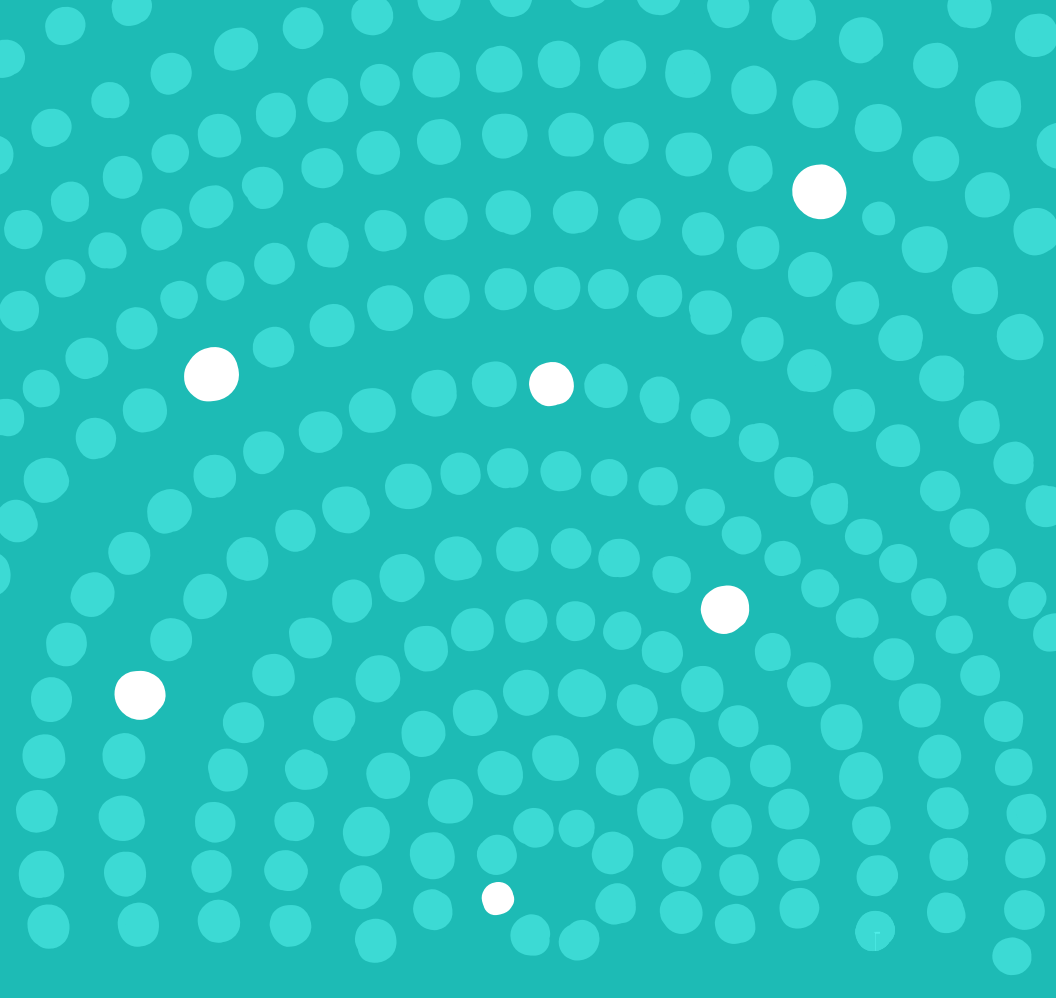

IMPACT

SIX PATTERNS TO SPREAD YOUR SOCIAL INNOVATION

Al Etmanski

Foreword: Severn Cullis-Suzuki
Prologue: Vickie Cammack

Introduction

The future is already here – it's just not very evenly distributed.

– William Gibson, National Public Radio interview

Do you want to change the world but feel frustrated by the limited impact you and others have had? Do you feel that despite your best efforts, and indeed successes, you have hit a brick wall? You may have mounted a fierce advocacy campaign, seen your public education campaign go viral, pioneered a social program, mobilized new funds or changed a law, but the status quo has barely budged. Social and economic justice hasn't increased. Power hasn't shifted. The old paradigm survives. And the sharp, distinctive edges of your social innovation are in danger of being eroded, isolated or forgotten.

The paradox of short-term success versus long-term impact is the central question this book addresses. Many of us believed that by now we would have absolute poverty under control. Or pollution. Or child abuse. Or deforestation. Or any number of other social and environmental challenges. The solutions certainly exist. They just aren't widely distributed.

Why do some social innovations take hold while others don't spread as far and wide as they should? Consider Women's Institutes, described by the Young Foundation as one of the top ten social innovations in the world. The first Women's Institute was founded in 1897 by Adelaide Hoodless in Stoney Creek, Ontario, in response to children dying because of poor hygienic practices in food production. Today Women's Institutes have a combined membership of nine million women from more than seventy countries and are credited with launching the first wave of feminism. It's a Canadian irony that the Women's Institute is better known in the UK than in Canada. The 2003 British film *Calendar Girls*, for example, is a fictionalized account of a real group from a

Yorkshire Women's Institute who raised money for cancer research by posing nude for a calendar.

Another social innovation that has taken hold is microcredit, pioneered by Muhammad Yunus. The Grameen Bank he created has provided over $5 billion in small loans to 5.6 million borrowers, primarily women, in rural Bangladesh. Today more than 250 institutions in nearly 100 countries operate microcredit programs based on the Grameen Bank model. In addition, thousands of other microcredit programs have emulated, adapted or been inspired by the Grameen Bank, benefiting over 80 million people worldwide. One expert in innovative government has called the Grameen Bank program "the single most important development in the third world in the last 100 years."

A third example is Greenpeace. Founded in 1971 in my home city of Vancouver, a small group of activists set sail for Amchitka, Alaska, to protest nuclear testing. The organization now has nearly three million members worldwide and a bigger budget than most countries spend on environmental issues. Greenpeace invented modern environmental activism by straddling national boundaries and catching the world's imagination with its media "mind bombs," a term Greenpeace co-founder used to describe actions that dispense with old clichés to create dramatic new impressions of an issue.

That's the kind of impact we all want.

What gave these groups the momentum not only to change laws and funding priorities but also to shift popular beliefs and the way we do things? How did they reach beyond the converted? How did they survive, indeed thrive, despite the odds against them?

These questions have plagued and fascinated me ever since I realized that lasting impact requires more than coming up with a new idea and proving that it works.

Novelty isn't enough. Neither are dedication and hard work, or loyal supporters, or a sophisticated strategy, or money.

Are these things essential? Yes. A good start? Certainly. But not enough to tip a system.

Just because you have a shiny new solution, the world will not beat a path to your door. Enduring social innovation doesn't spread by accident. We need to deliberately nurture the conditions in which it can flourish.

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That's not an easy lesson to learn, and it's one I confess I'm still learning. I've spent most of my adult life as a community organizer, starting as an adult educator with Frontier College in an asbestos mine in Cassiar, British Columbia. I was a youth worker on the streets of Halifax and a social housing planner in Vancouver.

When my second daughter was born with Down syndrome, I became a parent activist in the disability movement. My anger and righteousness had finally found a home. "Nurture" wasn't part of my vocabulary. My allusions and metaphors were all drawn from the military. My advocacy was fuelled as much by the chip on my shoulder as by a desire for justice.

I soon became head of the largest disability rights group in BC. Our activism produced a string of successes, including the closure of BC's three large institutions for people with developmental disabilities, all its segregated schools and many of its segregated classrooms and sheltered workshops. We blocked roads, sued government and won an important right-to-treatment court case. This all gave birth to what is now called the community living movement.

For me, these advances were tarnished by two realizations, one personal and the other cultural. First, my warrior mentality had taken its toll. I had become the very dragon I'd set out to slay. I left behind me a trail of busted relationships, particularly with government but also with some of my colleagues. Second, although the physical institutions were closing, an institutional mentality still occupied society's collective psyche. People with disabilities were no longer segregated, but they were not part of their communities.

Pity, charity and low expectations dominated. Society neither recognized people with disabilities nor expected them to become contributing members of society. My take-no-prisoners style may have removed one set of challenges, but it wasn't sufficient to tackle the next set, and I had fewer allies than opponents left to rely on.

Fortunately, I was given the chance to try another way when a group of older parents posed the question: "What's going to happen to our sons and daughters with disabilities when we die?"

By then I had become partners in life as well as in work with Vickie Cammack. Vickie was the founding director of Canada's first Family Support Institute, and she had launched a series of innovations in family support. She and I agreed to work with these older parents on what we thought would be a short-term project that would benefit a few dozen families.

To our surprise, we encountered a demographic tsunami. For the first time in history, a generation of people with disabilities was about to outlive their parents, and no one was doing anything about it. The situation wasn't on the radar of government, service providers or even most parents.

In 1989 Vickie and I and these families created Planned Lifetime Advocacy Network (PLAN). In doing so, we adopted a mindset and a mandate unlike those of any other disability organization. We knew we had to rethink the whole approach to disability. We realized that one of the biggest handicaps facing people with disabilities was their social isolation. PLAN believed that if this challenge could be addressed, parents would have an answer to their worries about the future. That's why we specialized in developing personal networks of support for people with disabilities well before the term "network" had entered the zeitgeist.

Fifteen years after PLAN was established, the dilemma of short-term success versus long-term impact became an existential crisis for Vickie and me.

By most measures PLAN was successful. Groups of families were adapting our model in other parts of Canada, Europe,

Australia, New Zealand and the US. PLAN had garnered much media attention. It was even the subject of three public education spots aired during the last episode of Seinfeld, which everyone in North America seemed to watch.

The scramble for organizational security appeared to be over. Foundations wanted to fund us. Vickie and I had received numerous awards and accolades. Enthusiasm, passion and momentum were everywhere. We should have been enjoying ourselves.

Instead, we were disheartened. Vickie and I were losing confidence that PLAN or its replications would ever make a dent in the profound loneliness experienced by people with disabilities. No matter how hard we worked, it seemed to us that this goal would take several lifetimes to accomplish.

We weren't sure what to do. We were so out of step with everyone else in the PLAN family that we felt like frauds. We loved PLAN, but we wondered if we should leave.

At the same time Vickie and I were struggling with our limitations, we were given a dream assignment by Tim Brodhead, then president and CEO of the J. W. McConnell Family Foundation. One of Canada's largest and most progressive private foundations, the McConnell Foundation had funded PLAN's replication strategy, and we had come to know Tim quite well. Tim's dilemma was similar to ours. The foundation funded a number of successful organizations across Canada, but neither Tim nor the organizations were satisfied with the impact they were having. In some cases, their intervention had made no difference to the overall statistics. In others, the problem had actually become worse.

Tim believed that people were trying to meet twenty-first-century challenges with institutions, funding methods and policies largely fashioned in and for the twentieth century. He felt it was time for fresh thinking. He wondered if there was a better way to effect social change, and he asked Vickie and me to explore

the emerging field of social innovation for insight and practical applications.

From 2004 to 2006 Vickie and I dove into the burgeoning literature on social innovation. We travelled across North America meeting activists, social entrepreneurs, thinkers, philanthropists, businesspeople and policy makers. And there, amid the swirl of ideas and inspiration, we discovered six deep patterns being used to successfully escort social innovations from the margins to the mainstream.

This book highlights those six patterns while tracing the insights we gained on our two-year journey – and our continuous learning since then.

Social Innovation and Impact

Social innovation is the latest descriptor of the ageless human pursuit to make the world a better place. It is a bundle of new learning, technologies and methods blended with the best traditional approaches to social change.

In this book and in my ongoing work, I'm less interested in defining social innovation than in clarifying its intent. Social innovation is an opportunity to renew the focus on social change. We have to stop doing things in the same way if we want to get different results. When applied thoughtfully, social innovation ideas and methods can become the catalyst for a renaissance in social problem solving. They can help us address the roots of an issue, not just the symptoms.

Humans' ingenuity and creativity in the face of adversity define us as a species. In that regard social innovation is not new. What is new is the recognition that many of our toughest social and environmental challenges have had time to develop deep roots that are resistant to just about everything we throw at them. Furthermore, these roots are intertwined with related problems that are just as entrenched. Think, for example, of the connections between homelessness, poverty, hunger, addiction, mental illness,

discrimination and social isolation. Each challenge is complex enough on its own. Together, they are impossible for any one individual, group, institution or sector to tackle.

If we are to be innovative about anything in the future, it must be about how we work together. Yes, social innovators have to be dedicated and creative problem solvers. But they also have to be wise travellers. Social innovation spreads through sharing, not selfishness. The heroic, "great man" model of social change makes for a good story, but it isn't true in practice. It is only through generous, respectful interactions across sectors, expertise and roles that social innovation achieves lasting impact.

That's why of all the definitions of social innovation I've seen, I like Tim Brodhead's the best:

> Social innovation is both a destination – the resolution of complex social and environmental challenges – and a journey – devising new approaches that engage all stakeholders, leveraging their competencies and creativity to design novel solutions.

Pattern Recognition

Change is composed of more unknown than known variables, accompanied by a dash of surprise. You may be certain of the general direction in which you're headed, but the precise destination often reveals itself only once you begin.

In the early days of PLAN, for example, we thought the best solution for the future well-being of people with disabilities was to encourage parents to develop a will and an estate plan. Nice and concrete, and very tangible. Then we realized that neither a well-written will nor a decent-sized estate could deliver what parents really wanted: someone to love their son or daughter when they themselves were gone. This led to the realization that, aside from their parents, most people with disabilities had no friends. This in turn informed PLAN's decision to specialize in developing caring networks made up of friends and family.

It's useful to have a strategic plan. It gets you started. But if you become too fixated on predetermined goals, you may not see what's actually happening. When something out of the ordinary occurs, you may view it as random or irrelevant. You may not appreciate its deeper significance.

"[W]hat pattern," asked Gregory Bateson, a key figure in systems theory, "connects the crab to the lobster and the orchid to the primrose and all the four of them to me? And me to you?" There is no such thing as something that is separate from something else. Insight emerges when you connect the dots and recognize an underlying pattern.

Pattern recognition will also help you become more deliberate and intentional about your actions. It will help you to anticipate and to discern, revealing meaning in seemingly random or irrelevant events. As the authors of *Getting to Maybe* point out, recognizing patterns helps you uncover "obstacles, accelerants, traps or enablers" and spot "strange bedfellows" and "powerful strangers." Every groove eventually becomes a rut. We have to become as smart and conscious about pattern recognition as we are about everything else.

A pattern is not just something you can train yourself to observe – it's also something you can follow. A pattern is a codified collection of insights, lessons, relationships, stories, values and desires you can apply directly to your work. That's the sense in which I use the word in this book.

Six Patterns to Achieve Impact

In our encounters with dozens of individuals, groups, coalitions and movements during our social innovation exploration, Vickie and I discovered six patterns that stood out. These patterns challenged our thinking and forced us to let go of many of our certainties about social change. They were our doorways into pattern recognition. And once we understood the underlying significance of these approaches, our own work changed profoundly.

The six patterns I present in this book do not exist independently of each other. Rather, they are mutually reinforcing, blending, merging and overlapping in various ways. Here they are in brief.

Pattern One: Think and Act like a Movement

This pattern is not about starting a movement, although your actions may be the spark that ignites one. Instead, it's about supporting the movement(s) you are already part of. That means paying attention to the key players and initiatives in your immediate field and beyond, and becoming more deliberate about aligning your efforts. When you think and act like a movement, you strengthen the specific work you are doing and expand general receptivity for the bold vision behind it.

Pattern Two: Create a Container for Your Content

This pattern invites you to do more than come up with the right analysis or solution. You also have to make it easy for people to do the right thing. Otherwise, there's too much for them to digest. You must create a literal or figurative container for your vision, data and values in a way that makes your message easy to grasp. Content is essential, but framing and packaging will enliven your ideas and inspire people to action.

Pattern Three: Set the Table for Allies, Adversaries and Strangers

You and others won't achieve lasting impact as long as you work on parallel tracks or at loggerheads. Changing that situation requires more than the usual suspects to be at the table. Dialogue and convening are more than a means to an end. They give structure to our need to belong, to be part of something bigger than ourselves. They broaden understanding, puncture assumptions, change authority flows and allow us to cultivate new relationships. Solutions spread when we move beyond blame, competition, misunderstanding and mistrust.

Pattern Four: Mobilize Your Economic Power

Your membership or constituency is an untapped economic market that, when properly mobilized, will both finance and further your social innovation. More and more, social change activists are flexing their economic muscle to disrupt business models, acquire flexible funds, reduce their dependence on grant funding and develop business partnerships that help spread their big ideas.

Pattern Five: Advocate with Empathy

This pattern proposes that we stop poisoning the political ecosystem, put aside tactics of blame and criticism and become solution-based advocates. These advocates have two mutually supportive objectives: they propose solutions and at the same time improve governments' capacity to innovate. Regardless of their political stripe, today's governments have shorter attention spans and are more risk-averse. It's no wonder new policy ideas fight for a foothold. If we want government to have empathy for our issues, we must develop empathy for its issues as well.

Pattern Six: Who Is as Important as How

An undue focus on how we do social innovation creates the impression that it's a specialty we must be trained for. Instead, social innovation is enlightened by who we are – by character, not technique. The conviction of today's social innovators arises from their emotional and spiritual maturity. They pay attention to what nourishes and replenishes their spirits. And they have the humility to admit their limitations and fears.

How to Use This Book

My hope is that this book will ignite what Pulitzer Prize–winning author Marilynne Robinson describes as a "resurrection of the ordinary." You have an important role in transforming the world. Indeed, without you, it won't happen.

In the book's opening chapter, I stress the importance of being a wise traveller in order for your social innovation to spread.

I pay particular attention to the passionate amateur in each of us, who innovates out of both love and necessity. Then in the chapters that follow, I examine each of the six patterns in more detail. I profile the person who helped me recognize the pattern; identify a few key, underlying concepts; provide a handful of illustrations that demonstrate the pattern in action; and describe how we applied the pattern to our work at PLAN.

I encourage you to treat these patterns as an integrated set rather than applying them piecemeal. Approach them with curiosity. Try them on. Play with them.

Let the patterns wash over you, slowly, thoughtfully, and intuitively. Give your imagination free rein. Trust your judgment. Adapt the patterns to your own circumstances. Use them to refresh what you already know.

Most importantly, don't give up too soon. Something will emerge. These patterns have stood the test of time. They are the accumulation of hard-won experiences. When used together, they will increase your chances of achieving impact, durability and scale for your social innovation.

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Thanks to our two-year exploration of social innovation, Vickie and I found we didn't have to leave PLAN after all. We did, though, hand over the day-to-day running to others, and the way we approached our work changed. We had received an advanced course in letting go. Letting go of our beliefs about how to change the world. Letting go of how we worked together. Letting go of how we financed solutions. Letting go of how we approached government. We came away with a deeper understanding about how the world is changing and how to apply these patterns to our work at PLAN and beyond.

We had a few hits and lots of misses. Not all of it was pretty, as you will read. However, playing with these patterns has enabled us to affect the lives of hundreds of thousands rather than hundreds or thousands. And we've spread our innovations not

only within the disability sector but farther and wider than we ever imagined.

May adopting these patterns achieve the same for you.

Etmanski is quite simply the best guide we have in the journey of transformation and *Impact* is his Lonely Planet guidebook to social innovation.

- Frances Westley, author, *Getting to Maybe*

Etmanski shows that when we innovate at the level of pattern as opposed to problem, we are contributing to an essential, evolutionary shift in human culture.

- Stephen Huddart, President & CEO, J. W. McConnell Family Foundation

Impact offers powerful strategies for anyone who wants to turn good ideas into world-changing action.

- Charles Montgomery, author, *Happy City*

Impact will help us all become more effective citizens of a planet dominated by the unpredictable economics of attention.

- Mark Kingwell, Professor of Philosophy, University of Toronto

Impact is a chronicle of the wisdom Etmanski has gained in exploring the keys to long-term social change. His findings lead us out of the past and onto a pathway for progress in the 21st century.

- John McKnight, Co-Director, Asset Based Community Development Institute

Impact beautifully distills the insights and deep wisdom of one of the world's great social innovators. Etmanski's book is far more than a practical guide; it's an invitation to reimagine possibilities for our lives and for the world we create.

- David Bornstein, author, *How to Change The World*

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