

Innovation as a Possible Element of Agency or Service Transformation

Dr Michael Kendrick is well known internationally for his work on leadership, advocacy, safeguards and the promotion of community living for people with a disability. He lives in the United States but works regularly in Australia. In his presentation Michael discussed the need for innovative thinking and action in achieving good lives for people with disability. Michael cautioned against innovation for its own sake and the highlighted the importance of the values underlying innovation.

"Creativity is thinking up new things. Innovation is doing new things."

Theodore Levitt

Much of what is considered innovative may simply be new to people. Even though the supposed innovation may have been invented possibly decades or centuries earlier, it may seem quite novel and possibly beneficial to those who have not encountered it before.

The distinction between inventions and the adoption of these is quite useful. In order for innovations to be created it may only take a tiny number of people. However, for innovations to flourish and spread into widespread use, it normally will involve very large numbers of people engaged in some manner of innovation adoption.

"Doing the same thing over and over, yet expecting different results is the definition of crazy."

Unknown

Innovation as a term is often used only in its positive sense as being a "good thing". Yet many innovations can be horrific in terms of human consequences, yet still be unprecedented inventions. The Holocaust, the atom bomb, global warming and the widespread psychotropic drugging of people with disabilities are all, at some level "inventions", yet these **bona fide** innovations are highly morally and existentially problematic. Obviously, we would all prefer that the innovations that are authentically beneficial to people would be those that are widely adopted.

Community services for people with disabilities were pioneered with the hope that they would be an alternative to old style custodial institutions; however some of them have quite unexpectedly perpetuated new forms of custodial existences. This perverse outcome had not been foreseen by their original pioneers and proponents; but it stands as a lesson for other "would be" inventors and innovation enthusiasts that we should be careful with innovations, as they may have aspects to them that are negative despite all of our hopes and good intentions. This is not an argument to not innovate, but rather to do so with fewer illusions that innovations will always be beneficial in practice.

"All existing things are really one. We regard those that are beautiful and rare as valuable, and those that are ugly as foul and rotten. The foul and rotten may come to be transformed into what is rare and valuable, and the rare and valuable into what is foul and rotten."

Zhuangzi

The present day agencies and community services have gradually revealed a wide range of their long-term shortcomings, at least from the point of view of those who rely on them. These include segregation, poor social inclusion outcomes for people, disempowerment, failure to engage needs effectively, mistreatment of and harm to people, the flourishing of vested interest and so on.

Leadership is needed to begin to understand why these shortcomings have developed as they did and what might be done that could effectively counter these emergent unhelpful features.

Such reformist leadership would need to either innovate beneficial alternatives (if they do not already exist) or more widely urge and foster the proper adoption of practices that are more reliably beneficial than the *status quo*. If we are going to be innovative, we have to apply ourselves to be innovative – someone has to do the work.

"Transformation means literally going beyond your form."

Wayne Dwyer

In initiating a mindful approach to invention, innovations and their considered adoption, it is important to make safeguarding such work a conscious part of what agencies routinely do. Should agencies be unable to do this, then it may be necessary to abandon conventionally configured community service agencies as being the cornerstone of community services and pioneer another means that is more consistent with the aims and hopes of service users.

If we take current community agencies as a basis for transformation and innovation, the types of investments made would be many in number; but taken together, could be suitable for both supporting needed innovations and their adoption.

The following are some briefly stated elements of an overall investment strategy to progress the innovation and agency transformation agenda. On a broader agency planning level, the agenda could include:

- Setting enduring agency goals and priorities that include: beneficial invention, innovation adoption, innovation safeguarding and innovation evolution as crucial.
- Creating concrete agency priorities and targets relative to innovation overall.
- Exposing people to potentially worthwhile innovations so that they can begin to appreciate their value.
- Linking internal innovators or potential adopters to the supportive networks of external innovators and adopters.
- Searching externally for examples of potentially relevant innovations, and the experience gained in their adoption, for useful lessons to guide internal adoption and practice.
- Making a routine practice of the intentional and repeated convening of both internal and external innovators, early adopters and potential allies as catalysts for needed changes.

On a practical level, an agency could invest in innovation by:

- Attracting, challenging and authorizing innovative people to undertake the various facets of the overall challenges involved in embedding potentially useful innovations.
- Exposure of potential innovators and innovation adopters to innovative thinking, persons and practices.
- Create intentional small scale safe “spaces” or “zones” within or near to services or systems where the unconventional can be experimented with and experience can be gained with new ways of operating.
- Protecting and cultivating innovative or experimental initiatives until they are mature and effective enough to be credible in their performance.
- Creating and developing the political, ideological and technical constituencies that would defend and promote needed innovations – whilst ensuring that the fiscal and human resources needed to succeed with innovations are present in sufficient amounts.

Safeguarding an appreciation for innovation is also important to ensure the upholding of a culture in which innovation is valued. The following are some examples of how this could be achieved:

- Ensuring that leaders are in place to understand the significance of innovations and how to locate, enlist and bring out the best in the people that can bring them into being.

- The development of strategies that link innovators to the people and needs that *bona fide* innovations may ultimately benefit.
- Education of the uninformed or currently undiscerning of the potential value of innovations so that they are more likely to be supportive.
- Add momentum, evidence and support to an ongoing innovation agenda by consciously capitalising on the emerging benefits produced by recent innovations.
- Begin to develop an appetite amongst supporters for innovations that have more potency and benefit (thus “significance”) in order to distinguish comparatively trivial from more profound innovations.
- Critically evaluate how beneficial innovations have been increased in scale for larger numbers in other jurisdictions.

The preceding strategies, taken as a whole, would go a long way towards animating the recognition and adoption of beneficial innovations. Nonetheless, more would be needed if the intent was to safeguard innovations from perverse unintended effects or aspects of proposed or already adopted innovations. In particular it would be important to:

- Investigate any perverse effects seen in similar innovations that had been adopted elsewhere and assess whether these developments might emerge in one’s own proposed innovations.
- In such investigations note any safeguards in practice that have successfully served as effective counterweights to perverse unintended outcomes emerging.
- Continue to critically examine one’s own innovation adoption so as to evaluate where these innovations may be vulnerable and begin to adopt or craft targeted intentional safeguards that might reliably offset undesirable outcomes emerging.
- Be attentive to small declines in the mindfulness of implementation as innovations are more routinely put in place. These could grow into unexpected perversities if not caught early enough and corrected.

It is important to recognize that even currently fruitful innovations may still have the potential for further evolution, refinement and strengthening. There may exist scope for examining such innovations with an interest in whether any qualitative improvements might be feasible.

Discontent can often be the seed of an eventual rethinking and redesign of an innovation that is developmental and evolutional in nature. For instance, the valued added benefits that can come from service users being supported to optimize the benefits they gained from their resources was overlooked in many early attempts to implement individual funding arrangements. This has subsequently led to their inclusion in a menu of potentially useful supports that other people can draw upon. In other words, innovations can often evolve into better innovations.

A lot of this begins with the capacity to imagine differently – to see the world from a new perspective. Imagination is a very powerful engine and is like a muscle that needs to be used. We are going to have to be imaginative in order to try and see something from a totally different angle.

"Innovation—any new idea—by definition will not be accepted at first. It takes repeated attempts, endless demonstrations and monotonous rehearsals before innovation can be accepted and internalized by an organization. This requires courageous patience.

Warren Bennis