



If We Do What We Always Did, Then We Will Get What We Always Got: the Case for Ambidextrous Innovation in an Educational Organization.

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If We Do What We Always Did, Then We Will Get What We Always Got:
The Case for Ambidextrous Innovation in an Educational Organization.

Doctor of Education Leadership (Ed.L.D.)

Capstone

Submitted by

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Dedicated to my Dad – John Charles Heal

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Abstract

Education First is a national, mission-driven, for-profit organization that provides policy and strategy services to states, districts, policymakers, and practitioners in K-12 education. From 2006 to 2018, the organization grew from a five-person startup to a 60-person consulting firm with influential client relationships across the educational landscape. In an effort to continue this growth and remain competitive in an increasingly busy market, the decision was made to develop and implement a strategy for innovation. To that end, I was brought in to Education First to build an Innovation Unit within the existing structure of the firm. This Capstone examines my work at Education First to design and embed that Innovation Unit. It follows my efforts to create the organizational conditions for innovation, and tracks our journey towards devising new products, services, and ways of delivering value to the firm and the field of education. My work is influenced primarily by Charles O'Reilly and Michael Tushman's model of Ambidextrous Organizations and is supported by an exploration of the broader role of innovation in organizational change. I reflect on my experiences of creating and capitalizing on the conditions necessary for innovation, as well as the successes and challenges I faced, before concluding with implications for my own leadership, for Education First as an organization, and for the education sector as a whole.

Introduction

Innovation is a term so variously defined and applied that it has come to mean everything and nothing all at once. Is innovation found primarily in seeking new solutions to old problems or in re-conceiving the very nature of those problems? Is it rooted more in lessons learned from the past or in a conception of the future? Even if we were to agree on what innovation means, how do we create the conditions for innovation, how is it operationalized, and what are the challenges associated with adopting innovation as a driver of change? As innovation efforts in education proliferate, how can we arrive at a better understanding of their function and value to the field? These questions occupied my thinking as I established an Innovation Unit at Education First: an education consultancy firm working with consultants, clients, and partners across the nation to increase equitable outcomes for students.

Upon first encountering Education First (Ed First), I understood it to be an organization of contradictions: a successful paradox. Here was a virtual organization striving to cultivate the close-knit culture of an in-person workplace; a for-profit company with a non-profit mission. It had built a reputation for delivering excellence for its users through an openly-stated policy of GSD (Get Stuff Done), a mantra developed over time through the introduction of a number of guiding principles, systems, and structures – and yet, as the company had grown more systemized in some ways, it remained flexible and entrepreneurial in others. Ed First's success over the course of the last decade was in large part due to a nimbleness of approach: the firm identified needs across the education landscape (often in the form of rapid, highly entrepreneurial efforts responding to new state and federal policy decisions), and demonstrated a track record of producing high-quality services that meet the needs of clients facing a changing educational landscape. Achieving excellence also came

about as a result of the organization's ability to attract top talent from the world of research, school administration, district offices, and philanthropies to serve a similarly-diverse client base. During its relatively short lifetime, Ed First had to be many things: flexible, yet dependable; focused and organized around strong quality assurance systems but entrepreneurial when it came to how products were delivered; and organizationally tight where it had to be while organizationally loose where it could afford to be.

The short history of Ed First has also been a tumultuous one at times. In 2011, the firm found itself well positioned to offer support to nearly all Race to the Top (RTT) states. This work enabled them to secure increased revenue and access, while deepening their own expertise in the various reform efforts being driven by RTT. Once the federal funding ceased, the firm found life more difficult and experienced their first dip in revenue since founding. This volatility pointed the firm to the importance of sensing the field's needs and of diversifying its services in a more sustainable manner – all at a time when the firm sought to reimagine its growth strategy, set its sights on increasing its staff, and restructure its organizational model to map personnel directly onto the respective practice areas outlined below:

- **Outstanding Educators:** Offering supports around Teacher Preparation and Diversity, Teacher Evaluation, and Teacher Development and Leadership
- **Engaged Students:** Offering supports around College & Career Readiness, Social-Emotional Learning (SEL), and Innovative School Models
- **Effective Organizations:** Offering Support around Outcomes-Focused Philanthropy and Non-Profit Strategy.

Prior to my arrival it was decided that the fourth and newest of these practice areas would be an Innovation Unit, with a new focus area: New Service, Product and Market Opportunities. Further exploration into the intentions of the organization revealed the rationale for turning to innovation as a means of thinking differently about the value Ed

First represented to the field and as a way to remain relevant and competitive in the increasingly-busy consultancy market. The firm had already decided to grow from a 60-person firm to an 80-plus-person organization over the course of 3-5 years. To that end, decision-makers saw intentional innovation as a potential driver of this growth and as a means of support for their continued evolution. This bet was underpinned by the belief that new ways of meeting client needs would need to be developed in order to support a growing company and that the current system was organized more to execute than it was to test and learn.

In addition, past volatility pressed on the need to evolve, and partners saw the idea of a more systematized approach to innovation as the way. It offered a means to enhance current practices while simultaneously allowing for expansion into new ways of creating value for the firm, their clients, and the wider field of education. The decision to develop the unit would therefore complement current strategic efforts with new and exploratory approaches. In the words of Jenn Vranek, the founder and CEO of Ed First, “Our growth strategy is driven by our goals; our innovation and improvement strategies are driven by our growth strategy” (J. Vranek, personal communication, July 2018).

My strategic project would be to work with Jenn and two Principals at Ed First to design, build, and embed the Innovation Unit (or iLab as it became known) within the wider organization. This capstone tells my story of that journey and explores many of the intriguing challenges that I encountered along the way. First is an exploration of what I needed to know about innovation in general and in this context: a process that developed and complexified my understanding of innovation in equal measure. I would soon learn the answer to the question “What is innovation?” is not a singularity. Instead, as with all

components of organizational change, it cannot be isolated from the people and processes or systems and structures of the environment within which such change efforts play out.

Having explored the necessary knowledge base grounding my work, I go on to tell the story of the strategic project itself, reflecting on that experience, and analyzing what it meant. This is where many of my hypotheses about the nature of innovation play out in real terms and are put to the test. I show how my experiences helped me to understand the perils and opportunities that come with innovation efforts. As part of that description, I consider what it means to organize and design for innovation, especially when it could be equally argued that innovative practices run the risk of being stymied when they are over-engineered. I explore the challenge of how and where we positioned our innovative practices relative to the rest of the organization. To this end, I examine questions such as: should innovation be something that happens ‘off to the side’; what should be the necessary points of connection and separation between those doing the innovating and the rest of the organization; and what are the costs and benefits of the choices we make regarding these organizational dynamics?

After exploring the structural conditions for innovation, I go on to examine how we went about the business of innovating itself and how we moved others to join us. These reflections drive the sense making of my strategic project, before I conclude with an examination of the implications of this work for myself, for Ed First as an organization, and for the sector as a whole.

Research and Knowledge for Action

Innovation as a Term and a Practice

For a term and a practice that has become subject to such variance in application, there are features about which the field of research has agreement when defining and discussing

innovation. Some of the earliest research into innovation attempted to map how novelty is introduced into economic systems as a driver of growth. Since then, the field of innovation research has grown from its relatively humble beginnings as a narrow strand of economics into the major role it now it now plays in management, sociology, and social psychology (Salter & Alexy, 2014).

As the field of innovation became more formally explored, research revealed the manner in which innovations do not exist in a vacuum but instead draw on bodies of work, with previous innovations and experimentation giving rise to subsequent newness through the introduction of a new element into an existing system or the rearranging of existing aspects of that system (Edgerton, 2008). Studies into the pace and rhythms of innovation have taught us that its cadence is more often incremental in nature, with radical, breakthrough innovations occurring much more rarely than we might expect (Anderson & Tushman, 1990). Indeed, it has been suggested that once a system is ‘set’, it will only undergo transformational changes if exogenous ‘shocks’ are visited upon it (Gersick, 1991).

Examination of the practices associated with innovation work have also revealed that it is highly relational in nature, relying on collaboration and transaction to realize the potential in new ways of doing things (Ahuja, 2000). One of the most important realizations upon which the field holds agreement, and which boded well when I first considered this topic for my strategic project, is that innovation can be organized for and routinized (Burns & Stalker, 1961). This is not to say that insight and creativity do not play their part in the innovative processes, but that there are ways of approaching innovation in a more systematized manner than we might first acknowledge when encountering the practice.

All of these components of innovation quickly became operative for me when I began to explore the possibilities for innovation at Ed First: innovation as ‘newness’ applied;

innovation outcomes as having recognizable patterns and rhythms; innovation as highly reliant on the relational dimension; and the productive tension that innovation is both subject to the influences of external factors *and* can be organized for and around.

When considering a working definition of innovation that I could hold onto as a guiding principle for making sense of my work at Ed First, I came across one in particular that spoke to the people, processes, and outcomes of innovation in a way that resonated with the experience unfolding for me at the time. Most important in this definition was the manner in which it considered the inputs, outputs, and context of the innovation process *in concert*. It was borne of one of the most extensive investigations into innovation ever conducted: the Minnesota Innovation Research Program (MIRP). An endeavor to understand innovation-in-action on an unprecedented scale, it brought together some thirty faculty and doctoral students across fourteen research teams to embark on wide-ranging longitudinal field studies of organizations striving to innovate over the course of a decade (Van de Ven, Angle & Poole, 1989). The consolidation of their work set out the terms of a grounded model of innovation, or ‘Innovation Journey’ as follows: “*New* ideas that are developed and implemented to achieve desired *outcomes* by *people* who engage in *transactions* (relationships) with others in changing institutional and organizational *contexts*.” (Van de Ven, 1999, p.6)

A holistic capturing of the innovation journey such as this was helpful in determining a working definition for my time at Ed First because it referred directly to the parts of the system implicated whenever innovation occurred. It reminded me that newness, or people, or systems, when taken in isolation, do not innovation make. Instead, it posited that to understand the processes of innovation in an operationalized sense, we must appreciate the manner in which innovation interacts with contexts, the transactions occurring between people, and the resultant outcomes – as well as the manner in which each of those parts

interact in contributing to the innovative whole. Using the terms of the MIRP study's definition of innovation as an organizing framework for my research of knowledge for action allowed me to make sense of what I was experiencing in a more accurate and systematized way. I began where their definition ends, with an exploration of context.

Innovation and Context

In order to better understand the innovation effort upon which I was embarking, I soon realized it futile to ask 'Why innovate?' and stop at that. In reality, I was faced with a living, breathing organization that hoped to innovate with intent, so I soon found myself asking: 'Why innovation *now*?', 'Innovation *to what end*?', and 'What will this innovation come to mean *in this setting*?' All such questions positioned innovation for me as both a product and determiner of the context in which it was to be borne out. As such, I considered it important to understand the context of *this* innovation effort, especially if I hoped to achieve any degree of coherence between the problems I was about to face and the terms of the innovative solutions I hoped to provide. To appreciate the context within which Ed First operated, it was important for me to appreciate its history – not only in terms of a simple chronological account – but also by understanding its story in developmental terms. If innovation and progress come about as a result of both exogenous stimuli and endogenous choices, then appreciating the evolutionary arc upon which Ed First had embarked to date would be crucial in framing the work I was setting out to accomplish.

To consider the history of Ed First as a developmental arc, I turned to the work of Larry Greiner (1998) whose work on organizational evolution and revolution argues that organizations occupy a series of predictable states in an evolutionary trajectory:

Creativity. Defined as the time of high entrepreneurial orientation, features of this period include a rejection of traditional management activities in favor of a more reactive

sensitivity to the needs of the immediate environment. Work rate is high, intense, and the majority of organizational energy is focused on making and implementing new approaches. The crisis affecting this phase is one of *leadership*, most acutely felt in the question of who will lead the organization out of the confusion of these early, chaotic days.

Direction. This phase is synonymous with more sustained growth under a more directive leadership model. Features common in this phase include the introduction of functional organizational structures, incentives, budgets, systems of accountability and work standards. The crisis affecting this stage is one of *autonomy*. It affects people at the top of the organization who face the challenge of giving up responsibilities for the first time and people in the lower levels of the organization who are not accustomed to making significant decisions by themselves.

Delegation. This evolutionary stage builds on the structures established up to this point in developing a decentralized organizational structure. Rather than simply creating systems to encourage distributed decision-making this stage involves the pushing down of responsibility from executive leadership down into the management level. The crisis affecting this phase is one of executive *control* over the distributed leadership model – as increasingly autonomous managers prefer to run their own shows without coordinating plans with the rest of the organization.

Coordination. This period in the organization's history is characterized by the development and use of systems governing the life of the organization. These systems are administered by top-level executives but they rely on a distribution of responsibility, as well as formal lines of communication and accountability across the executive, line management, and staff levels of the organization. The potential crisis affecting this stage comes in the form of a *red-tape* threat. Here, bureaucracy threatens to stymie problem solving and innovation, and

procedural approaches cause resentment in those who feel that the people responsible for implementing the system do not appreciate the local conditions of their enactment.

Collaboration. To overcome the previous crisis, the final evolutionary stage emphasizes strong interpersonal collaboration, spontaneity in management, and a prioritizing of self-discipline over formal systems of control. In this phase, control systems are simplified and made into multipurpose functions; teams are combined across workstreams; and experimentation with new practices is encouraged throughout the organization.

Greiner's argument that movement through each of these developmental milestones is precipitated by a period of 'crisis' that requires the organization to think differently than before certainly holds true with other parts of the innovation literature, which posit that 'shocks' to the system give rise to innovation and subsequent development (Schroeder et al., 1989). These theories suggest that while a conducive organizational climate helps set the stage for innovation, it is only in response to such 'shocks' that concrete actions to undertake specific organizational innovations occur. These shocks have their roots in causes both internal and external to the system but the constant remains that shocks and crises serve to concentrate innovation efforts, thus moving the organization to a new and more highly evolved plain.

Exploring Greiner's theory invited me to consider the following question as it related to my new environment: What were the 'shocks' and subsequent developmental milestones that brought Ed First to this particular point in its evolution – such that it was considering intentional innovation? Answering this question, I felt, would move me closer to at least two of my driving questions to date: Why innovation *now?* and Innovation *to what end?* To frame my approach to these questions, I began to consider models of organizational development that hold comparisons both to evolutionary principles of adaptation – governing the manner

in which organizations, like organisms, change over long periods of time to better suit their environments when faced with sub-optimal conditions (Aldrich & Martinez, 2001) – and theories of human cognitive, emotional, and moral development which hold that, as individuals, we advance through our own stages of growth as a result of encountering problems which we can neither diffuse or escape and which require us to step into a proximal state in order to survive and thrive (Keegan & Lahey, 2009).

In both cases, two principles hold true: First, that organizations (and organisms for that matter) innovate, adapt, and evolve when their context presents seemingly intractable problems that the current operating system is unable to solve. Second, even though these shocks to the system are required for innovative leaps to occur *the system can be primed to take that innovative leap when the situation demands*. In this sense, we might adapt the old adage to say: ‘Cometh the hour, cometh the innovation’. In the case of Ed First, shocks to the system had existential implications. In order for the firm to remain relevant and stay ahead of the competition, they felt that innovation would have to become part of its future – but what parts of the organization’s past developments are pertinent in making sense of the challenges and choices they now faced?

Since his is a developmental model, Greiner (1998) draws on the importance of context in the form of organizational history as a driver of change. What makes the model particularly interesting is the claim that organizations follow predictable developmental trajectories because the experience of each stage has a hand in determining the proximal state – thus reinforcing the theory that those organizations that are able to sense when they are going to be tested, *and* are primed to respond innovatively, are best positioned to rise to the challenges they face. These realizations certainly went a long way to explaining much of what I experienced when learning about Ed First for the first time – namely that there was talk of

the *timeliness* of their focus on innovation and that this decision to create the conditions for innovation in an intentional way was in keeping with an acknowledgement of the *evolution* of the organization. Indeed, this developmental arc seems to have been true of Ed First to such an extent that one might map its history and evolutionary trajectory onto the Greiner model.

The early days of Ed First were described as ‘The Wild West’ – and with good reason. This was the period, between its founding in 2008 and 2012, when the organization grew from a handful of founders to a staff of 30 handling 55 active projects per year (S. McLean, personal communication, July 2018). I understood the ‘Wild West’ to be a direct corollary to what Greiner terms the *Creativity* phase for a number of reasons. Ed First team members wore many hats, were spontaneous and informal in their modes of communication, but were nimble enough to meet the changing needs of an emerging client base. As a precursor for organizational development towards the next phase, there needed to be what Greiner refers to as a ‘crisis’, followed by an appropriate response. In this case, the crisis (or shock) was an unsustainable state in which everyone at the organization had to bear the multiple responsibilities that came with operating in a flattened, informal, ‘all-hands-on-deck’ structure. In this world, projects were sold, staffed, initiated and completed with something closer to idiosyncrasy than coherence; there was no competency model or project methodology in place to determine an agreed-upon sense of ‘the what’ and ‘the how’ of the work; and individuals or teams relied on their own expertise and guile to get the job done, absent the necessary mechanisms and structures. The response to the wildness of those early years was to incorporate the architecture of leadership, with the founders repositioning themselves as leaders rather than jacks-of-all-trades, and beginning to hire and develop other senior leaders into more formalized structures and habits of work.

These actions gave rise to a phase that can be understood using the second developmental stage in Greiner's curve, that of *Direction*. In the period spanning 2013-18, Ed First grew its staff from 30 to 55 and increased the number of active projects per year to 110. During this period of relative stabilization, a number of the mechanisms for determining how Ed First staff members (Ed Firsters) interacted with the task of delivering on their part in the organization came into being. Competency models, a project methodology, work plans, and training modules all began to set the tone for the content, cadence, and expectations of what it meant to work at the firm; approval filters for determining the best fit for establishing client engagements were developed in concert with this emerging professional identity; and systems for determining staffing capacity and availability allowed for more nuanced and effective use of time and human resources. Perhaps most importantly at this stage in their development, Ed First made a decision to establish consulting team structures organized around core areas of practice. The first iteration of these practice areas, established in 2010, concentrated on College and Career Readiness, Teacher and Leader Effectiveness, STEM, and Higher Education. In 2015, the mission and vision were refreshed, a move that added Effective Organizations and Investments to the original set. By 2018, these areas had crystallized into their current form: Engaged Students, Outstanding Educators and Effective Organizations and Investments, with business development and knowledge-sharing practices existing across the three functions.

Over the course of these evolving versions of their structure, one can see Ed First adopting an organizational logic in which they positioned units relative to the tasks they felt best placed to execute. They organized their talent and resources in accordance with what they could offer to the field and, in so doing, allowed for greater alignment to their core mission. In this sense, *Direction* offered a form of 'productive bureaucracy' of the type espoused by the

father of the phrase, Max Weber. Yet, this phase did not come without its own risk of ‘crises’, such as the threat of crystallization turning to calcification of the bureaucratic structure, all of which would need to be avoided if they were to meet their objectives moving forward.

In a world defined by *Direction* alone, there exists the ever-present question of how to manage autonomy. For every directive incorporated into a system, leaders face the challenge of being too organizationally loose on the one hand and too organizationally tight on the other. Rigid application of and adherence to the ‘rules of engagement’ can stymie creativity, while increased variability in implementing the mechanisms of the organization can lead to an intolerable variance in outputs. The latter appeared to be the case for Ed First as it moved to the end of its phase of *Direction* and towards the cusp of *Delegation*.

By the time I arrived in 2018 it had become clear that the organization was too large to organize itself in quite the same centralized fashion that had served it well in the previous phase. Everything from the application of project methodology, to the implementation of project management tools and practices, to the quantity and quality of feedback, were all subject to a degree of variability that indicated a shift in organizational structure was required.

As was the case with the original shift towards the task-oriented, consulting team structure, this shift had to stand for more than simply providing organizational efficiency. At a cultural and developmental level, it was important to acknowledge that new structures brought with them nudges towards new behaviors and subsequent conditions. As such, a move was made to reconsider the organization as a series of ‘Home Teams’, each of which would serve as a hub for operational, cultural, and professional development. These Home Teams, primarily responsible for the outward-facing client work of the organization, would hold more autonomy and localized control over functions that impacted project delivery, including new work approval, staffing, responsibility for utilization, and quality delivery

controls. Meanwhile, the internal team would become primarily responsible for finance, data insights, legal, and human resource functions.

It was in the flux between *Direction* and *Delegation*, that consideration of the development of a new Home Team was in the offing. Its conception at an intellectual level was very much in keeping with the reasoning behind the structural shifts that had occurred to date, namely that the organization was looking to take an aspect of the work they felt they already did well (innovation) and formalize it into a legitimate organizational function with the resources and authority it would need to perform. I noticed that these changes held true to the notion that, as organizations evolve, their structures and operating norms adapt to changing circumstances and that these adaptations in turn impact the expectations, processes, habits, and outcomes of those engaged in tasks on behalf of the organization (Morgeson & Campion, 2003). And yet, in this instance, the push for an entirely new set of operating norms and organizational conditions made this endeavor seem even more radical than the others taking place due to the degree of actual and perceived risk associated with investing in an innovation function which didn't offer the immediate promise of returns.

It is telling that the decision to conceive of the iLab came about at this exact point in Ed First's evolution. Having begun its life organizationally 'wild' in its *Creativity*, the firm had moved to tighten its structures in the pursuit of *Direction*. Now it was looking to take advantage of its structural maturity by distributing its leadership in the spirit of *Delegation*. During its movement through these first three phases the organization had shown that it was able to evolve and experiment with different modes of engaging in the work, as determined by the needs of the moment and their capacity to meet those needs. Up to this point, its main competitive advantage had been an ability to respond with nimbleness to the pain points of

the sector – but as the service provider market became more crowded, it was becoming clear that they couldn't continue relying on their old ways.

In response, Ed First now set out to launch an experimental function of the organization in the form of an innovation unit that seemed to borrow from all three evolutionary phases occupied to date. As a separate unit, it would be able to create conditions free from the constraints experienced by the core business, thus lending a creative freedom to the work; at the same time, it would be empowered to set the structural terms of its own direction and metrics for success; finally, it would by its very nature exist as a delegated branch of the organization writ large – separate enough to cultivate unique conditions but connected enough to be able to impact the firm and subsequently the field. But what would be the specific terms of the new endeavor and the innovations it promised – and what about the 'newness' of its design, approach, and intended goals would prepare the iLab to make meaningful impact?

Innovation and Newness

One important distinction to draw when considering the role of newness in innovative practices is the difference between 'innovation' and 'invention'. Innovation does not rely solely on the conception of new ideas, though this does serve as a satisfactory definition of 'invention'. The reality is that innovation extends beyond the conceptual. It is the process by which inventive thinking is developed, operationalized and implemented (Van de Ven, 1999). Innovation, in this sense at least, can therefore be described as 'newness, applied to a system'.

We have already explored the idea that organizations should expect shocks to the system that will initiate innovative leaps but this only goes some way to describing how organizations innovate and evolve. To address the question of how to lay the groundwork for innovation that would not only prime Ed First for the shocks it might face but also create the

conditions for innovations that break the mold and offer entirely new ways of conceiving the work, we began to consider the radical notion that an organization established around a single system is not enough. Instead, what if the main organizational system developed a satellite version of itself, separate enough to innovate without the constraints of the core but connected enough for those innovations to feed back into the main system in the face of organizational challenges? Charles O'Reilly and Michael Tushman's work on *Ambidextrous Organizations* offers us a way of achieving such a state.

According to O'Reilly and Tushman (2004), incremental growth can be gained through work to improve or 'exploit' an existing business, while the 'explore' side of the house is simultaneously seeking new markets and significant growth opportunities. They define the 'exploit' side of the work as those incremental innovations designed to improve the efficiency, quality, and market share of existing products and services, while 'explore' efforts concentrate on breakthrough initiatives designed to catalyze growth more exponentially.

In order to achieve this seemingly contradictory state of simultaneous exploitation and exploration, O'Reilly and Tushman offer what they call the 'Ambidextrous Organization': an organizational structure that separates out its goals and practices in accordance with the exploit/explore divide. The authors offer as an example: *USA Today's* reaction to what they sensed as a shift from traditional print media to online, multimedia offerings and their subsequent attempts to stay relevant in a technologically-evolving world. In this instance, an ambidextrous response to the challenge involved the creation of an innovation wing to the news organization, created with the express intention of exploring the possibilities of digital technologies as the means for delivering news, while the rest of the organization continued to exploit the current 'analogue' version of running a print newspaper (O'Reilly & Tushman, 2016). With these changes came a subsequent

reconsideration of how people within the organization (be that in the innovation-based, ‘.com’ side of the house or the traditional print side) positioned themselves relative to their journalistic tasks and one another.

The innovation arm of the newspaper started to experiment with incentive structures that encouraged collaboration between journalists and videographers – something that had traditionally been anathema to a highly territorial industry where the majority of people acknowledged their turf and did not share or play well with others. The eventual aim was for the innovations tested in the ‘explore’ side of the house to ultimately make their way into the mainstream of practice and offer fresh ways of looking at a changing landscape – unleashed by the new possibilities of the technology, but challenged nonetheless by the human, behavioral changes that needed to occur to make it all happen.

In Ed First’s case it was becoming clear that a model of ambidexterity (a term and a concept we had employed to describe the process from the beginning of my time there) would be worth exploring at this point in their evolutionary arc, residing as they were between *direction* and *delegation*, with the hope of *coordination* to follow. This, in turn, pressed on what became a fundamental question that we would need to address if we were to realize innovation by means of ambidexterity: How might we create the conditions for the development of an innovation unit that is separate enough from the rest of the organization, such that it can innovate free from the constraints of the main system, but connected enough with that system to impact (and be impacted by) those tasked with delivering on the innovations put forward?

Since answering this question would inform in large part the inputs and outputs of the unit, it was important to turn back to O’Reilly and Tushman (and others) in exploring what to expect when faced with the various possible outcomes of innovation.

Innovation and Expected Outcomes

The anticipated outcomes of innovation take different forms, both in relation to the scale and rate of change, each determined by the nature of a particular approach. As I explored the different ways in which innovation might play out in an ambidextrous environment, I came upon useful nomenclature which lent greater definition to the different types of outcomes we might expect from an innovation unit, as well as the approaches necessary to encourage such outcomes. Here, O'Reilly and Tushman describe the differences between three types of innovation at play as organizations undertake innovative processes of change:

They must constantly pursue *incremental innovations*, small improvements in their existing products and operations that let them operate more efficiently and deliver ever-greater value to customers. An automaker, for example, may frequently tweak a basic engine design to increase horsepower, enhance fuel efficiency, or improve reliability. Companies also have to make *architectural innovations*, applying technological or process advances to fundamentally change some component or element of their business. Capitalizing on the data communication capabilities of the Internet, for instance, a bank can perhaps shift its customer-service call center to a low-labor-cost country like India. Finally, businesses need to come up with *discontinuous innovations*—radical advances like digital photography that profoundly alter the basis for competition in an industry, often rendering old products or ways of working obsolete. (O'Reilly & Tushman, 2004, p.76)

Even though there is a place for all three types of innovation described above, I could not help feeling at the time that it was the last of these that must be the ultimate aim of an innovation unit. I based my thinking in the sense that true organizational

transformation happens not when an innovation or exploration unit is forever running tests ‘off to the side’ but only once the organization as a whole is incorporated into or exposed to a discontinuous change at some opportune moment in the arc of that change. What’s more, I felt that investment in a function of this nature should be in service of radical change, especially in the field of education where bold reform is required in many aspects of the system.

Yet, even as I was feeling compelled towards this notion of discontinuity through ambidextrous means, I was simultaneously cognizant of the dangers of being taken in by the allure of radical innovation. This is to say, I was aware that those involved in the unit, including myself, were more likely to be attracted to a model of innovation that positioned the work as bold and leading-edge in nature. I wanted to be sure that this brand of innovation was the right one for *this* context, rather than being driven by the compelling idea of bringing about radical, field-shaping change.

Innovation outcomes do not occur devoid of organizational inputs, with each innovative effort drawing on different resources to achieve its goal. It was therefore important to explore what would have to go into achieving our hoped-for innovations. For that, I turned to the work of Gary Pisano (2015). As part of his work on innovation strategy, Pisano outlines four types of innovation as determined by the organizational conditions required to realize the innovation in question. For each of these four innovation types, Pisano anticipates the organization having to draw on its existing business model (or a new one) and on existing technical competencies (or new ones) in order to realize the innovation at hand. His innovation types fit into a 2x2 framework as shown below in Fig. 1.

Putting aside how each theory uses ‘Architectural’ change differently (the term has a different meaning for O’Reilly and Tushman than it does for Pisano) the two models of

innovation were complementary in parsing out the type of innovation we hoped to see, and what we would require to realize that change.

Fig 1. From *You Need an Innovation Strategy* (Pisano, 2015)

| | | |
|---|--|--|
| REQUIRES NEW BUSINESS MODEL | <p>DISRUPTIVE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Open source software FOR SOFTWARE COMPANIES • Video on demand FOR DVD RENTAL SERVICES • Ride-sharing services FOR TAXI AND LIMO COMPANIES | <p>ARCHITECTURAL</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personalized medicine FOR PHARMACEUTICAL COMPANIES • Digital imaging FOR POLAROID AND KODAK • Internet search FOR NEWSPAPERS |
| LEVERAGES EXISTING BUSINESS MODEL | <p>ROUTINE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A next-generation 3 series FOR BMW • A new index fund FOR VANGUARD • A new 3-D animated film FOR PIXAR <p>LEVERAGES EXISTING TECHNICAL COMPETENCES</p> | <p>RADICAL</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Biotechnology FOR PHARMACEUTICAL COMPANIES • Jet engines FOR AIRCRAFT MANUFACTURERS • Fiber-optic cable FOR TELECOMMUNICATIONS COMPANIES <p>REQUIRES NEW TECHNICAL COMPETENCES</p> |

SOURCE CORNING; GARY P. PISANO
FROM "YOU NEED AN INNOVATION STRATEGY," JUNE 2015

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As I reflected on these theories explaining different expected outcomes of innovation, questions started to form for me relating to the most efficacious means by which we could achieve the most transformative ends. Namely, what type of innovation would we seek to enact: Incremental, Architectural or Discontinuous; what combination of organizational resources would be called upon to foster such innovation: Routine, Disruptive, Architectural or Radical; and what would be the best strategy for maximizing the former while remaining efficient regarding the latter?

I believed that in order to achieve discontinuous innovations (in O'Reilly and Tushman's terms), we would not necessarily need to act out architectural practices (in Pisano's terms) that required both new technical competencies *and* a new business model. Since we were a unit with limited direct resources, with expectations of being able to deliver

in what were entrepreneurial conditions, I wondered if it would be possible to begin with a lean approach that drew on existing resources, expertise, and intellectual property while still employing each in service of a new and innovative value proposition.

Innovation, People, and Transactions

The ambidextrous model presents an interesting challenge because it demands a deep understanding about the role of an innovation unit in the broader life of an organization, the role of the broader organization in the life of an innovation unit, and how both might interact with the field they hope to serve. The success of integrating a sub-system of this nature rests on the people involved, their perceptions of the efforts at hand, and their authority (formal or otherwise) in determining the success of such efforts. Examining the pitfalls of ambidexterity is important in understanding this dynamic – especially in terms of how it can affect the perceptions as drivers of behavior.

In one case study exploring ambidexterity in situ, Kanter (2006) takes us inside the Timberland shoe company as they strive to build their own innovation function. In this instance, the gains made by their innovation unit, and the manner in which those gains were accepted into the main swim of the organization, were initially impeded by the way the unit positioned itself and managed its environment. Rather than adopting a ‘separate-but-connected’ approach, the unit fostered a culture of exclusivity in which only certain members of the organization were privy to the goings on ‘behind the curtain’.

Symbolic and structural decisions were made that exacerbated this effect. The innovation unit was afforded a new office space with state-of-the-art technology, which was placed directly next to the current office space and set apart with signs and a card entry system that only allowed ‘innovators’ into the new realm. Custom-made T-shirts sporting the freshly minted logo of the innovation unit proved a bridge too far for many in the core side of the

business. The result was a high degree of resentment on the part of non-innovators and a reluctance to either contribute to or receive into their own practices the innovations being developed within the unit.

Timberland's initial attempts at innovation offer up an important tension. On the one hand, it appears important that the 'explore' branch of an ambidextrous organization is necessarily separate from the day-to-day running of the house. This makes intuitive sense since being entirely in the swim of the normal way of doing things makes it more difficult to think outside the realms of the status quo. On the other hand, it is clear that innovation units which exist as separate, dislocated aspects of the organization can fall foul of lacking relevant institutional knowledge and, worse still, erode trust. It is easy to imagine how a group of innovators participating in a detached 'laboratory of ideas' could draw resentment from those in the organization who feel they are the ones continuing to do the 'real work' of day-to-day practice. Indeed, Sarason (1996) suggests that organizational conditions are more likely to engender feeling than reason, and that changing lived realities and habits can undermine change efforts despite their technical efficacy.

The challenge, it seems, is to understand the most efficacious ways – both technically at the level of organizational structure and interpersonally at the level of those impacted by the change – in which an innovation unit of this nature interacts with the rest of the organization (not to mention the world of clients and partners it hopes to serve) in a manner that will ultimately allow them to deliver on their aims for the greatest good. That is to say, the ways it will be separate, the ways it will be connected, and how those involved will experience that separateness and connectedness.

One way to address such a question is to think about the traits found in organizations that successfully practice ambidexterity. In many of the organizations studied

by O'Reilly and Tushman (2004), and in the case of the Timberland shoe company (once they had made some necessary adjustments to their model) one aspect in particular held true: organizations operating ambidextrously with success share a clear articulation of what they are striving for and a clear conception of how innovation will help get them there. Since organizations attempting innovation by way of ambidexterity run the risk of having each side of the house pulled in opposite directions, articulations of organizational excellence, built on a collective definition of the 'why' of innovation, serve as the yoke that holds the organizational hemispheres together.

Clear definitions of organizational success such as these end up presenting yet another tension, however. At what point might the uniformity that comes with a coherent definition of success serve to stymie the very innovation one sets out to achieve in the first place? In their paper, *The Tradeoff of Social Control and Innovation in Groups and Organizations*, Nemeth & Straw (1989) argue that uniformity is not necessarily the Holy Grail to which organizations and teams should strive. They argue that it has its place when working towards the attainment of goals and harmony, but that it has detrimental elements too: "Uniformity may result in decreases in innovation, in the detection of error, or in the willingness or ability to adapt to changing circumstances." (Nemeth & Straw, 1989, p.175).

This moved me to a consideration of where to exercise innovation within the organization, when to be organizationally 'tight' versus being organizationally 'loose', and how those involved in the change (the authorizers, early adopters, resisters, and champions – both internal and external) would respond to these changing conditions.

Innovation and Implementation

Beyond the contextual, structural, and interpersonal considerations of innovation, there remained a need to understand the stuff of innovation practices themselves. Carving

out a space in which innovation could take place through ambidexterity still left the risk of concentrating too much on ‘setting the table’ for the practice of innovation rather than actually making it happen. To address this, I considered approaches that would allow us to move from an inventive to an innovative state.

The first approach I hoped to employ, Design Thinking, has become something of a procedural companion to innovation in the last decade, both in terms of its overall proliferation and the variety of its implementation across a range of fields. Today, the term is synonymous with the work of Stanford’s *D: School* and the creative consultancy firm *IDEO*, yet its roots can be found just as much in the design science principles practiced by Buckminster Fuller at MIT in the 1950s, the cooperative design movement that came out of the Scandinavian school of design in the 1960s, and the rational-experimental approach of the 1970s and 80s. Some have observed that the modern incarnation of design thinking is nothing more than a regurgitation of these antecedents, rebranded and sold back to the field for a hefty price. It has also been argued that it lacks the democratic, user-centered spirit many have attributed to the approach, instead inviting participants into a closed system of thinking that can narrow the creative range and impact the degree of inclusivity (Iskander, 2018). Despite these criticisms and a growth in the scale and diversity of its application in recent years, there has remained a subset of principles that I sought to recognize and draw from when considering its usefulness to our purpose.

Buckminster Fuller was instrumental in reclaiming one part of the meaning of ‘design’, which he felt had become overly associated with aestheticism and activities of embellishment. Instead, he wanted the term to stand more for the choices that determine the infinite possibilities of a given system. For Fuller, the universe was replete with intelligent design and, if humans were to unleash their creativity in contributing to that universe, it

followed that they would need to adopt the rigor of the scientific method to underpin their design efforts – hence his pairing of ‘design’ and ‘science’ (Edmondson, 1992). This conception of scientific design has survived into the modern application of design thinking in that it relies on the principles of hypothesizing, testing, and refining to the point of optimal applicability or repeatability.

The Scandinavian design movement took these conceptions of design-as-science, with its assumption of an expert at the center, and opened up the process in a way that placed *people* at the center. Here were the beginnings of a participatory approach to design that utilized ethnographic research, co-operative prototyping, and democratic dialogue to understand the needs and wants of those directly involved in the work (Bødker et al, 1995). This feature has found its way into current design thinking approaches in the form of ‘user-centeredness’.

Even though the design thinking movement was subject to more influences than that of Fuller and the Scandinavian school alone, these two forces in particular helped me in appreciating the essence of the approach and how it might serve our purposes at Ed First. The design thinking stages of ‘empathize, define, ideate, prototype and test’ struck me as a natural coming together of the scientific rigor of the hypothesizing and experimentation found in Fuller’s definition of design, while the conception of a user (with whom we might empathize and for whom we are ultimately in the business of designing) was closer to the sensibilities of the Scandinavian approach. I felt we would need to draw upon both traditions in our own work if we were to be successful.

These approaches seemed to fit Ed First’s approach, in that it resonated with aspects of their current approach, albeit expressed in new ways. The organization’s reputation for excellence made it important to value the rigor that comes with seeing design as possessing

of the scientific qualities of experimentation. The firm's commitment to equity in education meant that placing those with the greatest proximity to the problems facing the system would be important to our conception of the work. It was therefore particularly powerful when we were able to join forces with Christine Ortiz, whose work on Equity by Design had taken the concepts of user-centered, empathy-driven practices and directed them even more intentionally at arresting inequities in school systems. For Ortiz, school systems are inequitable by design, which means they can be redesigned. What's more, she posits that if we begin by designing for people at the margins (those with the greatest proximity to the problem) rather than 'typical' students at the middle of the curve, we are more likely to design for equity (Hill, Molitor & Ortiz, 2015). For me, this intentional commitment to equity-infused design completed the picture of the specific interpretation of design thinking upon which we would need to rely as we entered into the work.

The second approach that I felt could play a prominent part in our practices of innovation was the Lean Startup model. An innovation unit starting from scratch and hoping to realize new products and services into the world through an experimental approach was always going to rely on a model that talked of maximizing efficiency and minimizing risk. To that end, the lean approach offered a logical way of testing our emerging ideas for efficacy and potential impact without burning through our resources.

The model itself came about as a reaction to the costly mistakes that plagued the startup world through the early 2000s, culminating in the alarming statistic that, even to this day, 75% of such endeavors fail. The most common mistakes tend to revolve around an over-commitment to overly-extensive and rigid plans at the front end that leave little room for adjustment in the face of changing conditions (Gage, 2012). Instead of imagining a 'grand plan' which assumes a series of neat steps towards a preordained picture of success,

the lean approach expects failure, repositions customers (or users) as vital sources of information (often by virtue of them telling you what they *don't* want), and allows for an iterative process in which the business idea becomes progressively refined through rapid cycles of low-cost, rich-in-learning experimentation (Blank, 2013). Rather than mapping this process out in an unwieldy, unrealistic five-year plan, the lean approach instead recommends organizing frameworks such as the Business Model Canvas: a concise template for recording the emerging idea that describes the product or firm's value proposition, infrastructure, customers, and finances. Critical to its efficacy is the fact that the canvas can be amended and refined in real time to suit the changing picture of the product or approach in development (Ries, 2011).

Considering that Ed First had never engaged in the deliberate creation of products and services in quite this way before, let alone products that might rely on technology platforms to function, it was clear to me that we would have to rely on the power of prototypes or minimum viable products (MVPs) to inform our approach. Ed First already had intellectual property that we considered as potentially valuable to a field-facing audience, so I started to explore the possibilities of what has become known in the lean literature as 'Piecemeal MVP'. This is a process of prototype creation that pulls together existing tools, often free-to-use, in order to build a facsimile of the product you imagine in your mind's eye (Ries, 2011). This offered us the opportunity to build strawman versions of products, which could then be refined through use, while allowing us to test the assumptions we were making about the value they represented to the field and why.

'Value' is itself very much in the eye of the beholder when it comes to the outputs of innovation. Just as the practice of innovation is highly relational and transactional, so is the

manner in which innovation lands (or fails to land) with an organization's hoped-for users.

Indeed, it has been said:

The relational character of innovation is already reflected in the fact that its value is based on customers' and users' reactions to it. An innovation by itself has no value; it is only the consumer or business demand that innovation creates that leads to value creation and later value capture. In this respect, early customers and lead users provide the seeds to enable the spread and development of innovations and engagement of these users is a critical first step in building up interest in an innovation. (Rogers, 2003, p.223)

This was a telling reminder of what is seen by many as the innovator's trap: falling for your own ideas. By conceiving of 'value' as that which exists in the eye of the beholder, we would be better positioned to build products that were user-centered and driven by a clear value proposition that stood to impact the firm and the field in a meaningful way.

Innovation and Change

Innovation does not bring about change in and of itself. Rather, as we have already established, it operates within a broader context of change, being subject to the processes, people, and political transactions that make up the life of an organization. Considering this left me wondering what kind of change we hoped to see as a result of our work, what form that change might take at the level of the people involved, and how a better understanding of what it takes to accelerate change in organizations would help the cause.

To address questions such as these, John Kotter (2014) breaks down what the instituting and mobilizing of such change efforts can look like and offers eight 'accelerators' for generating and maintaining the momentum required for change to occur (see Figure.2). Most important for my purposes was the urgency of 'the why' residing at the heart of

Kotter's articulation of accelerated change. By creating the innovation unit in the first place we had to rely on a guiding coalition, albeit a fragile one at the authorizing level, out of which we hoped would come the strategic vision for 'the what' of the work. By carving out the organizational space for innovation to take place (through ambidexterity) and in deciding on our own vision of success, there would begin to be a sense of 'the how'.

Fig. 2 Kotter's Eight Accelerators



Questions that remained for me going into the work settled around the need for a clearer sense of 'the who', encapsulated in the question: 'Which other personnel in the organization would be recruited to support in the work and how would we invite them to appreciate the rationale for the work?' and 'the when', bounded in the question: 'How might we sequence these change efforts and at what point would we pivot from being an innovation unit doing work 'off to one side' towards a more integrated part of the organization offering a more visible and systematized version of innovation that incorporates stakeholders from both sides of the ambidextrous divide?'

Kotter's theories helped me to get at these questions informing my work, since his model posits that any accelerated change to a system relies on more than a select few tasked

with pushing innovative practices. Realistic change instead calls on what he describes as a ‘volunteer army’: members of the core of the organization incentivized to offer their expertise in support of the growing innovation. Kotter describes how, “The game is all about vision, opportunity, agility, inspired action, and celebration – not project management, budget reviews, reporting relationships, compensation, and accountability to a plan” (Kotter, 2014, p.25). In other words, support for innovation is cultivated through acts of leadership, not management.

It soon became clear to me that an innovation team of four people was not going to be able to deliver on the promise of our vision for the work alone. I realized that incorporating a supporting cast of interested stakeholders from the core organization to support innovation efforts would not only be desirable at the level of drawing on their expertise and reach but inevitable since our early efforts pointed to the need for reinforcements. Whether they would be out-and-out volunteers inspired to join in the good innovation fight or whether different incentive structures would be required remained to be seen.

Nonetheless, exploring the work of Kotter invited me to consider that both leadership and management would be required to mobilize this wider effort - since building a vision for innovation cannot occur without the former and the institutionalizing of innovation cannot happen without the latter. Deciding how far would be reasonable to expect us to take the work in this regard, including just how far we could expect to move around the ‘dial’ of Kotter’s change circle, added to the challenge of establishing a Theory of Action that was both ambitious and realistic.

The theory of action outlined below makes a series of bets around the causal effects of a series of actions. Broadly speaking, these bets fall into two important categories:

1. To what extent might we create the conditions for innovation?
2. To what extent might we take advantage of those conditions to innovate our way towards impactful solutions for the firm and the field?

Theory of Action

| | |
|--|---|
| IF I am able to build out the innovation unit as an independent entity with dedicated staff, distinct rules, processes, and incentives... | THEN the freedom from constraints that comes with that structure will allow us to explore powerful new ideas with potential for impact. |
| IF the innovation unit learns to capitalize on its conditions to ideate, test, fail, transfer knowledge, and learn again in rapid cycles... | THEN the likelihood of the unit creating powerful new ideas, products, and services that offer sustained value to our clients, distinct from previous efforts and offerings, will increase. |
| IF the Innovation Unit is able to inspire new and powerful solutions for the field while informing and encouraging innovative improvement efforts within the firm... | THEN Education First will be better positioned to deliver on a core commitment: to use knowledge, innovation and creativity to support the nation's schools in helping all young people succeed in college, careers and life. * |

*The last of these stages exists outside the scope of my ten-month residency but acknowledging and connecting my actions to the broader conception of success for the firm was important for our work.

Though it is important to acknowledge, even in hindsight, the difficulty of ascribing an entirely causal relationship between the intervention that is 'If' and the promise of change that is 'Then', it is possible to make inferences about choices made that go some way to testing the hypotheses established at the outset.

It is also worth noting that the nature of an innovation unit, and its tolerance for testing and failing more often than in more conventional organizational settings, presents an interesting challenge as far as providing *evidence of progress* is concerned. We had to challenge norms around what the returns of such a unit might be – including tackling notions of what constitutes indicators of success. For us, the early days of any R&D function were best

defined through the maxim ‘process is product’ – a condition that was certainly true of our experiences in the iLab. Our initial innovation efforts were for the most part held accountable through the transparency with which we articulated our approach to our authorizing environment – namely, the partners investing in the unit in the first instance and (after a time) the rest of the organization and the wider field, all of whom had the power to resist or encourage the efforts and outcomes of our work.

The ‘process is product’ theory influencing how we communicated evidence of the iLab’s activities will be no differently represented here – and I have weaved evidence of our progress into my description of the process for that reason.

Description and Evidence

The What, the How, and the ‘So What?’

By the time I arrived at Ed First on July 1st, 2018 it was clear that my job would be to design and deliver on the promise of an innovation unit within the firm. The decision had already been made at the partner level to create a unit that would complement current strategic efforts with new, exploratory approaches. It had also been decided that ambidexterity would be the model of innovation supporting the work. It is worth noting that, even though I was not at the firm at the time of the decision, the idea of an ambidextrous approach was a significant selling point to my opting to take part in this aspect of the organization’s change efforts. My strategic project would be to work with the founder and CEO, Jenn Vranek, along with two Principals at the firm, to design, build, and embed the unit within the wider organization.

In order to appreciate the nature of the tasked we faced, it was first important to understand what Ed First had been ‘in the business of’ – in other words, the value they had traditionally represented to the field, their position relative to the rest of their competitors in

the market, and how all this fed into a decision to take deliberate steps towards organized innovation. I had explored why organizations lean towards innovating in general and had started to develop a rationale from the research I had conducted in getting to know this organization in particular. At the same time, I was aware that there existed a story beyond the surface of why certain people within the firm were interested in an innovative endeavor of this nature – not to mention whether and why some might have been resistant.

Having been a Program Officer at the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and having occupied roles throughout her career that called on the need for a wide variety of consultative engagements, Jenn Vranek had a mountain of experience engaging with consultants across expertise areas from communications and PR, to strategy, research, and assessment. By her own admission, she had had enough of the variability she was seeing in the field – and upon founding Ed First she pledged that she wanted it to become the firm that she had long hoped to encounter but never found.

Ed First had now existed for twelve years and during that time the firm had come a long way towards realizing Jenn’s vision. They did so by developing expertise of domain through their work in Teacher and Leader Preparation and Social Emotional Learning. They had also shown that they could win the work being offered by a wide variety of clientele (from Foundations, to Districts, to State Departments of Education) and employ versatile modes of support (from big picture strategic planning and policy advising to on-the-ground coaching and facilitation support).

The question of what Ed First was ‘in the business of’ had also been addressed as the topic of a previous capstone written about the organization. Sarah McLean’s work on applying the ‘Jobs to be Done’ framework to the practices of Ed First tackled the notion of the *received* value it represented to those who sought their services. Through her work,

MacLean concluded that 85% of Ed First’s portfolio was dedicated to their serving as a “Co-creator, Facilitator/Politics Navigator and Learning & Networks Accelerator” – suggesting a high degree of tailored engagement and collaboration, either between Ed First and the client or across clients as a result of Ed First’s expertise in convening stakeholders. The remaining 15% of the portfolio positioned them as “Hired Guns” – suggesting client projects that were tightly bound and defined – and as offering a “Fresh Perspective” – suggesting work that allowed for a greater degree of innovation (McLean, 2017, p. 51).

As I looked more closely at the span of their work, I noticed that Ed First was able to draw on its deep knowledge base of the field to build robust diagnostic offerings for their clients, often coming in the form of landscape analyses and needs assessments – a service particularly useful to foundations who wanted to know where current efforts and resources were being deployed so that they could make determinations about where they might add the most value. The firm had also built a reputation for building communities of practice and for designing and delivering powerful convenings which rested on a highly-developed appreciation of adult learning principles and displayed high degrees of alignment between overarching purpose and the design of the learning experience. Strategic planning initiatives were also a strong suit, often coming in the form of implementation support and progress monitoring for philanthropies and non-profits. Then there was the firm’s commitment to inter-organizational alignment which saw them work with Funder Collaboratives to support state workgroups and commissions. Finally, there was their work in the program design space, characterized by implementation support and progress monitoring for states, districts and non-profits, as well as policy diagnostics and solutions for federal, state, and local policy representatives. Benefitting from Ed First’s content knowledge and appreciation of the activities of the field, these services also rested on the firm’s strong facilitation skills as they

helped teams through change processes – all underpinned by a strong understanding of the pains and gains of developmental work and organizational change.

The most common ultimate deliverable of these engagements, apart from the experiential, came in the form of comprehensive slide decks, characterized by high standards of quality assurance and accomplished with highly specific expectations in terms of structure and form. Style guides offered a granular picture of how the research, findings, and recommendations should be communicated to the client. The employment of sentence-long headlines introducing each slide was suggestive of a firm that wished to offer a detailed and highly developed picture of their thinking at every point in the client engagement. This commitment to the details that communicate excellence stand as emblematic of the kind of organization Ed First wished to be: a place where talented people with excellent content knowledge work with clients to examine complex issues, culminating in exemplary experiences and artefacts of that work.

Exploring the specific value Ed First presented to the field in this way helped to place the firm comparatively within the wider market of educational consultants. As I explored that comparison further, I discovered that Ed First was not the only entity undergoing an evolution: so was the market. When it opened its doors in 2006 as a scrappy, one-person organization, there were less than a handful of similar players in the field that offered the kinds of supports and value described above, with entities like Public Impact acting as one of Ed First's only true competitors. Even by the time it had grown to a five-person organization in 2008, with two other owners and two full time members of staff - contemporaries in the field were still just as scarce. By 2012, however, the number had grown to something closer to ten – with organizations like Bellwether and BCG building out similar functions. By 2018, around twenty direct competitors populated the field – with the

proliferation of independent consultancy firms (due to technological advances in virtual working and the increasing ‘gig economy’) accounting for much of the uptick (J. Vranek, personal communication, February, 2019).

This growing competition signaled to Jenn Vranek and the partners that a new way of thinking about the value Ed First represented to the field would be required if they were to remain relevant and ahead of the competition. Though consensus was clear about the nature of the threat, there was still debate around whether a dedicated innovation function represented the right solution at this time. Pressing on the question of whether intentional innovation was the right way to go was the more fundamental question of competitive advantage. As I have already stated, Ed First had traditionally differentiated through nimbleness in responding to the pain points of the field – but as the market was becoming more crowded with similar providers, what would serve as Ed First’s new means of standing out from the crowd and how might the innovation unit play a part in making that happen? The stakes of this bet were made all the higher by the fact that the iLab would constitute the largest single investment across the whole firm in a given year – such was the nature of staffing four employees to a unit that wasn’t driven by revenue, and especially when three of the four had been significant revenue generators for the core business up to that point.

In addition, the rate and extent of the change happening organization-wide (such as new hires, structural reorganization, and new investment in technology infrastructure) was a factor that could potentially have proved too much given the additional resources required to sustain an innovation effort. Jenn Vranek herself admitted that she was torn between her personal desire to realize the possibilities of innovating in this way and the pragmatism she felt whenever she realized the firm was making such a significant investment, the fruits of which they might not see for some time (J. Vranek, personal communication, February,

2019). In many ways, this tension could be seen as ambidextrous in its composition, with Jenn and others deciding between the stability that would come from exploiting Ed First's current value versus the potential yield that would come from exploring new ways of creating value. Just as had been the case with *USA Today*, a structural and strategic decision around when, where, and how to innovate was already having a very real impact on the nature of the 'innovation decision' at hand.

Indeed, it soon became clear to me that a big component of this dilemma around risk and reward rested on the very perceptions people had around innovation in general and how it manifested at the firm in particular. To better understand those perceptions and the choices that might rise out of them, I explored the varying perspectives on innovation held by Ed Firsters firm-wide and began to realize that there was an even more nuanced relationship with innovation at play. Across the thirty interviews I conducted in the early part of my time there, a number of prominent themes began to emerge.

Innovation was described by many as an amorphous term. Many of those with whom I spoke would offer something they had done with the accompanying question, "Is *that* innovative?" or "Does *that* make me innovative?" (personal communications, July, 2018). This uneasiness with the practice and term resonated with much of what I had been exploring in my own research about how the elusiveness of the concept – and the variety of its application – was in some way responsible for individuals' reticence to call innovation by its name.

Another prominent theme was the belief that innovation was already happening at all layers of the organization because of the nature of consulting in general and because Ed First was built on a spirit of innovation and entrepreneurialism in particular. This commitment to doing things differently was exemplified by the fact that the partners at Ed

First continued to be deeply engaged in client-facing work – a feature that was described to me as “new and rare” (personal communication, July, 2018). Not only did this level and type of involvement strike me as a hangover from the early days of the ‘creativity phase’ as Greiner would put it, I also learned from Ed Firsters that the approach had helped set the tone for an innovative approach firm-wide – especially in response to the needs of client-facing projects.

Innovation was described as happening at the level of individuals and teams and in a manner borne out of the necessities and idiosyncrasies of the projects being worked on at a given time. People told me that sometimes the scope and sequence of a given project prompted an innovative approach, because of the nature of the ask, at which point, Ed Firsters tended to rely on the fact that “We’re good at stealing ideas from one another” (personal communication, July, 2018) to get the tools they needed to be able to meet the demands of the situation. The reasons for this approach were seen as rooted in the fact that the systems for capturing innovative practices were underdeveloped. One person told me, “There has been so much that is new over the last six months but 85% is not sticky because of the swirl of work and the amount of initiatives” (personal communication, July, 2018).

From these interactions and others, I was beginning to realize that innovation was something that occurred at the level of need rather than in a systematized manner and that, even when innovation was seen to be taking place, it was hard to say how it was being defined, applied or measured. One of the few metrics used to capture the role of innovation at the point of individual practice was found in Ed First’s competency model and the accompanying process of self-reflection. Yet, of the fifteen competencies informing the self-evaluation, Ed First employees on average ranked ‘Innovation’ as 15th out of 15 in a list of aptitudes they were regularly and proficiently able to demonstrate.

An insightful and telling trend in my interactions also spoke to the relationship between innovation and content knowledge, or domain-specific expertise. It was noted on a number of occasions that the areas in which Ed First had been able to stand out and beat the competition were those where they had evolved in their expertise at the domain level. A good example of this is the way in which they had started in the business of Teacher Evaluation, which had evolved into to a growing reputation in Teacher Preparation, which was built out into their becoming a force in Teacher Leadership writ large. Through this deepening of the work, the firm had shown that it was capable of building a strong foundation of domain-specific expertise that ameliorated the likelihood of being branded ‘generalists’ – a costly threat many consultancy firms face.

At the same time, it was evident that their growing competence and confidence in certain domains, such as the advances and expert hires being made in SEL, allowed them to turn the corner from being responsive to the needs of the field towards a state that instead allowed them to set the tone for the sector and pro-actively contribute to the discourse around a given practice. As one Ed Firster put it, “We have become content experts in these fields, responding to both the demands of the field and beginning to engage in some ‘crystal balling’ from the firm and from funders about where the field might be going” (personal communication, July, 2018).

These perspectives on how innovation lives within the organization resonated with much of what I had been noticing from the literature about how innovation intersects with its context, people, and processes. It was clear from my early interactions that time and competing commitments had an impact on the extent to which people felt they could be innovative within their work – and yet, despite these constraints, it appeared similarly clear that innovation was happening in small ways within groups, normally determined by project

teams. Novel combinations of people and approaches were giving rise to more efficient ways of doing things but those with whom I interacted tended to describe *incremental* improvements to existing approaches as opposed to anything more radical. Then there was the notion of relying on field-based knowledge as a sense-making mechanism for responding to the needs of the field and how consultancy firms in particular have had to become finely attuned to such needs in order to stay relevant.

In each of these aspects, I felt that the iLab had the opportunity to operate in a distinctly-different manner. Instead of the constraints of competing commitments coming in the form of client-driven demands, billable hours, and sales targets – the iLab would have the relative freedom to develop products and services more patiently and according to an iterative process where failure was more acceptable. Instead of striving for incremental improvements through the happenstance of particular combinations of personnel who treat innovation as a response to project-driven necessity, the iLab could adopt a more systematized approach that utilized (in Pisano’s terms) disruptive means to build new models for change, in pursuit of (in O’Reilly and Tushman’s terms) at least architectural and potentially discontinuous innovation. Finally, rather than positioning ourselves as passive sense-makers in relation to the education field, adopting a reactive approach to what we thought the landscape needed, here was an opportunity to establish the iLab as a generator of best practices, working at the leading edge of what was in the best interests of the field – all based on our collective expertise working across a range of differing contexts.

Creating the Conditions for Innovation

In order to achieve the above aims and those described in the primary phase of my Theory of Action, it was first important for us to build out the iLab as an independent entity, such that it would exist as separate from the rest of the organization by way of its rules,

processes, and incentives. As I began to make sense of what it would mean to achieve this, I realized that these features would only be truly separate if they rested on a distinct conception of the very identity of the iLab as far as those working within it were concerned. I entered into the early days of the work with a recurring question: “Who are we and what are we *for*?” Repeating and reacting to this question served as a reminder of the importance of having a clear identity undergirding our work and grounded my decisions in those broader questions I had set out at the very beginning: “Why innovation *here* and *now*?” and “Innovation *to what end*?”

In service of building our identity, the first order of business before I had completed my first formal day at the organization was to come together as a team, build a mutual understanding of one another within this new context, and decide what we were bringing into (and wanted to get out of) working in an innovation unit of this nature. Over the course of a series of introductory meetings, culminating in a two-day retreat in early May, we established some of our key intentions which we called ‘The Why, What, How, and Who of iLab’. This initial brainstorming established a rationale for our work, namely that system leaders within the education space were too often under-supported and therefore did not always possess the skills, capacity, or networks to be effective leaders of change. We also agreed that increased awareness of the impacts of institutionalized racism on student success has created energy to address individual, organizational, and systemic challenges associated with diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) but that most capacity in the field was focused on individual and organizational DEI rather than addressing equity in organizations’ programming and services. We wanted to be able to create innovative solutions that would empower leaders to take on such challenges and that we wanted those solutions to grow out of Ed First’s mission-driven commitment to addressing inequities in education.

Early on, we agreed that a major responsibility, beyond the overarching promise of the impact we hoped to make, was to be able to prove and continue to articulate to the partners of the firm that the iLab was worthy of continued support. This need to maintain a ‘runway’ for our work was a necessary reality of our status as a newly-forged department, adopting the comparatively speculative practice of innovation and adhering to as-yet-unclear success metrics for our work. This, we agreed, would have to come in the form of concrete operating norms; transparency of process through the sharing of 30-, 60-, and 90-day project plans; monthly sharing and problem-solving calls with the managing partner and COO about the needs, decisions, and supports required; and a focus on maintaining the space to do innovation work – despite the competing commitments of an otherwise-busy organization.

In keeping with this transparency of process, we set out from the start what the iLab hoped to be and how it would fit into the broader life of the firm. We laid out these intentions as follows:

- We will work toward becoming an ambidextrous organization. In our ‘exploit’ practice areas, we should narrow and improve our core services; increase our market share in the core services; and bring in more productizing and efficiency. In our innovation unit, we will ‘explore’ new markets, new practice areas, and breakthroughs in service delivery.
- We will organize as an independent unit with dedicated staff, different rules, processes, incentives, and compensation. The unit will function independently and integrate back into the core business via senior management. The integration is two-way: innovations in the core business will inform the innovation unit, too. Given our size, a good amount of our innovation will be funded via exploratory client work (as opposed to being funded exclusively through firm resources).

- The innovation unit intends to use design thinking and Lean Start-Up principles to ideate, prototype, test, fail, succeed, learn and transfer knowledge in rapid cycles. Initial candidates for ‘explore’ efforts include: Talent Culture and Climate services; new ways of doing business such as ‘sprints’ or design teams; licensed or new tools; low-cost or subscription-based trend reports or analyses; and other new ideas that may emerge from the core business and need to be tested outside the operating procedures of our main business.

With these statements of intent as our starting point, we turned our attention to definitions of success both in terms of our own processes and outputs. This gave rise two foundational documents, the building of which was important to our emerging collective identity: a competency model specific to the work of iLab and a set of success measures and metrics.

The competency model stood as distinct from the definitions of excellence articulated to the rest of the organization and attended to the iLab’s overlapping function as a place to create new solutions, meet the needs of a changing field, continue to produce the high-quality work Ed First had become known for, and to capture our learning along the way in iterative cycles of learning and improvement. With that, we settled on four key competency drivers of the model: Design, Deliver, Discover and Document – each with their own sub-competencies capturing both process and outcomes. We wanted to be able to root all our actions in a learner-mindset and create a virtuous cycle of innovation with a nod to the design thinking process and the science of improvement.

Our design process allowed us to observe various creations as they came into being, capture our learning as we went, and use that developing knowledge base to inform subsequent design choices. The ‘design and delivery’ phases were informed by (and in turn

informed) the other strands of our work that preceded and followed. The ‘discovery and document’ phases powered the first two because we were able to capture, codify, and learn from the work that we were doing along the way.

This presented a significant departure from the traditional operating model of an organization like Ed First, since it privileged the development of ideas and their potential for creating different types of value in the longer term over their immediate prospects for return on investment. For us, ‘process would be product’. By adopting a competency model that stood as distinct from the rest of the organization, we hoped to establish a vision for how we would be different and how we wished to hold ourselves accountable to our distinctive approach (See Appendix 1. for the iLab Competency Model).

In response to the challenge of demonstrating leading indicators of success in an organization that was used to seeing more immediate returns, we started work on a new interpretation of our metrics for success. Here resided the beginnings of what became an important decision about how to articulate our Return on Investment (ROI) to the firm. The earliest version of the ROI we laid out set a revenue-based target of \$250,000 during our first year as an iLab. We soon realized that attributing a target of this nature to our work would establish incentives that would not be conducive with our intentions to innovate. This gave rise to the question of how to articulate value to something in an organization that had only ever used dollars and cents as an expression of value in ROI terms. Establishing these revised terms was not a straightforward process and it took some time for us to be able to articulate it in a way that made sense to us and the partners (See Appendix 2. for an early working draft of iLab’s Success Criteria). Early on in this endeavor, I met with Professor Michael Tushman, one of the architects of the ambidexterity theory, to explore his thinking on the question of ROI in ambidextrous settings. My time with Tushman and subsequent

strategy meetings as an iLab led to a number of clarifications for how we intended to define our value to the firm.

First, we decided that ROI expressed in purely monetary terms should no longer be part of the conversation at the partner level. We argued that just as our competencies, structures, and identity were distinct, so too should be our metrics for success. The message we wanted to convey loud and clear was that any investment in iLab was an investment in the future of Ed First. In keeping with that conception of future success, we needed to get comfortable with saying, ‘We’re not going to make any money...yet. But we are going to change the way we do what we do in new and powerful ways in the long run.’

In lieu of monetary indications of progress, we considered the ways we might otherwise demonstrate value, such as the number of attempts and fails made to create innovative products and services – something Tushman refers to as ‘Shots on Goal’ (M. Tushman, personal correspondence, September, 2018); demonstrations of what we were learning through the process; client responsiveness to our ideas; ‘buzz’ in the marketplace or the broader field; and the testimonies of lead users.

Instead of treating this approach to value articulation merely as an abstract rendering of the processes we were undertaking, I began to notice that we could operationalize the steps by mapping it onto a decision-making and product development framework. If our expression of value was best captured through a careful and transparent articulation of our process, then it followed that the terms of that articulation should also be the means by which we defined and maintained the innovation pipeline within the organization. What followed was a careful process of co-creating a framework that best encapsulated the machinery of the innovation unit in actuality. I started this process by researching the science of decision-making and, in particular, the kinds of ‘decision-gates’ traditionally employed in

innovation contexts (See Appendix 3. for the iLab Decision-making Framework). Added to this, I explored studies into product and portfolio management to better appreciate how the phases of the iLab as a ‘creator-of-products-and-services’ would function (See Appendix 4. for iLab Portfolio Management Framework). Out of this came a foundational decision-making and portfolio management matrix that would serve both as the rationale of our ROI *and* drive our process at the operational level.

Included in this stage of our work, and driven by our work on portfolio management, there arose questions about the range and type of products in the portfolio that were worthy of consideration. It quickly became clear to us that a blend of high and low risk projects would be required since our choices needed to speak to both the ‘secure’ and the ‘stretch’ ends of the innovation spectrum. A ‘blended portfolio’ invited us to develop projects that could exist both as ‘products’ (that offered repeatable, even automated use on the part of clients) and as ‘packaged services’ that would work in conjunction with those products in the form of wraparound supports. The model offered a path out of the traditional fee-for-service approach and its associated constraints. It also behooved us to deepen our understanding of the economics behind bringing innovations of this nature to market – namely, the interplay between numbers of customers, costs of products sold, associated consulting revenue, gross revenue, and net profits. More specifically, we needed to be able to determine how many and what mix of projects would offer the optimal balance of risk, reward, and learning. Along with this came, once again, a concession that the economics of the products being tested were not likely to pay off as standalone efforts. Instead, we argued there would be products involved in our testing and learning that would serve as a gateway back to fee-for-service-based contracts with new and current clients. This presented the opportunity to deliver products based on more cost-effective, value-priced

contracts that could be delivered much more profitably, thus disrupting the model that defined our existing services. We had long talked about what it would mean to disrupt competitors within the market – but the notion that we could offer alternatives to our *own* tried-and-tested approaches in order to create even greater value (and with it, increased potential for scale and impact) was new territory.

These initial drafts of an operational model for the iLab were useful in shaping our thinking about product and portfolio management. I took the specifics of each phase and the means by which we would hold ourselves accountable for developing a healthy innovation pipeline and rendered them into a form that could more easily be mapped onto an articulation of our value to the firm as a return on investment. We broke the process of developing a suite of products and services down into three phases, each with their own overarching purpose, measure of success, and target for the coming year:

| Stage | Purpose | Measure | Annual Target |
|------------------------------|---|--|--|
| Stage 1: Project Potential | How healthy is our development pipeline? | Quantity and diversity of type (<i>products, repeatable services, tech-based, etc.</i>) that iLab identifies as having potential for development | At least 10 ideas worth testing are in the pipeline at any given time |
| Stage 2: Product Development | Are we learning that our products and services are market viable? | Tangible evidence of “work in progress” <i>products</i> (e.g., microsities or a wireframes) or <i>repeatable services</i> (e.g., complete facilitation guides) | At least 2 per year have been researched, developed and tested for market readiness |
| Stage 3: Going to Market | Are our products achieving profit and impact? | The number and type of products or services being actively pitched, sold, or worked compared to the number in development | At least 1 profitable product/service per year successfully taken to market and sold with some scale |

With an ROI framework for our approach established, we started to think about what we would need in order to achieve each phase of the work. The incentives and

resources that drove our process were entirely different, both by necessity and design, than the rest of the organization, and our approach was underpinned by a sentiment that was as much a reminder to us within the iLab as it was for the partner and core business stakeholders with whom we engaged: We expect accountability for ROI *and* need to define it in a way that incentivizes trying many things, some of which might fail. These include deliberately developing promising ideas; intentionally stopping ideas that we learn are not promising; and bringing the right products to market.

Even though I felt we were making progress on the mechanisms driving the work, we needed to attend to the behavioral, interpersonal, and political dimension as it related to those implicated. To that end, the potential for interaction with and impact on the core business was front of mind. As much as I was sure that organizing for a firm-wide appreciation of our approach to innovation was a hypothesis worthy of testing, I was also becoming more aware of the challenges associated with arresting the received way of doing things at Ed First.

It is difficult to understate how different this estimation of value felt when held against the accepted norms of Ed First. Here was an organization that had a self-styled reputation for entering into its work with an attitude of ‘GSD’. As already stated, the acronym stood for ‘Get Stuff Done’, although the ‘S’ was interchangeable with another word, depending on the audience. Here was a place where billable hours had once been described to me as ‘oxygen’. In light of this, the notion that a unit that intentionally defined and incentivized itself as ‘trying many things, some of which might fail’ was always going to run the risk of appearing wasteful by comparison. Reimagining the value we represented, and the way that we positioned ourselves relative to the work in light of those evolving notions of value, were factors requiring significant consideration as we embarked on the next phase

of this change. Our efforts struck me as playing out in two arenas: internally at the level of the rest of the firm and externally at the level of the field. Understanding and shaping our relationship to each would be vital to our continued success.

Internally, we wanted to make it clear to partners in the first instance, and eventually to any ‘Ed Firster’ implicated in the work of the iLab, that they should expect their own offerings to be priced, sold, and delivered differently because of our work. For example, if an iLab project gave rise to a new approach to strategic planning that placed equity at the center in a manner not before articulated, or an iLab product invited a new way of designing proposals to our clients that handed part of the organizational lift over to a tool designed to be used absent the need of a consultant’s support, we were already showing that we could codify those learnings and ‘hand them back’ to the firm in a manner that offered some degree of value add to their existing approach.

We felt that generating these kinds of procedural efficiencies and additions, though closer to incremental improvements than the model of disruptive innovation we were attempting elsewhere, were nonetheless necessary to show the firm as a whole that the work of the iLab had the power to change the conditions within which *everyone* worked, even in small but important ways. By illustrating that this was possible, we stood to gain more support and authority to enact some of the more disruptive efforts that we were undertaking.

The initiation of these innovative efforts (be they small or large, incremental or disruptive) happened first as a result of the work of the iLab but we argued that, in time, the core business would be in a position to contribute to the refining of these products and services by using them – and even begin to offer more exploratory ideas for incubation

within the iLab. In this regard, we had begun to paint a picture of how the iLab would feed the core business and how the core business might feed the iLab for the betterment of the firm and the field. This promise of a ‘circulatory system’ that allowed innovation to flow in both directions in and out of the unit allowed us to position the iLab as happening *with* rather than *to* the rest of the organization. It was clear that we first needed to do more to define ourselves and begin the work of innovation as a unit – but I also knew that, if ever the iLab was to become accepted by the body of the organization, we would need to build and maintain such systems of transparency and reciprocity.

Externally, there also existed the challenge of understanding how we would be perceived and how our value would be acknowledged by the field. In this arena, it would be incumbent on us to capture our process as we went along and to be able to articulate the connections between what we were doing and the value it proposed to any potential user. This would eventually involve making a noise about the products and services on which we were working. This could come in the form of writing about our work, through broader thought leadership on the manner of innovation, and by establishing mutually beneficial partnerships with recognized players in the field. Paramount among these steps, however, would be to get the products into the hands of early adopters and capture what they had to say. In order to be in a position to determine how we might affect the field, we needed to create things to which the field could react.

These early stages of the life of the iLab had become known as the ‘soft launch’ because we were still operating at the level of establishing the broad structural conditions for the work; now it was time to go for the ‘hard launch’ of developing products. Having established the machinery by which the iLab would operate, it was time to ‘switch it on’ and see what happened.

Taking Advantage of the Conditions for Innovation

We had carved out the space in which innovation might occur and were now faced with the challenge of how to ideate, test, fail, transfer knowledge, and learn – all in pursuit of powerful new ideas, products, and services for the firm and the field.

Ironically, the original, monetary-based ROI target we had established in the earliest stages of our work was all-but-met in short order when the newly formed iLab promptly secured a significant proposal to serve the Oak Foundation Learning Differences Programme (Oak LDP). The project fell into the purview of iLab because it invited us to develop an entirely new approach to strategic planning that infused an Equity by Design approach.

As I have already described, the method blended design thinking with a commitment to equity, offering a new way of designing ‘at the margins’ for education systems. It had already received exposure and plaudits, primarily through its application to community-driven, collaborative school design but this was the first time it was being applied to a strategic planning effort in this way. Here was an early opportunity to engage in the kind of equity-driven work that was a stated priority of the firm and the iLab. It also offered us the opportunity to break new ground in terms of applying an innovative approach such as this at the systems level and to inform the strategic direction of a hugely influential and global foundation seeking to make meaningful impact in education. We felt excited at the possibility of codifying the work and playing our part in developing the instrumentality for what we considered a powerful new approach, applied in an entirely new context.

As the Oak project started to take shape, I shared our vision for the iLab to the entirety of Ed First’s staff for the first time. I opened with a picture of the last Blockbuster Video store in the United States and asked the people assembled to tell me what they saw.

After some wild speculation as to the location of this last Blockbuster (it's in Bend, OR) the staff mused on the existential perils of not adopting an innovative mindset. I demonstrated our hopes to be 'the Netflix' as opposed to 'the Blockbuster' of the education space and, from there, was able to sketch out the vision for the unit, its position relative to the rest of the organization, and to provide an idea of the kinds of things we hoped to achieve.

From the responses I was able to garner, this communication elicited a combination of excitement and mystery. There were clearly things about the iLab that offered a new pathway to value for the firm and field but still much to know and learn about the 'what and how' of our work. This experience and the reactions to it called to mind what I had been exploring in relation to the points of connection between the left and right hand of any ambidextrous project – how peoples' perception of proposed innovation at a relational and behavioral level can affect their willingness to get on board.

In an attempt to assuage these feelings of uncertainty on the part of those in core business, I ended the opening presentation to the whole staff with a slide that itemized all the things we *didn't* yet know – an approach I continued to employ in many of the other encounters and collaborative opportunities in which I was involved around that time. My hope in communicating with this degree of transparency was to build trust through vulnerability. I also wanted to make it clear that an approach such as this was not only fraught with uncertainty, but oftentimes thrives on it. I wanted to normalize the open-endedness of the approach, even suggest that it is acceptable to fail in the spirit of experimentation – a tack that was itself risky within the context of an organization that had gained a reputation for delivering with excellence through an openly stated cultural mantra of GSD (Get Stuff Done) and a relatively low tolerance for risk-taking in the context of high-stakes client engagements.

I started to wonder how an organization that had been set up to succeed through the adoption of these kinds of regularities would respond to the suggestion that innovation takes time, patience, and a high band of tolerance for ambiguity. I sensed that we had a relatively short window of time in which to deepen people's understanding of the role of the iLab and how it might affect the life of the firm if we were to avoid intrigue turning to mistrust or, worse still, indifference. The shorthand we developed for such efforts was encompassed in the belief that we wanted 'the firm to feed the iLab and the iLab feed the firm' and there quickly transpired a number of ways in which we could engage others in our work.

The Oak project was a clear starting point for capturing our takeaways, and codifying our learning quickly became a way to galvanize people around the concepts at play. We convened a working group, which developed an opinion-style piece on the challenges of adopting an equity mindset when engaging in strategic consultancy. We then created sample language that the core business could use in proposals or other written communications that underscored the value-add of adopting an equity lens in this type of work. In addition, there were opportunities at the level of researching, developing, and testing our emerging products that allowed us to invite people more meaningfully into the process. These were relatively light-touch ways of recruiting the beginnings of an 'army of volunteers', as Kotter would describe it, though I would suggest that it was closer to a squad than a platoon at this stage.

With the Oak project meeting the needs of much of our originally stated revenue target for the year, the iLab team found a degree of freedom regarding decisions around which projects to pursue. Having established a sense of what 'good' looked like for us as a team (the competency model) and having set the terms of what success would look like for our endeavors (the success metrics) it was now time to decide what projects we hoped bring into the world. Taking this as a starting point, I entered into our next iLab team retreat knowing

we were going to have to make some difficult decisions about what ideas to take forward and why. During these retreat sessions and those that followed, we established for the first time both a working list of potential project ideas and a set of criteria for selecting from what was an already lengthy roster. In the first incarnation of ‘the list’ we established 15 potentially viable products or new-service-based ideas that we felt offered some degree of disruption to our existing model (See Appendix 5. for iLab’s initial project list).

We used a variety of design thinking approaches to first generate and then decide on which ideas to pursue in earnest. These included ‘How Might We?’ exercises for exploring the problems we hoped to solve; real-time prototyping of potential products and services to help us articulate ‘How does this solution work?; and user-centered design activities intended to answer the question ‘Who are we for?’. These exercises allowed us to build design briefs for our work, which captured the essence of the idea in a clear and compelling way both for us as the designers and for the benefit of anyone we would want to bring up to speed in collaborating on an aspect of the idea (See Appendix 6. for example iLab Design Brief). In addition to capturing our design process in this way, we drew on Lean Startup methodology to build business model canvases for each of the ideas. Rather than sticking to rigid plans with long time horizons, these canvases allowed us to capture the key ingredients of a given idea in an accessible and pliable manner that allowed us to nimbly pivot and refine its terms as its value emerged. Populating the canvas led to insights about the customers we hoped to serve; what value propositions we might offer through what channels; our competitive advantages (or lack thereof); and details on how the idea would make money (See Appendix 7. for example, iLab Business Model Canvas).

Emerging from our time together at the retreat, and as a direct result of the design thinking and Lean Startup methods we employed, came the crystallization of what came to

be known as projects that were ‘So iLab’: our shorthand for any idea across the projects being proposed or undertaken that offered us the opportunity to address the following questions:

1. Can we solve big problems in the field: adult capacity; equity; coherence; purpose?
2. Can we generate scalable solutions for the field that maximize impact?
3. Can we price products/solutions/services differently to optimize profit?
4. Can products/solutions other than professional services produce profit?
5. Can technology be used to automate and improve our services?
6. Can we acquire new and different customers from existing Ed First markets?
7. Can we reach new and different customers from new market segments?
8. Can Ed Firsters ultimately benefit (sell, scale, deliver) from iLab-tested innovations?

Now that we had a broad portfolio of potential projects to pursue, and a series of driving questions determining how each might be tested and advanced, we began moving forward with the realization of a select few projects that we considered had the greatest potential. Starting with the long-list of fifteen ideas, we applied our emerging criteria for best fit and winnowed that field to four that became the subjects of product development:

CEO Cohort. A network of new-to-role leaders of education-focused organizations that reimagines the norms of membership, pricing structures, and benefits.

Automated Competency Model. An online tool that guides users through a bank of validated approaches and supports them in designing a bespoke competency model.

Oak LDP Project. Rethinking strategic planning by infusing it with the principles of Equity by Design.

Strategic Convenings Toolkit. Turning our existing expertise in convening support into a reusable instrument for the field.

Rather than tell the tale of how we moved all four projects through development, I will share the details of two iLab efforts. I will start by returning to the work of the Oak project as a way of illustrating the challenges of innovating within a client-facing engagement; I will then explore what it took to develop a brand-new product offering for the firm, The Strategic Convenings Toolkit, as a way of showing the full arc of a product development cycle within the iLab.

By describing and analyzing the nature of these efforts, and how ambidextrous conditions regulated their creation, I will show how the development of one service and one product were emblematic of the iLab's overall processes, while allowing me to explore the wider challenges and opportunities associated with our journey.

Oak Foundation 'Equity by Design'-Inspired Strategic Planning. As already outlined, the Oak Foundation project was an effort to employ Equity by Design in support of a full strategic planning refresh for a global foundation. Our work offered telling insights into the challenges associated with innovating in a seemingly more traditional, client-facing context – even as the content and approach being employed were more innovative in nature.

If we were to judge it by the terms of the original metrics for success that attributed a revenue target to the work of the iLab, the Oak project satisfied one version of success in that it was the major contributor to \$265,360 in revenue across iLab's combined projects for the year. If we instead place it against the *evolved* metrics for success and consider the prospect of the project afresh in light of what we came to call our 'So iLab' criteria – its status as a true 'innovation unit project' presents something more of a quandary.

It is fair to say, at least in terms of the approach we took, that this was a progressive take on the traditional model of strategic planning. Rather than developing a research plan for the work driven by the key questions the client wanted us to answer, we instead began

with the more open-ended question: ‘What is the problem we are trying to solve through our organizational strategy?’ This style of questioning allowed us to expand our appreciation of the problem at hand rather than necessarily being driven by what the client thought might have been the problem at first blush. To learn more about the nature of our evolving problem of practice, we asked people with proximity to the problem to provide us with their perspective through a series of empathy interviews.

Since Oak was refreshing its Learning Differences Programme, we began this process by asking students, teachers, and community members about times when they felt school worked (or didn’t work) in meeting their needs. By positioning the task of addressing learner difference as within the locus of schools and school systems, we shifted the idea of students with learning differences as being part of the problem and instead positioned them as users within a system, driving a process of redesign to fit their needs as opposed to whatever it would mean to design for a ‘typical’ student.

We then conducted a synthesis of the findings from the empathy interviews and used that to explore the root causes of the problem we had laid out in the first place. Unsurprisingly, the data collected from those with proximity to the problem afforded us a new and more highly informed take on the problem. Only once we had acquired this newfound appreciation of what we were hoping to solve, were we able to deepen our traditional desk research and outreach to leaders in the field.

Having completed this next round of research, we translated what we had uncovered into an emerging theory of action, rooted in the voices of all those experts (embracing the expanded definition of this term) we had encountered up to this point. We then convened and engaged people with proximity to the problem and other stakeholders with experience in the issue at hand to generate potential strategies that would lead to a realization of the

theory of action we had laid out in the previous stage. This part of the work was conducted in person, was highly relational, and called upon the creativity and insights of everyone involved to act as co-designers. Finally, we considered the resources and capacity available to implement the strategy, developed a preliminary implementation plan, and designed an approach to progress monitoring for the strategic work of the foundation moving forward.

Though some of these steps will seem familiar to anyone who has been involved in strategic planning, it is important to acknowledge the seemingly small but hugely significant differences of the approach we took. By placing those with proximity to the problem not just as a source of information but as integral to our work as active agents, we were undertaking a significant departure from the accepted approaches driving traditional client-consultant engagements. These adaptations to the traditional model were challenging because they required a significant mindset shift on the part of everyone involved.

For instance, we were able to communicate to the client the importance of solving with, not for people. People with proximity to a problem, we found, were best positioned to solve for the problems that affect them. We experienced that seeking to understand the experience of people, recognizing their expertise and actively involving them throughout the arc of the work recognizes the history, context, and experience of those we seek to support.

What's more, we were able to move the client in acknowledging that 'experts' are too-often defined in limited terms by the sector as researchers, field leaders or individuals with high visibility or power. While these perspectives can contribute important learning to any effort, they limit the lens of expertise (see Appendix 8. for iLab examples codifying Equity-infused Strategic Design).

Considering the iLab's commitment to learning, codifying and translating – we were able to capture much of the Equity by Design process along the way. We codified what we

were learning in the form of language to help in the framing of future proposals, frameworks to inform future strategic planning processes that wish to draw on the approach, and thought leadership pieces that sparked productive debate around the question of how to do this kind of strategic work in an equitably-minded way.

The distinctive nature of this commitment to equity in strategic planning, and the way we were able to communicate it through our codification practices, was sufficiently impactful to the Oak client that they requested one of our team to travel to Geneva, Switzerland to present on the approach at their global board meeting. It also prompted further powerful discussions within Ed First and has since informed our approach to projects at the point of proposal and execution.

Yet, as I will go on to explore in my analysis, there was an opportunity cost to what we were learning from Oak in that it took us away from some of the other iLab commitments and divided our focus. As efforts to advance the various iLab related projects continued, the work of the Oak project deepened and questions started to arise for us regarding its status in and impact on the iLab. In many ways, the decision to accept the Oak project under the banner of iLab had been driven by a conception of our return on investment that had already been complicated: a headline revenue target, rendered in dollars and cents, as a metric of success. As we started to develop more qualitative measures and leading indicators of the iLab's value to the firm, we began to notice that Oak might not have passed muster under our newly-emerging definition of 'value' at the level of the unit – and yet, as a project already in flux and operating under the banner of the iLab, we were duty-bound to deliver it as such.

As a high-stakes, client-facing project, Oak started to play an ever-more demanding role in the work – which exacerbated the tension around its status as belonging to the iLab

stable further still. With three of the four iLab members assigned, a challenge was always going to exist around how to preserve the capacity and resources required to do justice to the promise of our own innovation, and signs began to appear indicating this outcome perhaps becoming realized.

Whenever we were able to get together for extended periods of collaboration, either during in-person retreats or by carving out extended half-day virtual working blocks, we were always able to move the work forward in a meaningful way. Instead, it was the in-between moments where choices had to be made about meeting the needs of clients ('exploit') rather than progressing the work of the iLab ('explore') whenever a tension between our competing commitments started to occur.

It was also becoming increasingly clear that we needed more time alongside the current client demands to document, codify and learn – such had been our stated aim in capturing the products and processes of innovation. The Oak experience left me wondering whether we had achieved the right blend of systematic and opportunistic innovation and to question the impact our choices were having on maintaining the space to innovate that the promise of ambidexterity had presented us.

The Strategic Convenings Toolkit. This product was conceived as a response to the increasing preponderance of adult learning experiences in the form of education conferences, convenings, professional learning communities and other professional development efforts taking place around the country – and the high degree of variability to be found in their quality and effectiveness. We considered it dissatisfying, for instance, that convenings had become such a common and essential component of collective change efforts, yet many convening organizers were ill equipped to design experiences based on principles of adult learning and development that built community, connection, momentum,

and enthusiasm. We therefore resolved to take all that we knew about adult development, bringing together adults as learners and facilitating powerful convening experiences and putting that in one place. We would codify our own expertise in order to create a web-based, field-facing tool that would empower anyone organizing a gathering of educators numbering 20 people to 2000 people to be able to create meaningful adult development experiences.

The working title for the tool was *Convene Like a Champion*.

We conducted a market analysis and confirmed that there existed little formal support for how to design and deliver high-quality convening experiences rooted in a clear strategy. Ed First had already developed a reputation for designing high-quality convenings – so much so that people had begun to ask what was the ‘secret sauce’ of our approach. This, in turn, had given rise to an internally facing strategic convenings guide which set out some of the key ingredients of a successful convening and how to execute. We felt this stood as an ideal example of drawing on existing expertise in the form of current Ed First intellectual property to build out a reusable product for the benefit of a field-facing audience. The resulting product would support users through the process of designing and delivering a convening that stayed true to adult learning principles and was built on a clear articulation of the vision and value it presented to its participants. The toolkit would walk the user through the phases of launching, planning and executing a convening (or series of convenings) that utilized our exemplary methodology – as well as offering guidance on post-convening activities, continued strategic support of participants, and executive coaching opportunities.

Work began to convert the internal-facing version into a codified version to sell to organizations as an intact product – or with optional, limited consulting support. Our target clients were organizations that invested in one or more major meetings per year, who were typically under-prepared to plan them effectively. We saw this as a *low-end disruption* to our

own high-end, soup-to-nuts, custom convening planning typically purchased only by foundations. The thinking behind this was: if we can create a tool that acts either as a stand-alone solution for convening organizers, or that could be sold in conjunction with some light-touch ‘How to...’ coaching, then we would be able to maximize the size of the new market we would be in a position to support, without disrupting our own full convening support service.

We understood from our research into Lean Startup methodology that the majority of startup ideas fail because of a rigid determination of success at the front end and an inability to position potential customers as vital sources of information in the development of the idea. We appreciated that, although we had hunches that our product would add value to the field, we would only be able to understand this with certainty if we tested it with early adopters to determine whether they wanted what we were offering and why. We worked closely with a marketing expert with a background in taking products such as this into the field and made a number of important determinations about how to take our product to the next level.

We explored two of the more prominent approaches to product development and market positioning dominating the world of business. First, the strategy adopted by *Apple*, who make their impact by figuring out the amazing technology products that they know people will see as life-changing, before presenting it to them in such a compelling way that the user is left with little choice but to agree. Then there is the approach taken by *Kraft Foods*, who adopt a deeply research-based approach, collecting vast amounts of consumer data to inform the development of products that they trust will meet the needs of their users because they heard them say as much (B. Mahnke, personal correspondence, November, 2018).

We acknowledged that we had, in our own approach, started down both the *Apple* and *Kraft* roads somewhat simultaneously. The Strategic Convenings Toolkit came into being because we had a hunch that what made Ed First good at powerful adult learning experiences was worthy of codification and that people in the field would agree. At the same time, this bet was underpinned by the fact that we had already been exposed to significant feedback from users who had attended our convenings, telling us that they were moved by what they had experienced and wondering how we went about creating such events. Though this initial feedback into our convenings served as nothing more than a proxy for the potential to be found in a toolkit aimed at supporting others to do the same, we nonetheless felt that there was enough of a transitive quality to that knowledge to keep the faith in the product. We therefore resolved that it would make sense to continue down both paths - trusting in our own expertise of what we think the field needed, while continuing to learn from the reactions of potential users. We now had to overcome the important challenge of how to test and pitch an emerging product with the field - quickly and at low cost.

We settled on two approaches that we felt would give us a high yield of formative information on the development of this and other products, without expending resources disproportionately. The first was to get users to pay a discounted fee for a prototype version of the toolkit, sure in the understanding that they were early adopters who were helping us refine it through use. This 'deep-not-wide' approach enabled us to engage closely with a single user over a sustained period in co-designing a convening. It would allow us to see how the product and the process held up to the real-life challenges of a convening and to adjust the tool along the way, as informed by a real-world setting. The second approach was 'wide-not-deep' and involved us pitching the idea to 150-or-so of the individuals and organizations within our immediate orbit. This wouldn't provide the same granularity as working alongside

a single user but it would enable us to establish patterns as to why people were saying ‘yes’ (or, for the most part, ‘no’).

We built design briefs and business model canvases for the toolkit which proved extremely useful in communicating the vision for the product, how we intended to position it within the field, and the steps required to turn it into a real-world tool. In keeping with the Lean Startup approach, it also enabled us to make real-time adjustments to the value proposition and design features in light of the testing we were conducting. As we iterated on the features of the toolkit at the level of content, form, accessibility, and user experience, we were able to reflect these choices in the form of these design briefs and canvases which articulated the emerging value of the idea.

When considering the ‘deep-not-wide’ experimentation of early adopters, we agreed that they would have to possess a high degree of tolerance for ambiguity and experimentation – after all, this was not a completed product and the value proposition was not as clear and obvious as we hoped it would become in future iterations. Fortunately, we found precisely such a leader willing to serve as our first live test case: the CEO of an organization that brought together researchers, practitioners, and funders to explore issues affecting the educational landscape. I worked with the person responsible for putting together the original, internally facing version of the toolkit to develop the accompanying coaching provision. We invited the user to work through the toolkit, identifying components that they felt were activated as areas of need and then built an intentionally light, 8-hour coaching support program to sit alongside the tool in the run up to their convening.

At the same time, we tested for price sensitivity and experimented with value-based pricing, an approach that determined the value of a product based on the needs of the client and what they would be prepared to pay to have those needs met, rather than the

establishing of an arbitrary and fixed value that ignores the user. Our hope was to see just how small the nudge would have to be in order to bring about transformative results, with the toolkit's intellectual property sharing the load in adding value to the convening experience.

As we entered into these deeper product testing engagements, we began to implement the second 'wide-not-deep' strategy of pitching to a broader audience of potential users. It was important for us that we started with our 'nearest and dearest', drawing on the roughly 500 names comprising Ed First's existing client base and wider network the organization had established over time, as these were more likely to be receptive to our pitch than any cold call or blanket email blast. It was clear to us at this stage that we did not possess the resources normally enjoyed by larger R&D shops who, having developed the concept and moved a product to market readiness, would normally be able to 'hand it back' to dedicated sales and marketing teams with the background and bandwidth necessary to reach out to users in significant numbers and feel out the needs of the market.

Instead, we had to act entrepreneurially in calling upon what resources were available from the other side of the house. Just as we had done before with building thought leadership on the Equity by Design work done with Oak, this would prove to be another litmus test of the extent to which Ed Firsters from the core business would have the interest and incentive to support our endeavors. We had what Kotter (2014) calls the 'big idea' but we now needed what he describes as the 'volunteer army' to help deliver on its promise.

To ameliorate the likelihood of core business members resisting our calls for support, we first had to make the process and the lift as light as possible. I created a detailed set of supporting documents that would serve as a guide for establishing contact with potential users, conducting a walkthrough of the toolkit, and eliciting feedback in the form

of empathy-style interviews and user-experience surveys. I wanted to remove any potential roadblock and make the process as easy and automated as possible for anyone wishing to offer their support. I then conducted a series of short meetings with Ed Firsters who we felt were best positioned to access the parts of the market of interest, in each instance showing them the features of the toolkit, the coaching support materials and the feedback we had received from our early adopters.

By inviting them into the process we had been undertaking, I noticed that the majority of the potential volunteers began not by passively listening to me telling them about a tool the iLab had been working on but instead offered advice and guidance on how we might make the tool and the service even better. This was a pleasing byproduct of these engagements in that the members of the core business were actually positioning themselves as early testers of the product rather than simply agreeing to administer the test. This helped us refine the toolkit but also represented a level of investment in the project that I hoped to build upon in recruiting their support.

As I think about the steps we took to bring a product from the conceptual stage, through product development and into the hands of users, there is much to assess. Firstly, it is affirming that we were able to successfully adapt the existing intellectual property of Ed First and codify it into a field-facing tool that people wanted to try and buy. We were able to secure paid beta-testers who used it to prepare for their convening and who provided us with feedback in exchange for an early adopter discounted price and the results of these engagements were encouraging.

Despite this having been their third such convening, on what was a very light-touch engagement of the toolkit, plus 15 hours of coaching support, half of which involved direct client-facing interaction the organizers of the convening spoke about how “We never want

to do another funder briefing without coaching from you!” and that “It feels so strange that you aren’t going to be there with us on the day, considering how much you’ve contributed to the project” and, ultimately in light of having engaged in the work with us, that it constituted a “Life-changing” experience for them. They noted that, “The event felt like it largely ran itself once we were in the moment” and ended their feedback with, “I can't thank you enough for making your collective expertise available to us through this process - it truly made a WORLD of difference. We will forever be grateful!” (L. Quay, personal correspondence, January, 2019).

Beyond their own take on the value provided by the toolkit and coaching support, we worked with the organizers to dig into the feedback data of their delegates from the previous two years and conduct a qualitative analysis of the responses. This revealed an upturn in the positivity of the responses collected, particularly regarding what they had noticed about the convening preparation. As the client told us, “One new piece of feedback we got this year in our feedback survey was how much the prep and framing work came through very clearly for our participants and that is very much a result of our partnership with your team” (L. Quay, personal correspondence, January, 2019).

Further exploration into these feedback data also revealed a number of other themes that pointed to an improved experience as a result of our work, including significant reference on the part of delegates that the central theme of this year’s convening (that of ‘Belonging’) was much more prominent and present within and across the various components of the learning experience. Since the toolkit itself was designed to connect the user to an anchoring concept of what the convening was essentially about and to make all subsequent design choices rooted in those grounding values and objectives, it was pleasing to hear that reflected back to us as a feature of the experience that did not go unnoticed to

participants. We also suspected that our prioritizing of adult learning principles as central to the toolkit was driving this aspect of the user experience – an outcome that related directly to one of our core iLab criteria around building adult capacity and purpose.

Here was an example of how we might create significant value for a user, pursuant to their need to design and deliver a powerful and informative convening experience, with a fraction of the organizational ‘lift’ normally required for the soup-to-nuts approach Ed First had traditionally employed. This approach relied instead on leveraging institutional knowledge that was already present within the firm but which had remained latent until we were able to engage in the acts of redesigning and repurposing. By using the tool as an organizing framework for the coaching engagement, we were able to get real-time feedback on what aspects of the tool were landing (or not) and why. It was very much the case that the toolkit got better as it was being used at the same time that the user was getting better at designing the convening as a result of their using the toolkit. By the time the engagement had ended, the tool we had been using to support the convening was transformed to the extent that we had a living, working, web-based instrument that could be tested in a broader and more systematic way. In addition to beta-testing engagements, we were able to recruit other Ed Firsters to help us market the product more widely to our immediate network of clients, including those who had previously expressed a desire to secure our convenings support but could not afford a ‘soup-to-nuts’ engagement.

The real value of building this product in the way we did came in what we were able to learn along the way. Firstly, we learned about aspects of what our potential users needed from the product that far exceeded what we had originally sketched out as the potential value add of the tool. For example, an aspect of the toolkit that we considered to be a necessary evil of its prototype status – the microsite that we built for it actually sat on top of

a free-to-use Google Doc platform as its means of delivering the materials – was not considered to be a flaw of the tool but was in fact regarded as a strength insofar as users appreciated the fact that they would be able to manipulate the materials we were sharing and fit them for purpose. This was a function that a more polished, seemingly more ‘advanced’ version of the tool would not have been able to perform, and it soon became clear that we would learn more from the process leaving ourselves open to being surprised by what our users wanted rather than assuming what we considered to be their needs.

This process also afforded us a much more informed take on how to position the toolkit within the market. We learned that the tool could be used both as a standalone offering but also as a gateway into existing and potential project proposals. We posited that an established relationship with an existing client who had traditionally paid, say, \$150,000 for end-to-end convening support could evolve into them paying \$100,000 for the same output due to the efficiencies that the toolkit and coaching would bring to the co-design process. We also felt that clients who had traditionally been priced out of our full convening support would be better positioned to benefit from the toolkit and light touch coaching support for a significantly cheaper price. Not only would we be able to maintain the same profit margins as before, we would be able to serve more clients, more of the time and make a greater impact. Indeed, we began to imagine a future in which clients began with a fully-involved, every-step-of-the-way convening support service in year one which, by year three, would be dialed back to an ever-lighter touch employment of the toolkit, coaching supports and even automated functions of the tool that would enable us to take the idea to scale.

Indeed, we learned that perhaps more realistic pathway to profit and impact would require us to sell a high volume of copies, necessitating a significant marketing effort, but that a hybrid approach which placed the toolkit alongside a wraparound coaching function

could lead to greater impact - not just at the level of market penetration but, as illustrated through the feedback from our beta tests, at the level of individuals and organizations for whom we represented a significant value add in relation to their important work. Our beta tester sales were an example of this – they came about because clients came to us with a need but insufficient budget. Instead of turning them away (as we have in the past) we were able to use value-based pricing to give them a service within their budget, tailored exactly to the nature of their need, and build on their ability to replicate the process on their own after the engagement was done.

Testing the product in these ways also allowed us to lay out the various use cases for the tool. Was this a product for building the capacity of users by taking them through a modularized learning experience designed to accredit them as ‘master conveners’? If so, we could create a product that offered a standalone online learning experience, take it to an organization and recommend that every person responsible for the leading of adult learning experiences take the course. Was this a tool designed to show convening organizers what they were already capable of delivering versus what they might need to outsource as they began their convening journey? If so, it could be positioned as a benchmarking tool designed to codify the process and articulate the very best standards to which leaders could hold themselves accountable when doing this work. Was this a tool designed to allow for high degrees of customization, such that organizations could take our lead to create their own organizational products and processes, routines and materials? If so, the tool would have to become highly malleable at the point of user access and allow the user to tailor it to their every need as they went along.

At the heart of this innovation was a reimagining of the business model and the nature in which we positioned the client relative to the product and the product relative to

the client. Not only is the tool currently in use and adding value to educators in the field, there are powerful possibilities for the continued evolution of the product. This happened because we created the space to think deeply about what a segment of the sector needed, took time to build a product that we felt met those needs, and then had users work with us (be they colleagues or clients) to tell us the things we weren't yet able to appreciate about the potential good the product could do. We did not get out in front of what *we* thought and hoped it could be - but instead allowed others to tell us what they wanted it to be.

As I take stock of what we achieved, and continue to achieve, it is clear that the iLab was able to build and implement a unit that was structurally and procedurally distinct from the rest of the organization. We established a competency model, a set of success metrics, and a definition of value to the firm – none of which were unduly influenced by the norms, structures or systems of the core business. We built and met our own design cycle target of developing a broad base of fifteen initial concepts, with five moving into product development, and one already reaching market readiness and finding its way into the hands of real-world users. We built and began to meet the terms of a 'go to market' strategy that relied on a blended portfolio of products, though we continued to grapple with how to manage risk with reward and how to balance quick wins with high-impact, longer-term initiatives.

On the question of whether or not the development of these processes allowed us to explore powerful ideas, it is important to remember that we had set out early to learn and innovate on disruptive innovation projects in particular, for which the measure was our ability to leverage existing technical competencies in the form of new business models. We set the terms of what this might look like and what would have to be present in the form of our "So iLab" qualifiers, which placed our own energy for the project alongside the potential

for learning and its viability as a potential solution for the field. We also said that the ideal projects for designing, delivering, discovering, and documenting would likely be smaller and more numerous in the first instance so as to be able to fail and learn more quickly than perhaps the rest of the core business had been used to. This blueprint enabled us to innovate on our business model and generate solutions that disrupted our typical approach of one-client-at-a-time, nearly-always-customized professional services.

We were able to design new products and develop new ways of delivering them to the field. In design, we were able to work in rapid cycles to test and learn. We were able to adopt and adapt various product development methods and techniques, influenced by aspects of design thinking and Lean Startup methodology to achieve rapid prototyping and pivoting. In delivery, we experimented with different pricing and sales approaches; generated ongoing revenue by selling products at larger volume with very little human touch; and acquired new clients we would not traditionally have served. We were able to experiment with technical competencies that already exist, but were new to us as a firm.

One of the most significant achievements of the iLab was its ability to successfully articulate its value to the partners at the firm. As mentioned earlier, there existed divided opinion on an investment of this size and the burden of proof resided with us when it came to justifying the continuation of that investment. At the same time as convincing the partners to continue putting money in, we had to adjust mindsets around the matter of money coming back out. In both counts we achieved a high degree of success. Not only did we secure continued funding of the iLab for the coming year, we secured the status of the iLab's success metrics in terms other than revenue-based targets – thus freeing up the unit to work more creatively and with a higher tolerance for risk.

This agreement did not come without compromise, however. By the beginning of 2019, the partners had agreed that the iLab would move forward with two core members rather than four, to be joined by an analyst working at 80% of FTE by the middle of the year. These core members committed to increasing the percentage of their billable hours and to meet sales targets of their own, as well as conceding a slight decrease in the cash budget for the unit. The iLab also agreed to share in a more systematized way their learnings around new ways of designing, pricing and delivering products and services with the rest of the organization – a function that the iLab had always hoped to serve in the fullness of time. Upon reflection, we agreed that, although these constraints would present new challenges to the ambidextrous model of innovation we had set out to create, they were a price worth paying for the continued organizational investment in our work.

Analysis

As I look back on my experiences as a whole, one of my most important realizations is that we were building an innovation unit designed to test products and services – but our primary function was to test the viability of the iLab itself. Just as the products we hoped to develop were subject to the conditions in which they hoped to thrive, so the iLab ended up becoming both a contributor to and a product of the environment within which it was created. With this in mind, it is important to ask the following question: Why did things turn out the way they did and what did we learn along the way?

Mind the Ambidexterity Gap

There is much to explore when considering the manner in which we developed the structural terms of the iLab, particularly relating to its role in an ambidextrous structure and our positioning of it within the life of the firm. Utilizing ambidexterity in this manner has made it clear to me that the approach both gives and takes away. On the one hand,

ambidexterity offers something close to ‘splendid isolation’ and, in the beginning, I was a little overwhelmed by what I perceived to be the extent of that freedom. The iLab could be whatever we said it was going to be; the terms by which we went about our work and the means by which we determined our success were up to us because we thought we didn’t have to play by anyone else’s rules. This, of course, turned out to be a fallacy. In reality, a unit of this nature relied on a nuanced understanding of the ways in which it was necessarily connected and the ways in which it was necessarily separate from the organization (and ultimately the field) it hoped to serve.

In this regard, a fundamental tension came to the fore in relation to how we saw ourselves: we liked isolation because it brought freedom to think differently but we needed connection to and engagement from the firm to provide the authority and resources necessary to achieve our goals. At the same time, we seemed to syncopate between seeing the field as a body of *consumers* who would ultimately benefit from whatever products and services we considered to be of greatest value, and seeing the field as a body of *users* to whom we should listen and for whom we should design from a position of empathy. This tension explains why we sometimes behaved according to a kind of duality. At times, we were embracing of the space we had carved to innovate in isolation; at times, we were embracing of the people and resources we needed to recruit and connect with in advancing our work. Attuning ourselves to an appreciation of when it was beneficial to be in one state and when it was better to occupy the other became a key challenge to face.

The nature of our collaborative interactions with the core side of the business helps to illustrate this point. Even though the first and most important point of connection in an ambidextrous system takes place at the executive level, we made additional efforts to connect the left and right hand of the model throughout the organization. Whenever we

engaged in a policy of transparency in articulating our approach, it was an expression of our desire to demystify the way we were going about our work; when we communicated to other Ed Firsters at the one-to-one level or in larger groups that we did not yet have all the answers, it was in an effort to build trust and normalize failure in experimentation; when we reached out to other Ed Firsters to assist in the creation of thought pieces designed to codify our learnings, it was done in the spirit of inviting them into a shared creative process; when we recruited core business members into the process of refining products, we hoped it would reveal to them the relevance these tools might have to their own work. I made the point earlier that ‘our process was our product’ and it was certainly the case that our experiences and outcomes were made all the richer whenever we invited others in.

It is also true, however, that bringing people into our process was critical to our success because their perceptions of the iLab and how connected it felt to the locus of their work would ultimately play a huge part in the extent to which innovation would be accepted or rejected by the rest of the organization. Our work needed to be seen as making in-roads that made others in the firm think differently about their work, even as we were spending our time concentrating on the more exploratory projects. This was because we knew that there would come a time when we would need the support of others in helping to deliver on the promise of those initiatives, and positioning ourselves as perennially ‘off to one side’ was not a sensible strategy for the long term. I question the extent to which we achieved this balance of inclusion and separation. Many was the time that I was asked some variation of, ‘What are you up to over there in iLab?’ in a tone that could just as easily be construed as genuine interest or as intrigue-meets-suspicion. These moments reinforced for me that we perhaps could have found more ways to engage more of the people, more of the time, without necessarily detracting from our own work towards broader innovation efforts. Yet,

we always found ourselves short on time to innovate, let alone collaborate – a realization that invited us to question how we might better nurture the volunteer army, especially given such limited resources.

One way in which we were able to ameliorate the potentially adverse effects of ambidextrous separation was in the way new knowledge manifested and was managed in relation to the rest of the organization as a result of our work. I had long said that I wished the work of the iLab to eventually plug into a ‘circulatory system’ of knowledge management that would allow the firm to nourish the iLab and the iLab to nourish the firm. Despite established norms around the manner in which ideas had traditionally been shared (within project teams and at the point of greatest client-facing necessity – according to a theme that emerged from my interviews), we were able to take on the broader challenge of knowledge management precisely *because* of the nature of the challenge presented by ambidexterity.

Because an ambidextrous model presented the threat of an ‘us and them’ mentality between the core business and the innovation side of the house, it meant that we had to be more pointed than had perhaps been the case thus far in limiting the possibility for knowledge and practices becoming unnecessarily siloed or diffused. I am not sure that we would have thought quite as deliberately and strategically about how new information could be infused into the bloodstream of the organization if we had not been invited to do so in considering an ambidextrous structure.

For example, since Equity-by-Design-infused strategic planning theory was something we wanted to get into the knowledge flow of the organization, we exploited a number of entry points into that knowledge system, such as: traditional thought leadership opinion-style pieces designed to appear on Ed First internal or industry-specific external

blog sites; pre-written proposal language to make it easy to infuse the theory into pitch language; and ‘how to’ training guides designed to grow internal capacity.

Because we worked with core business members on projects, we were also able to send them back out into the mainstream of the rest of the organization with the remit to guide future project teams on how to staff, budget, and execute on strategic planning projects differently, given the approach to which they had been exposed. These efforts at distributing lessons learned from the activities of the iLab took time and resources in that we had to capture, curate, and codify a series of artefacts – each fit for their given place and purpose. And yet, by building such artefacts, we stayed true to the guiding principles of the iLab (enshrined in our competency model in the form of Design, Deliver, Discover, and Document) which in turn meant that those practices started to make their way more meaningfully into the discourse and practices of the firm. What’s more, we saw these steps as responding to the particular needs of a virtual organization for which sharing mechanisms of this nature were particularly important.

When it comes to capturing norms and practices, many organizations have intellectual property through which agreed-upon expectations are conveyed. They are often given names that draw on religious metaphor, such as ‘the Bible’ or ‘the Way’, because they serve as the guiding bedrock of the organization. Ed First was no different in that it relied on a wide variety of guiding doctrines, all of which set the tone for ‘how we do things around here’. We started down a similar path of codifying and strategically positioning the innovative fruits of our labor into the wider life of the organization, and I think this contributed to people’s willingness to support our efforts. We were, in essence, making new contributions to Ed First’s canon, and the proof of the efficacy of this approach began to be seen in those who engaged with what we were putting out. I know for example, the reason

that we were able to secure certain paying beta testers for the emerging Strategic Convenings Toolkit was due to the fact that people outside the iLab were able to rely on precise guidance documents that allowed them to speak knowingly about the tool, show people its features and value, and articulate with clarity the distinct value proposition we had in mind when we designed it in the first place.

The key driver of the success of such efforts resided in the fact that we created codifications of the knowledge we were accruing that aligned with the processes and practices other members of the core business were already well-versed in using. If we wanted someone to use a certain approach in their proposals to a potential client, we did not express the lessons we had learned as abstractions – we instead wrote it in the form of exemplar proposals, which could be easily edited and customized for the needs of that situation. When it came to sharing knowledge, I ended up realizing just how much the old adage holds true: The medium is the message.

Though we did a good job of managing the knowledge and lessons coming out of the iLab, I think we could have done more intentional work to encourage and regulate the knowledge inputs coming in the other direction from the rest of the organization. One key reason for us not being receptive to the possibility of information coming into the iLab, particularly in the early stages of the work, was the fact that we were so deeply engaged in the job of understanding who *iLab* was, the processes in which *iLab* would engage and how *iLab* represented value to the firm. This was a period of creative production rightly set to the side of the main organization, thus making it more difficult for us to act receptively at the same time.

It is entirely understandable that the early days of such an endeavor would need to attend to such unit-specific considerations and I am not suggesting that those acts were in

any way redundant. I am suggesting instead that we perhaps allowed the period of iLab-centric sense making and identity forging to stretch beyond the point of usefulness and into a more solipsistic state that threatened to isolate us in the work.

For instance, about four months into our time working together, we found ourselves in a position to talk about the iLab and engage in leading learning on what we had come to know about innovation at the all-staff, in-person retreat. Previous communications on the iLab to the whole firm had proved impactful, with a number of Ed Firsters following up with suggestions and offers of collaboration in light of our engaging them. On this occasion we opted to deliver a brief update of progress and an invitation of questions and instead spent the majority of our time together at the retreat continuing to delve deeper into our own priorities as an innovation unit.

The fact that we had gained a strong foothold in showing that we could generate content that people found useful and could have capitalized by inviting others to engage as contributors to our process felt like an opportunity missed. The fact that we were engaging in design thinking as a driver of our approach (itself a methodology that offers the opportunity to co-create inclusively) would have served as an easy and accessible way of incorporating others into the experience. We talked at length about offering ‘design sprints’ (short, focused ideation sessions working with groups from around the organization to solve a particular problem or capture a variety of inputs on an idea) and instituting the concept of ‘research fellows’ (an opportunity for Ed Firsters to step away from their day-to-day client-facing work and spend a concentrated period of time in the iLab to help realize a discreet innovation project) but, again, these ideas ended up becoming the dog that didn’t bark because of the attention we ultimately paid to our own work.

When I think about why some of these behaviors came to the fore, my thoughts turn to the reasons iLab members gave for why they joined iLab in the first place – prominent among them being a desire to work in an environment that operated by a different set of rules from the mainstream of the rest of the firm. Taking this as a starting point for their personal reasons for engagement, it is entirely reasonable to assume that this could have become a determining factor in our reluctance to engage more fully with the core business. The same incentive that made the relative freedom of an innovation unit appealing to us in the first place served as a factor in disincentivizing us to engage more meaningfully with the organization as a whole.

All that said, I think we simultaneously experienced a sensitivity in the core business' receptivity to our work – their capacity and willingness to pick up what we were putting down – that was as much influenced by broader contextual factors as anything we did or did not do as an iLab. It cannot be denied that the timing of some of these opportunities to share and collaborate in our work coincided with a busy time of transition for the rest of the organization. Our instinct in the face of this was to stay more at arms' length than would otherwise have been the case at a less busy time – a strategy that came from a good place and a thoughtful reading of the broader dynamics of change at the firm. That said, I also feel that this is a question any innovation effort would continue to come up against even as they move to and through the flux of wider organizational change: Will the core business forever be so busy managing its own change to be able to receive and innovate – and what does this tell us about how we should interact with them relative to our innovation efforts? This question of managing change in a time of flux is one I will return to in due course.

In addition to these broader factors, I wonder whether the specific composition of the team in relation to the task of instituting innovation was overly biased towards idea

generation at the level of groundbreaking new concepts than it was oriented towards implementation and execution. Early on in the process, we each took a purpose survey to ascertain which purpose drivers drove us in our work. It was telling that many of the drivers pointed towards the need to ‘build knowledge’, ‘think globally’ and ‘overcome societal barriers’. Again, did the lure of an innovation setting appeal to us because it spoke to our desire to make bold bets around big-picture systemic change that did not prioritize the day-to-day connections at the individual and organizational level required to make such change occur? Did the fact that we were all similarly of that persuasion mean that we lacked the diversity of opinion, approach, and purpose required to diversify our approach? Or were we simply unduly wedded to the concept of ambidexterity at its purest level – as an approach to innovation that insisted we stay separate from and uninhibited by the rest of the organization? I suspect that all of the above had a part to play at some point in determining our navigation of the ambidexterity gap.

Past is Prologue

As already mentioned, the most important point of connection between the innovation side of the house and the core business must be situated at the executive level whenever ambidexterity is at play. As Founding Partner of Ed First and a founding iLab team member, Jenn Vranek was the clear point of executive connection to the other key strategists and decisionmakers in the firm. This is one of the main reasons why the iLab was able to function and realize the successes that it did. We had an important member of the executive team on our side, engaging in the day-to-day work of the unit.

Many was the time I saw Jenn go to bat for the iLab at the executive level, whether that be in arguing the case for a new conception of return on investment for iLab, or in determining how the iLab should be staffed and resourced moving forward. I was fortunate

enough to see her present the case for innovation on a number of occasions both in person and in writing over the course of the residency. It is clear to me that a major reason why we were able to cultivate a sufficiently long runway to attempt at launching the projects we did was not just Jenn's positional authority and the high levels of trust she elicited but also in her individual ability to articulate the philosophy and value of what we were hoping to achieve. Jenn's actions drove the firm-wide investment in innovation, but the collective rationale and organizational history residing behind the decision to invest in the first place offers us even more clues as to why the unit ended up functioning in the manner we experienced.

To help illustrate what I mean by Ed First's past acting as the iLab's prologue, it is worth acknowledging the theory of Path Dependency, which asserts that organizational processes encompass a series of actions, decisions or events that do not happen separately. These events are connected such that they amount to a sequence in their own right, and the result of a given action in a sequence is imprinted by the preceding course of actions and its characteristics – even in instances where the nature of the connection and terms of the effect are not immediately obvious. As one team of organizational theorists put it: “History Matters” (Schreyögg & Sydow, 2011, p.321).

The historical reasoning for the necessity of an innovation unit existed in what I believe to be a path-dependent relationship with the historical constraints of Ed First's business model. Here was a firm existing across two hemispheres: an internal team that served as the operational engine of the organization, and the client-facing side of the house consisting of consultants charging billable hours in a fee-for-service model. Since only one of these halves was revenue generating and, in a world where profit margins on project work were relatively fixed, there existed a profit ceiling beyond which the firm could not grow – at least under the current model.

Overseeing both sides of the house were the partners who were responsible for the continued growth, success, and relevance of the organization as a whole. An innovation function offered a different type of hemispheric structure, with the core business on one side attending to continuous improvement and the innovation unit on the other, devising ways to reimagine or even break free from a fee-for-service model that was limiting the extent to which Ed First could increase revenue and make its impact known on the field.

This context for the decision to innovate led to a number of knock-on effects when it came to the choices the iLab and the wider organization made. It presented the very real threat that revenue would primarily drive the means by which success was measured for a unit of this nature. In that regard, one of the most important successes we had was in convincing the firm to separate this out and instead articulate our impact in terms that could not be articulated in dollars and cents.

Even so, the fact that the innovation unit was conceived in response to a need for disruption to our existing business model, what followed was a gravitation towards ideas that privileged the value of ‘newness’ in the form of such business models over other features and factors. We had said that we wanted to work on projects that made our heart skip a beat because of their exciting potential, that offered us the opportunity to learn, and that led to the dual bottom line of better profitability and impact. Yet, when I look at the projects that made their way to the top of our list of priorities, I see ideas that made the most practical financial sense in the first instance.

These projects were relatively inexpensive to get off the ground because they relied mostly on existing intellectual property; they presented us with an opportunity to gain quick wins because working prototypes (in the body of the strategic convenings toolkit) or early opportunities to bring people together to market test the idea (in the form of the CEO

Cohort) were readily available to us; and each offered a pathway to a mode of revenue generation that wasn't fee-for-service – be that an automated product that could be sold many times over or a subscription model that invited users to pay to be part of a particular ongoing experience. These are all first-rate reasons to choose new products and services in that they illustrated to those investing in the innovation function that the products we were creating had the potential to become realized in the world and generate revenue.

That said, I think we could have done more to explore the extent to which these ideas satisfied the *other* definitions of impact we had stated as important to us, such as their capacity to move the field forward or contribute to our core commitment to equity, as co-equal drivers of the process. The ideas we put forward did possess field-shaping qualities after all – infusing an equity focus into traditional strategic planning and rethinking the ingredients of powerful convenings are all steps that help move the field – and yet, I feel we could have done more to put these reasons out front in our work as articulations of our pursuit of impact, as well as relying on the full span of our stated criteria when considering the range of ideas we developed. I also wonder what a future innovation pipeline would look like if all the projects in the portfolio took their reasons for being from an even distribution of supporting criteria – attending to the viability, feasibility, desirability and overall impact of the endeavor (both financial and mission-driven) in equal measure at the point of design.

So why did we treat the task of innovating with a mind to revenue, even after we had removed the 'dollars and cents' articulation of success from the ROI? It is worth noting that, even in light of this decision, a clear reference to producing at least one profit-generating project or product per year was still the culminating metric for success. This decision was made at the partner level as a result of healthy debate – but was nonetheless informed by differing opinions of what innovation stood for and differing levels of tolerance for risk

associated with those opinions. Shifting the definition of ROI but keeping part of its articulation rooted in a prioritizing of the ‘return’ led to a shift in our approach to the task of innovating that, though difficult to appreciate at the time, was significant enough to move us away from longer-term thinking for dual-bottom-line impact and towards shorter-term thinking for single-bottom-line impact.

This change was manifest not so much in our consciously prioritizing the revenue aspect of impact as it was in our positioning the return on investment as unnecessarily *premature* in our implied theory of change. That is to say, the eagerness to show that the iLab could quickly build field facing solutions that created value lent itself more to the following implied logic model: *Invest in an iLab > iLab creates new products, services, and profit models > Reap the rewards* – as opposed to something closer to the following logic model: *Invest in iLab > Give it the time and space to experiment – absent traditional ROI targets > iLab fails to turn a profit in the first 2-4 years > By learning how to experiment, iLab creates new products and services > The firm and the field reap the rewards.*

These implied logic models are rooted in my interpretation of how we went about our work and are products of the benefit of hindsight. Nonetheless, as a leader, I feel I could have done more to pay attention to the manner in which we were positioning ourselves relative to the task of innovation. If I had been better placed to make the connections between the historical implications of the emergence of the iLab visible to the team as the work was unfolding, I feel that we would have at least been able to more thoughtfully interrogate what we were doing and why – as well as inviting others to do the same. I could have done this at the level of my colleagues in the iLab, in the way I interacted with the rest of the firm, and through my time spent with the partners or other authorizing figures. The

fact that I didn't take as much advantage of pressing this point home in a more intentional way gives some explanation as to why the above phenomena occurred.

Turning to Kotter's accelerators of change allows us to put a finer point on this idea. It is clear that we satisfied Kotter's stages of acceleration at the level of gaining quick wins and galvanizing support but we were not sufficiently focused on a 'single big opportunity' around which we were mobilizing – at least not in terms that mapped back onto a mission-driven set of overarching goals. Analyzing what we were actually organizing for in terms of 'the opportunity,' it's clear that we started the process by addressing the question, 'How can we build an innovation unit?' rather than 'What are the problems we hope to solve and how might we design an innovation unit that will help us meet those problems?' As the unit developed a greater sense of its identity and purpose, the question implicit in our behaviors seemed to become, 'How can we disrupt our current fee-for-service model and compliment it with other ways of producing revenue?' Subsequent choices around which products to pursue and how to develop them were in keeping with this articulation, and I again was left wondering what it would have meant for us to have lived by something closer to, 'How can we achieve the dual bottom line of increased revenue *and* impact on the field of education by innovative means?'

Although there were times when all of these questions were either explicitly stated or implicitly played a part in the way we went about our work, there was variation in the distribution and dominance of some purposes over others and the impact each had on our work – all of which meant that we organized ourselves in relation to the task of instituting the unit when we could have more often asked more specific driving questions about the means and ends of the iLab.

These behaviors render the question of ‘Who are we and what are we here to do?’ are even more pertinent when applied to an innovation process. Moreover, this question presses on a tension between the current and future value represented by a unit of this nature. Perceptions around when to expect returns became the arena within which tolerance for risk operated differently for different people within the organization. Indeed, it might not just be risk but tolerance for the patience required to delay the gratification of the return. It could be argued that revenue (or proxies thereof) achieved an inflated importance in the expected life of the iLab because of the lack of consensus around how much risk the iLab could afford to take.

In the face of what would otherwise have been the precarious state of investing in an innovation unit entirely absent summative metrics of success, there had to be *something* onto which the people associated with investment could hold. This tension between knowing what indicators of success to hold close and which to let go, also extends to and complicates Kotter’s view of accelerating innovation. The suggestion that one needs to create a sense of urgency to drive the work and achieve ‘quick wins’ can often fly in the face of the notion that one needs to wait for the fruits of the labor to ripen in order to realize their impact. In other words, an over reliance on the importance of short-term wins drives engagement in short-term thinking. This sets a tension between Kotter’s conceptions of “don’t declare victory too soon” and “doing too much too soon” that can be difficult to reconcile and explains why the iLab was subject to this particular set of expectations.

This is made all the more significant when one considers the size of an organization such as Ed First. The majority of the work that has gone into studying ambidexterity has concentrated on big organizations with large, well-established R&D functions. Ambidexterity looks different when you are 60 people wide, \$12 million deep, and the

innovation function represents the single largest line item investment in the firm for a given year.

The inflection point separating an innovation function's status as a liability and its status as an asset is positioned differently depending on the size of the organization, the type of constraints within which it operates, and the extent to which it is used to behaving in an entrepreneurial manner. In the case of ambidexterity at Ed First, I believe that our application of the approach in an organization of this size strained at the limits of what the model was designed to achieve because its more natural habitat can be found in organizations with more money to expend at the front end of the R&D journey.

The fact that an ambidextrous effort ended up playing out this way prompts a reconsideration of O'Reilly and Tushman. If my experiences are anything to go by, they are correct in positing that ambidexterity can be achieved in structural terms and that an innovation function can operate in a manner largely immune to the conditions of the core side of an organization. Where I feel their theory falls short in explaining my experience is in the variance to be found in smaller organizations attempting ambidexterity with fewer resources to commit, and the power of the historical, residual, and path-dependent effects that were passed on to the iLab by virtue of the organizational conditions that gave rise to it. Indeed, the shortcomings of traditional ambidexterity in a setting such as this invite the question of whether an entirely different model of innovation might have better suited Ed First's needs – or at least whether amendments to the ambidextrous model should be employed to render it more suitable to an organization like Ed First.

When I consider the work of the innovation unit and take the progress we made on its face, I am only prompted to consider aspects of our work as 'failures' when held up against a purist's picture of what ambidexterity says innovation *should* look like, namely: separate and

immune from the influence of the core business and oriented towards radical newness. By other more objective measures, the steps we took and the progress we made could just as easily have been defined as success.

That said, we made the choices we did and settled into our behaviors due to a kind of *doublethink* taking place within the team. All at once, we strived to create the space to innovate freely, only to simultaneously pursue projects that inhibited that freedom or went against the fullness of what we had set out to do. Similarly, we settled on a model for innovation that we hoped would provide splendid isolation from the constraints of the client-facing core business, only to become just as confined by the terms of the model itself through our unwavering commitment to ambidextrous means.

It is not enough to say that organizational history or current conditions alone were the culprits of these phenomena, even though they clearly played their part. Also at work were our own personal histories and resultant biases around what we considered innovation to mean and what we were prepared to do to make innovation happen in this context. We liked the *idea* of innovation as something that happens when you remove the traditional structures of the status quo. Yet, when those conditions were altered, it was as though we yearned for some structure to speak of – be that a set of expectations as implied by the terms of our return on investment or in the form of an ambidextrous model of innovation that lent shape to an otherwise shapeless process.

As has been observed on a larger scale in the case of the Charter School movement, altering the conditions of a system to encourage innovation can have the unexpected effect of people within the system creating new structures and constraints to replace the old ones. That movement was in large part informed by an experimental energy and by a question of what would happen if schools were afforded greater autonomy to innovate around what

good learning and teaching looked like. The experiment gave rise to mixed results, with many schools taking advantage of such freedoms to create innovative models, while others moved in the opposite direction towards what has become known as ‘no excuses’. This approach, defined by tight organizational structures and rigid cultural norms and expectations, strikes one as antithetical to the origins and espoused intentions of a movement that was designed to open up the system in pursuit of innovation.

Jal Mehta has referred to one such ‘no excuses’ school as displaying, “breadth over depth, certainty over exploration, control over passion” (Mehta, 2019, p. 15). Mehta observed this phenomenon playing out as part of his study into a ‘no excuses’ school network in which the system’s relative size and the competing commitments of those working within it meant that the necessary space for innovation could not be created. Having observed the day-to-day pedagogy and practices of a given school referred to as ‘No Excuses High’, Mehta concludes that – when faced with the question of whether to ‘explore or exploit’ – the school is “fundamentally organized to promote exploitation, and thus creating significant innovation within its current structure is a particular challenge” (Mehta, 2019 p. 35). He goes on to quote Justin Jansen and colleagues who describe the tension between the two states as follows, “Exploration and exploitation require fundamentally different and inconsistent architectures and competencies that create paradoxical challenges. Whereas exploration has been associated with flexibility, decentralization, and loose cultures, exploitation has been related to efficiency, centralization and tight cultures” (Jansen et al, 2009, p.797).

This presents us with a provocative insight into why organizations with limited resources might not be best placed to execute the ambidextrous model. If the explore and exploit states require such significantly contrasting organizational conditions, each implicating

structural, procedural, and cultural concerns, then any system with dearth of resource or limitation of size is going to have to make tough choices around which function will lead the way. In the case of 'No Excuses High', it appears that the organizing principle they could not afford to let go was the one defined by 'efficiency, centralization and tight cultures'. When considered in light of the implied the theory of change the school had established in supporting their vision of student success, the exploit principles won out as a priority over what might otherwise have come from a predominantly innovative approach.

In many ways, I feel that the iLab slipped into a similar trap by crafting what William Blake once referred to as 'mind-forged manacles'; I think we fell afoul of a creating inhibiting structures in places and for purposes we didn't necessarily need; and I think we did all this because of an innate need to rely on structures and stability in the face of what we perceived to be the structureless, unstable challenge of innovation. We were forced to prioritize in this regard because we didn't have the resources to innovate freely – even as we were claiming that the opposite was the case.

What I am seeing now through my reflections, and what I saw to some extent at the time, is that we could have achieved something closer to a questioning of ambidexterity that still allowed for innovation in *this* context – thus addressing one of our original driving questions: What does innovation mean *here*? I will explore this counter-hypothesis to ambidexterity more fully in the implications section.

Innovation in a Time of Flux

A telling tendency I noticed that impacted the way work happened at Ed First was its restless pursuit of continuous improvement. In organizations possessing of this tendency, it follows that there will always a high rate of change in terms of the initiatives and developments taking place at any given point. During the period of time that the iLab was

coming into being, there were simultaneous efforts to, among other things: rethink revenue targets, increase staff, replace the entire technological infrastructure of the firm, reshape the organizational chart, and place big new bets on deepening practice areas such as Innovative School Models and SEL. It struck me that within this period of organization-wide evolution (and the necessary evil of upheavals that came with the changes) there appeared to be a challenge around finding the time to slow down, reflect, and settle into new ways of doing things. Place alongside this a cultural norm around GSD (Get Stuff Done) and it is easy to imagine how such restlessness might turn to breathlessness.

This calls to mind my consideration of Ed First's evolutionary arc as mapped onto Greiner's theories of organizational revolution. I illustrated how the firm had already moved through the early days of *Creativity*, into a period of relative *Direction*, and were now on the cusp of something closer to *Delegation*. As I look back on the amount of organization-wide activity that accompanied the emergence of the iLab, I am struck by a couple of observations.

First, Ed First was behaving in a manner congruent with Greiner's theory, namely that shocks to the system preceded the need to move from one state to the other – and it was innovation in the face of such shocks that moved the organization along the developmental continuum. Clear in the original articulation of the iLab's reason for existing was the need to respond to the shock of an increasingly competitive market. Yet, there was something proactive as well as reactive about the firm's desire to take on the received notions about what a traditional fee-for-service consultancy company should and should not be able to do.

Second, and perhaps even more pertinent, is the notion that even as Ed First occupied their current stage of organizational development there continued to exist

behaviors synonymous with previous stages. This is to say, even as Ed First attempted to move through direction and into delegation, there continued to exist something of the creativity stage that had epitomized the early days of the ‘Wild West’. Just as the organization that had been forged in the spirit of restless entrepreneurialism, so it continued to behave with the same restlessness and perpetual motion of that five-person startup – even as it had matured and grown in so many other ways.

I recall a conversation with Jenn Vranek in which we questioned whether or not the iLab fell into the category of ‘great idea, wrong timing’, precisely because of the volume of activity surrounding the emergence of the iLab and the budget implications of investing in multiple new organizational functions and facets. I came away from that discussion firm in the belief that, if waiting for a period of calm stability was the criterion by which the iLab should have been given the green light, we would have been waiting for a very long time before opening for business.

The fact remains that we still achieved much despite these contextual factors, but there remains an argument that attempting to institutionalize innovation while so many other aspects of the organization are in flux can lead to competing commitments, diffusion of resources, and divided focus – all of which can detrimentally affect the creation and continued success of yet *another* entirely new function.

Adding an innovation unit to the otherwise evolving flux of the wider organization made for a challenging dynamic since it was sometimes difficult to differentiate ourselves as innovating when there was such a high degree of ‘newness’ already occurring on the other side of the house. If we had achieved a greater degree of connectedness to the core business then, perhaps, we would have been in a position to channel the organizational dynamism as

an asset to drive innovation organization-wide. And yet, it was not just the organization as a whole that was operating on multiple fronts.

The innovation unit itself had landed a large client project early in the form of the Oak engagement that, although possessing of some of the qualities we considered worthy of an iLab project, did not allow us to fail productively and learn in the way that our product development work did. The project was a demanding one and the fact that we utilized a staffing model that had never been used before at the organization led to a number of growing pains in terms of process efficiency.

In the end, the team created an outstanding deliverable for the client, while learning much and codifying plenty about an innovative way of approaching strategic design, but it left me concerned at what had been the cost to the iLab's net capacity to lean into its numerous other projects. Besides, here was a traditional fee-for-service project, and though we may have been innovating in terms of content and approach, the value represented by the initiative writ large did not necessarily fit all the criteria of a disruptive innovation project in the way we had described.

One of our key distinctions as a unit was built around the notion that we were developing ideas that represented future rather than present value. Yet, to engage in a client-facing, multi-month project of this nature tied us to the task of generating value for the here and now – and regardless of what we were learning for future posterity along the way, the impact on our ability to innovate free from constraints was certainly felt.

To echo an earlier point, we felt compelled to take Oak on because of the urge to show that the iLab could achieve quick wins. This urge was driven by the particular conditions within which the iLab was created as a potential savior that could offer new ways of generating revenue and achieving impact. These conditional pressures and expectations

made the prospect of meeting an aggressive revenue target in one fell swoop too good to resist, even as we suspected that it might lead to a potentially troubling drain on our collective capacity to institute the iLab effectively and attend to the remaining, emerging projects.

Another factor affecting the way the unit operated struck me as in keeping with a broader cultural trend I noticed at the firm – that of people power and the idea of ‘keeping the talent happy’ in driving decision-making. In the face of such a significant investment in a unit of this nature, it seemed to me that the idea of iLab was eventually sold in terms that had a lot to do with *who* would be directly involved and what they could bring to the endeavor.

As I have already suggested, Jenn held a unique position in the firm as its founding partner and the amount of trust she elicited was unquestionable. Add to that two other employees, both Principals at the firm with a track record of coming up with creative, impactful solutions, and it was easy to see how the beginnings of a ‘dream team’ were in the offing. Implicit within this approach, however, was the notion that populating the unit with the right talent was enough in its own right. It was as though the authorizers of the iLab were suggesting: ‘If we get good and trusted people on board and resource the unit well, then *they* will soon be in a position to tell *us* what innovation is and what it means to us here at Ed First.’

What’s more, it was clear that the talented and well established soon-to-be-members of iLab were similarly keen on the idea of working in a department that was separate from the traditional expectations of the firm. Constructing a team according to such terms and preferences is a different stance in the face of an innovation challenge than it would be to say: ‘There is a need for us to do specific things and now is the time to answer specific

questions (what the literature has suggested to us are responses to the specific ‘shocks’ or ‘crises’ of the organization) so what people and resources do we need to put into this unit that will help us get at these challenges?’ I mark this difference now because I think we struggled to mark that distinction at the time – which led in some part to a blurring of our focus when it came to a shared vision of the impact we hoped to make. I suggest that this connects to a broader cultural trend that I noticed at Ed First organization-wide.

During my numerous encounters and interviews with Ed Firsters, and through my own experiences of the work, I got the sense that the organization was rightly interested in attracting the very best talent. I also got the sense that thinking about how to bring those people together at the level of project delivery in ways that make them greater than the sum of their talents was a secondary consideration. The organizational restructuring to a Home Team structure struck me as a key step in more tightly bounding the people involved in the work to the nature of the task and the domain within which that task resides.

This is a good example of how Ed First is thinking differently about designing teams to meet the specific needs of their tasks and I would suggest that doing the same for the iLab, fitting people and resources more directly to task and purpose as they arise, would be beneficial.

The Craft of Innovation

Creating the environmental conditions within which innovation might take place does not inevitably lead to innovation. It is not as though the innovation muse shows up to inspire the next groundbreaking idea simply because you have cultivated a favorable environment within the organization. As a team, we had to think deeply about what it would take to develop these projects at a conceptual level, to build them out as working prototypes through product development, to test them with real-world users to refine the tool, and

position it relative to the field. It is clear to me that we made choices that took powerful advantage of the conditions for innovation that we were afforded, and other choices that meant we ended up getting in our own way – both of which had an impact on the extent of our eventual success.

An approach to innovation such as the one we took is fraught with potential complications, especially in a virtual working environment where team members are delivering on a number of disparate workstreams at once. The competing commitments of other projects in our portfolios presented a challenge when it came to huddling the team around the core innovation and product development work. I made a choice early on to divide out the various iLab project streams and assign each member of the team as owner of a given project strand. In hindsight I realize that my attempts at distributing the work in this way actually served to exacerbate the tendency for iLab team members to work in isolation whenever they turned their attention to innovation work – and I still wonder how things would have been different had I intertwined our work streams more fully.

Related to this was the need to address when and how we were coming together as a team and the effect that had on our ability to deliver on our projects. On a number of occasions, I worked to level set around the cadence of our meetings, the way in which we would interact with the task of bringing each product through development, and the manner in which we would collaborate with one another along the way. This had a positive impact in that we were able to institute a way of reporting out on project progress that incorporated consultancy protocols. Each team member would have their time in a given two-week period to share what had been happening, before presenting whichever problems had been keeping them up at night. We would then consult, brainstorm and build a plan that more and more incorporated our supporting the efforts of other projects on the table. At the same time, we

relied on business model canvases as a way of memorializing the progress of a given project. These canvases offered an accessible snapshot of the project or product that allowed others to be brought up to speed efficiently. This and other centralized documentations of the process (such as design briefs, market research analyses, feedback data from testers and evolving prototypes) were all kept centrally so that others had a window into the work.

These strategies and tools went some way to ameliorating the impediments that came with working virtually but I feel I could have done more to bound our work more tightly to a conception of quality and progress. For example, the competency model was used extensively in the opening phases of a project to situate what we hoped to do at the point of design but I could have weaved it more intentionally and regularly into the latter phases of the project so as to keep us mindful of the ways in which we were (or were not) adhering to our agreed-upon values in relation to the ‘how’ of our work.

After seven months, we had created products and initiatives that varied in the degree to which they might be considered ‘ready for market’. The most ‘complete’ of all the initiatives ended up being the Oak project because it was driven by the urgency of client demands and set to the traditional terms of an agreement to present a certain deliverable by a certain date. Within that timeline, we were able to devise a strategy refresh for their Learning Differences Programme that relied on, among other things, the careful empathy-driven practices described above, because of the belief the client had in that approach and the degree of trust we had established. Yet, as mentioned, the size of the project and the extent of the lift left us wondering whether the lessons we learned were worth it or whether it would have been better to treat it as a core business project with an exploratory component rather than as an iLab-led effort. When one considers the products we created, each moved along its own developmental trajectory in an entirely idiosyncratic way because of the extent to which we

were able to huddle around each as a design team, develop their conceptual value propositions, and build meaningful prototypical versions of the tools to be tested in the field. We all knew how to perform these functions and could demonstrate that process, but our ability to live them out came entirely down to the number of hours we could dedicate to the process of each stream.

This led us to a number of conclusions about how to manage capacity in situations where the imagination to innovate exceeds the capacity to operationalize innovation. We realized that it is more important to progress fewer projects meaningfully than to take on multiple streams – hence the model which tapered the number of projects on deck as we moved them along the developmental curve. The funnel-shaped approach to innovation was supported by the literature and we adapted it to lend the shape to our own process. That said, we also started to realize that there was an inversely proportionate relationship happening as products got closer to realization. Even though the number of projects in the portfolio got smaller, the amount of resources required to develop, test, market and sell a given product would increase. This is not a burden larger R&D functions have to contend with in full since they are able to hand the innovation over to sales and marketing teams when the time comes to take the project to the next stage – but with an operation of this size it certainly presented a challenge.

As we moved each project along its developmental arc, I noticed the limitations of working in a small but scrappy team such as ours. Much of the literature that I had been exploring about innovation spaces had grown out of the work of technology companies, including but also reaching back to well before the days of Silicon Valley. What unified many of these companies as examples of innovation was their ability to lend massive infrastructural support in building robust prototypes and products very quickly – particularly

those that relied on technology-based platforms – with a high degree of speculation about their value proposition or readiness for the field. At first, we thought far too much like one of these technology companies in terms of how we set our sights on what a product might look like. Our desire to put outstanding products into the world, even for the purposes of testing, biased us unnecessarily towards a ‘finished product’ way of thinking that was not helpful to our cause.

One turning point came when we made the decision to build our prototype-version of the Strategic Convenings Toolkit using free-to-use software rather than a bespoke web experience. The surface ‘shell’ of the user interface looked like a regular website, but clicking on any of the tools would take the user directly to a Google Doc version of the tool. At first, we were reticent about taking what felt too much like a strawman version of the tool into the market. We soon realized through testing that people either did not care or, in some cases, preferred the idea of a low-resolution point of interaction with the tool that they could download, manipulate, and use as they saw fit.

If we had not put the product out to test with real-world users in this form then we would never have learned that what we saw as a flaw was in fact seen by some as a strength of the tool. Due to moments like this, I feel that we were able to make insightful leaps in our appreciation of what these products and tools needed to become because we left ourselves open to these kinds of surprises and did not assume or attribute a value to our products in lieu of listening to what users had to say.

This idea of user-centeredness, a key tenet of the design thinking process, became a telling part of our work on product design and in our work on the Oak project. Indeed, it presented a vision of collaborative design that began with a high degree of empathy for those with proximity to the problem we were trying to solve. This, in itself, was an

innovation at the level of process and it had the potential to offer a hitherto underexplored take on the ‘consultative’ nature of consultancy. When we wanted to better understand how to build a strategy for tackling the challenge of supporting students with Learning Differences, we didn’t just turn to the ‘experts’ in the traditional sense of the term but began by interviewing students and teachers who deal with those challenges every day.

We began from a place of empathy, asking questions like, “Tell me about a time when you felt supported at school?” and “Tell me about the times when school didn’t feel like it met your needs?” In much the same way, we began our interviews about products we hoped to develop from a position of empathy because we needed to understand the pains of those people and potential gains they hoped to secure. We knew that we would only learn what people really wanted from a potential solution once we had pitched to 150 people and had them say ‘no’ 150 times, at which point we *might* be able to extrapolate what they did want from their articulation of what they did not. We also knew that variable costs are never higher than at the infancy of a product, when everything from creating the intellectual property to designing the prototype and devising ways to test its efficacy mean it will always take time to recoup and cover its costs.

Although I had heard much about the modern incarnation of innovation couched as ‘move fast, break things’ this was slow and careful work, by design. As such, it marked a distinction between the Silicon Valley incarnation of innovation and one which played out at the level of students, teachers, and communities. Our empathy-driven approach resulted in a significant expansion of our perspective on the people, problems and potential solutions with which we were engaged – and the concept of ‘breaking things’ could not have been less appropriate to our cause. At the same time, this approach presented a challenge in relation to moving products and initiatives forward at a pace commensurate with the demands of both

our external clients and the internal client that was Ed First itself – all serving as yet another example of the tension between getting stuff done and doing things right.

So, were we able to create the conditions for innovation and take best advantage of those conditions to create powerful solutions for the firm and field? When all was said and done, I do feel like we were able to demonstrate that innovation could take place and that our innovations brought as-yet unrealized value to the firm and field. Yet, there still exists for me a more nuanced question of the cost-benefit calculation that must be made whenever engaging in an innovation function of this nature which cannot be underestimated or overlooked. Innovation does not come cheaply, it doesn't happen overnight, and it requires a shift in mindset that can prove difficult to bring about. This high degree of commitment would suggest for some that the cost of innovation is too high, but this ignores the relative cost of not investing in innovation at all. This ultimately leaves us with a question that has significant implications at the individual, organizational, and system-wide level: What price are you prepared to pay for innovation?

Implications for Self

Acknowledging 'Why' as the Center of Gravity

Operating in an ambidextrous structure relative to the larger and longer-established part of an organization is like being a moon orbiting a planet. Though separate, the moon holds sway over important functions such that the planet would not act the same without the moon's influence. However, if the moon doesn't hold onto its own center of gravity, while reconciling the gravitational balance that keeps it in its existing orbit, it will likely crash into the larger planet or drift off into the indifference of space. Managing ambidexterity at Ed First often felt like striking the balance between these two potential outcomes.

Though I feel that we improved at connecting ourselves to the people and resources we needed while maintaining distance from the forces that we were better off avoiding – I nonetheless believe I could have achieved a greater degree of ambidextrous balance. Regulating my ability to balance these tensions was my relationship with ambidexterity itself. Indeed, I wonder whether I might have fallen into the trap of being overly beholden to ambidexterity, treating it as an article of faith, rather than questioning of the approach and its application in Ed First's context.

In a world of innovation often defined by messiness, the allure of order is often too difficult to resist. In keeping with this trend, I feel as though I relied too heavily on an organizing framework for a process I considered would otherwise be unwieldy and ambiguous. Decisions had already been made at the partner level to staff and fund a dedicated innovation function and there is certainly the possibility that a sunk cost fallacy could also have impacted my reticence to question ambidexterity in its purest form. I did not want to be seen as abandoning the ship of an idea that had garnered institutional support – even if that support was conditional in the first instance.

Yet my attitude towards the endeavor seemed to stem from something more fundamental than that: I consider the idea of ambidexterity to be a compelling one. It makes intuitive sense and examples from case studies across a range of fields make for a strong practical and theoretical case. As a model, it is definitive in the terms of the structural separation claimed as necessary for innovation to thrive, such that deviation from the approach can lead to a feeling that 'we aren't doing it correctly'. These factors conspired in convincing me that a purist's approach to what we might call 'classic ambidexterity' was worthy of our commitment and continued faith, regardless of signs suggesting that adapting the model might better suit our needs. Besides, in the spirit of experimentation we had

fostered, I wanted to see what would happen if we were able to execute it ‘correctly’ which I would not have been able to observe if we were adopting a potentially corrupted version.

These experiences leave me better positioned than before to treat theoretical approaches to organizational change as open to interrogation and adaptation before considering integration into any context within which those theories might play out. In this sense, the most ‘iLab’ thing I could have done early on would have been to experiment and question our interpretation of ambidexterity itself rather than following it with something closer to rigid obedience. In the end, I think I found balance in adopting and implementing *our* version of ambidexterity – but the time it took to get there, and the logical fallacies that boxed in my approach along the way, prevented me from opening up my thinking sooner.

The fact that I sensed environmental conditions that communicated something needed to be changed about ambidexterity but continued to lean on its theoretical authority holds implications for me as a leader, particularly in the realm of what I espouse versus how I act.

Holding myself and others more accountable to the purposes that informed the original conception of the iLab could have lent greater focus to our daily discourse, collective reflections, and future actions. These actions could in turn have led to a more honest and rigorous examination of what ambidexterity, and by extension innovation, meant to us. These experiences reinforced for me that one can never over-commit to the tenets underpinning the work. My values, more than any other factor, will serve as the gravitational center holding me in orbit as I go; they are values that prevent me from drifting from that original ‘why’ or from crashing into someone else’s. If maintaining my gravitational center means saying what I’m about to do, doing it, and then saying that I have just done it – all in keeping with a centralized notion of the ‘why’ of my work and returned to *over and over again for every leadership move* – so be it.

Making it Easier for People to do the Right Thing

Prior to my experiences at Ed First, I often felt that I had to make a tough choice as a leader: to organize myself relative to the tasks at hand or organize myself more in relation to the people with whom I was collaborating. The reality, I now realize, is that I can do both with a degree of balance that I had not before recognized – and it lives in something we see teachers doing every day. Matching people to purpose, whether that be a client, colleague or student, is an instinct I feel many educators have hard-wired into their makeup but which can get sadly lost in the mix when we attempt to apply it to strategic leadership in education settings.

An example of how this commitment to tailoring tasks to fit the actor played out successfully at Ed First was when we identified potential users to beta test our products. I made it clear that I needed people with a high tolerance for ambiguity and an almost mischievous appetite for experimentation because I knew our products were raw and anyone expecting their interactions with them to constitute a neat arc were going to be disappointed. It was also true, of course, that these users were gaining something out of the deal as well – beyond the discounted price of a prototype product. I could sense that they were energized and inspired by working at the leading edge of something new and that they were learning more by existing in this zone than they would have by carrying on in the way things had always been done. If tasks predict performance, then designing your leadership moves in relation to the task *and* the people implicated by that task, all set within a clear conception of what success would look like, is one good way of opening people up to the possibility of collaboration and change.

When I think of leadership couched in these terms, I am reminded of Kurt Lewin's work on change and the levers that we tend to use whenever we hope to move people. One

interpretation of Lewin's argument, offered in a recent interview by the behavioral scientist Daniel Kahneman, suggests that change efforts too often rely on the necessity of pressurizing people into change (Harris, 2018). These pressures come in the form of arguments, promises, even threats, but they also manifest in seemingly more benign forms such as the building of incentive structures, the establishing of cultural norms around how work gets done, or in the implementation of systems hoping to lend direction and accountability to that work.

Whether benign in their intention or less so, Lewin argues that levers of change such as these inevitably increase pressure because they *add* something to the system and give the people involved 'something else to do' rather than *taking things away*. Lewin invites us to think instead what it would mean to make it less onerous for people to move in the direction you want them to move by clearing their path. In other words: to make it easier for them to do the right thing. This is not as intuitive as it sounds, especially since whenever we want people to think and act differently, we normally reach into our toolkit of levers, which we willfully introduce into the system and the lives of those working within it, with the very best of intentions.

My experiences at Ed First have reminded me that increasing pressure by adding things can increase conflict (both internal and intrapersonal) while removing obstacles can reduce stress and increase psychological safety. Another example of how I think we did this well was when we translated the learnings of iLab into the language of existing Ed First canonical documents and structures – such as creating sample proposal and planning documents that infused the principles of Equity by Design into existing strategic work. Our hope in taking this step was to introduce a new way of thinking about strategic planning to the core business, as informed by our innovation efforts, but the *manner* in which we

introduced it was in support of making it even easier for people to go about their existing lines of work.

Conversely, I have been just as guilty of introducing additional pressures to the system through various initiatives because I did not consider how they might land with those implicated – most notably in the form of protocols and systems, the early manifestations of which were unwieldy and restrictive. Part of the urge to infuse such structures comes from equating success with adding things rather than taking something away. I also think it has to do with control and the need to feel that I am creating systems and structures which I hope will lend a shape to the work I am tasked with marshalling – after all, the alternative to this structure can often feel like something closer to chaos, especially in an innovation setting.

These big assumptions aren't rooted in reality but they tend to drive our need to 'add' nonetheless – which inevitably invites the question: Whom are these initiatives and additions *for*? More often than not, the answer will be that they help to assuage our own insecurities about the job at hand rather than having a facilitating effect on those around us – which is precisely why the implications for this phenomenon go beyond the personal. In a smaller organization attempting ambidexterity, the impact of seeing leadership as an act of removing rather than adding is significant. I am now more attentive to being the kind of leader who clears the path rather than piles the plate – especially as a response to the challenge of innovation.

Innovation as an Adaptive Challenge

I have resolved through this experience that innovation on its face is not difficult; getting people to think differently about their resistance to innovation is difficult. There were a number of ways I attempted to encourage this mindset shift – but two stand out as particularly memorable.

First, was the power to be found in transparency as a means for moving people – by revealing the imperfections of innovation for all to see. The ambidextrous model was always in danger of establishing a gap between us as ‘the innovators’ and the rest – as if to suggest that innovation was only happening on one side of the house or that we were somehow the experts or guardians of the process. Whenever I shared openly that we did not have all the answers and, at times, that we did not even know the questions, I noticed an engendering of trust and encouraging of participation positively impacting what might otherwise have felt like innovation bifurcated around an organizational divide.

Second, I helped shift minds by letting other people tell me what moves them, not the other way around. This was most evident in the empathy work I employed as part of our Equity by Design approach, which placed users (or people with proximity to the problem) at the center of the collaborative design process. It also showed up as we started to pitch and refine our products by sharing them with people in the field. I discovered that there are few more powerful ways to capture a person’s pains around a given thing than to ask, “When it comes to X, what keeps you up at night?” The key, I came to learn, was then to step back and let them articulate expansively – even if what they went onto describe had nothing to do with what I thought I was offering. In other words, allowing myself to be surprised by what people *actually* need rather than existing according to a mental model based on what I *think* they need.

These were hard-earned lessons because they required a degree of patience-in-process that is not normally associated with traditional consultancy. I remember feeling no shortage of pressure to perform (or Get Stuff Done as Ed First would put it) and my efforts to attempt an approach that was closer to collaborative than consultative only served to exacerbate that tension. I would also go as far to say that I projected part of my attitude

towards this tension outwardly rather than always acknowledging how it was showing up for me. I was acutely aware that my innovation journey presented adaptive challenges – in that it called upon some degree of mindset shift or development on the part of individuals (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002). I was also aware that innovation would not come about as a result of some technical fix that can simply be organized for – absent any consideration of the behavioral realm.

I have explained how I saw this challenge play out for others – be that the intolerance to risk displayed by some at the executive level or the intrigue-meets-suspicion I would sometimes sense from colleagues in the core business when discussing the value that innovation may or may not represent. However, these people were not the only ones facing a mindset challenge. I was also implicated. I, too, was subject to the adaptive challenges and mindset shifts required to engage in this work. It showed up for me in the blind faith I initially showed in ambidexterity, even in the face of indications that it was in need of adaptation for our context; it existed in my desire to formalize (and subsequently control) the practices of innovation taking place in the iLab in the form of competency models, decision-making frameworks and product management systems; it was manifest in my bias towards big ideas and radical change over incremental wins; and it influenced my attitude towards collaborators and authorizers – especially in terms of how I believed they should stay separate from or remain connected to the work. I am not suggesting that my instincts in these situations were always wrong or that my mindset consistently betrayed me into taking misguided action – more that I could have been better at reflecting on how the mindset work of innovation wasn't just about others in the organization but also called upon me to rise to the adaptive challenges it presented.

This serves up the sobering lesson that, just because I might be the architect or acolyte of a given initiative or innovation, that doesn't immunize me from the myriad behavioral reactions and mindset challenges I may have to overcome in order to bring about change. Change processes that I claim to 'own' still have the capacity to elicit feelings of uncertainty or reticence, just as they could bring about a sense of over-confidence or blind faith. Indeed, the work that I hold most dear will likely be that which is most intricately bound up with the kinds of mindset challenges, emotional entanglements and behavioral intricacies that can affect how I see myself in the work.

As I move forward, I hope to hold onto the lesson that all leadership work is adaptive in nature – but never more so than in an innovation setting where the old ways of thinking and doing do not meet the needs of the current challenge. If I am not moving myself or others to think or act differently than before in the face of such challenges then I am not leading for innovative change.

Implications for Site

Ours is not a cautionary tale. As an iLab, ended up doing *our* version of ambidextrous innovation and it worked in achieving progress in the ways I described. Though I do not see the theory as the be-all-and-end-all, I also do not believe our experiences provide an overwhelming case for throwing the ambidextrous baby out with the bathwater. There is a version of ambidexterity that can work for Ed First. This, after all, was my question from the start – What does innovation mean *here and now*?

In light of this, I will explore what we have learned at the level of the site and explain what versions of innovation (be they ambidextrous or otherwise) would best suit Ed First's needs moving forward.

Innovation as a Servant to Multiple Masters

In the spirit of achieving optimal efficiency and impact at the organizational level, dual functionality is an important concept to acknowledge as the iLab continues in its work – especially since it is a structure that I noticed repeatedly in various walks of the unit’s life.

First, there is the idea of dual functionality at the level of tasks that I have already touched upon. The iLab has now shown that it can get people from the core business, its client base, and even potential users to engage in tests and prototyping relative to its innovation efforts. By reacting to products in development, users going about their work experience the dual function as testers of iLab’s theories. This leads to a two-way enhancement, since the iLab gets more user data, while colleagues and clients are exposed to more and more leading-edge thinking.

The second aspect of dual functionality serves as a word of warning for how to enact the first. Ed First is, in essence, always serving two clients: the internal and external. Balancing the needs of each with their own urge to experiment is vitally important and testing for their respective tolerance levels in the face of innovation is central to this effort. Assessing the tolerance of internal or external authorizers to risk, or to the patience required to hold true to a course of action without the immediate promise of returns, is a conversation that should be had openly and often rather than trusting that it will play out as an implicit part of Ed First’s organizational behavior. There is a powerful way of doing this – you can *ask people*: “Are you prepared to work with us on something that could soon be a big idea but is currently messy and will require you to join us in being OK with that messiness?” There is more to be gained (and certainly less to be lost) in asking these kinds of questions up front since they cut to a layer of discourse that allows both sides to reveal their true intentions and expectations going in. Getting good answers to these questions saves time,

helps to right size the task for the people involved, and drives straight to that notion of tolerance for risk that can so often derail innovation efforts if left unsaid.

Finally, there exists a third dual function which implicates a question central to my concerns throughout this experience: Innovation *to what end?* Having experienced the iLab coming into being, I believe the answer to that question ended up becoming a duality in itself. In many ways, the iLab ended up becoming simultaneously an Innovation Unit and a Business Development Unit. The business development side was more concentrated on the specific economic needs of Ed First. This function sought to create new ways of unlocking new value in the design, pricing, packaging, and delivery of products. In so doing, it took on the task of maintaining the continued investment in and stability of the iLab. The innovation unit side of the iLab looked and felt more like innovation writ large in that it attempted to create and iterate on powerful new ideas that we had a hunch would make an impact on the educational landscape.

In light of this duality, I recommend that – as long as Ed First is happy with the iLab performing both sets of functions – they should carry on as before. If, however, there continue to exist signs that one function is impeding the unit’s ability to do the other, or that one side is adversely and disproportionately affecting the choices the unit makes about which products to advance, then treating business development as an independent function would alleviate the tension and allow the innovation unit to innovate – unencumbered by the demands of reimagining the business model for the firm.

One way of separating out the functions would be to formalize what had already become informally the case regarding the roles of the key players within the iLab. The executive sponsor would be formally responsible for the continuing efforts to secure funding and backing for the iLab; the operational leader of the iLab would then concentrate on

holding the unit to the origins of the iLab's reasons for being – the 'why' and 'what' of its work. Showing that these dual functions of the iLab are being attended to in equal measure would be to ensure that the impulses of stability and creativity are kept in a productive tension – all for the betterment of the iLab's processes and outcomes.

The Operational Implications of Ambidextrous Innovation

One implication to consider as the work moves forward is the way the iLab's own systems of operation intersect with the internal systems of the rest of the organization. Adopting an ambidextrous model does not exempt a unit such as this from acknowledging the operating norms that govern how projects are sold, staffed, executed or delivered – and our situation was no different. We started to flesh out what an agreed-upon set of operating norms for the iLab would look like, including specifics around project approval and bonuses, budget tracking, pricing models, and internal team supports. This elicited useful feedback from the operations side of the house which we were able to incorporate into an emerging set of 'business rules' for the firm when dealing with iLab.

Since the operations team were soon to completely replace their technological infrastructure for recording and monitoring the above processes, we ended up in a wait-and-see state regarding exactly how these new systems would allow and account for the idiosyncrasies of the iLab. Yet the recommendation still stands: to take full advantage of the infrastructural refresh when it comes, and use the uniqueness of the iLab's operating model to put any potential new system through its paces. The last thing Ed First would want to experience is having the creative capacity to execute on a new way of delivering the work only for the operational mechanics of the organization to stymie the effort, either because of the inadequacies of that system or because key operations get lost in translation as they move across the ambidextrous divide.

Related to the question of operational norms is another operational function that larger organizations take for granted as a distinct function: marketing and sales. When strategizing for how to get our products and services out into the field, we were able to rely in the immediate term on pulling in other Ed Firsters to help us test, market, and ultimately sell our new products and services. We also made the prudent decision to start with our ‘nearest and dearest’ – namely the client base and professional network that knew us best – when we first began sharing new products with the world which meant that we could be more targeted and efficient in how we sought out potential users.

All that said, if the iLab becomes a victim of its own success (which I sincerely hope will be the case) it seems to me that more will need to be done to build out the capacity of the organization so that they can turn the corner from successful product conception and development towards taking those products to scale through more substantial and coordinated marketing and sales campaigns.

Whether this comes in the form of a dedicated marketing and sales function or through the reimagining of incentive structures within the firm, adjustments will need to be made. Unlike traditional fee-for-service models which can rely on trusted relationships giving rise to large and lucrative projects, many of the ideas we developed will rely on a lower unit price but a higher volume of sales. The possibilities of this in terms of the breadth of impact Ed First could have are extremely exciting, but the organization will have to be careful if they are to avoid having big ideas but limited reach. As the organization thinks about the incentives that would need to be in place to get our innovations into the market, it will also be important for them to consider projects that satisfy a bar for healthy sales *and* which promise a broader impact in terms of the highest number of people being better prepared to deliver for excellence and equity in the field.

Considering the operational reality of investment in the iLab, it is clear that historical decisions and perceptions around the role of innovation impacted the manner in which the unit was funded and positioned within the firm. Rather than being overly influenced by such factors, I would argue that if authentic ambidextrous innovation is to be encouraged then it must come in the form of a no-strings-attached investment in the approach.

If that is the path to be chosen, I recommend that when the next cycle comes around to determine the funding of the unit and the reciprocal metrics for ROI, the iLab should be afforded a bounded, multi-year investment absent revenue targets and the proxies thereof. This is to say, the unit should continue articulating value in a ‘process as product’ fashion, and as the unit gains a greater reputation for creating impactful products and services, it should be allowed to work its way towards ever-higher levels of trust and autonomy.

All the terms of the existing arrangement should be fair game for the expression of this autonomy, from the billable hours and sales targets assigned to iLab members to the numbers of products or profit turning services moving through the pipeline. I would strongly suggest that an eventual metric for the success of the iLab can and should be devoid of as many organizational expectations and constraints as is responsibly possible for the organization to bear. Of course, such considerations should only be borne in mind *if* ambidexterity in its traditional form is to be maintained as the predominant model for innovation at the firm.

A Unified Theory of Innovation

I stated earlier that one of the key challenges of the iLab was to ascertain Ed First’s competitive advantage in a world where responding nimbly to the needs of the field was no longer sufficient in an increasingly competitive landscape. The most powerful way to respond to the dilemma of remaining true to what the iLab is really for *and* ensuring its

continued financial success has everything to do with this question of competitive advantage. In plain terms, the iLab could position itself relative to the field *and* its competitors with the simple prompt: ‘What can we do that no one else can?’ Thinking about innovation as a differentiating force is at the heart of what it means to be disruptive – but what is it that makes Ed First different and how does innovation make them so?

Answering this question of what sets Ed First’s innovations apart is far from straightforward. So far, one implied theory of the iLab’s unique value in innovation might be that it is better than the competition at taking existing intellectual property and codifying it into field-facing tools and services. Another take might suggest that the new competitive advantage is more to do with developing innovative methods for addressing age-old organizational demands – such as an approach to strategic planning that draws innovatively on principles of equity and user-centered design.

I am sure that if I were to ask my iLab colleagues to share their own takes on the competitive advantage of Ed First, or the innovative efforts driving that distinction, they would build out my list of potential examples further still. This multiplicity of expression when it comes to the iLab’s *raison d’être* might suggest a proliferation of creativity – but any organizational context in which a thousand flowers are allowed to bloom without coherence is problematic. Indeed, it is emblematic of the very problem I started out this capstone by naming: Innovation that means everything and nothing all at once.

Rather than relying on a diffused sense of how the net effect of iLab’s various innovations make Ed First unique, I suggest it would be more productive to innovate according a unified theory of what the unit stands for *and* what makes it outstanding. Tushman (2011) provides us with an interesting case of how to maintain organizational identity through periods of innovation and change with his study of the Ball container

company, which has been able to successfully reinvent itself over more than 100 years. As Tushman explains, “Its evolution from wooden buckets to glass jars to metal cans to plastic bottles was in part rooted in the firm’s overarching aspiration to be the ‘world’s best container company’” (p.77). This example illustrates for me something that the unit is still unable to state with absolute clarity: What is the iLab’s version of wanting to be the ‘world’s best container company’?

This is a question that the iLab has begun to answer through its conceptions of what constitutes an iLab project in theory. The unit can deepen that commitment by defining the value of their innovations in ever more clear-eyed terms and through future decisions about which innovation opportunities to pursue.

Alternatives to Ambidexterity: A Counter-Hypothesis

What if the terms of the iLab experience suggest that the writing is on the wall for ambidexterity in its current form as an overarching principle for innovation at Ed First? I have already laid out the argument that ambidexterity doesn’t translate easily into an organization like Ed First because of its size, the limitations of its resources, and the effect all this has on tolerance and capacity for risk. At the same time, it is clear that some version of ambidexterity was arrived at through our work – one that started to unpick these tensions and challenges. To realize a workable version of innovation at Ed First, the question must therefore be asked: Is there a viable alternative to ambidexterity in this context, or at the very least would an adaptation of the current approach better suit the needs of the organization?

One way of thinking about such an alternative would be to reconsider the central question of separateness and connectedness between innovation efforts and the rest of the firm. In other words, to create new terms for the innovation circulatory system, to decide on the ways in which that function intends to be connected and separate from the rest of the organization and to ask what those points of connection and separation might look like.

What would it mean, for example, for Ed First to create not so much an entirely separate innovation unit that behaved according to an entirely separate set of processes and which was only connected at the top of the organization – but instead to develop a ‘New Products and Services’ arm that takes the best ideas from existing consulting efforts and turns them into products and services that will unlock new lines of work? (J. Mehta, personal correspondence, March 2019).

The positive differences between this model and a fully-ambidextrous approach would include a greater level of involvement and engagement with the rest of the firm beyond the executive-level yoking of the two sides of the house. Such a step would also attend to issues of capacity and draw upon the collective innovations and connections to the field possessed by the organization as a whole. This, in turn, would lead to a greater degree of buy-in across the organization, creating a more virtuous cycle in which the army of volunteers would be encouraged to support the work due to the level of engagement they would experience.

The concession that would have to be made with such an approach is that this new version would not necessarily lead to the kinds of discontinuous, future-shaping innovations that ambidexterity was designed to foster – and yet, I think Ed First could question the notion of discontinuous innovation as necessarily being borne out of ambidextrous separation *alone* and advocate for the power of interaction as a driving force behind the practice. Of course, R&D functions in large organizations are big enough to achieve their own critical mass of collaborators, but less populous innovation functions in smaller organizations with fewer resources run the risk of dying on the vine if they fail to learn how to better connect themselves to the core.

It may well be worth clarifying whether such an approach would only ever lead to incremental improvements or whether more radical innovations remain possible in a more integrated system. Indeed, Ed First may wish to clarify in light of their experiences whether they are actually interested in field-shaping innovation at all or whether the examples I have described – with innovation as a driver of local adaptation to help the firm scale – constitutes a better bet.

Implications for Sector

Ambidexterity Exists Across Multiple Dimensions of Change

As stated, O'Reilly and Tushman's theory fell short in representing my experience not only because of the issue of size and availability of resources but also in that it failed to fully acknowledge the power of the historical effects that were passed on to the iLab by virtue of the organizational conditions that gave rise to it. Another way of saying this is that ambidexterity theory operates more logically when considered in spatial terms (the left and right hand of an innovation function) because that speaks to the structural concerns of current organizational reality, but less logically when applied along a temporal dimension (the before, during, and after of an innovation effort) in which choices from the past continue to affect present conditions and the passing of time has a very real effect on people's tolerance for the uncertain future of the innovations being attempted.

I would urge organizations of any size attempting ambidexterity not to lose sight of the historical conditions and constraints that gave rise to their respective innovation functions. It may well be that a high degree of separation can be achieved and that the innovation function can be operated in a way that is almost entirely immune from the influence of the rest of the organization. Yet the fact that a given organization gives life to a

given innovation function in the first place, a unique child to a unique parent, means that the behavior of that unit is always going to be susceptible to the influences of their shared DNA.

My experiences suggest that being alive to both the spatial dimension of change (the structure of the unit) as well as the temporal one (the history of the unit) is important when designing any innovation effort that strives for ambidexterity. Indeed, one of the main temporal considerations to bear in mind when assessing the progress of an ambidextrous effort is to acknowledge that a ten-month time window – as was the case in my experience – is far too short a period of time to arrive at a meaningful evaluation. Indeed, if more research is to take place into how this phenomenon plays out in a range of organizations and contexts, an appreciation of the multiple dimensions informing the change (time, structure, and size) would shed even more light on the various possible applications and implications of the approach.

The Impact of Innovation on the Core Technologies of Systems

Another major takeaway I had from exploring how Ed First employed ambidexterity presses on the question of precisely which parts of the system ambidextrous efforts hope to affect whenever they are employed in the pursuit of radical innovations. From many of the cases I studied, it is clear that ambidextrous innovation often rests on the need to create or respond to a significant shift in the core technology of a given organization or the sector within which that organization resides. The most memorable cases recount instances of organizations taking advantage of actual technological advances – but the analogous definition of ‘technology’ as standing for the operational norms that make up any industry or sector also holds true.

In the case of *USA Today*, the core technology up for grabs was the medium through which news was going to be disseminated in the future; the spoils would go to whoever

could most nimbly and innovatively respond to the introduction of that newness and apply it to the core operation of what it meant to be a newspaper. Though a significant challenge in its own right, *USA Today* had two important factors on their side: they were operating *inside* the system they hoped to change and therefore possessed a high degree of control, and the core technology associated with the change (the advent of digital) was *easily identifiable*.

As I look back on my experiences at Ed First and the ‘why’ of our work, I am still left questioning what were the ‘core technologies’ up for grabs in our case. Indeed, in the case of education reform writ large, what adaptations to the internal mechanisms determining how school systems operate would yield the greatest change – and what does it mean for ‘outside-in’ organizations like Ed First to attempt to affect such change when they have such little control over the technical core of the system they are hoping to improve?

By creating products and services that offered new value, we leaned into the question of what users in the field would need to know and be able to do in order to carry out their work more effectively – but what of the broader, systemic questions with which the field has long grappled; what about the ‘core technologies’ driving those systems are in need of reform; and what would it mean for innovation units of this nature to position themselves in such a way as to address these challenges more effectively?

It is clear that the educational landscape is changing. There appears to be an emerging sector comprised of an ever-growing number of organizations that can ‘push in’ to the traditional system in the hope of making a positive impact. Advances in technology have revolutionized the way such outside-in organizations operate, with everything from the efficiencies of virtual workspaces, to impactful new ways of disseminating knowledge having a huge effect on how these organizations will be able to carry out their work.

In keeping with its continued emergence, this sector would benefit significantly by better identifying which aspects of the core operational norms (or ‘technologies’) of the education system are most ripe for change; what improvements need to be made to those components to bring about that change; and how they intend to operationalize their efforts (by innovative means or otherwise) in bringing about the change they hope to see. Such organizations will have to define the units of change with absolute clarity and develop innovative ways of getting at those components if they are to have any hope of making lasting impact.

When it Comes to Ambidexterity: Size Matters

My experience at Ed First underlined a belief that traditional ambidexterity requires at the very least a connection at the executive level between the explore and exploit functions since it is that which provides the authorizing environment for innovation to more freely occur. Yet I have discovered that size matters when it comes to ambidexterity and that this plays out in the interactions and tasks occurring throughout the organization, not just at the top.

The extent of the resources available to smaller organizations, and the effect their size inevitably has on tolerance for risk and patience in the face of slow returns, is not something that the ambidexterity literature has explored in detail – mostly because the cases exploring the phenomenon have concentrated on much larger companies. When it comes to exploring ambidexterity writ large, it has become clear to me that innovation, change, and risk are all in the eye of the beholder – and more will need to be done to understand the idiosyncrasies of varying organizational sizes and contexts when organizing for ambidextrously informed innovation efforts.

Indeed, one wonders whether building out a new dimension to the ambidextrous model – one designed for smaller organizations with less capacity to burn – might help the field think differently about the diversity of its application. O'Reilly and Tushman go some way to addressing this problem by recommending the sharing of resources between the explore and exploit sides of the house. They refer to it as the 'cross-functional' aspect of an ambidextrous innovation structure:

"Tight coordination at the managerial level enables the fledgling units to share important resources from the traditional units—cash, talent, expertise, customers, and so on—but the organizational separation ensures that the new units' distinctive processes, structures, and cultures are not overwhelmed by the forces of "business as usual." (O'Reilly & Tushman, 2004, p.77)

As I think about this model in the light of my experiences of Ed First, I am left wondering whether this picture of the innovation unit drawing on 'important resources' while remaining organizationally separate is too firmly rooted in the norms and capacity enjoyed by the larger organizations that have traditionally informed ambidextrous case studies.

In the case of smaller organizations, one cannot be as certain that the resources are even there to be bestowed by the core side of the business – especially in contexts where the establishment of the unit may already have used up significant will and tolerance for risk on the part of authorizers. Rather than pulling on strained resources from the core, I suggest that exploit and explore functions in smaller organizations could more fully collaborate with one another and even integrate entirely at their most opportune moments of need. This is different from simply seeking resources, it is more entrepreneurial in nature and draws on the kind of dual functionality to which I have already referred. In this model, value is offered

in both directions across the ambidextrous divide, and the collaborative whole of the two sides of the house can be greater than the sum of its parts.

We might call this more integrated version ‘Interlocking Ambidexterity’ – a model which still acknowledges the need for a left/right handed structure aimed at exploiting and exploring respectively but which also sees the hands of the ambidextrous structure interlocking whenever the resources of the innovation function alone are insufficient in meeting the task at hand *and* the core business is not in a position to furnish the innovators with resources they need.

For example, it might easily be the case that an innovation unit uses its separation to conceive of an innovation that they suspect will move the field but which requires broader beta testing for the purposes of refinement. At this point, it would make sense for the unit to interlock with sellers from the core business to go about testing and refining the product with real-world users. The unit would gain greater insight into the nature of their product, while the core business would learn more about leading edge work and establish new possible leads or client engagements. In another instance, a promising innovation might come to light as a result of the work of people in the core business only for them to feel somewhat lost in determining how to develop the idea. They could then turn to the innovation unit to incubate their new offering and make determinations about its potential for impact, at which point the unit may well turn back to the core in order to recruit people to test it further.

Operational enhancements that could further contribute to interlocking ambidexterity might include improving knowledge management systems across the ambidextrous divide, taking better advantage of the inclusive nature of design thinking

processes to fold more people into the innovation process, and integrating the work of the innovation function more seamlessly into the existing cannon of processes at the organization, such that collaborating with the innovation function more naturally dovetails and even enhances the existing workstreams of colleagues organization wide.

An interlocking system of ambidexterity could also be employed to deal with the problem of marketing, sales, and distribution in smaller organizations without departments dedicated to those functions. By incentivizing people from the core business to promote innovative products and services as a part of their existing project work and client engagements, smaller firms would achieve greater reach and potential for scale when it comes to the innovations they hope to realize in the field. Of course, there is a risk to this approach and it is one I have already explored. If the unit interlocks itself with the core too fully then it will be subsumed into it and cease to exist as a separate entity. And yet, when it comes to smaller organizations, the risk of getting too close to the core is not as great as the existential threat of drifting too far away.

The fact that all these interventions were either considered or enacted at Ed First as part of our innovation work makes me wonder whether we ended up operating under something close to the conditions of ‘interlocking ambidexterity’ in all but name. It remains unclear whether a model such as the one I have described is closest to the cross-functional picture O’Reilly & Tushman had in mind or, indeed, whether it even warrants the ‘ambidexterity’ moniker at all – even as a subset of the original theory. Without the more collaborative and entrepreneurial version of ambidexterity having been observed in smaller organizations, it is difficult to say for sure.

What is certainly clear to me having experienced this particular brand of innovation first hand is that it would be fascinating to explore whether such a version better suits the

needs of smaller contexts and, indeed, whether studies into such organizations might reveal a tendency on their part to access entrepreneurially the resources needed for innovation by yoking their exploit and explore functions in a more reciprocal and interlocking fashion. Perhaps the first such study written about the approach will one day be conducted at Ed First.

Conclusion

For me, the promise of innovation lives in a mantra that has always driven my work as an educator: *If we do what we always did, then we will get what we always got.* This is to say, our education system is in so many ways flawed and, for too long now, efforts to fix the maladies of that system have shared the same root-causes and dysfunctions as the problems they set out to solve in the first place. This behooves us to consider innovative ways of thinking about the problems we face as educators if meaningful reform is to take place – and yet, if innovation as a term and practice is loosely understood and irresponsibly applied, it will only serve to exacerbate the dysfunction. My hope is that this capstone offers a picture of innovation that is authentically grounded in my experience and which serves in some small way to progress the field to think differently about the possibilities and challenges of innovative practices as catalysts for change.

Considering the nature and scale of the challenges we face across the education landscape, consultancy firms and other educationally minded organizations supporting the work of the system have a distinct opportunity to think differently about how to position themselves relative to the core technologies of school systems in ways that could disrupt the traditional approach. As I have illustrated, these organizations exist as entities outside the bounds of the traditional system but are nonetheless in a position to ‘push in’ and bring about innovative change. Even though this process is fraught with challenges, it is also

facilitated by the fact that such entities aren't subject to the same types of constraints affecting the core system. In this respect, these organizations have the opportunity to become the 'innovation units' for the system writ large – exploring the leading edge of what it would mean to deliver excellence and equity for the students we serve and infusing those innovations back into the core.

Of course, they will have to contend with all the challenges and possibilities of ambidexterity I have explored throughout this capstone – all playing out on an even larger scale and with higher stakes than has been understood to date. Yet, by exploring the possibility that they might serve as an innovation function for the broader system, these organizations have a very real opportunity to pivot away from their traditionally reactive stance to the needs of their clients and instead position themselves towards a proactive, even field-building approach.

In reality, opportunities to innovate such as these play out at the nexus of cost and benefit – they thrive or die during the time it takes for new practices to take hold, for deficits to become assets, and for the threat of risk to become the promise of return. If consultancy firms and other outside-in organizations choose to engage as innovators for the system, to position themselves as thought leaders, and to play an increasingly impactful role in the educational landscape, then an appreciation of the tolerance for risk required in encouraging those innovations to thrive will be crucial.

If such organizations are to affect lasting change, they will have to take steps to address not just how they position themselves relative to the sector but also to the people they hope to serve. This is particularly true when it comes to infusing empathetically-minded approaches into the work of educational consultancy – such that expertise isn't framed as existing in a narrow segment of the field, only accessible to the few, but where the people

most impacted by the problems we hope to solve are rightly placed at the center of the designing, strategizing, and decision-making process. Continuing to broaden the work of user-centered practices into the world of traditional consultancy could invite a powerful reconsideration of how we build solutions *with* instead of *for* people most affected by the problems of the system. If consultancy firms and educationally minded organizations more broadly were able to reconsider the value they represent to the field, to explore the approaches I have discussed, and to master their own versions of ambidexterity in becoming the ‘iLabs’ of the system – it could end up becoming their greatest innovation yet.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: iLab Competency Model

iLab Competency Model

Each iLab dedicated team member is accountable to the following competencies. We will each self-assess in September to establish our baselines against each of the four iLab-specific competencies. Beginning in 2019, these competencies will be part of our TBD evaluation framework and process.

| | Beginning | Solid | Advanced | Exemplary |
|---------------------------|--|--|---|---|
| Design (and Dream) | <p>Try old design approaches to products and services, but can explore new methods if prompted.</p> <p>Apply basic concepts of ambidexterity for organizations that are improving (exploiting) and innovating (exploring).</p> | <p>Able to improve on a product or service, making it more effective for the user as it moves through the design process.</p> <p>Understand the literature on innovation and the needs of users when building tools, products and services.</p> <p>Can evaluate the potential impact design choices might have on the firm or the field.</p> | <p>Engage in iterative design processes with multiple perspectives leading to tangible improvements in the product or service from draft to draft.</p> <p>Make connections between previously unrelated aspects of a problem that is being designed for.</p> <p>Show an appreciation of the literature on innovation, users' perspectives, and a sense of the markets and the field.</p> <p>Conceive unorthodox design choices and experiments without fear.</p> <p>Create tools, products and/or services that are repeatable, and less people-dependent than typical Education First offerings.</p> | <p>Engage in a design process that is creative, meaningful and joyous - and infuse the things we create with those qualities.</p> <p>Approach design with a clear and focused sense of the problem we are trying to solve as a driver of our work.</p> <p>Develop groundbreaking approaches that open up new territory for the firm and the field in the form of discontinuous change.</p> <p>Apply a deep appreciation of the literature on innovation, users' needs, and a sense of the where the market and the field are going.</p> <p>Create tools, products and/or services that are more repeatable, automated and interactive than typical Education First offerings and are aligned to our business strategy/the dual bottom line.</p> |

| | | | | |
|--------------------------------------|--|--|---|---|
| <p>Deliver (and Dazzle)</p> | <p>Satisfy the identified needs of users.</p> <p>Novel approaches to challenges are offered.</p> | <p>Provide users with new solutions to meaningful problems.</p> <p>Incremental improvements in their current way of doing things are encouraged.</p> | <p>Create user experiences that are joyous and memorable and which attend to capacity, coherence, purpose, and equity.</p> <p>Provide users with creative and powerful solutions to important problems.</p> <p>Help users to solve for their immediate problems and build their capacity for addressing future work.</p> <p>Create the kinds of products tools, products and services that we would be excited to use.</p> <p>Offer supports to users that are new, fresh and tailored to our own innovation strategies and approaches.</p> | <p>Create user experiences that are joyous, memorable, and impactful in the building of capacity, coherence, purpose, and equity.</p> <p>Instinctively discern the full extent of our users’ needs, what drives and engages them, so as to inspire all towards the creation of paradigm-shifting solutions.</p> <p>Impassion ourselves and our users with purpose and urgency behind the work and a belief in the power of innovative solutions in the face of important problems.</p> <p>Promote confidence and optimism in colleagues and users by extolling and exemplifying the power of innovative practices.</p> <p>Move not just the work of the user within the scope of a given engagement but open up new possibilities for subsequent improvement.</p> <p>Create products and services that become a byword for market-leading excellence.</p> <p>Establish new ways of pricing and delivering that unlock new levels of excellence, efficiency, and profit.</p> |
| <p>Discover (and Develop)</p> | <p>Debrief after projects to explore headline lessons for team members.</p> | <p>Identify questions to answer and/or problems to solve within each learning</p> | <p>Able to analyze and evaluate with insight the importance of project learnings and</p> | <p>Employ rapid learning cycles that efficiently evaluate the impact of multiple design efforts.</p> |

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| | <p>Explore possible implications for future work.</p> | <p>cycle and/or project/initiative. Apply learning to subsequent project work; encourage incremental improvement of iLab services through a growing appreciation of what works.</p> | <p>apply those lessons to each new project and phase.</p> <p>Can combine growing experiential knowledge with the best that has been thought and written about in the theory and practice.</p> <p>Encourage both incremental development of current approaches and the introduction of entirely new approaches.</p> <p>Begin to spot trends in what works and what is needed by clients and the field at large.</p> | <p>Acknowledge and learn from all projects on the perceived ‘success-failure’ spectrum.</p> <p>Use this knowledge to respond to the changing needs of the environment and predict trends and patterns to come.</p> <p>Respond to new needs and trends at ahead-of-the-curve speed.</p> <p>Set the tone for new trends through thought leadership and field building.</p> |
| <p>Document (and Disseminate)</p> | <p>Record takeaways from the work.</p> <p>Don’t always present what was learned in a manner that can be used formatively by the iLab or others.</p> | <p>Faithfully capture the lessons of a given project (whether that project realizes its full potential or not).</p> <p>Develop a base of knowledge around the work.</p> <p>Share that growing understanding with others.</p> <p>Collect data to measure against measures of success.</p> | <p>Develop a growing knowledge base which feeds into an increasingly sophisticated signature approach for the iLab at a methodological level.</p> <p>Communicate these features in a clear and compelling way to internal and external audiences, such that significant positive changes and shifts in approach are encouraged.</p> <p>Document and codify tools, products and/or services and return to core business.</p> | <p>Capture the breakthrough findings and failures of the iLab’s work for distribution across the firm and the field.</p> <p>Share and systematize our collective wisdom such that the iLab feeds the firm and the firm feeds the iLab.</p> <p>Document and codify tools, products and/or services such that the core business can quickly sell, repeat and scale.</p> |

Appendix 2: iLab Initial Metrics for Success

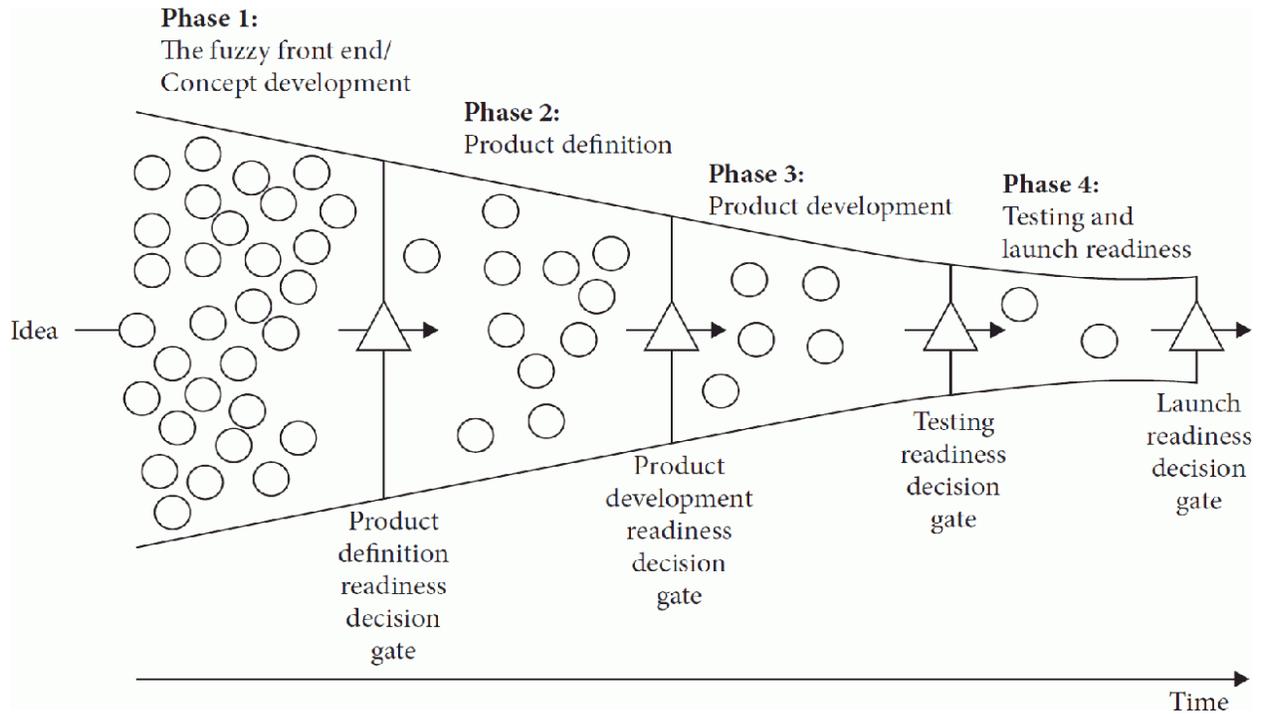
iLab Success Measures: Q3-4

| Core Concept | | | |
|---|---|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Innovate (explore) - Pursue breakthrough innovations in our business model and with new technical competencies in order to create more value, grow profit and sustain Ed First Improve (exploit) - Encourage the core business to resource a “skunkworks team” cutting across the home teams that will identify and complete improvements to core service offerings in the main business that lead to more value and impact. | | | |
| Year One Success Headlines | | | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2018: Earn \$250k revenue and turn focus to maximizing profit Successfully begin and test for efficacy innovative (explore) projects that experiment with business model and/or new technical competencies Understand whether/how to share ExD strategic planning tools and training with the core business | | | |
| Overarching Indicators of Success | | | |
| <p>Big questions we seek to answer in pursuit of the dual bottom line, overall and in specific projects/initiatives we test:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Can we solve big problems in the field: capacity, equity, coherence, purpose? (North Star) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Can we generate scalable solutions for the field that maximize impact? (Impact) Can we acquire new and different customers from existing Ed First markets? (People/Users) Can we reach new and different customers from new segments of the market? (Market reach) Can Ed Firsters ultimately benefit (sell, scale, deliver) from iLab-tested innovations? (People/Users) Can products/solutions other than professional services produce profit? (Methodology/Biz Model?) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Can technology be used to automate and improve our services? (Technical Competencies) Can we price products/solutions/services differently to optimize profit? (Biz Model) <p>Any project that helps us to answer these questions is ‘<i>SO iLab</i>’.</p> | | | |
| | Initial Specific Steps to Measure | Success Indicators – How will each step be recognized by users? | How will we know? |
| First 90-Days July - Sept: Soft Launch | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish a clear and compelling manifesto for the iLab for internal and external use. Decide which projects we will prioritize for the first 90 days and how far we want to get on each, create an action plan for accomplishing that. Decide what new skills or knowledge we each need to build and how we will do so | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ed Firsters will be able to accurately answer the question: What is the iLab in the business of doing? How does it go about its work? Oak will feel satisfied by the work provided and empowered to keep using the tools we have shared. They will reflect that Ed First didn’t just help them to improve, | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Client surveys, debrief conversations. Decision filters for continued testing Documented lessons from early service offerings, including analysis of what has worked, what |

| | | | |
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| | <p>(e.g., workshops, convenings, job shadowing opportunities)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deliver on an iLab-related project (e.g. Oak) and derive key takeaways from the various innovation ‘tests’ being conducted as part of that work. • Develop a set of evolving criteria to determine what makes a project iLab ready; what makes iLab’s learnings, products, and services ready to be cycled back into the core business. • Begin to test out at least one new iLab offering that draws on a new way of structuring/offering/pricing the work: e.g. CEO Cohort as an example of a networked offering; <i>Imperative</i> collaboration as an example of white labeling existing tech products to bring to K12 market; competency model bank and/or culture survey and/or DEI offering as an example of reusable products and repeatable services <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ As part of this, create new habits of documenting and learning from the work • Finalize iLab competency model and begin to use it regularly in our work together. | <p>but invited them to rethink the very way in which they go about their work.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prospective iLab projects will have seen clear progress primarily in the form of what we learn from the experiment of the project and then in the form of value to the end user, the firm and the field (all dependent on the extent to which the project is fully realized). | <p>hasn’t, why (formative)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We will have made clear decisions around what branding, IP, and thought leadership we wish to convey. • We will have begun to develop a sense of the market for the products or services we are testing (e.g., we will know whether there is a market for eXd and/or how to create one). |
| <p>Next 90-Days October - December: Hard Launch</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Announce iLab products and services to appropriate stakeholders within Ed First’s network of contacts with clarity of vision and a compelling value proposition. • Establish new clients and collaborators to test emerging iLab modus operandi and associated intellectual property - Could | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Those who come into contact with the iLab will be able to accurately communicate its vision to others - to the point of being able to speak to and advocate for its value. • We will know by the end of the Oak project what, if anything, from the approach has | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We will have developed a clear sense of the market for the products or services we are testing (e.g., we will know whether there is a market for ExD and/or how to create one). |

| | | | |
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| | <p>include the creation of a reusable service and/or an automated service that uses technology as a delivery mechanism.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complete Oak project, consolidating learnings into effective, reusable ExD tools for internal and (possibly) external use. • Take CEO Cohort and/or at least one TCC project through a full test cycle to explore viability to users/the market, with associated learning takeaways. • Begin to capture and crystallize what could become iLab's signature methodologies to share with potential clients and collaborators. • Begin to develop a system that captures and leverages the learnings of the iLab for the benefit of the core business. • Begin to develop a system that captures the learnings of the core business for the benefit of the iLab. | <p>potential for replication and/or how the service offering needs to be modified to achieve maximum profit and impact (dual bottom line)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Those involved in the culmination of the Oak project and the emerging CEO Cohort will experience the benefits of being part of a dynamic and iterative creative process designed to add value to their current work and open up new ways of thinking about what they do. • A growing and more diverse number of potential clients and collaborators will emerge, such that we will have more options than we can accept, requiring us to further hone our best fit metric for iLab readiness. • The iLab team will, with increasing confidence and clarity, be able to articulate a set of core competencies that define their brand of innovation. • Ed Firsters will experience the first signs of positive effects of the iLab's learnings in ways applicable to their day-to-day project work. • Ed Firsters and iLab members will begin to recognize how each can be a contributor to and beneficiary of the others' success. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The iLab is approached by or establishing connections with new and diverse clients or partners. • A growing portfolio of usable solutions for clients. • Client feedback surveys and focus groups to show increasing awareness and affirmation of the iLab's work. • Ed First feedback loops reflect positive associations for iLab and its value add. • The best, most useful iLab-generated tools and approaches have 'landed' in core business project sales and/or deliverables. • Improved competency scores for the Innovation team. |
|--|---|--|---|

Appendix 3: iLab Decision-making Framework



Moving through the gates: At the end of each phase, the project is reviewed and must pass specified criteria before being promoted to the next phase. These reviews are called ‘gates’ and consist of formal project review meetings with key project leaders, product stakeholders, and decision-makers. Typical review criteria include strategic fit, market and customer input, and technical feasibility, plus any other potential show-stoppers. A project can be approved for the next phase, it can be rejected/recycled, it can be put on hold perhaps to synchronize it with other activities and events, or it can be terminated. If firms need to hit tightly defined launch windows such as being able to present a new product at a trade show, and if technical feasibility is difficult to achieve, target specifications are often adjusted downwards. New methods and technologies, such as agile software development or rapid prototyping, can increase the iteration cycles and speed up the innovation process. (Managing R&D and New Product Development. Maximilian von Zedtwitz, Sascha Friesike, and Oliver Gassmann. The Oxford Handbook of Innovation Management. Edited by Mark Dodgson, David M. Gann, and Nelson Phillips. January 2014).

iLab Product Development Cycle and Decision Gates

| Phase/Stage | Description | Questions to answer before moving through the gate into the next phase | ‘SO iLab’ features informing each phase | Tools and resources for use at this stage |
|---|---|--|---|--|
| The Fuzzy Front End/Concept Development Phase. | The primary objective of this phase is to identify ideas for new products and advance them towards concept readiness. This stage draws on tacit | What opportunities are met by the products/services in consideration? | Does a given idea make our heart skip a beat? Does it afford us the opportunity to learn new things that will be of use to the iLab? | In-person ideation. Up-down voting/enforced prioritization. Desk research. |

| | | | | |
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| | knowledge, organizational priorities or pressure, accidental discoveries and insights, great uncertainty and often complex information. | <p>How do these products/services fit into iLab's strategic intentions?</p> <p>Have we encouraged the genesis of the ideas through consulting our own expertise and that of outsiders?</p> <p>Is idea selection informed by best alignment to our goals and values?</p> | <p>Does it stand to generate profit for the firm or lead to associated benefits?</p> <p>Does it have the potential to change the firm or field in a meaningful way by offering a whole new way of doing X?</p> | Interviewing experts, other providers in the field, and potential users. |
|--|---|---|--|--|

-----**PRODUCT DEFINITION READINESS DECISION GATE**-----

| | | | | |
|-------------------------------------|---|---|---|--|
| The Product Definition Phase | During this phase, the product concept is matured further and married with market needs. Here we develop the basic aspects of the product's architecture, defining key functional and technical features and integrating initial market-ready specifications. | <p>Have we deepened our understanding of the product/service opportunity in an effort to reduce uncertainty?</p> <p>Have we explored and can we articulate the benefits of the product in development (be it incremental or discontinuous)?</p> <p>Have we anticipated and can we describe the potential technical hurdles and risks associated with the development of the product?</p> <p>Have we painted a picture of the competitive landscape into the which the product/service might be launched?</p> <p>Have we explored any intellectual property, patent, or licensing agreement considerations relevant to the emerging product/service?</p> | <p>Why would the world be better for having this idea in it?</p> <p>Who is this product/service for and how will they benefit?</p> <p>Does this idea represent a disruptive innovation that generates higher profit margins and is less reliant on human touch?</p> <p>Does this idea have 'first mover' advantage?</p> <p>Does it look like we can do this differently or better than anyone else?</p> <p>Who are the clearly identifiable market segments and early adopters?</p> | Business model canvas. Design brief. Market analysis scan. Technical specification requirements analysis. |
|-------------------------------------|---|---|---|--|

-----PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT READINESS DECISION GATE-----

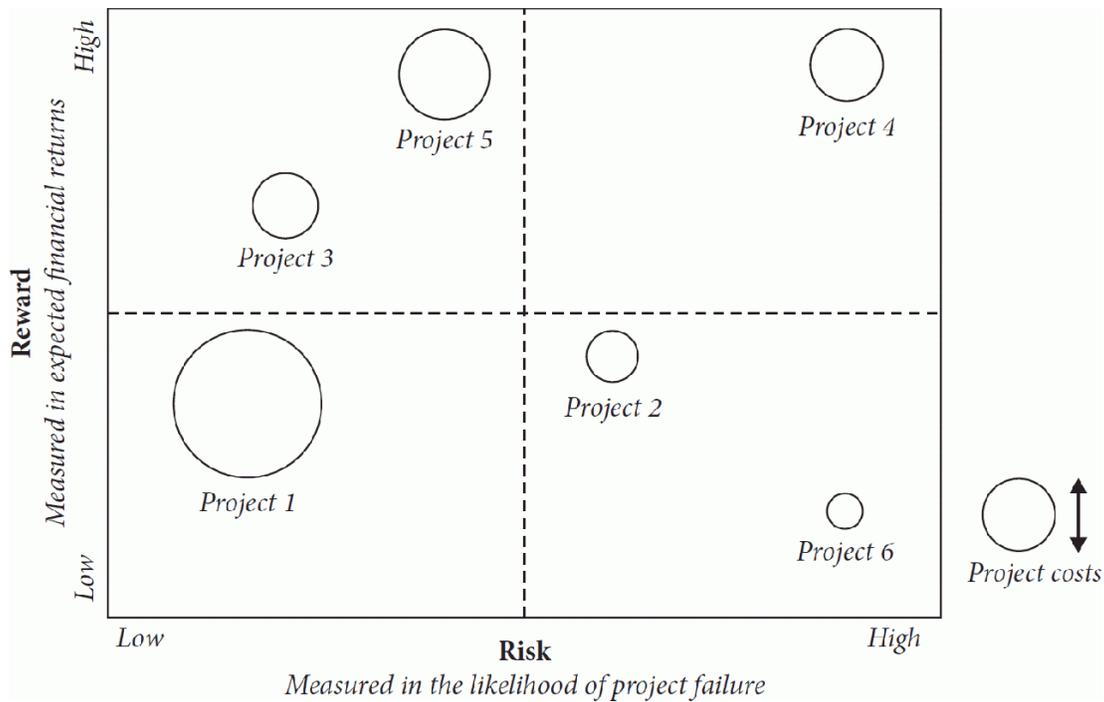
| | | | | |
|---|--|--|---|--|
| <p>The Product Development Phase</p> | <p>This phase, the heart of the new product development process, sees the physical creation and implementation of the product. This is where the product development team translates all design requirements, based on component and partial prototypes, drawings, mockups, and other inputs, into one integral prototype.</p> | <p>Have we secured access to the necessary resources (personnel, financial resources, technology supports) to do justice to the prototype being created?</p> <p>Have we engaged all relevant potential collaborators into the creation of the prototype, for the purpose of sharing resources, comparing approaches and advancing the innovation where necessary?</p> <p>Have we incorporated potential customers into the prototyping process to gain new insights and keep the user experience front and center?</p> | <p>Does the product rely on existing Ed First IP for any part of its development?</p> <p>Have we embedded into the product and its delivery mechanisms to capture user data and user experiences?</p> | <p>Free-to-use websites and wikis for developing wireframe prototypes. Survey software, focus group protocols.</p> |
|---|--|--|---|--|

-----FINAL TESTING/LAUNCH READINESS DECISION GATE-----

| | | | | |
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| <p>The Final Testing and Launch Readiness Phase</p> | <p>During this phase, the product moves into its final stages of prototyping and testing, before being prepared for production. This phase also attends to the market readiness of the product or service.</p> | <p>Is the product real-world ready for public consumption, with all potential 'glitches' identified through extensive 'road testing'?</p> <p>Have we established a pricing structure for the product?</p> <p>Do we have a market entry date, a marketing strategy (be it widespread or targeted) and outbound logistics for getting the product/service into the hands of users?</p> | <p>Has the prototype gone through an iterative process of improvement?</p> <p>Have we incorporated all relevant feedback loops into the features of the final product?</p> | <p>Design thinking cycle.</p> |
|--|--|--|--|-------------------------------|

Appendix 4: iLab Portfolio Management Framework

iLab Portfolio Management: Portfolio management systems are used to provide information about the features of individual project offerings within a holistic, aggregated picture of all project streams. Research has shown that the selection of individually promising projects doesn't necessarily lead to an optimally-performing portfolio, so understanding how projects work in concert with the whole is just as important as appreciating individual projects on their own merits. The following offers a way into managing a portfolio, with the three interacting traits of project risk, reward, and cost represented:



Below is a list of possible criteria for inclusion in an iLab-ready 2x2 portfolio matrix. These criteria would be used to populate a holistic picture of our multiple iLab offerings at any point in time, such that we could map their features relative to the whole. We could use multiple matrices or prioritize a select few criteria for consideration. The checking questions would be used at the project definition stage of product development to determine which projects will enter the process, and at each subsequent gate to determine whether the characteristics of our projects are still in keeping with what we had set out at the beginning. When decisions are being made about whether to drop, scale or hand back to the core business various iLab offerings, we will use this mapping process once again to ensure we are cognizant of the balance of project types in our portfolio.

| | | |
|---|-----|---|
| Novelty to Ed First (Is this a new direction or a repackaging of something we already do?) | vs. | Novelty to the field (Will this feel new to users?) |
| Potential for market differentiation (Will we stand out?) | vs. | Market acceptance (Is the market ready for something like this?) |
| Expected value (If we can pull this off, what would be the impact?) | vs. | Probability of success (How viable is the idea?) |

| | | |
|---|-----|---|
| Potential for learning (Will we grow as a result of this work?) | vs. | Potential for financial returns (Will it make money?) |
| Capacity for the work (Does this draw on existing knowledge and skills or new ones?) | vs. | Strategic alignment (Is it SO iLab or not so much?) |
| Reach of the idea (How great is the potential for scaling this project?) | vs. | Degree of control (How much ownership and agency do we have in design and delivery?) |
| Heart skips a beat (How much does this work excite and motivate?) | vs. | Head says it is worth it (How much does this work make pragmatic sense?) |
| Viability and likelihood of financial success | vs. | Viability and likelihood of impacting/changing the field |
| Time horizon of handoff to core biz | vs. | Degree of lift while in iLab |

Appendix 5: Long List of Potential iLab Products and Services

Initials = Names of iLab members voting for each idea and why.

| Project No. | Project Idea | Does it make our heart skip a beat? | Could it be a revenue/profit generator? | Will it contribute to our learning as an iLab? |
|-------------|--|-------------------------------------|---|--|
| 1. | Executive Coaching (for supts, others?). Toolkit with S&S (new repeatable service) | Give to Core Biz | Give to Core Biz | Give to Core Biz |
| 2. | Convenings Toolkit. Codified product with optional add-ons/tiered pricing | JV, IDT | JV, IDT, AP | JH, JV, |
| 3. | CEO Cohort (network w. Membership pricing - repeatable products for X role). | IDT, JH, JV | JH, AP | JV |
| 4. | Funder expert database (product) | | JV, IDT | JV |
| 5. | Automated competency model (product) | JH, JV, AP | AP, JV, IDT | JH, IDT |
| 6. | Change management/implementation workflow (product) | JV | | JV, AP |
| 7. | Workshops for TCC | AP | | JV, AP |
| 8. | “Books” on Amazon for TCC, Change management (part of IP Journey) | | | JV, AP |

| | | | | |
|-----|---|------------------|------------------|------------------|
| 9. | ExD Strategic Planning methodology (service) | Give to Core Biz | Give to Core Biz | Give to Core Biz |
| 10. | ExD Skill Building (Workshop or online modules) | IDH, JV | IDH, JV | JV |
| 11. | DEI Org journey | JV, IDH | JV, IDH | IDH |
| 12. | Org Culture survey | AP, JV | JV, AP | AP, JV |
| 13. | Imperative for students | AP, IDH, JH | | IDH, JH, AP |
| 14. | Coherence needs assessment (framework, curriculum, training) | JV, AP, IDH, JH | | IDH, JH, AP |
| 15. | Self-site-sector framework to organize benchmarking of best practices | IDH | | JV, IDH |
| 16. | Virtual Org IP | JV, JH | | |

Appendix 6: iLab Design Brief – Example: Strategic Convenings Toolkit

Design Brief - STRATEGIC CONVENINGS TOOLKIT (adapted from Equity by Design brief – developed by C. Ortiz).

Ed First’s iLab designs breakthrough solutions for challenging problems in education. We design with users in mind, with a sense of what the field needs, and with the overarching intention to build capacity, coherence, purpose, and equity in all we do. We use a design brief to ensure that we are staying true to our principles and processes.

Any design brief we create should:

- Articulate a problem and the means of addressing that problem.
- Set out the mission at hand.
- Serve as an open statement of ambition.
- Convey a clarity of purpose.
- Inspire excitement.
- Act as a path into meaningful work and creative relationships.
- Leave enough runway for the idea to take off.

We achieve these ends by asking and answering the following questions:

What is the problem we are trying to solve?
[Articulate in the simplest possible terms what is up. This articulation should capture the essence of the problem in a way that is both accessible and compelling to the listener. It should inspire action.]

Convenings are an essential component of collective change efforts, yet convening organizers are often ill-equipped to design experiences that build community, connection, momentum and enthusiasm.

Why does the problem exist?

[What are the root causes of the problem? Why has it been allowed to sustain?]

Convening organizers sometimes fall short of creating engaging experiences because they conflate the experience of a conference (experts at the front, passive recipients of information in the audience) with that of a convening (the expertise of all those attending is acknowledged and harnessed) or at the very least set out to do the latter and end up creating the former.

Convening organizers tend to miss out on the opportunity to design effective adult learning experiences because they don't make explicit connections between the goals, objectives and outcomes of their event with the methods that adult learners need to learn, apply and make plans to achieve goals.

Some convening organizers lack the knowledge to execute their vision because there is a dearth of reliable, accessible support available. Some convening organizers simply lack or do not plan for the amount of time it takes to design and pull off a powerful convening.

The supports are unreliable and inaccessible because very few organizations have consolidated their convenings expertise convenings into validated guides that offer structured support.

What is the context of the problem?

[What do we already know about the history of the problem, the people affected, and previous or current attempts at solutions? Is anyone else already addressing this problem?]

More and more attention is being paid to the role of collective impact in social change efforts. Initiatives such as By All Means at Harvard's Education Redesign Lab place bets on the power of community and sector-wide collaboration, recognizing the potential for impact whenever stakeholders with influence over a shared problem are brought together in the spirit of meaningful dialogue for meaningful change.

Similarly, the Barr Foundation has dedicated significant resources to sector-spanning arts and creativity initiatives at the local level in the hope that bringing together a diversity of perspective and expertise to the issue will accelerate the change they hope to see. This notion, that it is not enough to strengthen individual organizations if the links between organizations are not being strengthened, is increasingly being referred to in the world of foundations as 'systems philanthropy'.

These examples of the broader shift towards collective impact have one thing in common: their success depend in no small part on the caliber of the convening experiences that drive their work, and the impact those convenings have on the creativity, collaboration, and action of the attending stakeholders.

In keeping with the growth of the collective impact movement, we have seen an increase in the number and scale of convenings in recent years. And yet, the convenings concept has remained largely unchanged and the increase in the quality of convenings has not been commensurate with their proliferation. People who attend convenings are still all-too-likely to encounter passive experiences which fail to invite critical engagement, connection, and a call to action. There exist examples that appear to buck this trend by adopting a more innovative approach to session design and structure (e.g. PSELI convening, Ed First-led convenings) but such bright spots are certainly not the norm.

There are myriad supports for organizational change within education but most offerings focus on solving problems at the level of individual organizations. There are fewer examples that explore the specifics of cross-organizational change and fewer still that recognize convenings as a unit of change and are positioned to offer expert advice and support to maximize their impact.

What is the proposed solution to the problem?

[What are we going to do about it? This should be expressed as a series of causal bets that we are making about the impact of our solution.]

A Strategic Convenings Toolkit that supports users through the process of designing and delivering a mind-blowing, game-changing convening. The toolkit would walk the user through the phases of launching, planning and executing a convening (or series of convenings) that utilizes exemplary adult learning methods - as well as offering guidance on post-convening activities, continued strategic support of participants, and executive coaching opportunities. The guide would include easy-to-use facilitation techniques designed to bring the convening experience to life and lots of exemplar materials that are easily adaptable.

Why does this work matter and what are the causes for excitement?

[What about this project touches on our core hopes for capacity, coherence, purpose and equity? What about this project gets our heart racing? Who are we in this work and how might our identity shape our experience of it?]

Convenings present an opportunity for educators to come together to confront some of the most important challenges facing the system today. The power of networked solutions to such problems has been well documented (Bryk, T. Learning to Improve, 2015) and it is clear that maximizing the impact of convenings would have a positive effect on delegates' ability to deliver on the promise of equity and excellence in their given contexts. The more widespread a tool like this became and the greater fidelity with which it is implemented, the better-positioned we would be to demonstrate its value to the field.

Excitement comes from the fact that this is already something Ed First does remarkably well. We have good ideas to share and have every reason to be enthusiastic at the prospect of sharing them in a systematized and impactful way.

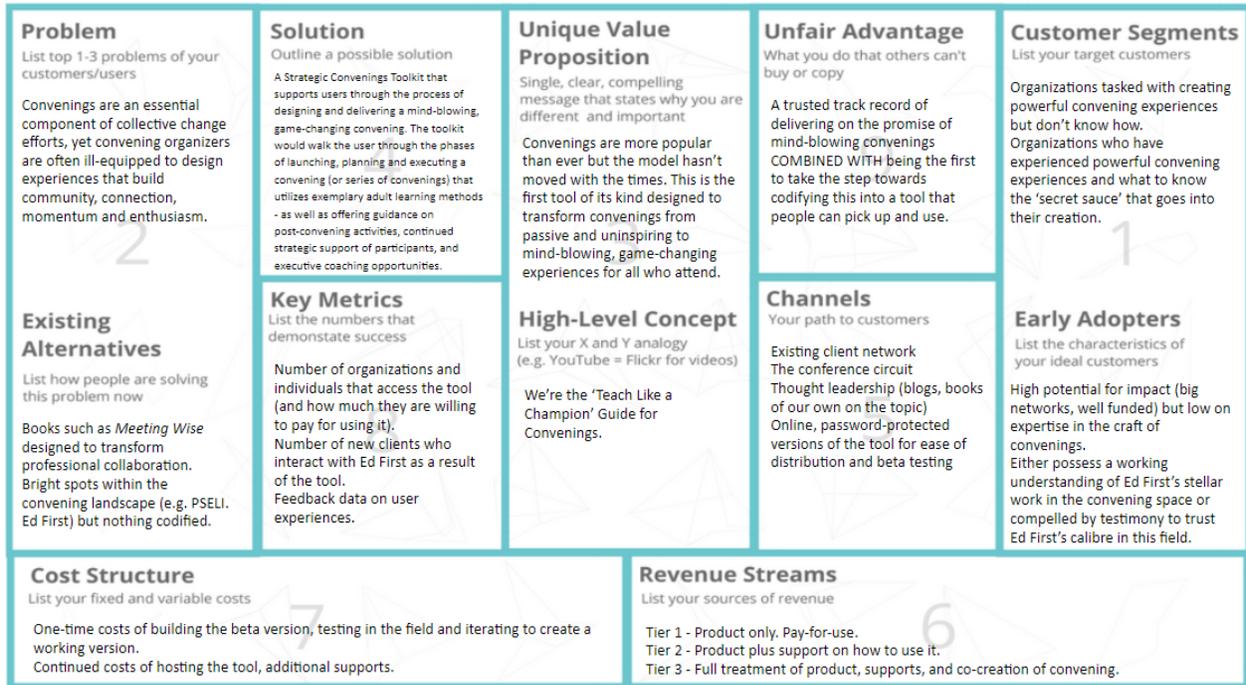
What do we hope to learn along the way?

[How will we use reflections and feedback loops to document our learning and pivot? What tests do we want to run and how will we capture the results? What potential exists for the translation and transfer of our findings back into the firm or out into the field? How might this opportunity for learning lead to additional opportunities to develop?]

This is one of our first attempts at translating an area of expertise into a reusable tool for the field. There are a number of tests we might be able to run around the user experience, the most effective way to price (or tier-price) the offering, and how to balance selling the tool (Tier 1) with selling the tool plus supports (Tier 2).

We also have the opportunity to learn more about our own process within the iLab, such as the challenges associated with moving something from the conceptual to product level, the benefits of creating an MVP and the lessons we can learn about the instrument from rapid test cycles.

Appendix 7: iLab Business Model Canvas – Example: Strategic Convenings Toolkit



Appendix 8: iLab Codification of Innovation Practices

Example A: Opinion Piece on Human-Centered Strategic Design

***Don't (always) start with the end in mind:
A human-centered approach to equitable strategic planning.***

Much of our lives are spent planning. Whether we are the beneficiaries or the executors of plans, there are very few walks of life and work that don't require us to think and act with a conception of the end in mind. Which is why I am going to suggest something that feels strange to write and might feel unsettling to read, particularly for Ed Firsters: Traditional planning can be overrated. Traditional planning can be presumptuous. Traditional planning can even be damaging and inequitable.

Consider the work of developing a strategic plan for an organization. Here is a process that, in too many examples from across different fields, starts with an image in the mind's eye of what one would hope to achieve. Like a statue hiding in marble waiting to be revealed by the sculptor, most strategic planning

processes end up uncovering the rationale behind a strategic direction that had in large part been decided upon from the very beginning. These predetermined outcomes tend to come from the implicit expectations of those driving the process and an often-unrealized need to maintain the status quo of the existing system, despite whatever might be said to the contrary about wanting to ‘reimagine’ a strategic direction.

The conditions that give rise to such predeterminism can also come from the manner in which we as consultants engage in the process. Whenever we assess the needs of a client, help them to define a problem, ideate on solutions, or recommend a coherent set of strategic actions, we make choices that affect how these phases will unfold. Whenever we determine who will be consulted, where expertise lies, how work will be distributed, or the nature of our reflective practices, we are inevitably crafting an experience that falls somewhere on a spectrum with ‘responsive to the needs of those affected by the problem we hope to solve’ at one end, and ‘closed to a predetermined path as set by a few influential stakeholders’ at the other. If we are to help organizations lead for equity through strategic planning, then the very process of that planning needs to stand as a faithful representation of equitable practice. The educational systems we encounter have been designed in a manner that leads to inequitable outcomes for students; if we are to redesign such systems then we need to think differently about the processes and practices we employ along the way. As we reflect on our work applying the ‘Equity by Design’ approach to the Oak Foundation strategic planning process, the team is beginning to notice a number of features that set it apart from what we might call ‘traditional’ approaches.

The Role of the User. In traditional approaches to strategic planning, experts tend to be seen only as those people who have studied the topic extensively or those with status and power, regardless of whether they have experienced the issues firsthand. They are more likely to be able to speak to the issues and problems at hand with objectivity rather than subjectivity - a perspective that offers much but often doesn’t provide the full and experiential picture of what is really at stake. In human-centered approaches, people with proximity to the strategic problem are positioned as experts in their appreciation and understanding of that problem. This is because they live it and can speak to the manner in which systemic or environmental factors have become manifest *for them*. By conducting empathy interviews with those with proximity to the problem, we

were able to identify patterns in the accounts of educators, families, and students relative to what they were thinking, saying, doing and feeling when faced with the problem at hand. When we presented this knowledge back to the client, there began a very different discussion about the change they hoped to see in their work, underpinned by a shift in their conception of the problem - all because we consulted the experts. *Questions to bear in mind when adopting this approach:* How do you hear everyone? What happens if ‘experts’ contradict one another?

Conceptualizing the Problem. Traditional strategic planning often sees us entering the process with an established, or close-to-established conception of the problem we seek to solve and devote more time to solutions. A core part of any equitable approach to the work is deeply understanding the problem we seek to solve - its historical context, the root causes and the way this problem is experienced with people with proximity to it. This approach to problem definition is the guiding light of the entire process but it is also the aspect that requires the greatest mindset shift on the part of those involved. When it came to defining the problem, the team would have at times been forgiven for thinking that there was something unnecessarily repetitive about the approach. On numerous occasions, we would return to the conception of the problem, its context and its causes because our evolving schema in relation to the problem meant we were seeing it anew and with a greater degree of nuance each time. In this regard, the strategic planning process can become closer to a collective experience of learning. Learning about the problem at hand and its relativity to the organization, the individuals in it, and the knowledge, skills, and values the underpin the work. *A question to bear in mind when adopting this approach:* How do you reconcile this approach with meeting the needs of the work in a timely and efficient manner?

Teaming, Roles, and Responsibilities. Since this approach invites a closer appreciation of one’s own identity and values in relation to the work, there are necessary differences in the ways we hope to define and reflect on the role we play within the team. In traditional strategic planning, we acknowledge visible experience (roles, titles, etc.) as the predominant organizational structure for the project. The nominal title held by each team member brings with it a bounded definition of the scope of that individual’s work and the

locus of their control. In more inclusive approaches, we acknowledge that each of us brings a lens to our work and that it's our responsibility to examine perspective, implicit bias and power dynamics as we design solutions. Since these aspects of our identity, personality, preferences, and strengths cannot be captured entire by a traditional role type, there opens up the potential for organizing through less-tightly-bound terms. As the project developed, we discovered that the roles we actually played came more authentically through, such that our role types felt more like nicknames than nametags. 'The Professor'; 'The Conductor'; and 'The Connector' became better approximations of what we brought to the work than anything a predetermined role assignment could have done. It also allowed us to think differently and more expansively about what we might be able to bring to the work rather than what we ought to bring. *Questions to bear in mind when adopting this approach:* What happens if you replace existing role types with others that similarly bound the involvement of team members? How might the dynamic of the team be affected by a change? (e.g. Modes of communication, the division of labor, accountability structures.)

Solutions development. In a traditional approach, research and promising practices guide the solutions development. For instance, we use landscape scans, traditionally infused with the perspectives of objective experts alone, to frame recommendations in the form of 'bright spots' and 'What works?' exemplars. Offering suggestions of this nature will always add value to existing or supposed plans of action but are less effective at solving for altered conceptions of the problem. In an equity-driven approach, solutions emerge through a more careful and patient process of exploration and a willingness to push boundaries. The mantra 'If we do what we always did, then we will get what we always got' is alive and well in this phase of the work, and while research and promising practices contribute to solution development, they are not the sole drivers. Iterating around the potential for different solutions at this stage is more common in a human-centered approach, with a higher tolerance for ambiguity giving rise to a broader palette of options. *Questions to bear in mind when adopting this approach:* What happens when ambiguity becomes uncertainty and how do you prevent that from occurring? Does this take a particular type of client? If so, how would that change the way we engage potential clients?

Example B: Guiding Documentation for Equity by Design-infused Strategic Planning

Equity by Design (eXd) & Strategic Planning

In July 2018, Ed First launched a strategic planning project with the Oak Foundation. This project was conducted through the Innovation Unit and was designed to test the integration of equitable design into Ed First’s strategic planning approach. The following outlines the project approach and compares it to traditional, funder strategic planning projects at the firm.

Guiding Principles

| Principle | Description | Rationale |
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| Solve with, not for, people | People with proximity to a problem (PPP) are best positioned to solve that problem. Seeking to understand the experience of PPP, recognizing PPP’s expertise and actively involving PPP throughout a strategic planning recognizes the history, context and experience of those our clients seek to impact. It can bring to life and research and promising practices to deliver more innovative, while still practical solutions that don’t exacerbate a problem. | “Experts” are often limited to researchers, national field leaders or individuals with high visibility or power. While these perspectives can contribute important learning to an effort, they limit the lens of expertise and ignore the historical context and lived experience of people with the greatest proximity to the problem. |
| Interrogate the problem | Focusing deeply on understanding a problem before developing solutions forces us to go beyond surface level solutions. Grappling with the root causes at the heart of a problem and developing solutions centered on addressing those problems increases the likelihood of deeper impact. | If we aim to solve a problem, it’s likely we have given some thought to a potential solution. We can become invested in solutions creation and implementation without devoting the necessary time to understanding whether we solving the right problem. System inequities cannot be addressed without focusing efforts at the root causes of the problem. |
| Recognize your perspective & location | We all bring a unique lens to our work, and it is our responsibility to examine the ways in which identity, implicit bias and power impact our perspectives and actions. | Ignoring what we as individuals and as a collective bring to an effort leaves our work susceptible to major blind spots. Acknowledging who we are bringing to an effort helps us make visible the dynamics and realities at play. |

Comparison of Ed First Strategic Planning & eXd-Driven Strategic Planning

| EF Phase | Description | eXd Phase | Description & Supporting Actions |
|---|--|----------------------------|---|
| Notice & Reflect: | | | |
| Reflect on ways our perspectives and location contribute to our decisions and actions <i>throughout the entire project.</i> | | | |
| Context | The team develops a research plan based on the key questions the client would like to explore. | Empathize: Research | The team asks itself- “what problem are we trying to address through our strategy?” It puts forth an initial problem definition, and learns more about the problem through listening to people with proximity to the problem (PPP). Supporting actions: During project launch, engage with |

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|-----------------------------------|--|---|---|
| | <p>The entry point differs based on whether this is a new strategy or strategy refresh.</p> <p>The extent of the research (SWOT, landscape scan, etc.) is driven by client need.</p> | | <p>the client to determine the organizational MOCHA/RACI, and also take a temperature check for informal power dynamics that may be at play.</p> |
| | | <p>Define: Understand the Problem</p> | <p>The team uses what it learned from PPP to explore root causes. The problem is redefined in terms of root cause(s), which becomes the driver for research and outreach to field leaders. The team defines its desired impact. Supporting Actions: Prime the client to explore problems through the lens of those with closest proximity to the problem. Frame the learning from this phase- PPP's experiences-as data that is as valuable as evidence-based research.</p> |
| <p>Strategic Direction</p> | <p>The team takes recommendations from the research phase and develops and workshops theory of action.</p> <p>It applies filters to determine areas the foundation is best positioned to support and considers the outputs and outcomes it seeks to work toward.</p> | <p>Ideate: Set Goals & Strategies</p> | <p>The team translates what it's learned into an emerging theory of action. It applies filters to determine areas the foundation is best positioned to support. The team engages PPP to generate potential strategies the team will pursue, and considers the outputs and outcomes they seek to work toward. Supporting Actions: Before engaging external-to-the-org partners, confirm the role of the PPP in decision-making (e.g. are they co-creators or providing input). Prepare the client to hear ideas that could range from deepening existing work to a major departure in focus area (though still aligned to org vision). This is also a good time to reconfirm the client decision-making roles and power dynamics.</p> |
| | | <p>Test: Assumptions & Framework</p> | <p>The team tests the TOA with partners and critical friends. The team workshops and refines the TOA. Supporting Actions: Prepare the client to share a brief overview of the approach we took to arrive at the draft strategy to ensure they understand why there may be intentional refinements or departures from the current strategy.</p> |

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| Management | The team considers the resources and capacity to implement the strategy and develops an approach to progress monitoring. It also develops the preliminary implementation plan, which typically includes details for the first 3-6 months and up to two years of high-level milestones. | Prepare for Implementation | The team considers the resources and capacity to implement the strategy and develops an approach to progress monitoring. It also develops the preliminary implementation plan, which typically includes details for the first 3-6 months and up to two years of high-level milestones. |
| Execution | Execute strategy, monitor progress and revise strategic framework, as needed. | Implement, Monitor & Evaluate | Execute strategy, monitor progress and revise strategic framework, as needed. |