Characteristics of Community Innovation

Organizational Characteristics and Leadership Values that Promote a Culture of Innovation

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What is the Bush Prize?

The Bush Prize for Community Innovation is an annual award that honors and supports innovative organizations with a track record of making great ideas happen. Winners are selected for their pattern of innovative solutions; pattern of using inclusive, collaborative, and resourceful processes; and leadership that fosters a culture of innovation. They receive a package of recognition, including a flexible grant of 25 percent of the organization's last fiscal year budget, up to $500,000. The Bush Prize is part of the Bush Foundation's Community Innovation program, designed to inspire and support communities to create innovative solutions to their challenges. Each year, the Bush Foundation selects Bush Prize winners from the geographic region it serves: Minnesota, North Dakota, South Dakota, and the 23 Native nations that share the same geography.

What is the purpose of this review?

The purpose of this review is to share the processes and elements of organizational culture that help organizations in their pursuit of community innovations. Our hope is that by providing examples and analyzing themes within this review of how the 18 Bush Prize winners from 2013 and 2014 achieved their innovations and foster a culture of innovation, readers will have a greater understanding of the factors and approaches that are common among organizations that have demonstrated a pattern of community innovation.

This review highlights common findings and themes we identified among the Bush Prize winners regarding the following research questions:

- What does a culture of innovation look like? How does leadership help to create a culture of innovation?

- How is community innovation different or distinct from other kinds of innovation?

It should be noted that this report repackages findings from of the full Characteristics of Community Innovation report. In addition to organizational characteristics and leadership values that promote a culture of innovation, the full report also features findings about the process by which Bush Prize winners achieved their community innovations.

To access the full report, please go to the Bush Foundation's Bush Prize webpage (https://www.bushfoundation.org/grants/bush-prize-community-innovation) or contact Ryan Evans at (651) 280-2677 or ryan.evans@wilder.org

Methods

As a part of this review, Wilder Research conducted a series of interviews with each of the 2013 and 2014 Bush Prize winners. Specifically, we conducted interviews with organizational leaders and key stakeholders they identified. The leaders we interviewed most often serve their organizations as Executive Directors, CEOs, and Presidents. Wilder Research also reviewed internal documentation provided by the Bush Prize winners that they deemed important for understanding their community innovation, such as strategic planning documents, organizational charts, and evaluation frameworks and reports.

It should be noted that interviews with the 2013 and 2014 Bush Prize winners had different areas of focus: whereas the 2013 interviews focused much more on the winners' processes, the 2014 interviews also focused on what a culture of innovation looks like. Because of that, certain components of this report may rely more heavily on one set of interviews than the other. Interviews from the 2013 Bush Prize winners and stakeholders were retroactively analyzed using the framework developed when analyzing the 2014 interviews, where applicable.

This review illuminates how 2013 and 2014 Bush Prize winners' organization characteristics and leadership values helped them achieve their community innovations. Much of our conversations with winners and their stakeholders provided anecdotal evidence pointing to their innovations being more effective, equitable, or sustainable than existing/previous approaches, but only a few winners have conducted their own evaluations. Conducting original evaluations of winners' innovations or reviewing their existing evaluations was not in the scope of this project.

The 2013 and 2014 Bush Prize winners

2013 winners

Anu Family Services
St. Paul, MN
Field: Foster care, child welfare and well-being

Behavior Management Systems
Rapid City, SD
Field: Mental health

Cloquet Area Fire District
Cloquet, MN
Field: Fire protection and emergency services

Community Violence Intervention Center
Grand Forks, ND
Field: Community violence prevention and intervention

Four Bands Community Fund
Cheyenne River Indian Reservation
Field: Finance, economic development

Great Plains Food Bank
Fargo, ND
Field: Hunger relief, food access

Juxtaposition Arts
Minneapolis, MN
Field: Arts, youth development, city planning

Northern Plains Sustainable Agriculture Society
La Moure, ND
Field: Agriculture, seed breeding

Project PRIME
Rapid City, SD
Field: K-12 math education, higher education

2014 winners

Cannon River Watershed Partnership
Northfield, MN
Field: Environment preservation, water quality

Community of Care
Arthur, ND
Field: Older adults in rural areas

Destination Rapid City
Rapid City, SD
Field: Economic development

Domestic Violence Crisis Center
Minot, ND
Field: Domestic violence intervention

Face It TOGETHER Sioux Falls
Sioux Falls, SD
Field: Addiction management and care

First Peoples Fund
Rapid City, SD
Field: Arts, cultural preservation

Lanesboro Arts
Lanesboro, MN
Field: Arts, community development

Legal Services of North Dakota
Bismarck, ND
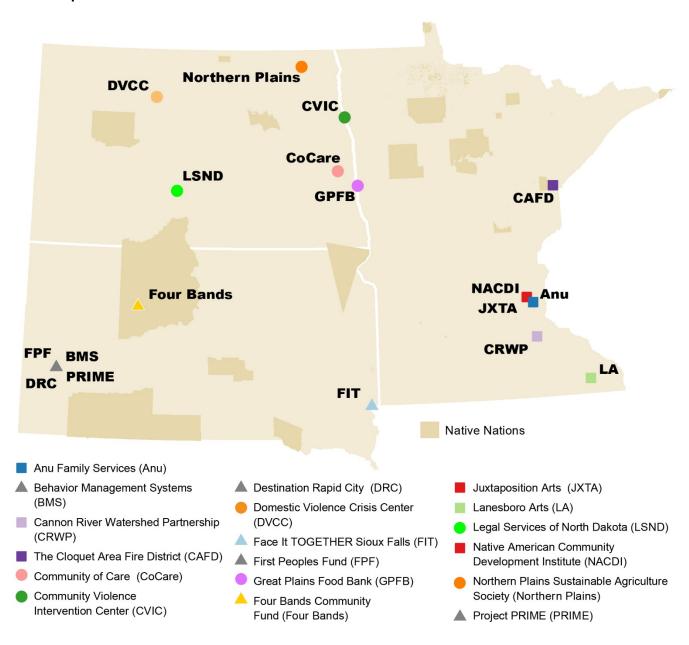Field: Legal services and assistance

Native American Community Development Institute
Minneapolis, MN
Field: Community development, arts

Figure 1 illustrates where the Bush Prize winners are located. Although the winners are spread across the Bush Foundation's service area, there are concentrations in Rapid City, South Dakota, and in the Twin Cities in Minnesota.

1. Map of 2013 and 2014 Bush Prize winners

- 🟦 Anu Family Services (Anu)
- 🔺 Behavior Management Systems (BMS)
- 🟪 Cannon River Watershed Partnership (CRWP)
- 🟪 The Cloquet Area Fire District (CAFD)
- 🔴 Community of Care (CoCare)
- 🟢 Community Violence Intervention Center (CVIC)

- 🔺 Destination Rapid City (DRC)
- 🟠 Domestic Violence Crisis Center (DVCC)
- 🔺 Face It TOGETHER Sioux Falls (FIT)
- 🔺 First Peoples Fund (FPF)
- 🟣 Great Plains Food Bank (GPFB)
- 🔺 Four Bands Community Fund (Four Bands)

- 🟥 Juxtaposition Arts (JXTA)
- 🟩 Lanesboro Arts (LA)
- 🟢 Legal Services of North Dakota (LSND)
- 🟥 Native American Community Development Institute (NACDI)
- 🟠 Northern Plains Sustainable Agriculture Society (Northern Plains)
- 🔺 Project PRIME (PRIME)

What does a "culture of innovation" look like?

The Bush Prize is given to organizations that exhibit a culture of innovation, which is understood by the Bush Foundation as internal characteristics, values, and systems that make it possible for an organization to produce a pattern of innovative solutions. Through interviews with Bush Prize winners and stakeholders, Wilder Research developed four characteristics of a culture of innovation. This section of the report provides a foundation for understanding these characteristics, and how winners exemplify them. The characteristics of a culture of innovation include:

■ **Sharing ownership**, which happens through listening, building relationships, and recognizing expertise

■ **Fostering creativity**, which happens through welcoming ideas, and being proactive about vetting and pursuing them

■ **Learning from failure**, which happens through reframing risk, emphasizing learning in instances of failure, and continuing despite setbacks

■ **Committing to community**, which happens through developing shared community vision, and representing the community

How does leadership influence a culture of innovation?

An integral part of a culture of innovation is how an organization is led. Bush Prize winners and their stakeholders alike gave credit to leadership for their role in creating a culture of innovation in their organizations, collaboratives and partnerships, and communities. Findings regarding a culture of innovation and how leadership promotes such a culture are presented jointly in this section of the review.

Sharing ownership

Sharing ownership with community members, partners, and internally among staff members results in an innovation that is community-owned. Bush Prize winners share ownership of their innovations by listening, building relationships, and recognizing the expertise of stakeholders involved in achieving their innovation (Figure 2).

2. **Bush Prize winners that noted the importance of various aspects of sharing ownership**

	2013	2014	Total (N=18)
Listening	9	9	18
Building relationships	8	9	17
Recognizing expertise	7	6	13

Listening

The importance of listening for an effective community innovation process was noted by all 18 Bush Prize winners, with a Community of Care leader saying, "You have to be a good listener, to listen to those who live here and what their needs are." Through listening, it was noted, the leaders of Bush Prize winner organizations gained the trust of stakeholders and partners, resulting in a more meaningful and effective community innovation process.

> *If you don't have empathy or listen to what someone else has to say or what someone's going through, that's going to cause issues. – Legal Services of North Dakota stakeholder*

Developing trust through listening also allows constituents to begin to view the winner organization as a safe space to voice their opinions and community needs. This dynamic supports the creation of a culture where winners are continually able to identify and address needs that arise in their communities. For example, Native American Community Development Institute hosts a monthly engagement series that is open to the public, and a leader said that "people come to rely on it as an opportunity to come together and create new initiatives." By building a reputation of listening to their constituents, a Face It TOGETHER Sioux Falls leader likewise mentioned that members of their community "knew that they could come [to Face It TOGETHER Sioux Falls] and say, 'There's a need here. Can you help us figure this out?'"

Listening can be challenging due to the complexity it adds to the process. Winners noted that considering additional perspectives in decision-making can slow the work. However, a Cannon River Watershed Partnership leader stated the importance of honoring all

community members' viewpoints, even those that they disagree with, saying, "Ultimately they're a part of the community and a part of the solution."

> *There's this constant juggling of taking in new information, assessing, and prioritizing.*
> *– Face It TOGETHER Sioux Falls stakeholder*

Building relationships

Building relationships is another way in which winners share ownership, with 17 of 18 Bush Prize winners mentioning its importance. A Lanesboro Arts leader stated that "relationship building is the most vital thing you can do to see yourself as a leader or be seen as a leader." Leaders from Domestic Violence Crisis Center and Cannon River Watershed Partnership extolled the benefits of building relationships with community members, suggesting that word-of-mouth communication from constituents who care about their work can result in increased effectiveness.

> *Any time you bring people in and they buy in to your project, that's a positive because they go out in the community and talk to friends and coworkers.*
> *– Domestic Violence Crisis Center leader*
>
> *A project needs a champion. Often a project that's successful has one or two people who are not necessarily the leader but somebody who is thoughtful and asks the right questions, who pushes to keep the project moving forward when it stalls. They're asking key things of their neighbors or they're willing to talk to their neighbors.*
> *– Cannon River Watershed Partnership leader*

Winners primarily build relationships through conversations with community members, potential partners, and others necessary to achieve their innovations. According to winners, these conversations include at least some discussion of the innovation toward which winners are striving. In pursuit of their innovation, a Destination Rapid City leader talked with "every American Legion, Kiwanis club, senior retirement center, city council person." Relationship building was seen as a useful skill for leaders of community innovation processes to possess, with a Community Violence Intervention Center stakeholder saying, "[Community Violence Intervention Center leader] is a very dynamic and open person, a real natural relationship-builder."

Strong internal relationships are also important to a culture of innovation. A Domestic Violence Crisis Center leader suggested that "you have to have good lines of communication with the staff and board." The benefit of strong relationships with partners was also noted, with a Legal Services of North Dakota stakeholder saying, "[Legal Services of North Dakota leader] did what came naturally to him; he worked on building relationships and developed partnerships throughout the state."

Recognizing expertise

Sharing ownership also occurs when community members, partners, and others are recognized as experts regarding their community and how to pursue a community problem-solving process. In interviews, 13 Bush Prize winners said that recognizing expertise was important for their innovations. Some leaders spoke of this aspect of their work in terms of honoring the experiences of community members and sharing power with them.

> *If I'm considered the expert in the room, community members want to know what I think. We really try to say, 'What do you think? It's not our job to tell you the answer because we don't know if that's the right answer for you.'*
> *– Cannon River Watershed Partnership leader*
>
> *One of the things that Juxtaposition Arts really tries to do is set up opportunities for everybody to share their expertise. [They say], 'This is our overall vision based on shared values; we want you to bring your super powers to it. – Juxtaposition Arts stakeholder*

Moreover, by recognizing the expertise of a wide variety of stakeholders, the collection of skills and resources available to a community innovation process is expanded by additional people's knowledge, connections, and experiences. In this way, recognizing expertise contributes to increased effectiveness of a community innovation process, with a Destination Rapid City leader saying, "We don't know how to fix everything, but we can find someone who does."

It is also important for a culture of innovation to acknowledge the expertise of internal staff or team members. Anu Family Services' leader gave an example of recognizing their staff's expertise, and connected the idea of recognizing expertise internally to "operating flatly" within their organization. In this way, a culture of innovation entails honoring staff's perceptions and experiences, even if their perceptions and experiences contradict directives from supervisors.

> *I had a worker call me last week. I supervise her supervisor's supervisor. She said, 'You sent me an email to do this and I don't want to do it. I think it's a bad idea.' I said, 'That makes good sense to me. You ought to not do that.' – Anu Family Services leader*

Fostering creativity

Fostering creativity drives the generation and pursuit of ideas. Bush Prize winners foster creativity by welcoming ideas, and being proactive about vetting and pursing these ideas (Figure 3).

3. **Bush Prize winners that noted the importance of various aspects of fostering creativity**

	2013	2014	Total (N=18)
Welcoming ideas	9	9	18
Being proactive	6	9	15

Welcoming ideas

All Bush Prize winners noted the importance of welcoming ideas for a culture of innovation. A Lanesboro Arts leader suggested that welcoming ideas is "about not being set in your ways, it's about deviating from the script." Additionally, welcoming ideas means being "open to forces that are out of your control" (a Destination Rapid City leader) and exhibiting flexibility regarding preconceived ideas of how a process or task should be accomplished. Similarly, a Face It TOGETHER Sioux Falls stakeholder explained this concept as "trying to stay as close to the line that we've set, but recognizing the line may need to change, too." A Native American Community Development Institute's leader spoke about their own dedication to welcoming new ideas:

> *"You have to be open. You never know where that opportunity will take you, and that's where innovation lies. [You have to be] connected to letting go of control."*
> *– Native American Community Development Institute leader*

Welcoming ideas was also framed as a problem-solving strategy. A Cannon River Watershed Partnership leader commented, "We really welcome any new idea as a way to get around something or figure out a way to do it." Additionally, welcoming ideas was linked to the idea of humble leadership, with a Project PRIME stakeholder saying, "[Project PRIME leaders] are humble enough to know that they don't know everything, and are open to learning." Cloquet Area Fire District leader asserted that a community innovation's success relies on the humility of its leaders:

> *If leadership isn't willing to admit that they don't have all the answers, you're not going to succeed. You have to be able to sit down with someone and say, we're weak here… You have to be able to do that sincerely and really mean it when you say that you need their help. –Cloquet Area Fire District leader*

Additionally, welcoming ideas from diverse sectors was noted as an aspect of a culture of innovation, with one Community of Care stakeholder explaining the benefit of exchanging ideas across sectors:

> *As a community banker, I wondered why anyone was interested in my opinion; it seemed a long way from my expertise. But I understood after attending the meeting that our footprint was very similar. – Community of Care stakeholder*

It was also noted that fostering creativity is vital because community processes do not necessarily work in perpetuity, and because fields are constantly changing, so organizational relevancy relies on changing with it.

> *What we found is that what we used to do doesn't necessarily work anymore. You have to look at ways to change things up. – Lanesboro Arts stakeholder*

Being proactive

Fifteen Bush Prize winners mentioned the importance of being proactive in pursuing their innovation, with a Legal Services of North Dakota leader stating, "A culture of innovation requires leadership to be proactive." To keep momentum going within a community innovation process, it is important "to be incredibly proactive with vetting new ideas and turning them into substance" (a Face It TOGETHER Sioux Falls leader). Similarly, a Juxtaposition Arts stakeholder mentioned an instance in which the organization proactively pursued an idea, saying, "They started to just tinker and make and do. They didn't ask for permission." Domestic Violence Crisis Center also spoke about the importance of following idea generation with action:

> *You have to listen and observe and take that leap of faith… You have to move forward and hope it turns out, and if it doesn't, you have to step back and figure out a Plan B. – Domestic Violence Crisis Center leader*

The necessity of creating and pursuing actionable tasks was talked about more deeply by winners whose innovations involved a larger number of partners (10 or more). To ensure proactivity in the midst of larger partnerships, Community Violence Intervention Center and Behavior Management Systems each hired a full-time coordinator.

> *Every meeting has an action and every meeting has an outcome. You're not just sitting there drinking coffee and asking, "What's going to happen now?" – Behavior Management Systems stakeholder*

Two winners also mentioned the importance of modeling proactivity for their staff and their community as a way to build a culture of innovation. A Lanesboro Arts leader mentioned that they modeled investing in their community, saying that they "gave others

permission to invest in [the community], too." This sentiment was echoed by a Native American Community Development Institute leader as well: "Taking initiative is contagious; it rubs off on people."

Learning from failure

Learning from failure is necessary for any innovation process; all winners mentioned at least one instance in which they were not successful in achieving their initial goal. Bush Prize winners exemplify this characteristic of a culture of innovation by reframing risk, emphasizing learning in instances of failure, and continuing after setbacks (Figure 4).

4.   Bush Prize winners that noted the importance of various aspects of learning from failure

	2013	2014	Total (N=18)
Reframing risk	4	9	13
Emphasizing learning	5	9	14
Continuing after setbacks	7	6	13

Reframing risk

A component of learning from failure is reframing risk. Thirteen winners talked about reframing risk, or simply reframed risk in their interviews. Risk-taking is inherent in community innovation because often the result of pursuing a new idea is unknown. Rather than something to be avoided, risk was reframed by winners as a necessary component of their work. A Cannon River Watershed Partnership leader commented, "We just expect that things we do won't work sometimes," and a Legal Services of North Dakota stakeholder noted, "You have to be willing to make errors."

When asked about assessing the risk associated with pursuing a new idea, Lanesboro Arts and Native American Community Development Institute leaders connected taking risks with being proactive, with the Lanesboro Arts leader saying, "Sometimes people get so caught up in the risk, but the risk is actually in doing nothing."

> *NACDI is of the stance that we should try something; we have nothing to lose. That's a cavalier attitude, but it separates us from others in the region. Best case scenario: we get things like the Bush Prize. Worst case scenario: it doesn't work out and we go back to the lab and try something different.*
> *– Native American Community Development Institute leader*

Some negative financial-related consequences of taking risks were mentioned by winners, with a Native American Community Development Institute leader saying, "A lot of times [experimenting] has hurt the funding and sustainability of the organization." However, two winners mentioned that their risk taking has become better informed, with a First Peoples Fund leader saying, "Over the years, we've learned how to take risks, but to do it with our eyes open."

Emphasizing learning

Instances of failure are inevitable during innovation processes. In response to failure, it is important to intentionally reflect on and learn from what went wrong (this was noted by 14 winners), which contributes to effectively moving forward. A Domestic Violence Crisis Center stakeholder noted the importance of explicitly examining failure: "Why did it not work? What could we have done better?"

Additionally, a few winners mentioned that they think of failures as "things that worked out differently than what we thought [they might when we began]" (Anu Family Services leader). This mindset highlights that despite failure, these winners focused on reflecting on the situation, learning from it, and moving forward. This stance was characterized by a Juxtaposition Arts leader as follows:

> *I say "unsuccessful yet." It didn't turn out quite like we wanted, and then we learn from that and do it differently next time. – Juxtaposition Arts leader*

Continuing after setbacks

The last step in the cycle of learning from failure, according to 13 winners, is continuing with their work after an instance of failure with the knowledge gained from intentional reflection about what went wrong. According to a Domestic Violence Crisis Center stakeholder, "You get up, dust yourself off, and take off again, and hopefully you don't hit the wall as hard again."

Committing to community

Committing to community intertwines an organization and its work in the values of their community. Bush Prize winners commit to their communities by developing a shared vision with their community, and by representing their community (Figure 5 on the next page). By developing a shared vision with their community and crafting their organization's work around that vision, Bush Prize winners serve as a concrete and genuine example of the community's strengths, needs, and vision.

5. Bush Prize winners that noted the importance of various aspects of committing to community

	2013	2014	Total (N=18)
Developing shared vision	6	8	14
Representing the community	4	9	13

Developing shared vision

A commitment to community includes identifying how their organization's work fits into a larger, shared community vision (this was noted by 14 winners). In essence, developing shared vision is a way to ensure that the result of a community innovation process is meaningful for the community within which the innovation occurs. A First Peoples Fund stakeholder noted, "We really try to work hand in hand with [our] communities." By intertwining their work with the vision of their community, Bush Prize winners delivered innovations that are seen as valid and useful by community members, according to their stakeholders. Winners developed shared vision by spending time with and learning from multiple community members, adopting community values as their own, and changing their plans based on constituent input. For example, the Native American Community Development Institute spent three years collecting input from the community and compiled their results into a blueprint documenting the shared vision of the community.

> *It was never about us; it was always about the community and how to drive the community.*
> *– Destination Rapid City leader*

The role of leadership in developing shared vision was mentioned by stakeholders of a number of winners (Anu Family Services, Community Violence Intervention Center, Great Plains Food Bank, Juxtaposition Arts, Lanesboro Arts). These stakeholders acknowledged that while a shared vision is developed with community, it is the leaders' commitment to that vision that ultimately pushes a community innovation process to completion.

Representing the community

Additionally, 13 winners had the goal of representing the many facets of their community, which is another way that they committed to their community. Through regular and intentional communication with their community, organizations can gain a thorough and nuanced sense of their community's make-up and voice. In order to effectively represent their community, Bush Prize winners spoke about the importance of having staff with a diversity of ideas and experiences, and in particular having staff whose ideas and

experiences align with their community's. By embedding diverse perspectives within the organization, Bush Prize winners felt they were able to more accurately and genuinely represent and have a relationship with their community.

> *I want to make sure our team has all types of people who can connect with all types of people. I like the fact that no matter who walks in the door, we can find somebody to connect with that person. It's very intentional. – Face It TOGETHER Sioux Falls leader*

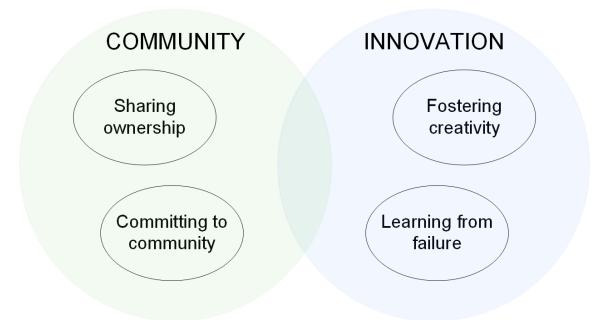# How is community innovation a different kind of innovation?

From our interviews with Bush Prize winners and stakeholders, and our review of innovation literature, it is clear that community innovation occupies a distinct space within the innovation field. Community innovation is distinct from other types of innovation because it relies on and takes place within community.

Sharing ownership and committing to community are distinctive characteristics of community innovation

Of the four characteristics of a culture of innovation that were identified during interviews with Bush Prize winners and stakeholders (sharing ownership, fostering creativity, learning from failure, and committing to community), two are related more directly to "community" and two are related more directly to "innovation." The characteristics related more directly to community are: sharing ownership and committing to community, while the other two characteristics – fostering creativity and learning from failure – are related more directly to innovation. In this way, the characteristics of a culture of innovation can be separated into "community characteristics" and "innovation characteristics." While the "innovation characteristics" are important for innovation, *community* innovation only occurs when the process toward innovation is grounded in these "community characteristics" of sharing ownership and committing to community.

It should be noted, however, that the presence of all four culture of innovation characteristics are important for community innovation. The "community characteristics" are foundational, but an innovation will not occur if the "innovation characteristics" are not also present. For example, an organization can share ownership and commit to their community, and never venture into innovative endeavors. Community innovation occurs at the overlap of "community characteristics" and "innovation characteristics." See Figure 6 on the next page for a visualization of these concepts.

6.   Characteristics of a culture of community innovation

COMMUNITY

INNOVATION

Sharing
ownership

Committing to
community

Fostering
creativity

Learning from
failure

Community innovators ensure that every aspect of their work is deeply relevant to their community

The most important finding from this review is that successful community innovators have discovered ways of ensuring deep relevance with their communities. This relevance is an utmost priority for them and their work; it is embedded in how they think, how they approach their work, and how they measure success. Because community relevance is so important to them – and because they see the value inherent in this relevance – community innovators take extra, time-intensive steps to meaningfully engage their community. Bolstered by sharing ownership (through listening, building relationships, and recognizing expertise) and by committing to their community (through developing shared vision with community members and representing their community), community innovators tackle tough community problems by ensuring that each phase of the problem-solving process is deeply relevant to their community.