

Innovation and the Jewish Family Services Network

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Newark, New Jersey, in 1861 was like many emerging cities on the East Coast of the United States. The still young country was growing in population and commercial enterprise, but success was not shared by all. The Civil War was looming in the near future, but for many, an economic downturn in 1857 had brought more immediate personal issues. The unemployed crowded the sidewalks of Broad Street begging for assistance.

The city's response was to cram as many needy people as possible, and more, into the almshouse. Orphans, widows, the elderly, "lunatics," drunkards, the blind, deaf, dumb, incurably ill, and "paupers" were all thrown together in deplorable conditions. Although there were not large numbers of needy Jews among the destitute of Newark, there were Jewish widows, orphans, and the unemployed who required assistance. So, 14 young Jewish businessmen gathered on January 2, 1861, and formed a benevolent association to assist their fellow Jews (Wallerstein, 1962).

Much has changed in the 151 years since those 14 social innovators met in a parlor in Newark. The benevolent association formed on that night has evolved along with these changes, guided continually by the goal to meet the needs of individuals and families in the area surrounding Newark. Today, the organization that formed from the inspiration and dedication of those 14 young men is known as Jewish Family Service of MetroWest.

Many Jewish family service agencies have similar origins as 19th- and early 20th-century start-ups. They were built on ideas that responded to unmet needs. They were born from a willingness to help others, the inspiration and perseverance to solve a pressing social and community challenge, and a recognition of the obligation to make the world a better place for the vulnerable among us. These same qualities have led these long-standing organizations to evolve and regenerate, like Jewish Family Service of MetroWest has done, to continue to meet the needs of their communities.

INNOVATION DEFINED

Innovation is a term often used in both for-profit and nonprofit managerial circles. Many assert that innovation is a key to success. Some say it is necessary for survival, and probably all agree that new ideas keep people interested in an

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organization. People are always talking about innovation, but what does it really mean? How does innovation look in the real world?

The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines innovation as “the introduction of something new.” There are two parts to this definition—the novel creation itself and the process of introducing the creation. It is a noun, but an active noun, one that necessarily implies the effort behind the objective. Looking deeper at how innovation plays out in real scenarios, two more elements emerge. First, an innovation must produce value. People do not refer to a product or service as innovative if it detracts or does not add value. Second, an innovation is typically introduced to fill a void or improve a process. Imagine the bright thinker identifying an unmet need and developing, testing, and finally introducing a new idea that will produce enough value to meet this previously unmet need. That is real action and true innovation.

Successful nonprofits, whose missions are rooted in meeting unmet needs, continually innovate on many levels. The term “innovation” can include the work of any organization redefining its target audience or service methods to provide greater results. Over the past 10–15 years, the nonprofit sector has experienced an influx of products, methods, and matrices for measuring the impact of its service. Executives analyze reports, assess their theories of change, and redesign service methods for a greater likelihood of mission fulfillment. The value produced by the redesign that fills the prior void in a novel way is innovation.

For us, the current question is, How can this ongoing innovative process be encouraged to reach its greatest potential? In the *Harvard Business Review* article, “Managing Your Innovation Portfolio,” Bansi Nagji and Geoff Tuff (2012) introduce a tool they call the *Innovation Ambition Matrix*. They note the broad spectrum on which organizations can invest in innovation, with varying degrees of risk and reward. The closer the new initiative is to the current operations, the lower the risk and the greater the likelihood of success. The further the novel idea is from the current business, the greater the risk, but the greater the potential is for a successful innovation to have transformative effect. Nagji and Tuff counsel organizations to “simultaneously invest at three levels of ambition, carefully managing the balance among them.” Strategic innovation should involve a balance of core, adjacent, and transformational initiatives to ensure that the organization continually produces value.

INNOVATION AND INCUBATION

As a result of the emphasis on novelty in innovation, creativity is generally understood to be a crucial element. It is difficult to argue with that premise. We might picture an innovation as the light bulb over the head of a person who can find solutions by thinking “outside the box.” But what does this creative innovator really look like? Do innovations spring only from young, unencumbered minds? Is it the lack of baggage of the rogue entrepreneur or the basement startup that enables free thinking and true innovation to occur? And are those with years of experience in the field too ingrained in the way things have always been done to find solutions in novel places?

Much young, unencumbered innovating is happening today, particularly in the Jewish community. The next generation has caught the attention of the establishment. They are an energetic force—smart, networked, and driven to

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make a difference. But remember our definition. True innovation requires novelty coupled with an existing void and effective application of the novel idea to fill the void. It is at the intersection of idea and execution that the destiny of an innovation is determined. Young entrepreneurs operating in a vacuum are less likely to have a sense of where the voids reside in the system and which methods of execution have the best chances of success. But couple their energy and outside-the-box creativity with the history and outcomes analysis of established organizations, and you have a recipe for positive outcomes.

Numerous Jewish organizations have sprung up to reside in the space where idea meets execution. They are incubators—backed by the wisdom and resources of established entities and put in place to help bring new ideas to fruition.

Bikkurim: An Incubator for New Jewish Ideas was one of the first to promote the interface between new Jewish ideas and the established Jewish community. Understanding the risk involved in entrepreneurship, and recognizing that not every innovative ideas will succeed, founding board member Martin Kaminer reasoned: “What’s key is that some of these organizations are going to be the Hillels and Hadassahs and B’nai Briths and ADLs of our children and grandchildren’s time. But I can’t tell you which ones” (<http://bikkurim.org/node/65>). Bikkurim has helped propel many organizations to initial success, including Limmud NY and Sharsheret, and has begun to assist some organizations to accelerate from initial start-ups to the complex second stage of development.

Many others, including JumpStart, PresenTense, ROI, Joshua Venture Group, and UpStart Bay Area, have emerged to enhance the field of Jewish incubation. All connect well with creative, passionate, and dedicated young entrepreneurs, and all are well connected with established Jewish entities that provide support to help turn creative ideas into realities that benefit the Jewish community.

UpStart Bay Area, in particular, has made clear the necessity for connectedness between emerging and established entities. Support for creative, new ideas sometimes may happen in a vacuum, but it takes connectivity to bring those creative, new ideas to fruition in a way that can add real benefit to the community at large. Operating within the web of the community brings the kind of reality check that will select for success the innovations that meet real voids. And connecting with larger entities provides the creative start-ups with the capacity to execute on these ideas, thereby turning ideas into results. Once inspired, it takes a lot of hard work to turn idea into reality.

Incubation Relationship

Incubation is a process of providing favorable conditions for growth and development, but creating these favorable conditions for growth can take a variety of forms. It makes sense to look at incubation as a continuum. The lighter touch involves mentoring, training, and sharing information on proven models. A next step along the continuum may involve providing office space and technology and sharing expertise in budgeting, marketing, development, or legal affairs. More intensive incubation may involve the pooling of resources; for example, shared staff, a peer community, coordination of events, and group purchasing. An incubator may provide seed money or even ongoing financial support, or it may act as a fiscal agent. It might hire the entrepreneur or absorb the program into its own suite of services.

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The value to the start-up of this connection is obvious. The established entity shares resources, knowledge, experience, and expertise to propel the start-up to success. There is an element of risk sharing as well. The larger entity invests in laying the foundation for the start-up, thereby making the new venture less risky.

It seems to us that the value to the incubator is equally obvious. By reaching out to new, organically emerging ventures, the incubator keeps its finger on the pulse of its community. It becomes infused with the energy and passion of the innovator. And it plays an important role in bringing valuable services to people who need them or novel goods to people who want them.

Where the incubator is an organization founded expressly for the purpose of nurturing fresh ideas, its *raison d'être* is to participate in the innovative process. Where the incubator is a direct service organization working in the field, the benefits of incubation are multiplied. If the innovation directs value to the same group targeted by the established organization's mission, there is a match. Lending a hand to lift up the new idea invigorates the very field about which the established organization cares most. And the act of associating with the innovative process has the potential to infuse new life into everything the incubating organization does. The result is greater mission impact across the board.

BRINGING JEWISH FAMILY SERVICE AGENCIES INTO THE PICTURE AS NATURAL INCUBATORS

In 2008, several leaders in the Jewish innovation field conducted a "Survey of New Jewish Organizations." The ensuing report—*The Innovation Ecosystem: Emergency of a New Jewish Landscape* (JumpStart et al., 2009)—produced several key findings and recommendations on how the Jewish community can collaborate in nurturing bright new ideas. Let us focus on Key Finding 3:

The vast majority of new initiatives describe their mission category as religion-related, education, art/culture/humanities, or civil rights/social action/advocacy. Very few are focused on service provision, such as human services, mental health/crisis intervention, employment, housing/shelter, or health care.

Why are the crucial services provided by the Jewish family service network not the object of start-up innovation? The authors of this report wondered as well, stating, "The very small proportion of initiatives focused on human services and related missions invites further analysis." They speculated about some reasons—the grand scale of resources that are often required to meet social needs or the potential for engaging in human services through non-Jewish organizations. They suggested that in coming years, "innovators may increasingly be motivated to bring their entrepreneurial spirit" to the human service field.

Human services continue to be left out of this crucial conversation, even though the Jewish family service movement has continued to evolve, to adapt, and to persevere in finding effective ways to meet community needs. We propose that now is time to begin including the Jewish family service sector in the Jewish community's efforts to nurture innovation. Given their long histories, their continual evolution and adaptation to meet needs as they arise in the community, are not Jewish family service agencies natural partners for innovation? Given their ear-to-the-ground approach to finding unmet needs and their dogged focus on

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measuring impact, do not they have much to contribute to help start-ups execute their ideas in the real world?

Jewish family service agencies have survived and thrived by continually creating where voids exist. This ability to adapt and grow is the reason that Jewish family service agencies are recognized leaders in program development and service delivery in communities across North America. Even in the face of the harsh economic downturn of recent years, when financial resources were scarce and community need was at an all-time high, many Jewish family service agencies met the challenge by being strategic, flexible, and innovative, much like the founders of their organizations had been many years before.

Almost seven years ago, Jewish Family Service of Los Angeles formed a “Future of JFS Committee.” This committee engages in rolling strategic planning, creating an ongoing dialogue between staff and board. The result has been the growth of programs in areas in which the agency has always excelled and the ability to serve more people despite the limitations of some of their traditional funding sources. Jewish Family & Career Services of Atlanta credits a culture of change and risk tolerance for their ability to grow and adapt to serve needs not previously served. Jewish Family & Children’s Service of San Francisco, the Peninsula, Marin and Sonoma Counties uses a social enterprise model to consistently develop earned income to support social goals. Jewish Family Service of Seattle has placed an emphasis on recruiting board members who are proven innovators in their professional and personal lives. Because the agency is intentionally positioning itself as a change agent in the community, it has become a magnet for new ideas that are realized in services that bring benefit to the people it serves. These are examples of the impact of the spirit of innovation that resides within these agencies.

A Proposal

Steven Johnson (2010), in his book, *Where Good Ideas Come From*, describes the problem-solving process: “The trick to having good ideas is not to sit around in glorious isolation and try to think big thoughts. The trick is to get more parts on the table.” In the Jewish community, we have many challenges, some of which we share with the greater community and some that are unique to us. But we are fortunate that we have many “parts” we can bring to the table to mine the good ideas that become the solutions for our challenges.

Individual and start-up organizations should be encouraged to think creatively to serve unmet needs and build a stronger social fabric. As organizations that were formed by such creative thinking and have been able to thrive by continually challenging themselves, Jewish family service agencies are well suited to support this innovation. As a Jewish people, we continually look to develop better ways to serve vulnerable populations and to strengthen the individuals and families who are our community. Bringing together inspired social innovators and Jewish family service agencies that have the experience and infrastructure to nurture and sustain their innovative ideas would have a positive impact on the whole community.

We encourage innovators and start-up organizations to contact the Jewish family service agency in your community. Send an email to its executive director or the director of programs. If you have trouble connecting locally, contact AJFCA, the North American umbrella organization serving the Jewish family service movement. Share your vision and your idea for bringing it to life. Come

prepared with research and data to support your theory of change. Talk with your local agency about ways in which you can collaborate for the mutual benefit of the target audience you both seek to serve. The form that this relationship would take may vary widely depending on the community and the needs, but the ultimate goal of executing and sustaining innovative programming is consistent.

We invite social innovators to attend AJFCA's Annual Conference to learn more about trends in Jewish family service programming and to interact with professionals working on the ground. We envision inspired conversations taking place throughout the convention hallways about new ways we can work together to meet growing needs. And we encourage Jewish foundations, federations, and individuals to support the intersection of innovation and program execution by establishing social innovation funds that will prime this critical work. The spark of innovation fueled by funding and nurtured by experience and practical assistance on the ground can grow to energize entire communities.

The impact of such collaborations would vary along the broad lines that form the work of the Jewish family service agency in its community. Currently, these agencies are deep in the midst of navigating the changing health care landscape, considering the best ways to maintain patient security as clinical data travels electronically. Agencies are studying best practices in serving clients on the autism spectrum. They are serving those who face food insecurity and those fleeing from abusive conditions. And they are looking for ways to serve these clients that are sustainable, both in terms of funding and reducing their carbon footprint. While deep in the trenches of this reality, Jewish family service agencies are forward thinking enough to welcome the opportunity to collaborate with innovators who may have great ideas to address some of these pressing needs.

CONCLUSION

The start-up organizations of the 19th and early 20th centuries are some of today's major Jewish family service agencies. Built on innovation, they continue to foster creative ideas to serve people in need and strengthen our communities. Jewish family service agencies have a culture built on the spirit of innovation and a recognition that good ideas need a sustainable and collaborative process to be transformed into meaningful programs and services. Today's innovators are creative, energetic, and working hard to develop new ways to meet some of our community's most pressing challenges. This is a natural partnership that has the potential to introduce valuable and novel solutions to fill some important voids. It is *besheit*. And its impact has the potential to lead the Jewish community solidly into our collective future.

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