Editor’s Note
The Mother of Invention
By Eric Nee
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The proverb “Necessity is the mother of invention” has been a part of Western culture for centuries. That’s because it neatly summarizes something that has been proven to be true: that when faced with a difficult problem, people can be amazingly creative at devising new solutions.

We have seen this repeatedly the last 18 months as nonprofits, governments, and businesses around the world have changed how they operate to overcome the impact of COVID-19. We have published numerous articles about some of these efforts: grassroots organizations helping to get their neighbors vaccinated; food banks rapidly scaling up to meet unprecedented demand; schools and teachers moving from in-person to virtual learning.

Many of these efforts involved adopting already-known approaches, such as funders changing their grantmaking to provide general operating support rather than project funding. Doing this is often not a trivial task, but it doesn’t require creating a truly new idea or process. Some of the efforts that organizations undertook, though, did result in truly new ways of tackling social problems. And that is the subject of the cover story in this Fall 2021 issue of Stanford Social Innovation Review, titled “Open Social Innovation.”

The article (written by SSIR’s Academic Editor Johanna Mair and Johannes Kepler University Linz Professor Thomas Gegenhuber) examines a massive hackathon in Germany of about 28,000 participants tasked with finding solutions to problems created by the pandemic. That is an impressive number of people, and to be able to operate at that scale required some novel adaptations to the hackathon. But that wasn’t the innovation.

What was new was that the hackathon involved individuals and organizations from all parts of society (government, business, nonprofits, individual citizens, etc.), who were actively involved in the entire cycle of creating and scaling up solutions: identifying problems to solve, creating solutions, prioritizing them, and then implementing and scaling up the solutions. This could only be done because all of the stakeholders who were needed to solve the problems were involved.

The authors call this approach “open social innovation.” It’s “open” because the entire process was open to all. Enlisting a wide variety of people increased the odds that smarter people would work on the problem and that new ideas would emerge because of the cross-fertilization that comes from diversity. And bringing organizations from all parts of society into the process increased the odds that the ultimate solutions would be embraced and fully implemented.

As the authors write: “Building a coalition and prioritizing collective action over individual action might slow the social innovation process, but this collective process amplifies the likelihood of success in the long term. Forging and growing relationships among like-minded innovators and also with institutional stakeholders can transform practices and catalyze systemic change.”

While open social innovation is not a panacea, the approach is useful for tackling some social problems, and there are many aspects of the approach that one can learn from and possibly incorporate into one’s own work.—ERIC NEE