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The Keys to Fostering Innovation in the Humanitarian Sector

🕐 May 21, 2014   👤 Alec Green

[innovation]   [UNHCR]

A common refrain in many humanitarian organizations is "we have a hard time getting new ideas implemented." The UNHCR is certainly not immune to these challenges. But has empowered a small team to solicit new ideas from all levels of the organization and adhere to a rigorous evaluation process to bring the most promising ones to fruition.

UNHCR launched the "UNHCR Innovation Initiative" in 2012 as an inter-departmental initiative to foster and support creative problem-solving, experimentation and new kinds of partnerships in responding to delivery and programmatic challenges faced in field operations.

Chris Earney and Joel Nielsen have spearheaded this Initiative from the beginning. We had the pleasure of hosting a webinar with them to learn more about their experience and identify best practices in driving innovation in the humanitarian sector. Here are a few of their recommendations for getting your organization's best new ideas off the ground:

- **Ensure you have high-level support.** No matter the size of the NGO, one must

gain access to the leadership team to make your case. It can be very challenging to push innovation from the field, particularly in large organizations. How you get this buy-in depends on the culture of your organization. But make the case that the organization needs to innovate in order to stay agile and stay relevant to your persons of concern.

- **Foster a culture of innovation.** The best ideas can come from anywhere in an organization. And with teams spread all over the world, one needs to have a process to tap into that expertise from the field. Build a culture of innovation and make it clear that everyone in the organization is empowered to innovate.
- **Create a forum to solicit new ideas**. That can be on an intranet, or broadcast emails, or any number of online platforms. UNHCR has a "UNHCR Ideas" portal to gather online feedback. But has also launched an Innovation Fellowship to physically convene individuals from throughout the organization to develop, debate, and operationalize the best new ideas.
- **Ensure trust.** Everyone in the organization needs to feel comfortable bringing up new ideas. Those not in a position of authority need to feel confident they will not be ridiculed for challenging current assumptions.
- **Convene experts from various backgrounds.** The UNHCR team set out to address their ongoing challenges in providing shelters to refugees that would bridge the gap between temporary tents and more permanent houses. Earney leveraged the convening power of the IKEA Foundation to bring together 2 universities, four manufacturers and a group of experienced UNHCR staff to develop a new UNHCR expertise to come up with several prototypes.
- **Develop prototypes**. Rather than building a finished product based only on your experience, build scaled-down prototypes with more detailed specifications. Get users to test out the new concept and then provide honest reaction and actionable recommendations for how it can be improved.
- **Gather experiential feedback**. UNHCR wanted to get feedback from refugees on these new ideas while they were still in the prototype stage. Earney and his team took 26 of these houses down to Ethiopia and returned every few months to observe the refugees living there and talk to them about their experience.
- **Be vulnerable.** Oftentimes the best ideas come from the passion of the individuals doing the work and their sincere belief that their proposed solution will make a material difference. For some, it can be very difficult to accept criticism and may not be open to others questioning their original assumption. In order to gain the buy-in and support of your colleagues, one must be truly open to feedback.

Innovation can seem like a herculean endeavor. But most changes don't involve tearing up the book and starting over. Follow an established process to solicit, vet, and iterate new ideas from all levels of the organization. Success for the project's champion will depend on his or her willingness to proactively solicit feedback from colleagues and benefactors and being

open-minded enough to integrate those recommendations to improve the final product or deliverable.

If you are interested in continuing the discussion on how best to promote and foster humanitarian innovation, connect with us in our newly formed **Humanitarian Innovation Community** on DisasterReady.org.

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About Alec Green

As Chief Marketing Evangelist, Alec Green is responsible for developing the overall marketing plan and strategy for the Foundation, executing all outbound communications, increasing visibility of the Foundation's programs, and building engagement with our partners... **more**

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