

No innovator is an island- creating an innovation capabilities framework



UNHCR Innovation Service

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The myth of the lone innovator was cast to the margins in a recent exploratory study.

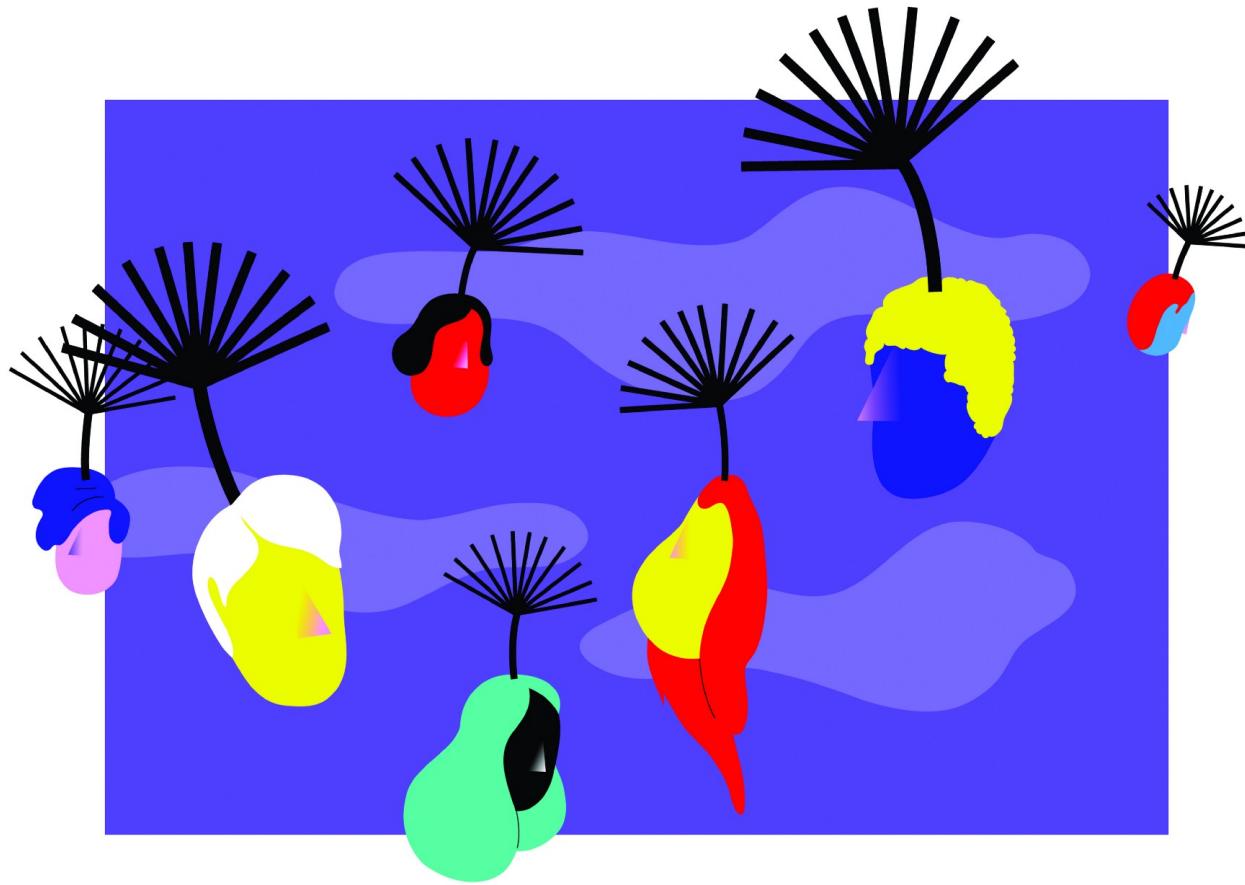


Illustration by Ailadi

The first post in this two-part series on the Collaboration between UNHCR's Innovation Service and Loughborough University London's Institute for Design Innovation is available [here](#).

An innovator who ‘gets it’ won’t get far if others don’t get it too. An innovator who is motivated and curious won’t scale further than their desk if they can’t influence their colleagues. A well-positioned innovator stands on little more than a title, if the power of their position can’t be leveraged for the benefit of a team, of a vision.

The Innovation Fellowship Programme, which has been operated by UNHCR’s Innovation Service since 2012, recently collaborated with the University of Loughborough London’s Institute for Design Innovation on a research initiative with the objective of assessing the impact of the Fellowship on its participants. To achieve this, the researchers focused on assessing the participants’ individual perceptions of how the Fellowship, from 2013 to 2018, influenced a range of key innovation capabilities in their day-to-day work. Innovation capabilities are skills that allow an individual or group to innovate. Creating a framework of innovation capabilities for measuring these perceptions was a process that asked questions striking at the very heart of the Fellowship.

A framework under construction

To develop the framework, the project team began with three broad categories of skills: **understanding, motivation and positioning**. Understanding refers to skills that allow an innovator to understand their environment, the key issues within it, the practical reasons of unpacking a challenge and user needs, and the self-awareness of strengths and weaknesses. Motivation is the capability to engage with the work environment, the curiosity to learn, and the personal drive to collaborate and solve problems. Positioning amounts to the ability to influence the environment, the leadership and role required to implement an innovation, and the tolerance of uncertainty and taking calculated risks. Together, these three categories functioned as a baseline for creating a framework of innovator capabilities.

Except, something was missing. “Who is this superhuman?” remarked Prof. Mikko Koria, Director of the Institute for Design Innovation at Loughborough University London, “We realised that no matter what the capabilities and skills of an individual may be, they are only as useful as their ability to be used in the social environment.” For example, a management style in a team that sees alternative ideas as a threat to management’s authority or to the established way of working could well silence an all-curious, all-creative subordinate. And so, the three categories were wedded to social competences.

Understanding was paired with **socialization**, attributing equal value to an innovator's ability to facilitate the understanding of others, raise awareness and negotiate.

Motivation found a match in **influencing**, the capacity to motivate others to take action. While positioning found the social competence of **directing**, which focuses not on the individual position, but on the ability to direct change and to have the power to impact decision-making. The framework grew to reflect the reality of innovation in an organization such as UNHCR, that no innovator is an island. Navigating the organizational and social structures is as important as the entrepreneurial spirit of any individual.

With a baseline of categories in place, the project team proceeded to draw inspiration from entrepreneurship literature, design thinking and psychology to choose twenty-five capabilities, against which to assess the data from the surveys of Fellowship participants.¹

And so, the capability 'to understand and be responsive to user and client needs' in the understanding category developed to include the capability 'to have others consider user and client needs' in the socialization category. The motivation category's capability 'to act despite fear of failure' was complimented by the capability in the influencing category 'to influence others to adopt new ways of working' and 'to foster creativity in your work environment'. The fusion of individual capability and social competence was perhaps best demonstrated in the pairing of the capability in the positioning category 'to experiment boldly in your own work' and the influencing category's 'to support experimentation with your colleagues, partners and others'. The framework, and therefore the design of the interviews and survey with past Fellowship participants, found its core assumption. All that was left was to find out if the Fellowship moved the needle.

A framework in operation

Two key data sets were collected in the form of semi-structured interviews and a survey to assess the perception of past Fellows of the impact of the Programme on their capabilities. The research team then proceeded to code the data, that is, placing a tag on elements of the response that relate to a capability in the framework, and then analyze the quality and quantity of the tags to reveal a picture of the perceptions. Dr. Antonius Van der Broek, Lecturer and Teaching Fellow in the Institute for Design Innovation, engaged primarily in this analytical process. He noted that to conduct the process, "It was important to iterate amongst the team during data analysis and learn

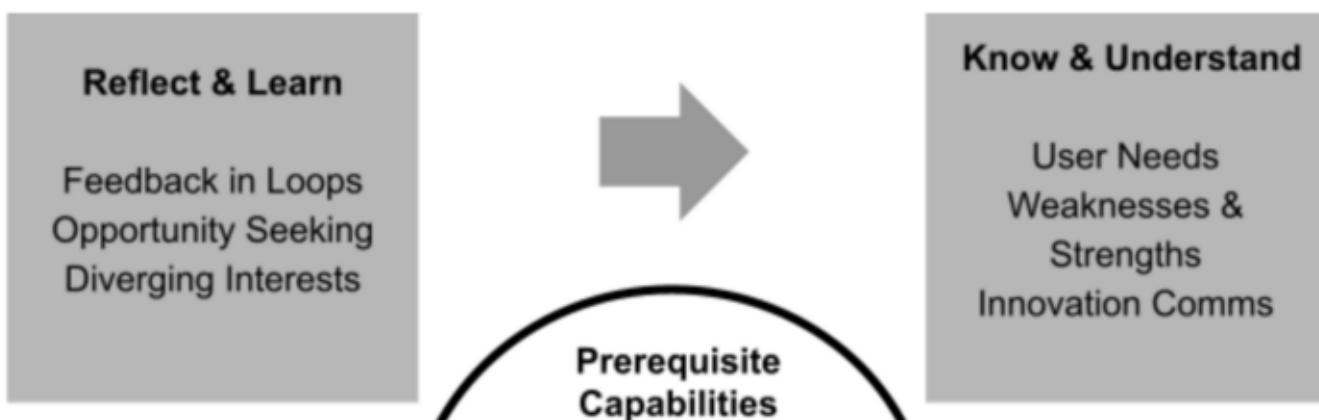
from each other's interpretation of the data as we had different experiences and relations to the project."

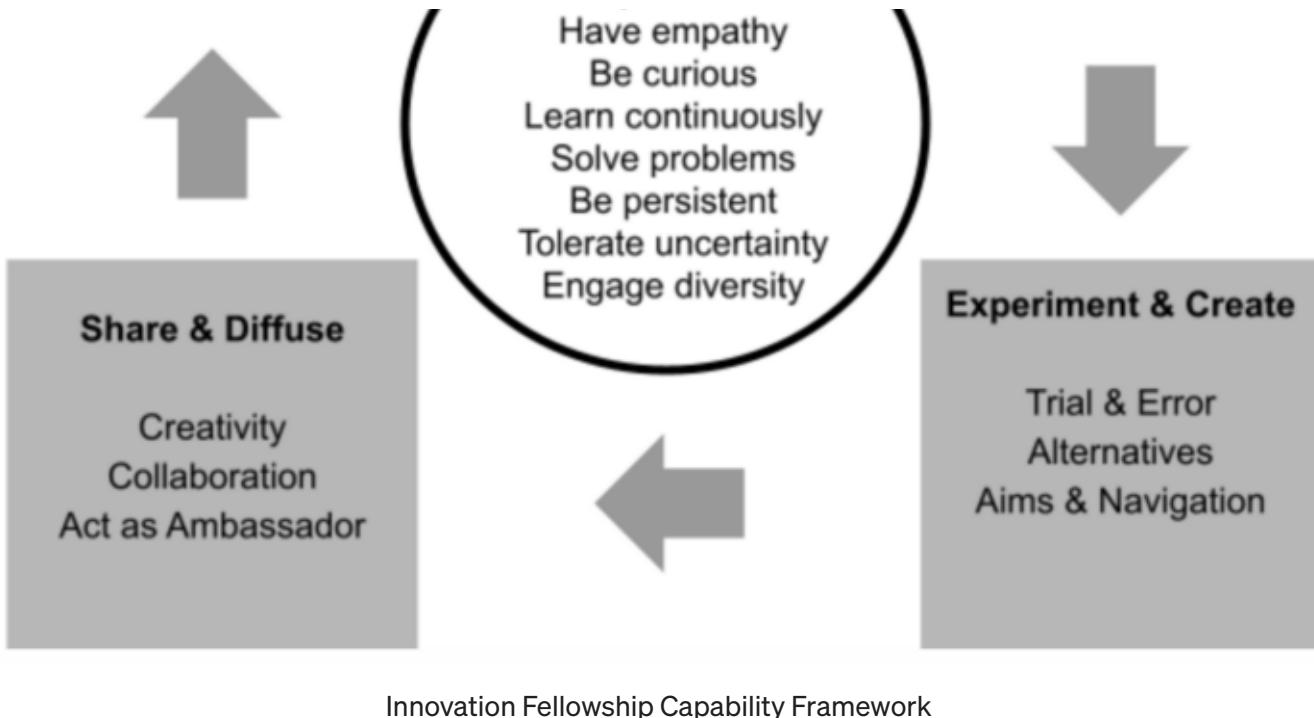
The results of the interview data and survey with former Fellowship participants revealed that the Fellowship Programme had significant impact on a great many individual capabilities and social competencies. 9 out of the 25 capabilities saw a perceived improvement of 40%, and a 30% improvement was observed in a further 9 capabilities. Interestingly, the two capabilities that showed the least change as a result of the Fellowship were 'to be curious' and 'to have empathy'. Emilia Saarelainen, Innovation Fellowship Programme Manager, noted that, "The little change in perception of empathy, curiosity, and continuous learning suggested to us that these capabilities function more as prerequisites that Fellows join the programme with already. We adjusted our application process to reflect this belief, and now seek evidence of less certain qualities."

The most surprising learning from the research was that social competencies were the biggest site of change for Fellowship participants. Far from a theoretical whim in the process of designing the framework, the interviews and survey showed that Fellows developed the skills of collaborative innovation. The report claims, "Overall, the Fellowship seems to have had the most impact in supporting the participants in the development of their ability to influence activities in their work environments." Notable spikes post-Fellowship in competencies such as facilitating collaboration with others and influencing others to adopt new ways of working speak to the impact of the Fellowship on innovation that is embedded in its context and structural challenges.

Prof. Koria offers a more succinct thesis: "Social context mediates what we can actually do with our capabilities. The organisation sets the boundaries of what we can and can't do."

Dealing with the new





Saarelainen believes that, “The learnings from the research go beyond the Fellowship. They tell us about what to emphasise when seeking to develop skills in an organizational setting.” Another outcome of the research was for the capabilities to be mapped onto the innovation process (see diagram above), as is the Fellowship itself. It is important to situate an individual’s capabilities in the social environment, without losing sight of the innovation process that undergirds the action.

The necessity of social competencies, as explored in the study, likely speaks to a broader reality of innovation in an organization such as UNHCR. The introduction of a novel idea or approach can be an unsettling modulation in the flow of work for a team. To be bold in experimentation is to hold a mirror up to current actions, and by inference, to the wisdom of how and why we do things the way we do. The virtue of boldness in innovating masks an underbelly of risk-taking and dealing with doubt. The Fellowship tells us that disruption from an individual is not enough, and that innovation is just as much an act of building trust and consensus, and forging the necessary culture of psychological safety to find new solutions and flows of work.

¹ The final research report outlines a number of the key sources: “The framework was informed by the set of entrepreneurial characteristics set out by Spinelli and Adams (2016), the cognitive, affective and the psychomotor frameworks (e.g. Bloom’s taxonomy), the qualities of design thinkers (Dosi et al., 2018; Schweitzer et al., 2016) and the high level capabilities from Capability Approach with its extensions (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2000; Stewart, 2013, Subra et al., 2017).”

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