

BOLSTERING INNOVATION AND EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION

By Dr. Jodi Sandfort, Professor at the University of Minnesota's Humphrey School of Public Affairs and Academic Director of the Future Services Institute
Henriët Hendriks, Research and Evaluation Director, University of Minnesota Future Services Institute

ABOUT FSI

The Future Services Institute (FSI) was established in 2016 in the University of Minnesota's Humphrey School of Public Affairs in partnership with county and state governments. Our mission is to advance human services into the 21st century; this subtly points out that much of publicly-funded human services has not yet adapted to the current social and economic, or taken advantage of new technological or social innovation. Broadly, our work falls into the categories of design projects, leadership development programs, and evaluation and research.

In our work, we are committed to:

- Attacking institutional racism and other systemic inequality that prevents the current human services system helping all Minnesotans live respectful lives
- Working across organizations – public and nonprofit – with people who bring their minds and hearts to the work of transforming human services
- Alleviating the burden, stress, and fatigue in these systems
- Integrating services across systems, institutions, and agencies
- Acting as an incubator, innovator, and influencer in the human services sector, with a focus on appropriate and effective service delivery to people in need.

PARTNERSHIPS

We support leaders who are making change in state agencies, counties, tribal nations, community organizations, and human services policy field. Some of our current partnerships include:

- *Whole Family Systems Initiative with the Minnesota Department of Human Services, and eight local government and tribal nation organizations* – This project is supporting the design of 2-generational program models and enabling the state government to learn side-by-side with local innovators, to help pinpoint where current state policy and administrative practices inhibit effective program implementation.
- *Pathways to Prosperity and Wellbeing pilot program with Olmsted and Dakota Counties* – These counties worked with us to redesign the service experience of young parents who are

trying to make ends meet with low-income.

- *FAIR program evaluation with Prepare and Prosper* – We are supporting the rapid cycle adjustment and scaling of a financial access virtual platform to help more people access dependable and affordable banking services. By connecting this product to the assets available at 'tax time' Prepare and Prosper seeks to help those trying to manage with limited means.
- *Equity Works Leadership Institute with MSPWin and Minnesota Association of County Social Service Administrators* – Because the outcomes of Minnesota's human services system are significantly biased by race, we are tackling this problem head on. Challenging the white supremacy baked into system operation requires leaders do significant work on understanding their own biases and building skills to overcome current practices. This cohort-based leadership program (noncredit) facilitates change among people who want to step into this important work.

Our approach

We strongly believe in deploying frameworks and methodologies of change that acknowledge the complexity of the problems and systems in human services. While our toolbox continues to evolve, our work is grounded in the following three methodologies.

HUMAN CENTERED DESIGN AS A METHODOLOGY FOR IMPROVING SERVICE EXPERIENCE AND CREATING HELPFUL PRODUCTS

At the Future Services Institute, the human-centered design process is fundamental to the work we do. It provides an anchor to our innovation work in human services and other adjacent fields. We use a Design-Based approach in our work because much of what has created inefficiency and ineffectiveness in human services is a result of bad design. Those who work in the human services sector often begin this work because they are passionate about people and changing lives, but the nature of the system wears those passions down. This, in turn, affects people who turn to the public sector for support.

The appeal of an intentional design process – and engaging in

redesign in public and nonprofit sector work -- is that the mismatch between the needs and what exists can be improved.

Design offers a systematic methodology to develop feasible, viable, and desirable solutions within constraints. It is pragmatic and focused on developing local solutions that fit local contexts, building upon understanding and awareness that might exist but are often obscured by existing hierarchy or process about how to improve services and products. Design methods and tools create space for out-of-the-box problem solving, where stakeholders (or "user groups") bring valuable insights, stories, perspectives, habits, and resources to both shape the understanding of problems and the co-creation of solutions to follow.

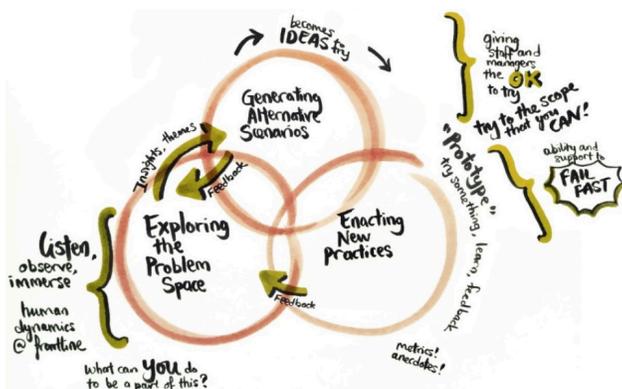
Elements of Design Methodology

Because design looks and feels different than what public sector managers are used to, it can be disconcerting.

Design uses:

- **Tools.** These are concrete artifacts (spread sheets, storyboards, journey maps, personas, policy field audits) often that can be created from templates. These provide the what of design.
- **Methods.** These are particular procedures used gather information during the design process. Interviews, contextual observation, focus groups, design labs, these and other methods can help gather information systematically. These provide the how.
- **Methodology.** This is the larger articulation of why. It help clarify the purpose, assures that the tools and methods deployed are aligned with the purpose and constraints found in the context.

Figure 1. Overview of Public Sector Design Methodology applied by FSI



Source: Sook Jin Ong adapted from Christian Bason (2017). *Leading Public Design: Discovering Human-Centered Governance*. Bristol, United Kingdom: Policy Press

ART OF HOSTING AS A METHODOLOGY FOR LEADERSHIP AND CHANGE MAKING

Groups and organizations using participatory leadership as a working practice report better decision-making, more efficient and effective capacity building and greater ability to quickly respond to opportunity, challenge and change. People who experience participatory leadership typically say that they walk away feeling more empowered and able to help guide their meetings and the conversations they are part of moving towards more wise collaboration and decisions.

Many people experience meetings that waste time, conversations that feel more like debates, and invitations to input which turn out to be something altogether different. People want to contribute, but they can't see how. Leaders want to engage the followers, but often don't know how to do so.

The Art of Hosting provides a set of frameworks, practices, and methods for stepping into participatory leadership. Based on the assumption that people give their energy and lend their resources to what matters most to them – in work, as in life – the Art of Hosting blends a suite of powerful conversational processes to invite people to step in and take action. So why is conversation so powerful? Conversation, more than any other form of human interaction, is the place where we learn, exchange ideas, offer resources and create innovation.

The Art of Hosting practices draws attention to the art of becoming skillful at helping ourselves and others work well together, especially in these times of increasing complexity. We focus on hosting, because it gives attention and care to all aspects of people's work together. Just as any person welcoming guests will make sure they have everything they need to make their visit fruitful, hosting sets people up to be successful. When hosting, we take the whole process into account – all the preparations before the participants come together, what happens while they are working together, and how the results of their conversation – the 'harvest' – support next steps that are coherent for their purpose and context. We plan our conversation design around the harvest we want to produce, determining what methods we use and how. We are continuing to grow our harvesting capacity and experiment with different forms of harvesting – digital images, photographic, musical, social media, multi-media, narrative – you name it! We think good harvesting is one of the most potent ways to assure that the agreements and decisions arising from important conversations actually lead to clever action.

DEVELOPMENTAL EVALUATION AS A METHODOLOGY FOR FEEDBACK

In social policy, it is common to do evaluations to document the process of program implementation or assess impact. Fewer in

human services are active users of continuous quality improvement, the practice of gathering information systematically to make process improvements. This practice is an important part of the human centered design process, particularly in testing ideas that are being developed further into prototypes to see if they are working. Sometimes, though, a more robust methodology is needed.

Developmental evaluation (DE) focuses on supporting innovation, to inform and support development and adaptive change in complex, dynamic environments. The emphasis is on real-time feedback and utilization of findings to propel the innovation forward. Evaluation research and feedback methods evolve over the course of the project to assure the right information is available to inform decision making. At the Future Services Institute, we see developmental evaluation as complementary to the systems changes we are trying to support in many of our projects. For leaders interested in innovation, structured evaluation that also is flexible can be an invaluable tool.

"The discipline of evaluation has something to offer social innovators that can really help them succeed. Developmental evaluation is based on the insight that evaluative thinking, techniques, practice, and discipline can be a boon to social innovation—that data systematically collected and appropriately tied to users' goals and strategies can make a difference, even in open-ended, highly complex settings where the goals and strategies are themselves evolving. Developmental evaluation has something distinctive to offer through the way it marries empirical inquiry focused on the innovation to direct engagement with the innovator. What developmental evaluators do helps innovators advance social change, but it only works when customized to the very special context of each social innovation."

James Radner in Michael Quinn Patton, Kate McKegg, and Nan Wehipeihana, eds.

Developmental evaluation exemplars: Principles in practice. Guilford Publications, 2015

OUR THREE-FOLD PRACTICE IN ACTION – THE INTEGRATED SERVICES ASSESSMENT TOOL

FSI was brought in as a design partner in an initiative in two counties focused upon developing more integrated services models in the public sector. To support this significant change in the services system, county leaders realized that a new assessment tool needed to be design, to help both frontline staff and the system better understand the assets and needs of families seeking support. Such a tool also would allow the government to document their impact by measuring changes in a family's wellbeing over time.

To launch the design project, FSI team took a number of steps to explore the problem space: (1) We identified, studied and spoke with experts involved in using 15 various assessments (nationally and globally) to learn more about how they were created, their purpose and intended use, and the staff and participants' experience in using the assessments, (2) we convened state, county and non-profit experts who had experience either developing, adapting, or implementing similar assessment tools to talk about what was working, and what needed to be changed when thinking about a comprehensive, integrated services tool, and (3) we convened the frontline social workers in one county to talk about their current service delivery experience, and where a tool like this would be helpful.

This multidimensional engagement made a significant difference in the rest of the design process. Rather than creating a tool to merely document the range of domains, such as income, education, health and well-being, we realized that any tool needed to support the new frontline practice model providing integrated services.

We developed this idea and made rough sketches of the potential layout and visual attributes. Frontline staff provided feedback about essential elements, such as enabling it to be touched and used by families and reducing its technocratic look. Another idea that was tested was how to best highlight areas of strength as well as need, and to let families identify their own priority areas for assistance.

We began working with the county to develop more complete prototypes of various versions, keeping these ideas, goals, and constraints in mind. The team created initial paper/pencil interface as well as several visual metaphors depicting experiences from in-crisis to thriving. We hosted numerous sessions in which program managers and front-line staff shared their feedback and needs, revising the tool based on this feedback.

Ultimately, we decided upon a name: the Integrated Services Assessment Tool (ISAT). Rather than the a conventional Likert-type scale 1-5 rating, human faces with different emotions (from frowning to smiling) were decided upon to denote "in crisis" to "thriving." We created a booklet version, complete with perforated tear-outs, additional blank templates, and a caseworker record form. Because we understood the implementation context, we also developed other supporting materials, such as a training manual, a 'cheat sheet,' and promotional flyers to use with clients. This version of tool was tested out small scale in a rapid-cycle learning trial from May to August 2018. County staff administered ISAT with fifty 50 families. To provide systemic test of the tool, our team held focus groups and observed staff actually using it with families. They shared tweaks they made that improved the interactions with the families and pointed out the parts where they repeatedly ran into

difficulties. They also provided feedback about the various versions via email, a structured web-survey, and check-in calls.

In a revision of the initial prototype, the ISAT booklet was then modified to be half its original size, with only the key domains listed, and optional ones addressed through 'blank' domain pages. Staff who tested ISAT also developed innovations to improve its usability, too – for example, some of them began laminating the 'smileys' to make it reusable with various clients. Updated copies were made available for the more formal tool evaluation period, a validation study focused upon determining concurrent validity or whether or not staff assessments are corresponding to other, independent measures.¹

¹ For more information about ISAT, including a video about this process, please see <http://futureservicesinstitute.org/assessment-tool>