

## Introduction

*Our world is moving at a lightning speed. And, it's no illusion: with technological advancements, a global economy, cultural shifts, and new generational perspectives, it's no wonder that emerging ideas, products, and policies seem to introduce daily disruptions. Commonly referred to as innovations, we witness, experience, and adopt these changes as consumers everyday. What's challenging, however, is the ability to embrace or even catalyze an innovation within our professional lives. Today, all stakeholders—from intern to chairman of the board—are prioritizing innovation.*

*The Aging and Nutrition sector is not immune to the threat of obsolescence. Having a charter with origins in the mid-20th Century, it's important we continually reexamine our audiences, our programs, and our operations. Every organization should innovate, especially senior nutrition programs given our ever-evolving business environment and the growing need for our services. Increasing competition from for-profit organizations are a new normal as our "clients" become "target markets" and our "purpose" becomes "greater sustainability." Collectively, we must strive to ensure one size fits all programming become more client-centered, attractive, and contemporary offerings. We must be ready to rise to the occasion to balance discipline with creativity to yield all the potential possibilities.*

*Beyond the buzzword lies opportunity for disciplined creativity. We cannot simply say we want to innovate, we must understand why we should innovate, build a culture of innovation, fail forward and learn and grow from our attempts.*

## What is innovation?

Innovation is not new. It has been with us since fire, the wheel, and modern language, to name a few. What's new is: today, we crave it and almost expect it. We have entered a revolutionary period where the quantity and speed of innovation is remarkable. It has become a game and people want to play it.

Simply stated, innovation is pure problem solving. Democratization of the process is key to success—curiosity, creativity, and collaboration across the organization will kick your innovation machine into high gear.



Let's explore the four basic steps to innovation to guide you as you begin your journey.

### 1. Understand.

#### Listen with curiosity.

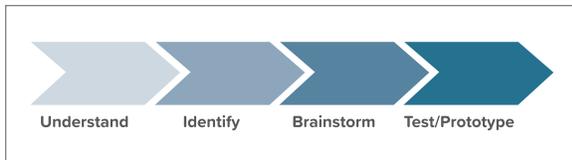
Who are your current clients? Why do they engage with your services and programs? Now for the hard part—who aren't you reaching or who has dis-engaged? Establishing an ongoing listening platform through satisfaction surveys, personal interviews, and group workshop discussions will allow you to understand the value you offer—and what can be added to improve service delivery.

#### Listen with empathy.

Oftentimes, customers are the best innovators as they offer up their opinion and suggestions to improve your service delivery. The next best innovators are your front line staff, these are the people who are delivering meals or coordinating programs, and they can see the opportunities for improvement. Walk in their shoes without any assumptions or expectations—here is where you find the pleasant surprises!

#### Listen with intent.

Get started with your listening platform and map out your mission, program by program. For example, say you manage a senior center. Start with the initial inbound inquiry and follow along the customer journey (from initial call to becoming a client) - detailing every decision point or action point in the process. Where are the friction points? Does someone call with questions but never show up for a class or meal? Could transportation be a challenge or do the classes conflict with doctors appointments? Keep



*Innovation Process*

a journal of these results and move to the next step with your team.

## 2. Identify

### Assess the challenges.

You cannot manage what you cannot measure. So, developing a reliable tracking system of challenges is critical. You can choose to engage your entire organization or a small subset of your programs. Regardless, be clear with your team about the purpose, timeline, and outcomes of the investigation. Create a uniform, shared reporting system so your data is organized all in one place

### Prioritize the challenges.

Small teams are the most nimble. Who are you inviting to the table to identify the challenges with the biggest return on innovation? Be open minded in your selection. Your “go-to” executive team could be positioned too close or too far away from the issues to truly offer new ideas. Choose a cross section of your organization to mix up the thinking and get the creative juices flowing—this helps you begin to build a culture of innovation!

### Isolate the challenges.

Avoid “analysis paralysis.” When starting a new initiative, start small so you can gain some quick-wins and encourage your organization to support the initiative. For example, say you manage a meal delivery service in a rural area where there is little internet connectivity. Your team has been given a mission: identify the challenges that have some easy-to-reach solutions or larger challenges that can be broken down into smaller pieces. Use internet connectivity as an opportunity to find low-tech ways to reach your audience and address this challenge. Are there other communication hubs or partners where you could reach more customers? Have you established a direct mail plan to get addresses of seniors in your rural communities? What partnerships do you have with other community

assets like places of worship or grocery stores.

## 3. Brainstorm

### Brainstorm together.

When cross-functional and unlikely teammates are paired up to brainstorm solutions, they are more likely to find novel connections—creating more value for the organization. What’s more, innovative thinking requires use of both the left (logic) and the right (creative) brain, so exposing staff to new ways of thinking and new perspectives will propel you forward.

### Brainstorm bravely.

It can be difficult to innovate when the mission is set by another entity. Staff members can become accustomed to automated work habits and less likely to challenge the status quo or evaluate operations. Set ground rules that encourage curious and open thinking. “Blue-sky” brainstorming allows your organization to truly explore the possibilities. If needed, you can work together to create some “guardrails,” otherwise disruption means dreaming big! Let’s say you have restrictive grant funding, could you find a private foundation who would be interested in your new angle on serving seniors or other vulnerable populations?

### Brainstorm nimbly.

Don’t get stuck on the finer details, and don’t wait. Funding cycles need not determine operation cycles. While it’s important to manage grants and grant cycles, operations should be aligned with your mission—continuously delivering the best services and experience to your clients and stakeholders. Instilling a sense of curiosity and natural, healthy competition within your organization will prime your organization for natural innovative tendencies. Coach and guide teams to think on their feet, be open to iterations, and to build on others’ ideas. When staff feel they are a critical piece of the mission, they tend to push themselves to achieve beyond daily tasks.

## 4. Prototype/test

### Assess feasibility.

Step one in prototyping (or creating a test-run) of your innovation is feasibility: will this work? These are more of the mechanics of who-what-where-when-how. Think of all the pieces required to get your idea off the ground: funding, internal

capacity, outside support—are there any barriers to successfully pulling off the innovation? Can your team find a way to maneuver around it?

#### **Determine viability.**

Step two in prototyping is viability: should we do this? Good ideas have to breakthrough. It's easy to think a government designation or long-term service as a provider translates to the comforts of monopoly. We all now know this is not the case. Take a look at the competition within your geographical or programmatic areas to keep a pulse on the options in your community. How sound and sustainable are your ideas? Does it stand strong against the competition to add value and maximize impact? How does your idea fit within this broader landscape?

#### **Anticipate desirability.**

Henry Ford's famous retort when asked about his latest invention [of the automobile] was: "If I had asked them, they'd want faster horses." Sometimes our audiences don't know what they want or what's possible (think: UBER), but we take a calculated risk with our innovations that pivots us within a future context. Balance your understanding of your audiences with your dreams—then test out your prototype with a small sample size or focus group. Are folks excited about the possibility? Do they have refinements to make it a stronger idea?

#### **Who is innovating?**

It would be unfair and inaccurate to say that only large, well-funded senior nutrition organizations can be innovative or that innovations require major overhauls to an organization's operations. Quite the contrary. We've seen examples across the spectrum of organization sizes and innovation types. Take a look below for inspiration and motivation!

#### **Case study: Alexa, I need carrots!**

**Problem to solve:** How to enable home-bound vulnerable older adults to leverage available community resources to access needed, nutritious supplemental foods.

**Solution designed:** Use smart speaker technology-driven home-delivered food pantry box program to allow seniors to order food on demand with existing home technology.

**To learn more, [click here.](#)**

#### **Case study: Modernize the congregate meal program - a pop up cafe concept: Encore Cafe.**

**Problem to solve:** How to address decreasing participation at traditional congregate meal sites.

**Solution designed:** Use contemporary pop-up style food delivery to meet audiences where they are all while satisfying the client need and boosting a sense of community with wellness programming, dietitian visits, and chef-led cooking demonstrations.

**To learn more, [click here.](#)**

#### **Case study: Forge new healthcare linkages and expand services across a statewide network.**

**Problem to solve:** How to improve quality, increase efficiency, and reduce the epidemic of older adult malnutrition.

**Solution designed:** Use new products and practices within the statewide delivery system by creating new medically-tailored meal packages and meal delivery mechanisms for patients transitioning from hospital to home.

**To learn more, [click here.](#)**

## **RESOURCES**

Delivering on the Promise of Nonprofits, Harvard Business Review: <https://hbr.org/2008/12/delivering-on-the-promise-of-nonprofits>

Creating High Impact Nonprofits, Stanford Social Innovation Review: [https://ssir.org/articles/entry/creating\\_high\\_impact\\_nonprofits#](https://ssir.org/articles/entry/creating_high_impact_nonprofits#)

Design Thinking for Innovation, Coursera [University of Virginia]: <https://www.coursera.org/learn/uva-darden-design-thinking-innovation>