



Find Ways to Innovate – But First Move Past Inertia

If you want your organization to thrive,
you must embrace meaningful, lasting change.

By Gabe Cooper

Innovation comes at a cost. It requires a great deal of time, energy, and resources. But innovation is crucial. If you don't challenge yourself to find new ways to reach donors and other target audiences, your organization will wither. So you need to get beyond inertia. Here's how.

Start a Small Snowball & Let it Roll Downhill

When inertia has set in and your organization is stuck in its ways, you simply can't implement sweeping changes. Not only will they not work but you'll alienate your employees, volunteers, and board members. Change is scary for folks. Totally overhauling the status quo can be interpreted as a sign you're unhappy with the job your team is doing.

Instead of going gangbusters with your vision, aim for small and concrete. In software companies, we often use an approach called agile methodology. The agile approach breaks projects into well-defined, two-week intervals called "sprints" with clear deliverables at the end of each interval. You can mirror this tactic in your own nonprofit:

Choose a goal that you think the entire team will support, preferably one that seems lofty but *just* out of reach.

Map out what's necessary to reach that goal, and then chop it into actionable steps that can be taken within a two-week period.

Figure out how you can measure success with each of those small steps as well as with the overall goal.

What Might This Look Like?

Let's say your organization has its annual run coming up in a couple months. You want more runners but haven't had a spike in participants in years. Your team has mentioned wanting to use social media to encourage registrations, but every time you've gone to look into it, it's seemed too complicated and you've had your attention drawn elsewhere.

Here's how you could use the agile methodology. Set your goal as something like "getting 20% more runners than we did last year." Break that into how many people you think you need to tell about the run in order to get that number of participants. Then break it down further into how many people each team member needs to tell.

If you think social media might be helpful in getting you there, map out the specific steps you and your team could take over the next two weeks to get started with it. Maybe one person creates social-media accounts (if you don't have them already), another one looks into Facebook advertising, and another researches the social-media pages of two similar nonprofits that have great event turnouts to see what tips you can learn from them.

Set clear, bite-sized deliverables for each person, and check in at the end of two weeks. Then map out the next two weeks, and so on.

Once you reach your larger goal (or get close), you can implement this agile approach in other areas of your organization. As you build on your success, it won't be hard to

gain steam and start soaking this faster-paced, flexible methodology into the fabric of your organization. Agile is perfectly suited to spur innovation, so it's a great way to shift into an innovative mindset. It also drives accountability and transparency for your team.

“Set bite-sized deliverables for each person.”

Tech Is Really about Process Changes

Another way to move past any holdups caused by institutional inertia is to think about how technology can move your organization forward. If you're not using the tools available to you to improve efficiency and reach your goals, you're going to struggle. Technology enables innovation because it causes people to think differently and frees them to focus on their core strengths.

One of the easiest ways to engage your supporters is with a CRM (customer relationship management) system. Of course the “customers” you'll be tracking are your donors and volunteers. This type of software can help you build bonds with these important extensions of your team and spend less time in manual follow-up.

Keep in mind that the hardest part of introducing new technology is the change in processes that must go hand-in-hand with it. People like technology generally, but they don't usually want to make changes to their workflow or the habits they've had for years. And when you implement software with which people must interact (like a CRM), that's what you're asking them to do. It's worthwhile, but your biggest battle in this area will be to train your personnel on features and functionality, yes, but also on the cultural and process changes they should expect.

Also, make the technology accessible to your staff, your board members, and your volunteers; just be sure to set permissions wisely so that people can make only the changes you want them to make (for example, you may want to set the volunteer permissions so they can't delete any contact records). Be clear about the processes you expect all stakeholders to follow, and work to paint the vision of how this technology is going to help serve those you all care so deeply about serving.

Loop in Your Allies

Finally, if you're eager to innovate and keep pushing your nonprofit forward, don't forget to involve everyone who is invested in your organization. Sometimes we put our donors in their own little box in our minds and forget to think about them as people who can contribute a lot (even beyond money) to our mission. But in order to get more from them, they need to feel known.

This doesn't have to be as hard as it may seem. If you get comfortable with technology, you can get to know your donors by using click tracking to see what links

and e-mail subject lines have appealed to them. You can then personalize communication with them through simple marketing automation sequences. Then you can customize what you're asking

of them by suggesting gifts or asking for direct help in an area of their specialty. The more you tap into external people (like donors) and ask for help and feedback, the more you can get yourself out of a rut and thinking in new ways.

Move Forward, Step by Step

It's never easy to get a group of people to stop doing what they've been doing and start doing other things. But if you want your nonprofit to impact as many people as it possibly can, you've got to move beyond complacency and comfort.

Start small, try incorporating an agile approach, consider how tech may help you, prepare your team for the changes that are sure to come with new technology, and remember to keep your allies close. Innovating will still take time and intentionality, but these steps will help you reach the wildest dreams you can imagine for your organization. 

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