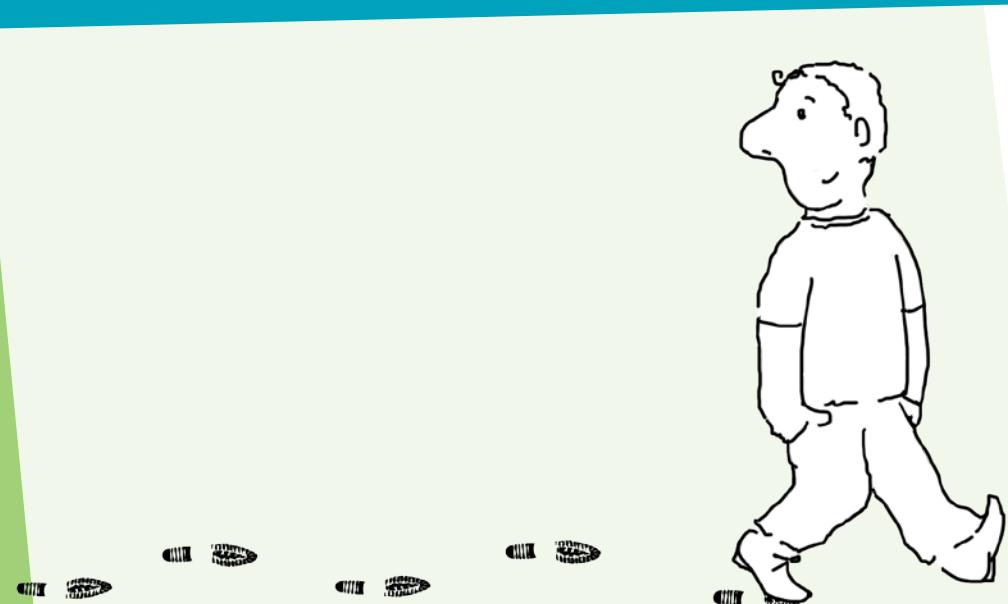


Strategic Assessment Guides Innovation



BY BRADLEY SOLMSEN

Innovators must understand 1) issues, challenges, and their own capacities for change, 2) that innovation is a cyclical process, and that 3) assessment strategies are fundamental to innovation from inception through completion.

THE NEW OXFORD American Dictionary defines “assessment” as “the evaluation or estimation of the nature, quality, or ability of someone or something.”

“Evaluation or estimation”—Many people assume that assessment is something you do toward the end of a given work cycle. I believe that best practices (in any field or endeavor), especially regarding attempts at innovation, demand that assessment during planning and implementation happens at the earliest possible opportunities of a given project.

At the beginning of Project InCiTE (<http://www.projectincite.blogspot.com>) we had the opportunity to learn closely with professionals from SIT (Systematic Inventive Thinking) (<http://www.sitsite.com>). They explained, “Don’t just listen to the voice of your customers; listen to the voice of your product.” Over the course of the work of this project I have learned three lessons regarding the relationship between innovation and assessment.

Lesson #1: Assessment to Understand

You cannot truly innovate until you fully understand all the issues or challenges at hand. This deep and full understanding comes from strategic assessment. An educator or organization interested in developing an innovative new program must fully understand what existing programs are being offered and why and how they are succeeding or failing; demand an interest in new programs; and know the challenges currently in the field, resources available (human, financial, and other), and other important variables.

A potential innovator must also be able to effectively assess his or her own capacity to effect change. The innovator needs to be able to articulate the impact of his or her vision on the field, what resources will be needed, opportunities for partnerships and collaboration, and how an ideal will be both funded and sustained.

Only with this full understanding, through strategic assessment at the outset, can an idea move from the theoretical stage to a more actual stage.

Lesson #2: Assessment Reminds Us That Innovation is a Process

As each Fellow worked to develop an understanding of the field of teen engagement with Israel and Jewish peoplehood as well as generate potential ideas for innovation, we quickly became aware that the development process was cyclical. Each member of the project continually returned to examine goals, resources, assumptions, challenges, passions, and many more variables.

The role of assessment during the project development phase (as opposed to at the implementation phase) was to remind us to ask important questions. Were our plans still connected to our initial goals? Were our resources and our ideas in alignment? Did we have buy-in and support from our organizations, supervisors, and other key stakeholders? Without assessment strategies we would not have been asking these key questions and our projects would have been more likely to venture off track.

Lesson #3: What Did We Do?

If assessment strategies were deployed at the very outset of the project (i.e., How would we measure whether we were achieving our goals?) and we were asking assessment-based questions during the development of the project, then we would be in the position of having a significant amount of tools and data to explore to help us answer the question: What did we do/what impact did our innovation have?

At this stage it is often essential to work closely with an assessment expert to interpret initial findings and data. In all of our cases we were developing pilot projects. It is at this point that

we each needed to remind ourselves that the definition of pilot projects are that they be assessed for what worked and what didn't work—and that they might need to change in possibly fundamental ways.

Change, even for new ideas, can be difficult, but thoughtfully collected data and guidance from experts often helps to mitigate the challenge of change and adaptation.

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assessment throughout the project. We need to continue to see assessment strategies as fundamental components of our work...from the very beginning of each project through to the final phases of innovation. ■



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