

LEARNING FROM SERVICE INNOVATION

Audrey Verhaeghe

Fervent, passionate and inspirational, but also steady, soft spoken and humble – the truth is that innovators come in different shapes and sizes and from all walks of life. This special breed of people embodies different ethnic backgrounds, social standings, educational levels, genders, ages and even general looks.

The CPSI (Centre for Public Service Innovation) commissioned me in 2004 to survey a number of social innovators that led award winning projects and have been honoured as Impumelelo Innovation Award Winners. In this short article we cannot explore each project in detail but we will unpack the generic lessons learnt from these inspiring innovators who, through their commitment and dedication, made a difference in the lives of ordinary people in South Africa. We surveyed innovators from Soweto to Cape Town and they represent the best in all of us.

The first observations made during the survey are represented in the following list and are seen as important innovator attributes for successful innovation in services:

- A positive attitude,
- Action, drive and persistence,
- Understanding people and the environment in which they operate,
- Teamwork,
- Bravery and conviction,
- Using their skills,
- Mobilising skills they do not have but need,
- Passion,
- Being real,
- Using what they have and where they are to the best of their ability, and most of all,
- Having a vision for a better tomorrow.

One of the factors that stood out from the conversations with these innovators is that it is people that innovate, not systems or structures. Actually, systems and structures can often stand in the way of, or even bog down, the innovation process. Successful innovators, however, always manage to overcome such constraints. These are



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some of the lessons learnt from innovators in services:

Lesson 1: There is no Blueprint for Innovation

Henry Poincare said: "It is by intuition we discover and by logic that we prove." If we could describe and demystify the topic completely, we can make it completely risk-free for the would-be innovator. There will always remain a piece of magic and a piece of risk in any new project/intervention or change introduced.

"Pelgrim roads are made by walking". The innovator will have to take risks in conquering the unknown. The following advice is given to novice risk-takers:

- Start small.
- Take risks often.
- The most appropriate risk is when there is a good chance of success or failure. (Otherwise it is not really a risk)
- Prepare for your risks.

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Innovations come from chaos or structure. Some innovations present themselves because of chaos and others were managed pro-actively by a person. There is no formula for the birth and development of an innovation but it always stems from something that moves one emotionally.

Lesson 2: Think Big, Act Small

Innovators dream, and they dream big. Furthermore, they follow their dreams with persistent, focused action. It could be helpful for the start-up innovator to start planning from a certain place in the future and then work backwards. At Da Vinci we call this Reverse Engineering the Future. The process, in short entails the following:

- State the desired future outcome.
- Tap into the values that will drive you personally.
- Identify the barriers that could stop you from reaching your goals.
- Develop action plans to overcome the set barriers.
- Answer and act upon the notion of: "What do I need to do now to start to achieve the future outcome".

All the innovators we interviewed had sceptical people they had to deal with at first. Some even had to win the trust of the communities they operated in. You often have to achieve some success before more people will start believing and supporting your vision.

While you are taking the small steps that you need to achieve your dream, ask yourself the following three questions regularly:

- What do we still need to do?
- What should we stop doing?
- What should we keep on doing?

You learn by doing. One innovator succinctly put it like this: "If you stand too far from an automatic sliding door it will not open for you"

Lesson 3: Swimming Upstream

Innovation, by definition entails doing something that is different from the present paradigm. Whether you want to file documents differently or deliver water and sanitation to a community in a different way, it entails disrupting the way a number of people work. They will not like it!

All the innovators we interviewed experienced set-backs and felt like giving up. Some even experienced ridicule and rejection for a while. They all persisted, succeeded and were awarded for their efforts. You will be too.

Lesson 4: Innovation requires Basic Management

All successful innovations were managed properly. The main areas of successful project management are:

- Understanding the critical need,
- defining the objectives,
- mapping out the scope of work,
- agreeing on the deliverables and timescales and
- monitoring and evaluating the project.

Proper planning and management increase the potential to successfully implement new innovations.

Lesson 5: See the Doughnut, not the Hole.

This lesson entails that you need a positive attitude in your survival kit as an innovator.

The following statement, by an innovator, captures this lesson: " Even if the breath of hope which blows on us from that new continent were fainter than it is and harder to perceive, the trail must by all means be made. For there is no comparison between that which we may lose by

not trying, and that by not succeeding.” Sir Francis Bacon in settling in the New World.

Lesson 6: Understand your Environment

Service innovation is different from product innovation in that service innovation requires a significantly stronger focus on the human and environmental aspects of innovation.

Innovation is applied creativity that is contextually relevant.

Lesson 7: Innovation Is Not A One Person Show

You need a network of other people to successfully complete an innovation project. Three types of networks emerged in the survey. You need networks to help to fund your innovation, you need networks to help you implement the innovation and you need networks in the community in which the innovation takes place. All of these can be built through the innovator’s dedication. All the innovators we surveyed were humble and gave huge credence to the team of people they mobilised to help them or who were moved by their vision and volunteered to help.

Lesson 8: Innovation is about Solving Real Problems

A survey of innovation in industry published in

the economist in 1999, shows that innovation has more to do with a pragmatic search for opportunity, than with romantic ideas about serendipity or lonely pioneers pursuing their vision against all odds.

Understand the problem that you try to solve through innovation and do not get caught up with a product or an idea that has only one possible solution.

Lesson 9: Innovation has a Heart

Successful innovations always come from the heart. One innovator puts it like this: “You have to be rooted in what you do and do what you really love.”

In summary, celebrate the uniqueness of your innovation and learn from others who also have had to think big and act small. Swim upstream, be positive, manage creativity in a structured way, work through networks, but most of all, follow your heart. As one innovator remarked in the survey: “If you have a stirring about something that needs to be done and you are not following it up with action, you are committing a sin against humanity” and another innovator said: “If someone like me can do it anyone can do it”

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF THIS ARTICLE

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