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Book Review – Lean Impact: How to Innovate for Radically Greater Social Good Review & Implications for Engaged Programming

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Acknowledgments

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Book Review – *Lean Impact: How to Innovate for Radically Greater Social Good* Review & Implications for Engaged Programming

M.C. “Molly” Immendorf

Extension Foundation

The book “Lean Impact: How to Innovate for Radically Greater Social Good” outlines ways to infuse innovation techniques learned from the private start-up sector into sectors traditionally working to make a societal change that may be funded through governmental agencies and grants. These techniques are also applicable to the Land-Grant Cooperative Extension System (CES) through combining them with engaged programming practices and CES best practices and the tools and methods of the Extension Foundation’s Impact Collaborative in urban programs and beyond.

Keywords: innovation, impact, Impact Collaborative

Lean experimentation and design thinking were born from the need to innovate rapidly with a focus on empathy for customers and clientele. Most lean experimentation books and resources focus on the business and/or tech entrepreneur to create a better widget, tool, experience, etc. *Lean Impact: How to Innovate for Radically Greater Social Good* by Ann Mei Chang (2018) is different. Like Cooperative Extension, Chang focuses on making a local, meaningful impact. Drawing upon her experiences in Silicon Valley, government, and non-profits, she leads the reader through the why, what, and how to use lean experimentation and design thinking as well as the implications of changing the status quo through setting audacious goals, piloting, validating, and iterating to a better future, and working differently. Chang’s understanding of the not-for-profit, governmental, and non-governmental sectors’ work to improve lives, systems, and policies makes transferring the principles of “lean impact” to local urban Extension programs much easier.

Lean Impact Principles

When looking to make positive long-term impact in local communities, Chang suggests one should “fall in love with the problem, not your solution” and “combine scientific rigor with entrepreneurial agility” through the use of the three lean impact principles below:

1. Think big: Propose a vision not of incremental change but of big, bold social change with at least a 10-year horizon.
2. Start small: Design small pilots to test ways to achieve the big audacious goal, experiment, learn, and pivot if needed. Use validation techniques to test assumptions and ideas.

3. Relentlessly seek impact: Use metrics to make social change visible and measurable, not numbers of activities or activity participants.

Innovation Is the Path; Impact Is the Destination

Chang reminds us that “innovation is the path; impact is the destination” to the change we seek. Extension also places focus on the public value through measuring short-, medium-, and long-term impacts of projects and programs. Often logic models are used for program planning and evaluation purposes by identifying program “outcomes” before the implementation stages. These outcomes or impact indicators show attitudinal, behavioral, and policy changes in clientele and their communities. Many think that innovation is the invention of a breakthrough or disruptive product, service, or tool. When thinking broadly, there are at least ten types of innovation and can also be incremental as well as “breakthrough” (Geith et al., 2018). Chang describes “social innovation [which] involves iterative testing and improvement, refining business models, influencing partners and policies, fine-tuning logistics, and many other practicalities.” In other words, she is describing the pond that Extension swims in. Chang shares the three pillars of social innovation: value, growth, and impact. Potential solutions should be valued by the beneficiaries and their community, have the potential for growth and scale, and include the measurable impact of positive change in behaviors, attitudes, and more. This aligns with Extension’s mission and goals of public value and transformational change to improve lives.

Experimental Mindset

Drawing upon lean principles and design thinking, Chang recommends the adoption of an experimental mindset, including questioning, testing, learning, and pivoting. Like Silicon Valley start-ups, the testing begins with pilots of the minimum viable product (MVP). Testing also includes being transparent about assumptions being made and testing to see if they are correct or need an iteration or a pivot to another idea. It’s the validation of ideas, pilots, and programs that help determine whether there is public value, growth potential, and impact.

Challenges to Using Lean Principles

Grant funder expectations don’t always align with dreaming big but starting small, according to Chang. She calls for new funding models that encourage experimentation, rapid learning, and pivots. Supporting measured risk-taking is also sometimes elusive to the traditional Extension models, including the “expert model,” which puts a high value on the Extension professional’s academic expertise being shared with the community. There is a growing understanding of the learning gained through failure or, less dramatically, from planned outcomes not being realized. A change to the experimental mindset with the support of community and institutions is needed to “fail fast” and learn for improvement. In other words, learning from failures should be celebrated as much as successes.

Extension Foundation Impact Collaborative

Embracing innovation has been identified as crucial to the future of Extension (Franz & Cox, 2012), and the Extension Committee on Policy's Innovation Taskforce asked the Extension Foundation to respond to help spur on innovative practices through professional development. (Smith et al., 2016) which led to the creation of the Extension Foundation's Impact Collaborative (<https://extension.org/ic/>). Through the Impact Collaborative, Extension-led teams use the Impact Collaborative's Innovation Skill-Building Experience (ISBE) curriculum and tools to co-innovate and co-create projects and programs with community members and partners to make visible, measurable local impact. The ISBE curriculum combines creative entrepreneurial methodologies, including design thinking and Chang's lean impact principles with Extension best practices in a toolkit. The toolkit was created to encourage working differently, which includes adopting an experimental innovative mindset. The toolkit is a manual for Extension-led teams that include community members, stakeholders, and partners. The manual leads teams to rapidly identify their big audacious goal, ideate potential solutions, and document the impact they plan to measure and achieve while making assumptions and learning more rapidly visible. The Extension Foundation's Impact Collaborative is more than a toolkit and curriculum. During Impact Collaborative events, teams are paired with a trained impact facilitator who coaches teams to identify their stage in planning as well as facilitating the use of the ISBE tools to focus teams to identify and achieve their goals and next steps. Another unique opportunity for teams is on-the-spot advice from a national network of key informants during Extension Foundation's Impact Collaborative Summits. The informants have the experience, knowledge, and network connections to help teams identify and fill gaps in their planning.

The Impact Collaborative encourages the Extension-led teams to adopt a hybrid or engaged program or project planning and delivery model (Vines, 2018; Vines & Stiegler, 2018). Teams that embrace a hybrid or engaged model include community members who are stakeholders and partners. This leads to a shared vision and better sustainability since the leadership can be more fluid and sustainable in the long run. This is a step up from simply having empathy for and feedback from clientele. By purposely including them as partners in the beginning stages, there is shared ownership in solving the issue and finding potential solutions. In *Lean Impact*, Chang shares many examples, and one is an innovator who sees an injustice, societal issue, or big problem that is ready for a change from status quo. The next level goal of Impact Collaborative teams is to move from designing with users (beneficiaries) to users designing innovative change for themselves and their communities.

Extension Foundation Impact Collaborative Summit Urban Teams

More than 250 Extension-led teams from across the United States and its territories have participated in Impact Collaborative Summits and its predecessor events since 2016. Notable teams that have participated with urban-focused programs include

- University of Kentucky. *Urban Action Team*.
<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1TZeVxouqM7kP8alSocmlGthSWZGHwiguGyl4uiNXzDE/edit?usp=sharing>
- University of Minnesota. *Place-based Approach Model*.
https://docs.google.com/document/d/1Mr-hliqGYJd_fBtAXYLcJDLZSd6v9_NAADd3Uc1UMY8/edit
- Purdue University. *DEI Indy*.
 - 2018:
https://docs.google.com/document/d/1cCGt2ZDgxEO_xGYbSP1vQeYtut5zFVI3faPqXlwRw0Y/edit
 - 2019:
<https://docs.google.com/document/d/13xvHXkDSoZNdGYo2hJPFbjh0id7jQf4Nm95ej4V1mz8/edit>
- Purdue University. *Sustainable Urban Food Systems / Indiana Urban Agriculture*.
https://docs.google.com/document/d/1FQIaSoTckOWlgs36197sbOH3F07tDu3ExU_CmT0BUJ8/edit?usp=sharing
- Prairie View A&M University. *A New D.E.I.*
<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1X0Y6KK2CJEgFR9HFulylnQo3vfOeb89jvGmEYjqnQtc/edit?usp=sharing>
- Prairie View A&M University. *Healthy Houston*. <https://use.vg/Ne9uVV>
- University of Illinois. *Cook County Composting Initiative*.
https://soundcloud.com/user-735659541/sets/impact-collaborative?utm_source=clipboard&utm_campaign=wtshare&utm_medium=widget&utm_content=https%253A%252F%252Fsoundcloud.com%252Fuser-735659541%252Fsets%252Fimpact-collaborative

Although many of these teams were in different formative stages, the Impact Collaborative Summit experience accelerated their planning for implementation by providing personalized facilitated coaching using the ISBE workbook and just-in-time advice from a national network of key informants. This process allows teams to make decisions quickly, move forward, and identify the first pilot experiments to launch their initiative. (Forde-Stiegler, 2019).

Innovation, Impact, and Moving Forward

If innovation is a path and impact is the destination for significant positive social change, then Extension is perfectly poised to engage with communities to make that change. Extension's model of positioning Extension professionals in local communities serves as the impetus for co-innovation and co-creation with community members and partners because they are also members of the communities. By adopting the principles of Chang's *Lean Impact* and the Extension Foundation's Impact Collaborative methodology and tools, Extension-led community teams can go further faster to make the change they seek.

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