Walter Isaacson.

ⁱⁱ <https://www.wired.com/story/silicon-valley-dead-not-according-to-venture-capital/>

ⁱⁱⁱ https://www.wsj.com/articles/innovation-moves-to-middle-america-11626199747?mod=opinion_lead_pos5

^{iv} <https://hbr.org/2016/03/innovation-springs-from-the-unexpected-meeting-of-minds>

^v *Design Thinking for the Greater Good*, Jeanne Liedtka, Randy Salzman, Daisy Azer, 2017. [Amazon](#).

About the Center for Civic Innovation (CCI)

CCI is a community-based innovation ecosystem where residents, businesses, local governments, and academia tackle our region's challenges. We support civic innovation that leads to a more equitable and sustainable community. We do this by enabling better community engagement, cultivating the knowledge, skills, and resources in our community, and convening key partners to create the conditions for success. [needs work]

Find out more: www.centerforcivic.org

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