

WHAT'S NEXT *for* COMMUNITY PHILANTHROPY



PROTOTYPING SOLUTIONS: A collaborative exercise

JUNE 2014

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Overview

Prototyping is a way of quickly sharing and testing new ideas.

Even after you've surfaced interesting new ideas for serving your community, it can be difficult to figure out how to move forward. There's no way to know in advance which creative solutions will work and which won't — and piloting programs can be expensive and time consuming.

The process of *prototyping* enables you to quickly and cheaply mock-up your idea into something tangible (e.g., a sketch, diagram, framework, or virtual model) that others can see, interact with, react to, and help shape. The process forces you to visualize how your product, service, or program will actually work; to think about all the stakeholders who might be involved; to articulate your assumptions; and to make difficult design choices given financial and other constraints.

In some fields, such as architecture, engineering, and product design, prototyping is a natural part of the job description. Architects, for example, use sophisticated computer-aided design programs to assist in the creation, modification, analysis, and optimization of their designs. And while there are obvious differences between an architecture firm that's assessing the design for a downtown high-rise and a community philanthropy organization that's testing a new program for serving inner-city youth, the value proposition for prototyping ideas is largely the same.


Prototyping enables you to accomplish a range of different goals:


- Better understanding the problem you are trying to solve
- Gathering more information about what it would really take to execute the idea
- Testing the idea early, quickly, and cheaply
- Identifying and resolving potential hurdles before implementation
- Sharing the idea and getting input from others
- Building interest and excitement in the idea


You can use prototypes to run small-scale experiments that help you evaluate and assess ideas for feasibility, desirability, and long-term viability — and to improve them before turning to implementation.


In essence, the commercial sector can teach community philanthropy a lot about prototyping.


Years of experimentation with rapid prototyping approaches in the commercial sector can provide a wealth of lessons for innovators in community philanthropy. Here are a few tips to help your efforts to prototype new solutions in your community:

 **Focus on high-impact ideas.** You can prototype any idea, but it's often best to start with ideas that show the most promise. Choose an idea that is aligned with your mission and represents a growing need or emerging opportunity in your community. At this early stage, you should not be asking how likely the idea is to succeed or fail, but rather what *difference* your idea would make if it did succeed. While many of your ideas won't make it past the drawing board, you want the few that do to represent products, services, or programs that could really make a difference.

 **Remember that ideas need people to drive them forward.** Think about your staff as you design your prototype. Ask yourself who might be passionate about the initiative inside of your organization, both at the leadership and staff levels. These individuals should be comfortable with failure and iteration and have an adventurous and connecting disposition, as they are the ones who will help move your idea from prototype to experimentation to execution.

 **Look beyond your own organization.** Think about the capacity, expertise, resources, and incentive structures that would be required for your idea to succeed, and look externally at others in your community who could help you meet these requirements. *Who comes to mind? How might they get involved? Why would they get involved and what would they get out of it?*

 **Accelerate your learning.** While prototypes help you make your ideas more concrete, you often won't get them right the first time around. You'll need to iterate on your designs (i.e., over several weeks or several months). Determine the simplest experiment you could run to test your prototype, and engage others in your organization and community to rapidly gather feedback about your idea.

 **Just do it.** Rather than trying to get all of your partners and stakeholders on board with your big ideas right off the bat, design prototypes, run small week- or month-long experiments internally and with small sets of users, and then modify them and make new prototypes (depending on how the previous batch worked). Prototypes that show signs of initial success will have a higher likelihood of garnering support from others down the road.

This exercise is designed to help you prototype new ideas to serve your community.

This document provides community philanthropy leaders and their staff with a process for prototyping or mocking up promising new ideas for serving their constituents and the broader community — before they pilot the ideas or invest in rolling them out. We hope that this exercise provides you with the guidance and materials you need to run your own prototyping workshop, that it enables you to create a safe space for honestly assessing your ideas and what it would take to implement them, and that it helps you test a few early prototypes in the weeks and months to come.

This document is part of the *What's Next for Community Philanthropy* toolkit, which was published by Monitor Institute in June 2014 with support from the Council on Foundations, the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, and Community Foundations of Canada, along with more than 15 North American community foundations.

The *What's Next* toolkit aims to help community philanthropy organizations apply innovation and design methodologies to think creatively about their business models and the broader future of the field. The research for this toolkit involved nearly 200 interviews with leaders of community foundations and other community philanthropy organizations, as well as more than a dozen interactive workshops and user feedback sessions.

Visit monitorinstitute.com/communityphilanthropy to learn more about the *What's Next* toolkit and research methods.

Objectives

This exercise is meant to help community philanthropy organizations — their staff, senior leadership, and/or board — do two things:

- Mock up and test promising new ideas for addressing specific unmet community needs
- Build internal organizational capacity to “do” innovation

Materials and setup

We recommend doing this exercise in one or more small groups of five or six people.

What you'll need

- A copy of the instructions *per small group* (pages 4–5)
- A copy of each of the three prototyping templates *per small group* (Appendix A), preferably printed onto 3' x 4' sheets of paper or handwritten on flip charts
- A large flip chart and markers *per small group* to capture group conversations
- A space that's *not* your usual meeting place, where participants will be able to think creatively together
- 90–120 minutes of participants' time and attention (with plenty of breaks and snacks in between)


Prework you'll need to have done

- Share the overview (pages 1–2) with participants ahead of time to establish a baseline understanding of the Prototyping Solutions exercise.
- Hone in on a promising concept for addressing an unmet community need before you begin this exercise. (We strongly recommend using the **Generating New Ideas** design in the *What's Next* toolkit to help you with this process.) The concept — the “something” that you will try to prototype — should be specific and concrete enough to be manageable, because it can be exceedingly difficult to jump straight from abstraction to implementation. There is nothing wrong with abstract ideas — but they will take additional work to make them more specific before they are ready for prototyping. Here are a few examples of concepts that are at the right level of specificity:

Too abstract for prototyping...	Just right for prototyping!
A program to address racial and ethnic inequality	An initiative to encourage public conversation around race and income inequality
An initiative to increase civic engagement	An electoral lottery to encourage more local residents to vote
Support for local changemakers	A prize for local changemakers who have creative ideas for improving their community

Instructions

Prototyping Solutions is a 90- to 120-minute exercise designed for small groups of five or six people *who have already agreed on a specific new idea for addressing an unmet community need that they'd like to flesh out and prototype.* (If your staff, senior leadership, and/or board members are still in the early phases of exploring different ideas, refer them to the [Generating New Ideas](#) exercise of the *What's Next* toolkit.) It involves systematically walking through three rounds of questions, listed below. We highly recommend working on large printouts of the 3' x 4' templates provided in Appendix A to ensure that participants are (literally) on the same page, to keep the group on track, and to make it easier for the facilitator to capture group ideas.

Note that having two or three small groups work on prototyping the same basic idea is preferable as it will spur competitive energy and allow groups to test their thinking with each other when they are finished. Some of the activities below, indicated by the icon () , only apply if you are doing this exercise with two or more small groups. To make the exercises run smoother, make sure each small group has a skilled facilitator who will capture key insights on the templates, help move the conversation forward, and reconcile conflicting points of view.

ROUND 1: What would the idea look like? (25 minutes)

Each small group should talk about their concept, first at a high level and then more specifically, until participants get to greater clarity about why they would pursue this concept and what it might look like. The questions to be discussed are included below (as well as on the first template in Appendix A).

- **Draw it out:** *What could the concept look like? How would it work?* Bring the concept to life by creating a “visual story” of how it would work and who it would help.
- **Thing big:** *What difference might the concept make if it worked?* At this early stage, you want to evaluate the concept based not on how likely it is to succeed or fail, but on whether it will make a real difference if it did succeed.
- **Communicate concisely:** Use Twitter as a guideline; *how would you describe the concept in 140 characters or less?* Get participants to agree on the simplest description of what they're trying to do before they move to the next round.

Break (5 minutes)

ROUND 2: What would it take? (25 minutes)

Next, each small group should discuss what it would take to operationalize its concept. This is where the rubber meets the road and where you start discussing how to make your concept a reality. The questions and topics to be discussed are included below (as well as on the second template in Appendix A).

- **Get concrete:** *What capabilities would you need?* Include technical skills (e.g., coding), softer skills (e.g., network weaving), relevant experience (e.g., knowledge about running a challenge prize), and the like.
- **Look inward:** *What internal passion/skills could you leverage?* Think about who in your organization would have the interest, disposition, and skills to drive the idea forward.
- **Look for partners:** *Which external partners could help you?* Think about other place-based organizations that might be interested in the concept and might be willing to contribute financial and human resources to it.
- **Pay attention to the finances:** *How would you (and/or your partners) pay for the new product, service, or program?* Push yourself to think beyond your usual sources of financial capital (e.g., grants and donor-advised funds).
- **Identify hurdles:** *What hurdles might you need to overcome?* Think about the technical, financial, political, and cultural issues you may face along the way.

Round-robin (30 minutes)

One member of each small group should pitch the concept to the broader group *in three minutes or less*. The broader group will then have 10–15 minutes to ask questions about the concept and to provide additional feedback. Make sure to capture the insights from these conversations on flip charts so that feedback can be incorporated into the conversations that follow.

Break (5 minutes)

ROUND 3: What could you do tomorrow? (30 minutes)

Finally, each small group will turn their attention to the smallest, simplest experiment they could run to prove that the concept would be worth pursuing further. A good place to start is with the hurdles from Round 2 (and if doing the exercise with multiple groups, additional obstacles surfaced during the round-robin). *How could you prove that those hurdles could be overcome? What would you have to show to your senior staff, board members, and potential partners and stakeholders to have them believe that the concept would be worth a larger investment?* The questions and topics to be discussed are included below (as well as on the third template in Appendix A).

- **Prioritize hurdles:** *What are the top two or three hurdles you'd have to overcome for this concept to succeed?* A compelling prototype should address some of these hurdles.
- **Prototype on the cheap:** *What's the simplest experiment you could run to test your concept?* Imagine you have no more than \$5,000, one staff member, and five weeks to run your experiment — what would you do? (This timeline may seem a bit ambitious but is meant to remind you that your purpose is to create an experiment that makes the case for further investment.)
- **Find your proof point:** *How would you know whether your prototype was successful?* If possible, think creatively about metrics other than those you usually use to evaluate any of your programs.
- **Think about the finances:** *Who would help you finance and execute your experiment?* Again, look beyond the traditional sources for financial resources when possible.
- **Take action:** *What are three actions steps you would have to take next week to make your experiment happen?*

Round-robin (15 minutes)

One member of each small group should pitch the prototype to the broader group in three minutes or less. Once each group has presented, vote as a larger group: *if you could only do one of the prototypes, which one would it be?* Discuss how the chosen idea could be improved even further.

Next steps

This exercise can lead to several different follow-on activities, briefly described below.

- **Build support to run small-scale experiments in your organization.**
 - It may not be apparent to everyone in your organization that it is even necessary to try new things or to run small-scale experiments. If it's helpful, make the case for innovation in the organization by sharing with them the [What's Next overview](#).
- **Get your entire organization involved, leveraging the creative energy of staff and/or board members.**
 - Host brown-bag lunches that enable *anyone* at your organization to participate in the Prototyping Solutions exercise. Or issue a challenge for staff members to submit prototypes related to a specific concept. This can double as an opportunity to find champions in your organization who are interested and qualified to move a given idea forward.
- **Understand who else would want to work with you on your prototype.**
 - Use a prototype developed during this exercise as the basis for a discussion with a potential partner. Share it with them as a half-baked idea so they can provide feedback and further shape and build the prototype.
 - If possible, ask a handful of other community-based organizations to join you in this exercise (paying attention to any underlying power dynamics). The combined expertise, experience, resources, and community knowledge in the room will likely enable you to create a more robust set of prototypes.
 - Finding ways to partner with others who complement your skills and expertise can be an effective way to focus and leverage your limited resources. Use the [Landscape Mapping](#) exercise to help you understand who else is already playing different roles in your community and what it might mean to collaborate with them on one or more prototypes.
- **Prioritize concepts that are worth exploring and prototyping — and take action.**
 - Use the [Prioritizing Roles](#) exercise to gain greater clarity about the roles you play today and the aspirational roles you might want to play in the future. *Where in your portfolio do the prototypes you developed fall?* Prototypes can focus on ways of rethinking current roles that you already play, or on aspirational roles that you might want to try in the future.
 - Once you've created a set of prototypes, get your staff and close advisors to help decide which would be worth moving forward. Make the outreach materials fun and fresh. Once you've identified the most interesting prototypes, commit to piloting and assessing one or two of them over the next few months.
- **Address orthodoxies that could get in the way of further shaping certain concepts.**
 - Assess whether the prototypes you shaped might challenge ingrained assumptions about what your organization does and how your organization functions. If you find that this is the case, consider facilitating a [Flipping Orthodoxies](#) exercise to help your staff and board challenge orthodoxies that may be obstacles to prototyping new solutions.

Appendix A

Print out the three templates that follow on 3' x 4' paper. If you are unable to print them, re-create each template on a large flip chart.

Provide one copy of each template to each small group.

ROUND 1

What would the idea look like?



Draw it out. What could the concept look like? How would it work?

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, intended for drawing or sketching a concept.

Thing big. What difference might the concept make if it worked?

Communicate concisely. How would you describe the concept in 140 characters or less?

ROUND 2

What would it take?

Get concrete. What capabilities would you need?

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Look inward. What internal passion/skills could you leverage?

Look for partners. Which external partners could help you?



Pay attention to the finances. How would you (and/or your partners) pay for the new product, service, or program?



Identify hurdles. What barriers might you need to overcome?

ROUND 3

What could you do tomorrow?

Prioritize hurdles. What are the top two or three hurdles you'd have to overcome for this concept to succeed?

Prototype on the cheap. What's the simplest experiment you could run to test your concept with \$5,000, limited staff, and five weeks?



Find your proof point. How would you know whether your prototype was successful?



Think about the finances. Who would help you finance and execute your experiment?

Take action. What are three actions steps you would have to take next week to make your experiment happen?

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