3-30-2018

Review -- Design Thinking for the Greater Good: Innovation in the Social Sector

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Design Thinking for the Greater Good:
Innovation in the Social Sector

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The emerging value of design thinking for problem solving and innovation by organizations in the social sector was signaled by Tim Brown in *Change by Design* (Brown & Katz, 2009), claiming design thinking is particularly useful for solving complex problems involving human needs. Now, Liedtka, Salzman, and Azer, in *Design Thinking for the Greater Good: Innovation in the Social Sector,* offer glimpses into design processes at eleven real-world organizations. These richly descriptive stories highlight impressive and creative solutions to problems in complex and uncertain environments. The authors who, like Brown, came from the business sector, articulate that challenges faced by the social sector are bigger, messier, and also more urgent, since they involve human needs.

Part One: Why Design Thinking? begins by drawing a parallel between innovation and the Quality Movement decades earlier, which utilized a Total Quality Management (TQM) approach. Liedtka, Salzman, and Azer believe a revolutionary shift is underway today, a move from Innovation I, innovating by designers, to Innovation II, which involves multiple stakeholders in the process. According to the authors, this "democratizing of innovation" changes the meaning of innovation. It's not about big breakthroughs; it's about serving people more effectively, which is the primary mission of social sector organizations.

Design Thinking for the Greater Good: Innovation in the Social Sector by Jeanne Liedtka, Randy Salzman, and Daisy Azer. Columbia University Press, 2017. ISBN: 0231545851, 9780231545853

This shift from Innovation I to Innovation II is characterized by change in:

- Who does the designing

- Team composition

- Relationship with outside stakeholders

- Problem framing

- Expectations for solutions

- The conversation itself

The authors propose that design thinking aligns with Innovation II, and should become a core competency in organizations. Design thinking, like TQM in quality management, provides a common language and a methodology for applying innovation. It makes a "clear and compelling case for an altered future," bringing stakeholders along. Their four-question toolkit and approach to design thinking, as used in their previous books, is:

- What is? Explore current reality.

- What if? Begin to generate ideas.

- What wows? Create a pre-experience, or prototype.

- What works? Test and try out prototypes with stakeholders.

In Part Two: The Stories, case studies of ten organizations are shared. The organizations span the fields of health care, agriculture, transportation, social services, and security, both government and non-government entities. These inspirational stories demonstrate there is no one-size-fits-all approach to design thinking, and that results can be achieved with particular emphasis upon inquiry and deep understanding of constituents. *Part Three: Moving into Action: Bringing Design Thinking to Your Organization,* features a case study from the education sector. The authors then describe how design thinking can be used to increase capacity for innovation.

The case studies presented were all from large or bureaucratic organizations. Since both problems and resources look quite different depending on the size of the organization, the book may be less helpful for practitioners in smaller organizations who may not easily see themselves in these circumstances. A more diverse group of organizations may have been more useful.

The depth and complexity of information in the case studies makes it difficult to read the book all at once. The book may be better used as a reference guide with case studies being read and assimilated individually, and ideas put into practice over a period of time. Parts One and Three serve as bookends to the case studies, introducing the concepts and concluding the study. The placement of the eleventh case study in Part Three does not fit with this format, and potentially confuses the reader.

Further, the authors have created their own system of new designations for the design thinking process: *What is, What if, What wows, and What works.* By naming processes differently than those in other design thinking literature, they add another layer to an already complex process. Practitioners may become lost in reading the case studies, needing to refer back to the meanings of these designations.

Design Thinking for the Greater Good: Innovation in the Social Sector was written for social sector managers and practitioners looking to implement design thinking as an innovation practice, and to address the many challenges that arise with its use. The authors stress the need for beginning practitioners to spend significant time becoming familiar with design thinking tools and practice them in real life situations in a disciplined and rigorous manner. The book can aid in this process. Readers may get ideas for solutions that will work in their own organizations.

Somewhat surprisingly the authors contend that design thinking is most successful when it begins at a grassroots level in an organization. They conclude that the best successes occur when employees are supported in their innovation efforts by leaders who provide the tools, time, and resources that the innovators need. Practitioners may find this encouraging, and upper level leaders may learn how to support innovation in their organization.

Benefits of the design thinking process are described and illustrated throughout. These include the avoidance of polarizing debates among stakeholders, focus on inquiry which holds users in the problem space long enough to develop deep insights about human needs, development of multiple solutions, and the ability to share prototypes with stakeholders and funders, gaining support and reducing resistance to change.

The authors appeal to social sector organizations by referencing human needs and using quotes to illustrate stories and outcomes, such as the quote by the farmer who stated: "For the first time I'm producing enough to feed my family, feed my animals and a bit extra to put in the market" (p. 216).

Taken altogether, *Design Thinking for the Greater Good: Innovation in the Social Sector,* is an excellent resource on a practice which has gained popularity in the business press and academic literature. This work is important for its contribution to research and understanding of the practice of design thinking at eleven organizations. Importantly, it serves as a practical guide for those who want to undertake organizational change from Innovation I to Innovation II, in a social sector environment that focuses on meeting human needs.

Reference

Brown, T., & Katz, B. (2009). *Change by design.* New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers.

Book Review