Design the Future

Breakthroughs with diversity, inclusion, and design thinking

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with Lisa M. Wenger, PhD

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BREAKTHROUGHS WITH DIVERSITY, INCLUSION, AND
DESIGN THINKING

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Canada

This book is for those who want to design the future. We can do better to achieve results that matter with diversity and inclusion (D&I).

This book is about:

- The need for transformational change in D&I
- How Design Thinking combined with D&I principles can help us co-create groundbreaking innovations
- D&I *next* practices to benefit lives, teams, organizations, communities, and the world

This book is *not* about:

- Common D&I 'best practices', habits, or rituals
- Traditional benchmarking
- Program 'how-to' guides (e.g., recruiting, mentoring, sponsoring, organizing ERGs/ BRGs, developing allies, etc.)
- Unconscious Bias training
- Self-Identification initiatives

Are you eager to deliver on the promise of D&I and co-design breakthroughs we need *today*?

If so, please read on.

Table of Contents

Design thinking isn't linear, and neither is this book.

This book has been designed so that each section can stand on its own. Dive in wherever you are most interested.

- If you are eager to learn about *doing* design thinking, go straight to that section and take a story-based tour of my lab and its results.
- If you would rather first learn about design thinking principles and how they can be blended with D&I, you can find that in the section on *understanding* design thinking.
- If you want to read about the case for designing a new house for D&I, start there.
- And so on.

Explore these ideas in whatever way works for *you.*

Preface: Designing the Future of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Together, we can design a future that makes the most of a full mix of people to solve our most complex business and societal challenges.

Where some view Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) as a distraction or problem to be resolved, I know it as an opportunity. D&I is integral to sustainable business growth and purpose fulfillment, a healthy society, and thriving individual lives. Because of this, I am frustrated when irrelevant factors get in the way of individuals having the opportunity to reach their full potential or enjoy an optimal lived experience. I believe in the individual, institutional, and community value of D&I. That is why I am committed to helping organizations benefit from the rich possibilities presented at the intersection of ideas, identities, and perspectives.

When I started working in the field of diversity in the early 1990s (before we added an explicit focus on inclusion), I was eager to learn what leading organizations were doing. How were they attracting and promoting a mix of employees? How were they engaging a broad array of people in a respectful environment? How were they working collectively to achieve business goals? I've long had an orientation toward creativity and continuous improvement, so after carefully studying best practice benchmarks, I would refine them with incremental enhancements tailored to the organizations where I worked.

After a few years, I began to grow concerned that diversity best practices were not generating the meaningful, timely, sustainable, and business-linked results we sought. Behind closed doors, colleagues and I discussed how stakeholders were being let down, even within companies with well-resourced, award-winning D&I strategies. We knew our work was vitally important to individuals and organizations, and we felt demoralized as we compared our results with the impact we knew was both necessary and possible.

I became convinced that we would not generate better or more rapid outcomes by continuing with the same approaches, no matter how well executed or finessed. The global field of D&I needed breakthrough innovation.

My concern converted to inspiration.

I began looking for companies that might provide an optimal landscape for me to launch and lead a radically different type of global D&I strategy. I found this opportunity in a surprising place. The organization where I would grow my ideas was one deeply uncomfortable with D&I. Despite their pioneering products and central focus on innovation, leaders in this rapidly growing organization did not yet understand their potential to distinguish the company around progressive and business-linked D&I. Even more, many sought to actively distance themselves from the work. For them, D&I was about meeting compliance requirements and avoiding lawsuits. As is often the case, it was the limitations I faced in this organization that provided me with a distinctive opportunity to design an innovative and effective strategy *entirely void of traditional D&I best practices*.

Exploring new ways of working in D&I

Seeking ways to weave D&I throughout this global organization, my team and I pursued partnerships with business and functional leaders in marketing, sales, research and development, information technology, customer support, operations, procurement, and human resources. Without using familiar strategies or terminology, our goal was to integrate D&I principles directly into their work to help them accomplish what they cared about most. To foster a symbiotic relationship, we learned about each business unit, function, and leader. Then, we co-designed ways to naturally blend D&I into their strategies to align with their specific objectives, needs, practices, and processes. We helped them leverage D&I in new ways that could enhance, enable, or accelerate achievement of their mission-critical business objectives. Ambitious for the *impact* of our work, we remained in the background, crediting our strategic partners for value created for the business.

Exploring new ways of thinking in D&I

As this process challenged me to develop new ways of working in D&I, it also provided an opportunity to learn how various business units were tackling their specific challenges. In particular, a partnership with the User Experience team re-introduced me to the principles of *design thinking*. Constantly seeking integrative possibilities, I began to consider how I might be able to experiment with this solution-building approach to propel the *new* thinking I knew we needed to elevate D&I results.

Serendipitously, this exploration of how design thinking might help propel D&I innovations intersected with my exposure to research on how D&I could *drive* innovation. Along with colleagues in a peer network of European D&I executives, I examined academic research illustrating how groups of people with a diverse mix of ideas and perspectives can function as a key ingredient in generating innovations. I became fascinated with the dynamic interplay among these concepts: How we might *inclusively engage a diversity of people* in *design thinking* to build the innovations we needed to *elevate D&I outcomes*[1].

Activating intersections of diversity, inclusion, and design thinking

My belief in the dynamic and valuable intersections among diversity, inclusion, and design thinking for D&I innovation led me to launch my own consulting business. Core to this work are my signature D&I Breakthrough Labs where I combine D&I principles with human-centered design thinking. Simply, these labs seek to harness the power of diversity within an inclusive setting to boost innovation. Over the past six years, my labs have helped a variety of organizations generate new ways of thinking and working with D&I, including:

- Fresh D&I strategies capable of achieving bold, business-relevant D&I outcomes
- Groundbreaking products, services, strategies, & processes to achieve business goals

As I partner with organizations, I help them inclusively engage the collective intelligence of a diverse mix of participants to design D&I breakthroughs. I've developed and led both rapid and in-depth labs, including engagements internal to a single organization and those bringing together participants from a variety of organizations. These labs have focused on opportunities such as:

- Helping organizations build bold new solutions to persistent D&I challenges
- Tapping into a mix of participants within an organization to generate new products, services, processes, and revenue streams to sustain competitive advantage
- Working with leaders across industries (e.g., via professional networks, academies, & conferences) to help them gain exposure to the D&I Breakthrough process. In these

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[1] I became so interested in this idea that I later partnered with my colleague Marjorie Derven to author this article: Diversity & inclusion and innovation: A virtuous cycle: https://www.emeraldinsight.com/doi/abs/10.1108/ICT-09-2014-0063 (Winner of the Outstanding Paper in the 2016 Emerald Literati Network Awards for Excellence)

conditions, they collaboratively develop promising ideas to take back to their organizations for further exploration and development

- Fostering opportunities for progressive thinkers around the world to generate and experiment with broader, pan-organizational, breakthrough strategies for D&I

We need D&I for innovation AND innovation for D&I

Sparking D&I innovations to create greater value for individuals, organizations, and broader society is fantastically energizing work. As I continue to witness the potent impacts of these labs, I believe design thinking is a vitally important competency for D&I leaders and professionals. It presents an opportunity for us to put the power of D&I into action for the benefit of our field.

We must do better with D&I, and design thinking can help. That's what this book is about.

<div align="right">~ Rebekah</div>

How I understand D&I

Given the variability in how Diversity and Inclusion are understood and brought to life within organizations and in popular discourse, it is helpful to define my professional perspective.

In my work, I use the following definitions:

Diversity: The mix

Inclusion: Making the most of the mix*

I use this framing to emphasize that **diversity** strategies must include *everyone*: every identity (i.e., all ethnicities, races, genders, etc.), every way of working (thinking styles, cultural perspectives, problem solving approaches, etc.) and the many intersections within any particular individual. As Debbe Kennedy describes in *Putting Our Differences to Work,* we all must work to ensure that everybody benefits and nobody is harmed by our decisions and actions.

As we design the future, we need to lift the value for *everyone*.

The work of **inclusion**, then, challenges us to comprehensively foster an environment wherein every individual and every combination of people can thrive, unencumbered by irrelevant factors, to meaningfully contribute toward collective goals.

D&I is for everyone

*These working definitions of D&I are informed by R. Roosevelt Thomas' insights from the 1990s when he described diversity as the total mix of similarities and differences in a group. Later, Andrés Tapia potently influenced this field with his distilled descriptions: *Diversity is the mix. Inclusion is making the mix work*™

Building a Better House

Dr. R. Roosevelt Thomas, Jr. challenged us to build a better house for diversity. In this call to action, he shared a fable about a giraffe who invites an elephant to join him in his tall, thin house. Despite the giraffe's genuine welcome, Thomas describes how the elephant is simply unable to thrive in a structure designed for giraffes. The doorways are too narrow for his ample girth, and the stairs too weak beneath his weight. The well-meaning giraffe is determined to help his elephant friend fit in the house. Suggesting exercise classes to get him "down to size" and more "light" on his feet, the giraffe pleads, "I really hope you'll do it. I like having you here." But the elephant recognizes the broader challenge, noting, "I'm not sure that a house designed for a giraffe would ever really work for an elephant, not unless there are some major changes." [2]

Thomas' story remains salient, and I often share it because his metaphor helps us to think differently. In many of our organizations, marginalized populations continue to face challenges similar to those of the elephant[3]. Our organizational structures, processes, and systems have largely been designed by the mainstream and shaped for the prevailing population's preferred ways of working.

Although rarely *intended* to keep other groups out, the exclusionary outcomes of these design limitations are potent, pervasive, and intensely limiting for many individuals and organizations.

Certainly, the news is not all negative. Over the course of three decades working in D&I, I've witnessed impressive successes. The field has been advanced though tremendous minds and passions, and we have a rich history of progress in helping organizations build more diverse workforces and benefit from a broader range of perspectives, identities, and experiences. We have many reasons to be proud.

But we do face serious challenges. How many times have we heard that progress in D&I is stagnant, that D&I change takes a long time, or that D&I efforts are stuck or not "moving the needle"? Too

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[2] You can read Thomas' fable in his book co-authored with Marjorie I. Woodruff, *Building a House for Diversity: How a fable about a giraffe and elephant offers new strategies for today's workforce.*
[3] Alison Maitland and Avivah Wittenberg Cox offer a compelling discussion of this through a gender lens in in their book, *Why Women Mean Business.*

many organizations have not fully resolved D&I challenges or realized D&I opportunities. And too many organizations are failing to realize and benefit from both diversity *and* inclusion. Our 'best practices' are not allowing us to rise to our own or our stakeholders' needs and expectations.

We are further limited by problematic patterns in how D&I is envisioned, resourced, and supported within our organizations. Together with May Snowden and Jörg, I describe the most pervasive and limiting organizational factors as the *D&I Dirty Dozen*: *The 12 absurd risks businesses take only in D&I*. Originally presented to D&I Executives during a June 2016 meeting in New York, the D&I Dirty Dozen include reliance on volunteers for specialized D&I work, expectation of financial ROI without meaningful investment, copy and paste D&I strategies, avoidance of uncomfortable issues, reliance on simplistic metrics, and more[4].

Socio-political forces positioning our work and its underlying philosophy as a point of debate in the broader culture exacerbate these challenges. Discussions of diversity and inclusion are highly charged, both within and outside of our organizations. We must build productive paths forward within environments where our work is often sidelined or dismissed. We must advance on our goals and create value amid continuous demands for the *next* business case to prove D&I's worth.

Within this context, D&I initiatives and strategies have largely remained centred on fitting elephants into giraffe houses (or sometimes just dressing the windows of the house).

There are iterations of Employee Resource Groups[5] that help elephants connect, learn, and share tactics about how to survive in giraffe houses. Many companies offer leadership training or mentoring to help elephants learn how to lead and advance like giraffes. Elephants are told they just need to be better advocates for themselves, or to *lean in*.

If we believe the workplace is fine as it is, and that some groups of people are simply less prepared to navigate it, these individually focused tactics can feel necessary, even smart. Even when we are able to look beyond the individual dynamics and recognize the systemic challenges at play, we likely also know how difficult it is to systematically redesign a whole house. Force-fitting individuals can

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[4] See the appendix for the full Dirty Dozen
[5] ERGs are employee-led groups of volunteers typically organized by shared identities, such as gender or ethnicity, and focused on elevating workplace D&I

seem like the pragmatic path. But demanding that marginalized individuals find ways to adjust to ill-fitting workplaces is highly problematic. When we push elephants to act like giraffes, we communicate that they are fundamentally inadequate. This can reify existing systems of power and reinforce assumptions about who is a *natural* fit within our organizations versus who requires exceptional support to succeed.

The individual costs of this approach are high. Those who remain within an ill-fitting environment can become distracted by the enormous effort of trying to hide their elephant characteristics. They can become disenfranchised as they face an accumulation of blocks to engagement, productivity, creativity, and opportunity. There are profound organizational costs, as well. When we fail to access everyone's distinctive contributions and perspectives, we severely limit our capacity for creative problem solving and breakthrough innovation. And when we fail to engage people as they are, we risk losing them to more inclusive competitors or their own start-up enterprises. Making elephants into giraffes is not just a waste of time and resources; it also harms individuals, and it's simply bad business.

If we are satisfied with the status quo, we can keep doing what we have already done in D&I. We can overlook the unintentional collateral damage of many current D&I practices. We can ignore the wicked complexity of this infinitely evolving work as we continue to achieve the same kind of positive, but slow and insufficient results. We can temper our boldest aspirations as we continue to expend our energy on making yet another business case for D&I while making do with inadequate resources to achieve results that matter. But I know I am not alone in my belief that we can do better.

I know others share my conviction that our work is too important for us to be comfortable with *good enough*. The stakes are too high.

As we strive to keep pace with the increasing demands of organizational and societal complexity, we need innovation to elevate and accelerate meaningful, sustainable D&I outcomes for individuals, teams, organizations, and society. To deliver on the promise of D&I, we need breakthroughs.

We must do better.

We need to be architects of the future of D&I

Today's D&I best practices are not delivering the results we need for individuals, organizations, or society. We need D&I breakthroughs to fuel widespread, sustainable changes. Transformative ways of thinking and working can help us create organizations where a full mix of people are included and can fully contribute. As we devote ourselves to thoughtfully and comprehensively re-designing our organizations to deliver on the full promise of D&I, we can be energized by the possibility that the house of tomorrow might look very little like the one of today.

We need to Question

Our ability to design a new D&I future starts with questioning our assumptions, including why and for whom we do this work, and how we can deliver genuine and lasting value. As we reconsider what we know, we must listen to an array of stakeholders. We must seek a deeper understanding of the needs, preferences, and insights of everyone we need to make our organizations thrive in an increasingly thorny and competitive environment.

We must step back from familiar strategies and habitual practices to thoughtfully question what we do to create value with D&I.

To design breakthroughs, we must be willing to ask questions that challenge the status quo as we critically interrogate our organizational systems and structures, individual beliefs and behaviours, and group interactions and dynamics.

We need to Collaborate

This is not solitary work. To propel creative, innovative business solutions, D&I leaders must partner with one another and with those who have a stake in our work. We must sample across our organizations and from different sectors and disciplines to find valuable ideas to integrate into our work. We must tap into the potential of a mix of diverse identities, perspectives, and ways of working. If we are to achieve our ambitious goals in D&I, we must challenge ourselves to cross-pollinate ideas and collaborate on groundbreaking understandings, actions, and impacts as we bring a new lens to the familiar.

We need to Build (and Rebuild)

This is difficult, complex work. There is no simple 3-part formula or 12-step manual to success, no magical training module or algorithm. Rather, as our organizations evolve within a complex and dynamic world, ours will always be work in progress. We will need to explore, test, re-examine, refine, build, and rebuild. But the outcomes are worth the effort.

The risks of the status quo outweigh the perceived risks of change.

Through persistent engagement, we can make meaningful progress toward delivering on the promise of D&I and building a house that works for all.

Human-Centred Design Thinking can help.

Radical, systemic, and lasting change is challenging, but we are up to the task. Within our D&I community and across our organizations, we have the benefit of great minds and vast experiences. To make the most of these, we need strategies to unleash the innovation that can advance D&I. And design thinking can help.

As detailed in the next chapter, design thinking is an iterative approach to developing innovative answers to complex questions. Many are already familiar with this approach, as it has expanded beyond the world of product design into other organizational contexts. Design thinking is not a panacea; it will not magically resolve all of our challenges. What it can do, however, is help us to thoughtfully listen to our users, those who have unmet needs requiring design of new D&I strategies and initiatives.[6]

As we strive to build a better house for D&I, design thinking can help us listen to the individuals connected to our organizations, including current and future employees and contingent workers, business leaders and people managers, our organization's customers and clients, suppliers, partners, investors, and others. As we work to gain empathy about their experiences, we can integrate their

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[6] I use the language of *"user"*, common in design thinking parlance, to describe the people for whom we do the work of D&I, and those impacted by what we do. In some cases, a team might focus on a sub-group or specific user (e.g., a diversity identity group such as women or a stakeholder segment such as leaders), but because D&I is relevant to all people, the user might also include a broader mix.

needs and ideas with our professional knowledge and expertise. We can collaboratively explore, test, and refine D&I breakthroughs in partnership with those who will be most affected by what we build.

During the past six years, I have worked to blend the principles of design thinking, diversity, and inclusion into my D&I Breakthrough Labs. Building on my extensive experience in D&I and business strategy, these labs expand upon traditional design thinking approaches by integrating principles of D&I into the process. In particular, my labs:

- Actively focus on innovations enhancing D&I strategies and practices
- Deliberately bring together a diverse mix of lab participants (D&I experts, other business leaders and different subject matter experts, community members, etc.)
- Intentionally foster an inclusive lab environment
- Explore whole system, business-relevant change

Each lab is customized to help participants and their organizations reimagine, learn, and co-create bold ways to pursue new terrain in D&I to overcome stubborn challenges. Across these experiences, I have witnessed groups engage their mix of ideas, perspectives, and knowledge to collaboratively drive the innovation we need to advance the field of D&I.

There are a multitude of resources on design thinking as an approach, as well as its application in product development and for organizational outcomes. Although I have led labs for those purposes, this book is specifically about how design thinking can help us drive the innovations we need to deliver on the full promise of D&I.

We must build vibrant systems where all people can lend their distinctive contributions to shared goals.

As we commit to new paths forward in D&I, we must dismantle common barriers that limit progress. Our ability to create bold, new strategies requires that we:

Reject the complacency tied to the assumption that D&I results will take generations. We must pursue promising new practices that can deliver meaningful, timely results for everyone connected with our workplaces, *today*.

Recognize the need for *real* investment in D&I, including highly skilled and well-resourced professionals who can build, execute, and sustain strategies. We must stop downloading this work on volunteers via D&I committees or Business/ Employee Resource Groups.

Challenge ourselves and each other to move beyond simplistic metrics commonly limited to representation. We must develop advanced methods of demonstrating D&I results and the business value these create.

Accept that silence and inaction are not a choice. We must have difficult conversations often avoided.

This work is good for individuals, and it is smart for organizations.

Take action today

QUESTION YOUR THINKING HABITS

Which of your beliefs or assumptions about D&I are getting in the way of transformational change? What gaps in understanding are limiting your vision? What underlying fears might be getting in the way? What can you do today to start shifting how you think about D&I? How can you help others to do the same?

CONSIDER THE COSTS AND OPPORTUNITIES

What are we losing as a society or business by pushing conformity to a single standard? What could be possible if we put into action our belief that every person, as they are, has something valuable to contribute? Take a moment today to consider how you have had to adjust who you are to fit in at work. What are the costs? Ask a colleague the same question, and thank them for sharing.

EXAMINE YOUR ORGANIZATION

How has your organization been designed for giraffes (one mainstream population)? How are your D&I strategies trying to fix elephants (everyone else)? How would your strategies look if the focus were on redesigning the house, instead of asking individuals to change to fit in? What is one modification you can make *today* to start building a more inclusive house?

Understanding Design Thinking for D&I

A brief introduction to Design Thinking

Before detailing how I combine design thinking and D&I in my labs, it is helpful to start with a brief overview of the history and principles of design thinking. This is a high-level introduction. Those seeking detail are encouraged to explore the references included here as well as design thinking resources more broadly.

Contemporary design thinking can be understood as both a mindset and a method to help groups achieve innovative solutions to particularly challenging problems[7]. In her in-depth study of design thinking in complex environments, Stefanie Di Russo explains that as business and organizational leaders have sought to integrate strategies employed by product designers since the 1960s, they have begun to ask:

> What could our products, processes, approaches, or services look like if we built them around what the user really wants and needs?

Depending on their specific context, design thinkers use a rich array of tools, methods, or techniques to answer this question. Across these options, though, Di Russo highlights three common principles guiding a design thinking approach:

First, design thinking is human-centred. Human minds (including intersecting cognitions and emotions) are the focus, and the intention is to address human issues. Design thinking requires that we seek to understand the perspectives, thoughts, feelings, and actions of those most impacted by a challenge or opportunity. As Jon Kolko asserts in his *Harvard Business Review* article on the topic, this practice of building empathy around the practical relevance and emotional resonance of an offering for users stands in contrast to a more utilitarian focus in product or service development. In a "design centric culture," strategists recognize that an understanding of a user's wants and needs is just as critical as the financial or technological specifications that tend to dominate more traditional decision-making.

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[7] See Di Russo's study, *Understanding the behaviour of design thinking in complex environments*, for more

Second, design thinking integrates a multidisciplinary, collaborative, non-linear, and iterative process. In this, IDEO[8] emphasizes that design thinking is not just the insertion of user data or creative activities into traditional modes of decision-making or product development. Rather, it is a deliberate process of reframing a challenge and engaging rapid ideation via visual, disruptive, and both divergent and convergent thinking techniques to build novel connections. Combined with a deep understanding of the "user experience," and a careful review of technical feasibility and business viability, this process enables a "third way" of problem solving. This third way, IDEO explains, opens the door to innovation.

Third, design thinking addresses difficult issues. As teams of strategists combine creative *and* analytic tools to harness collective wisdom, the focus is on building meaningful, practical, and truly innovative solutions to complex and ambiguous challenges, or what are often framed as "wicked" problems. Conceptualized in the early 1970s by design theorists Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber,[9] wicked problems are socially relevant challenges that defy familiar, linear problem solving approaches. These are problems that involve multiple stakeholders, are interconnected with other challenges (and can be symptoms of those), present on-going demands (no once-and-done solution), have no true or false response (only better/ worse), etc.

Aligned with this concept, Adam Kahane[10] offers a useful, concise framework for understanding how challenges can be complex:

> A challenge is *dynamically complex* when cause and effect are not only interdependent, but also far apart in space and time. Firsthand experience is not sufficient for understanding these challenges.
>
> A challenge is *socially complex* when the people involved have different perspectives and diverging interests. Because they see things very differently, the problems become polarized and sticky.
>
> A challenge is *generatively* complex when its future is essentially unfamiliar or undetermined; that future can emerge in unpredictable ways.

In his discussion, Kahane provides critical guidance to change makers:

> Successfully addressing complex challenges, he explains, requires engaging the system as a whole. Isolated, piece-by-piece initiatives are ineffective. As well, solution builders must

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[8] IDEO is a leader in helping organizations understand how to apply design thinking (ideo.com)
[9] See Rittel & Webber 1973 article, *Dilemmas in a general theory of planning*
[10] Check out Kahane's book, *Solving Tough Problems,* for more on this

> involve those who are in the midst of the challenge as they transcend traditional methods or past "best practices," to design new, "next practice" solutions.

Limits and opportunities

Design thinking is not without critique, including that some question whether it can truly deliver on its claims. Certainly, as Di Russo has pointed out, "design thinking is only as good as its implementation and can only be measured by its outcomes and applications." As design thinking continues to spread in use, we can anticipate that there will be some applications and evolutions that deviate from core principles. And a desire for quick results with limited investment can lead some to reduce design thinking to a linear set of steps, lacking the necessary commitment to on-going engagement and revision, or the required discipline to bring a promising new idea to life. To enhance confidence in the approach and combat skepticism, there remains a need for transparency and more empirical research, including careful documentation of methods and outcomes.[11]

No approach to driving innovation is perfect, and promises that design thinking alone will yield a rapid, spectacular resolution to a wicked challenge should be dismissed. Design thinking does, however, offer something distinctively valuable. In a context where business needs and external experts have long dominated decision making, design thinking provides an opportunity to productively integrate the insights, perspectives, and expertise of those impacted by the products and services we create. Recognizing that we are smarter *together*, this approach allows us to dispense with the myth of the brilliant inventor working in isolation and expands possibilities for boldly new, relevant, meaningful paths forward.

As we engage in collaborative creation, design thinking challenges us to commit to questioning what we think we know, to learn from critiques and failures, and to engage in a process that requires us to build, test, refine, and sometimes start again. In my experience, the personal transformations enabled through participation in this process can be just as valuable as the prototypes developed or innovations brought to life. As these labs engage individuals in an alternate way of thinking about and addressing critical challenges, they can enable mind shifts that dramatically open up possibility and potential well beyond the context of the lab setting and experience.

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[11] Di Russo has a valuable discussion on this in her study noted earlier

Where Design Thinking fits within an organization

An organization committed to engaging design thinking can take a range of approaches to resource the method. As detailed by Sabine Junginger in her work, *Design in the organization: parts and wholes*, a common positioning of design thinking is on the periphery of an organization, wherein external resources are used to address a particular challenge or design need. This is how I often get engaged to partner with organizations. Also common is the positioning of design thinking as the work of a particular function (e.g. Marketing), an approach similar to the traditional housing of D&I within Human Resources.

Less frequently, design thinking is located at an organization's core, or woven into its fabric or ways of working. In this fully integrated model, Junginger explains, "Managing and designing are no longer treated as activities that apply to different organizational realms" as a wide array of problems are addressed via design thinking.[12] Rather, an organization positions itself to be fundamentally, and continually, shaped by design questions and approaches. This highly integrated model is not necessarily more effective than ones on the periphery. In fact, Junginger contemplates whether an external design team might have more freedom than one housed at the core. Similarly, in *Collective Disruption: How corporations and startups can co-create transformative new businesses,* Michael Docherty explores the potency of designing with a mix of internal and external collaborators, boosting the mix of perspectives feeding the potential for innovation.

While anyone can go through the motions of design thinking, effectiveness requires ample knowledge, experience, and skill. An analogy sometimes used is that any of us can pick up a musical instrument and make a sound, but our ability to make music requires a great deal of practice. If design thinking expertise does not exist within an organization, it can be efficient and effective to bring in an outside partner with design thinking experience. Overall, it is helpful to consider how a variety of models might be engaged depending on institutional context, resources, competence, and commitment.

Connecting Design Thinking, Diversity, and Inclusion

Our ability to create and sustain organizations that make the most of a full mix of individuals requires us to navigate highly complex challenges, including:

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[12] Quotation is from Junginger's article *Design in the Organization: Parts and wholes* (p. 9)

- Historic and current forces of systemic discrimination and inequalities
- A vast range of user and stakeholder needs and interests
- An ever-evolving context within both organizations and society

As we strive to build a 'better house' that works for everyone, we need approaches that allow us to hear from our users and engage fully with the complexity of this challenge.

Human-centred design thinking can be a potent strategy for this work. First, design thinking disrupts the dominance of typical business drivers, traditional practices, and conventional assumptions about top-down expertise. That requires us to commit to achieving something new and provides us with an iterative process to achieve these breakthroughs. As The Conference Board's Charles Mitchell, Mary Young, and Amanda Popiela contend in their report, *The Future of Work*, organizations must become "obsessed" with their customers or users, both internal and external. The development of any new strategy, program or process, must start by asking: "Who is my customer," and "What does my customer need?" Human centered design thinking helps us to frame a challenge, pursue an answer, and build a relevant response focused on human impacts and outcomes.

Second, design thinking can provide an ideal forum within which we can harness the innovative power of diverse groups. We know that *diversity makes us smarter* and more innovative solution builders[13]. Whether our differences are borne of our identities or experiences, research shows that diverse *and* inclusive teams tend to make better decisions.[14] Although traditional approaches to design thinking do not require diversity or an intentionally inclusive lab space, I explicitly integrate the principles of D&I with the design process in my labs. This approach, I have found, creates a strong environment for different ideas to connect to boost innovation. Simply, when we (a) deliberately bring together a full mix of individuals, and (b) help them apply their diverse perspectives and ways of working to a shared challenge, we (c) enable access to a richer pallet of techniques and insights as they engage in collaborative, cross-fertilizing, creative solution building.[15] This can boost design lab outcomes.

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[13] See Katherine Phillips *Scientific American* article on this

[14] There is a great deal of research and writing on this, including *Innovation, Diversity and Market Growth* by Sylvia Ann Hewlett and colleagues, *Delivering Growth through Diversity* by Vivian Hunt et al., *The Difference* by Scott E. Page, and – of course – Katherine Phillip's *How Diversity Makes us Smarter*

[15] In addition to Hewlett et al., Page, and Phillips' work on this, check out Keith Sawyer's *Group Genius* and Franz Johannsson's *The Medici Effect.*

In addition, as groups engage design thinking to help them let go of familiar assumptions, the differences among individuals can enable a healthy and productive dissonance. Uniformity of identity and experience can lead to conformity and groupthink. These forces restrict innovation.[16] But differences complicate easy consensus. As Katherine Phillips explains, diverse groups tend to work harder to accomplish shared objectives:

> *[Diverse groups] anticipate differences of opinion and perspective. They assume they will need to work harder to come to a consensus. This logic helps to explain both the upside and the downside of social diversity: people work harder in diverse environments both cognitively and socially. They might not like it, but the hard work can lead to better outcomes.*

When we deliberately foster a positive orientation to different strengths, styles, and ideas, we can create a space wherein individuals can share their different perspectives without the risk of censure. This carefully curated inclusive setting can enable the intersection of a diversity of ideas necessary to propel novel outcomes. Or, as Keith Sawyer argues in *Group Genius,* the connections made among different individuals can enable "collaborative emergence," unleashing "multiple sparks" of innovation. Human-centred design thinking can help ensure these innovative "sparks" start with user's unmet needs and that promising solutions are also tested and refined with these firmly in mind.

Innovation enhances D&I

D&I enhances innovation

By combining the principles of D&I with design thinking, we have a distinctive opportunity to engage a D&I *virtuous circle[17]*:
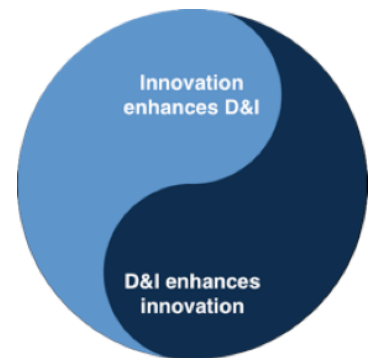
We use the power *of* D&I to propel innovation *for* D&I.

In other words, design thinking provides a valuable process to engage a mix of people in the challenging work of crafting the D&I breakthroughs we need to accelerate relevant, meaningful, and lasting results.

Design thinking helps us do the hard work.

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[16] For more on this, read Rock and Grant's HBR article, *Why Diverse Teams are Smarter*
[17] See my article with Marjorie Derven for more on this

As we start to get "obsessed" with our D&I users' needs and innovative ways to fulfill them, we must free ourselves from familiar assumptions. We must question today's best practices. These mind shifts unlock potential for breakthroughs that can elevate and expedite D&I outcomes that matter. This does not mean that we reject everything we do now. But it does mean that we are willing to think differently and be open to the possibilities of working differently. To get new outcomes, we must take action to explore new ways of thinking and new approaches to our work. But this is not a feat achieved with good intentions alone. This hard work requires thoughtful inspiration, preparation, and guidance.

Design thinking combined with D&I can help us do this hard work by challenging us to listen to and work with users, meaningfully engage a mix of perspectives, and contribute a wide range of skills and ideas to the pursuit of creative and meaningful solutions.

There are a multitude of potent design labs driving change across organizations.

How my D&I Design Labs are distinctive

Focus on innovations for the field of D&I

Intentionally integrate D&I principles, including that I encourage a diverse mix of participants and thoughtfully foster an inclusive environment to make the most of this mix

Engage my ecosystem model to bring a whole systems lens into activation process to enable widespread, sustainable, business-linked outcomes

Benefit from my **extensive experience in contemporary D&I and business strategy**, in addition to Design thinking

Doing Design Thinking for D&I

The *doing* of design thinking requires courage. In many organizations, leaders have a bias for familiar linear and deductive approaches. Even when individuals and teams accept the value of dynamic, iterative, and creative approaches, it can be difficult to step into this unfamiliar territory. Some want to know, *specifically*, what innovations will emerge from this process before they participate or commit resources. This is paradoxical to the process; our ability to pursue novel designs requires that we not predefine the outcome. Other leaders are comfortable with the inherent emergence, but are concerned that serious professionals will scoff at the artistic, playful, and disruptive elements used to foster bold creativity. In fact, with some potential clients, it is necessary to spend extra time influencing and preparing skeptical leaders to take a necessary leap of faith.

And it is a leap.

While there is a clear, evidence-based backbone to the design thinking process, uncertainty and emergence are productive elements allowing participants to elevate ideas rather than limit them. Design thinking requires individuals to trust in a process they often cannot understand until they have experienced it. Diverse teams must be willing to immerse themselves in creative activities. And they must collaboratively move forward without knowing where they will end up.

In design thinking, we are challenged to both anticipate and shape the future.

The lab experience

Design labs bring participants into an incubator where they engage activities designed to help them enhance their understanding of user needs, explore possibilities for addressing these, and prepare to bring innovative solutions to life[18]. To productively tap into collective genius for innovation, I embed the principles of D&I within my labs, and orient the process around four design-thinking experiences: Explore, Design, Refine, and Activate.

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[18] Check out the Nielsen Norman Group for a helpful illustration of this process.

Before you continue…

The best way to learn design thinking is to directly experience it, and make discoveries along the way. The story shared in the next section offers a discovery-driven approximation of this. An amalgam of actual D&I design labs I have developed and led, this story walks you through the four key components of my D&I Breakthrough Labs. Additional detail and insights are offered at the end of each section.

Explore

We begin with a story

You have a meeting about how D&I can enable the achievement of business goals. Anticipating the usual at your traditional organization, you open the boardroom door expecting an agenda-driven discussion with like-minded peers around a polished-wood table. Instead, you find a space transformed with sights, smells, and sounds of a Moroccan market. You're surprised, intrigued, and a bit nervous, unsure what to expect.

As you enter, you recognize a few familiar faces from previous D&I initiatives. But the room is filling with people from different business units, functions, and sites. You notice some are early career employees. Some are senior executives. And among the two-dozen gathered, there are people from a range of identity groups. You are curious how so many different perspectives will blend together in the shared work ahead.

No agenda is circulated or opening statements made. Instead, as the lab coach welcomes you, she invites you to select a piece of colourful paper and a crayon and find a seat on one of the bright cushions spread around the floor. As you sit, you are asked to write a poem revealing what it means to be truly included, as well as to be excluded. One person speaks to a shared hesitancy, noting that he is not a poet. Another laughs, adding that this is not how meetings typically start. Encouraged by your lab coach to trust, you start to write.

Soon, participants are taking turns reading their poems aloud. Typically, you would feel uneasy sharing something you just drafted about such a personal topic, but this space feels safe. You're moved by the insights you hear in others' poems. You also find that the poetry has allowed you to express experiences and feelings you've not previously shared at work, even via the annual engagement survey or in traditional D&I events. You wonder how this group is able to go so deeply so quickly. The collection of poems is powerful. You imagine sharing them more broadly in the organization. These poems might evoke greater empathy and insight that could influence committed action by leaders.

As you continue to reflect on experiences of inclusion and exclusion, the lab coach asks you to reconsider what you know about D&I. Using storytelling, she illustrates ways of reframing this work and shares radical D&I principles to drive a contemporary approach. This is reinforced with accounts of how progressive organizations have built and benefited from novel D&I strategies. These mind shifts make sense. In a small group, you explore your own assumptions about D&I

and the possibilities presented by a next level foundation. You have a germinating sense of liberation as you start questioning convention.

Building on these insights, the lab coach engages your small group in a parallel thinking exercise to spark new ideas. Focused on real problems in your daily work, these activities quickly generate promising, new ideas for sticky problems. As the larger group reconvenes, you are invited to share the most exciting new idea spawned so far. A positive energy builds in the room as creative ideas are brought forth. One participant leans forward, noting with equal parts surprise and eagerness that this lab has already contributed a key idea for her business plan for the coming year. You've never thought of yourself as creative, much less as an innovator. But you are starting to rethink that assumption, especially as your ideas mix with others from different perspectives.

The conversation shifts to the core challenge that brought you together. Your CEO addresses the group with the orienting focus of the business, and of this design session. She explains:

To fulfill our organization's mission, we must be a sustainable company. To be a lasting leader in our industry, we must evolve to ensure we continue to offer relevant and meaningful opportunities to an array of employees and customers. To maintain and grow our impact, we must foster an environment where a wide mix of people are able to flourish, contribute to, and benefit from what we create together. In a dynamic marketplace and shifting social world, this is no small challenge. We need bold new thinking. Our challenge is this: How can we innovatively elevate inclusion to help meet our sustainability goals?

You experience an 'aha' moment. Although you've long believed in D&I as the right thing to do, you are powerfully inspired by how it can also be a catalyst to achieve business goals, including the business sustainability goal put forth by your CEO.

As you begin to contemplate possibilities that address this business imperative, the lab coach asks you to set aside your familiar D&I presumptions and past practices. Your task, she explains, is to consider the CEO's inclusion-for-sustainability challenge from the perspective of your users. Specifically, what are the needs of the diverse mix of employees, leaders, customers, investors, partners, and others affected by sustainability efforts? "What does success looks like from these individuals' perspectives?"

To help you gain insight and empathy, the lab coach shares data from research, practice, and a series of surveys and meetings conducted in advance of today's session. This information provides detail on how those connected to your company seek to thrive, and how they perceive inclusion. She also refers you to your pre-work, including specially scripted interviews you conducted with individuals from your company. Based on these data, you are challenged to forefront user needs as you begin to build a progressive approach to elevate inclusion.

As you look forward to what is ahead in this lab, you're surprised by how you've been drawn into this experience, and realize you haven't looked at your phone a single time.

Explore: Summary

Carefully guided by someone with design thinking expertise, the Explore component of the lab includes activities to unsettle familiar ways of thinking, unlock the creativity important to developing relevant and meaningful solutions, and get participants focused on user needs and perspectives. This is important to helping participants avoid selecting solutions driven by other factors: the loudest voice in the room, the most senior executive's powerful influence, the comfort of familiar practices, or something irrelevant to the user's needs.

I put the diversity in the room to work to enhance the potency of this exploration. Specifically, I design my labs to include a multi-faceted mix of innovators with an array of identities and experiences. When possible, we also include users and representatives from outside the host organization to augment the innovation-boosting diversities. Notably with this focus on diversity, the lab experience must also foster an *inclusive* environment. This enables the mix of participants to coalesce into a connected group that can tap into collective wisdom for their shared purpose.

Disrupting

In addition to the poetry writing, as illustrated in the story above, I use a range of approaches to help participants reframe challenges and set aside methodical temperaments, including:

- **Arts:** Writing exercises, sculpture building, drawing, photography
- **Discussion:** Panel discussions, unconventional interviews, storytelling
- **Research:** Data, academic studies, case studies, user observation
- **Reflection:** Appreciative Inquiry, coaching, guided meditation
- **Shake Ups:** Disruptive questions, divergent thinking, wild idea sharing, games, etc.

Given our focus on D&I innovations, we also take time to reconsider and reframe personal and professional assumptions about the purpose and practice of D&I.

Building empathy

As Stanford University d.school's Emi Kolawole asserts, "to get to new solutions, you have to get to know different people, different scenarios, different places." [19]

To overcome blind spots and ensure designs solve problems from the

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[19] IDEO Field Guide to Human-Centred Design

perspective of those who will use them, we must take steps to understand and empathize with our users.

Pre-work can help initiate the empathy building needed to consider the challenge from the user perspective. Activities including interviews, observation, shadowing, storytelling, readings, photo diaries, online communities, and other data-gathering strategies can help ensure that participants enter the lab space with greater understanding of these user needs. As they endeavour to hear users' voices, and "walk in their shoes," lab participants record what they hear and what they observe. They also have an opportunity to process their notes and impressions to illuminate and distill insights. Empathy building continues through the lab as participants discuss and examine user perspectives in more detail, and share early prototypes with users for feedback and refinement.

Design

Back to our story

You are invited to build a sculpture. Provided with vibrant materials, including Play-Doh, Tinker Toys, Lego Blocks, metal foils, origami papers, Brain Flakes, washi tape, and more, you are asked to build on your own and without a specific end in mind. You notice nervous glances around the room as a colleague releases a good-natured groan. But your lab coach emphasizes this is purposeful. You begin to create as rousing jazz music fills the air.

Looking around, you're amazed at the variety and originality in the sculptures. You are asked to interpret your model. What does it represent about the future you want to create with D&I? You find your thoughts sparked by colours, connections, height, patterns, and movement in what you've created. You realize your spontaneous sculpture reveals quite a bit to tangibly clarify your D&I vision. Likewise, you are inspired by the ideas, feelings, points of view, and values uncovered in others' creations.

Moving into small groups, you are asked to take the best from each individual sculpture as you work together to build a single, collective piece. As you rapidly collaborate, new ideas are sparked at the intersection of objects and ideas, and your conversation reveals emerging insights about your collective vision for D&I. You listen as each group shares what their co-created sculpture says about the ideal future of a sustainable organization making the most of a mix of diversities. You feel exhilarated by the remarkable ingenuity and revelations about D&I.

Building on this rush of creativity, each small group is asked to develop a potential design question to be addressed in the lab. Your lab coach reminds you to remain centred on your users' needs as you respond to the CEO's challenge. To help craft a concise, specific, compelling question, you follow a guiding template. You are encouraged to take time and care with this process, as the ideas for creative solutions you generate will fall within the frame of the

questions you ask. After each small group presents their draft question, the larger group selects this question to focus on in the design stage:

How might we foster sustainability by making inclusion a consideration in every business decision we make?

As you prepare to generate innovative ideas to answer this question, the lab coach challenges you to be bold. She emphasizes that you take care to ignore the internal voice that tells you that an idea might be too wild. To help inspire you to seek remarkable innovations, your lab coach highlights breakthrough ideas that have been successful. These include how wildly unexpected innovations have impacted space missions, organ donation, neighbourhood crime, bullying, prison violence, and more. She outlines the remarkable work of Tostan,[20]an NGO based in Senegal, that is achieving widespread, sustainable, generational change in only three years.

To begin ideation, you are asked to pick up a Crayon and individually sketch initial ideas responding to your design question. It's unusual for you to use images instead of words to represent possible solutions. But the waxy aroma of the colourful Crayons seems to unlock your imagination. Soon, your paper is covered with colourful concentric circles, intersecting amoebic shapes with clusters of boxes inside, a sphere full of wriggly lines, a catapult, a nest, a hive, interlocking pyramids, a playground, a field of wildflowers and pollinators, intersecting cogs, overlapping fingerprints, card decks riffling together, a quilting circle, a basketball team with their coach, a choir, an artist's pallet where paint colours mix together, an atomic nucleus on the face of a spinning top, a chemistry lab, and more.

Next, you cross-fertilize ideas. Sharing sketches within your small group, you are asked to take a 'yes, and' approach to each idea[21]. No single idea is eliminated as you seek to build on each other's while also collectively sparking new ideas. During this process, your lab coach periodically inserts images and questions to challenge and disrupt your path. These encourage you to be even bolder in generating remarkably novel ideas. This process is difficult, but you feel a rush of excitement as your group conjures cutting edge ideas.

Soon your small group has an energizing list of possibilities. Although all are recorded for potential future development, your team selects the boldest for development in the lab:

- An app to guide and reward inclusion as leaders make daily business decisions

  As the other small groups share their most innovative idea to make inclusion the default in all business decisions in this organization, you hear exciting ideas, including:

- A remarkable process to remove bias from business decision-making processes and systems, including from data collection and software coding for Artificial Intelligence

- A distinctive business decision making process supporting development & commercialization of new products for underserved markets

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[20] https://www.tostan.org/
[21] This is a strategy borrowed from improvisational comedy, a guideline to accept and expand on an idea rather than reject it and move in a different direction

- A toolkit that supports business decisions making the most of intersectionality[22] instead of outmoded single identity silos

- A scheme for decision making about compensation and rewards focused on how each employee helps others (not only themselves) succeed

Each small group is invited to move their selected idea onto the prototyping stage. You work with your team to begin co-creating a prototype for your app, drafting what your new idea looks like and how it functions. Your group builds a storyboard to communicate key features, while other small groups create 3-D models, outlines, and other tangible descriptions. Your idea continues to develop throughout this process, and soon you have a fleshed out model to which others can react. Your lab coach asks that you leave the idea for now, letting it marinate without your conscious attention before the next part of the lab.

Design: Summary

Equipped with a more concrete understanding of their organizing challenge, teams build possible responses in the Design stage. Arts continue to play a critical role in this process as participants work together to draft a guiding question to focus their work, before exploring bold, new responses to answer it. Notably, I often start this part of the lab by helping participants enter a creative mental space. Art, music, and play are practical, purposeful strategies to fuel creavity.

Through this part of the lab experience, barriers break down, and connections among both collaborators and ideas grow.

Building a question

As participants gain a broader field of vision, they are asked to consider the following prompts as they develop a design question centred on user needs:

1. What are the unmet needs of those who are meant to benefit from your design?
2. Why are these needs unfulfilled?
3. What is the opportunity you are trying to fulfill (or problem you are trying to solve)?
4. What is the ultimate outcome or impact you want to create?
5. How does that outcome connect to the overarching mission and goals of your organization?

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[22] A framework or lens for seeing people, groups of people, and/or social problem as affected by multiple discriminations and disadvantages. See work by Kimberlé Crenshaw, in particular, for more.

Much of this work is about reframing how individuals approach a challenge. As Tina Sellig emphasizes in her book, *InGenius,* when we expand or shift the frame of how we look at a challenge, we broaden the range of answers. She reinforces this point by reminding us of a quotation from Einstein:

> *"If I had an hour to solve a problem and my life depended on the solution, I would spend the first fifty-five minutes determining the proper question to ask, for once I know the proper question, I could solve the problem in less than five minutes."*

Depending on the organization and the lab purpose, we might create and employ a single design question, or several. In all cases, the same rigorous considerations apply as we work to generate worthy inquiries.

Boldly responding

As groups begin to ideate, or conceive possible solutions to their design question, participants are challenged to remove all restrictions to imagining the boldest possibilities. There will be a need for pragmatism later in the process, but at this stage no idea is too wild. Ideas are generated individually and collectively, a process benefiting from a mix of identities, backgrounds, thinking styles, and experiences. Ideas evolve as participants rapidly build upon each other's contributions, challenging each other to be bolder. They might question some elements of ideas and expand upon others. As they advocate for what they feel is essential, they also listen and learn from others.

The diversity in the room helps propel creativity while clarifying what is crucial, and this routinely leads to many "sparks" of innovation.

Remarkable ideas with the most potential to answer the design question while meeting users' needs are selected for prototyping, or further development. By building, sketching, or drafting preliminary versions of fresh concepts, participants continue to explore and develop ideas. Critically, these rough solutions also enable a tangible representation of an idea so that others can review it, ask questions, and provide feedback and further direction.

Some ideas and prototypes will not move forward. These are seen not as failures, but as opportunities to learn more about users and their needs. With deeper understanding and refreshed direction, designers advance an even better solution that they can bring to life.

Refine

Returning to our story

As you return to the lab space, each small group's prototype is displayed around the room. Your lab coach guides you through a gallery walk, wherein you have an opportunity to both receive and provide feedback. As groups mingle and offer a range of cross-fertilizing ideas to make each prototype bolder, more business-linked, and more user-need focused, your lab coach continues to insert disruptive questions (e.g., how would your idea shift if you had an unlimited budget, if you only had 3 months to achieve your outcomes, if children had to implement it, etc.?). Encouraged to seek out connections between the ideas, your small group notes the complementary resonance of your draft with that of another group's prototype. Your two groups decide to combine the prototypes into a single, stronger, and more remarkable iteration.

As each group incorporates the cross-pollinating feedback and ideas into refinements to elevate their respective prototypes, your lab coach reminds you that this feedback process must continue. While your lab colleagues have helped you improve your preliminary draft, you also need to hear from those you want to benefit from your prototype. You're hesitant about bringing your idea to the user, noting that your prototype still needs a lot of work. But your lab coach reminds you that the goal of your prototype is not perfection. Rather, your focus is on continuing to learn about users' needs to enable continued revisions. With this in mind, your team builds a plan to share your draft to gain this user feedback.

As you move beyond the lab space to engage with users, colleagues, and other stakeholders, you continue to hone your prototype. Despite your concerns about sharing early drafts of a solution, you find that it was essential. The prototype has continued to strengthen via broader ideas and questions, and it is rewarding to connect with people who could actually benefit from what you are designing. Over the course of this incubation period, enhancements have also occurred to you when you were jogging, upon waking from a nap, and other moments when you were not consciously focused on your design.

Your innovation has grown stronger with each iteration: bolder, more feasible, and more capable of addressing users' unmet needs. Before the design lab, you felt frustratingly stuck about how to integrate inclusion into business decisions. Now you are invigorated by the experience and the remarkable outcomes you are propelling. But you know that innovation is not simply an extraordinary idea; you must bring these ideas to life to create new value. You have raised expectations among those too often left out of decision-making, and your commitment is enhanced by this accountability. To drive execution of your design, your group is encouraged to become fiercly practical. You continue to refine your prototype, retaining the breakthrough potency while strengthening feasibility.

Refine: Summary

A design-thinking approach anticipates that ideas and components of promising solutions will continue to evolve and strengthen. As they collectively tinker with their emerging solutions, designers

share rough drafts to solicit feedback to improve their prototypes. This refinement process begins within the lab space as small groups solicit input from others in the room, but it does not end there. It is important that prototypes also be taken to users for feedback, pilot tests, and experiments to ensure designs remain tethered to users' needs. Ideally, users also participate in the full lab to co-design alongside others.

Strengthening (not perfecting)

Through this process of feedback, testing, and experimentation, solutions are iteratively refined for greater relevance and impact. Working closely with users, designers remain open to changes in needs and in the broader organizational context, even late in development. Although the goal is to refine the prototype, not perfect it, there is value in ensuring adequate time and space for incubation. Ideas and revisions can emerge through a marinating process even when individuals are not actively working on them.

Activate

Returning to our story

Through refinements, your prototype has become stronger and you are ready to implement this more robust breakthrough. You successfully pitch your design to executive sponsors whose commitment you need to proceed. Starting your pitch by sharing poems written at the start of your lab is unexpected, but you take that risk. Leaders are visibly moved. They note that the poems were a tipping point for them to commit to not only your innovation, but also a broader D&I strategy integrated with the business strategy. This is an important triumph that previous business cases, survey results, and other data had not achieved.

As you reconvene with your lab coach, she helps you prepare for widespread, sustainable, business-linked implementation. Inviting you to view your organization as an ecosystem, or a combination of interdependent components, she challenges you to consider the cohesive set of changes required to support the full implementation of your innovation. As you contemplate this orientation, you recall previous D&I initiatives organized around a single new policy, isolated training, or solitary event. These piecemeal approaches ultimately failed to produce meaningful or lasting results. In fact, you recall how some unintentionally led to frustration, fatigue, and unfulfilled promise. You're eager to try a more effective approach.

Walking you through the ecosystem technique, your lab coach asks you to consider how your innovation fits with key components of your organization.

- How does it align with the current business strategy and mission-critical objectives?
- How does it fit with the leadership strategy?

- Does your organization's structure naturally support your innovation?

- What will your innovation require in terms of skills and capabilities?

- How does your innovation connect with stakeholders' assumptions and behaviours?

- What will need to change in regard to your organization's policies, processes, systems, and structures for your innovation to thrive?

- What does your innovation require in regard to metrics, accountability, rewards, and consequences?

Underlying this analysis, your lab coach explains, is an understanding that your plan to implement and sustain your innovation must be cohesively reinforced across all these components. This also means your breakthrough cannot be blocked by allowing conflicting current practices to continue. As your group considers intersecting dynamics across the organization, you identify components in conflict and ways to address them. You also find elements that are already aligned with your design; these will remain unchanged, which makes the path forward begin to feel less daunting.

This is detailed work, but you're surprised by how easily your team comes up with a first iteration ecosystem plan to implement your innovation. Your group and lab coach agree that your plan holds together as a robust whole. Now you are ready to create fresh value for your users and your organization, though you also know you will continue to modify the innovation as you follow up on specific questions and engage organizational partners to help you achieve necessary changes. As you reflect on what you are learning, respond to feedback, and adjust to broader changes within and beyond your dynamic organization, these engagements will help you refine your prototype and action plan to ensure that your innovation will thrive. All components of the ecosystem around your innovation will be mutually reinforcing for successful launch and lasting outcomes.

You're excited to move forward, confident your solution can help advance inclusion in a manner that helps people and elevates the business. This feels like a previously unimaginable breakthrough. Even more, you find yourself thinking differently and more creatively as you consider what else can be transformed by combining diversity, inclusion, and design thinking in your daily work. Reflecting on those with whom you've shared this lab experience, you're keen to engage this new network of colleagues and to continue the cross-fertilization of creative ideas. You think it could be valuable to establish D&I design labs as a regular part of your business.

`Now that you know how contemporary D&I can help individuals, teams, the organization, and even shareholders succeed, you realize it's irresponsible not to make it part of your business strategy and your daily work. You are energized by how D&I can create value in your organization, and you feel more confident and equipped to be a continuous innovator to elevate results that matter.

Activate: Summary

Through this iterative process participants prepare to move their innovative prototypes into practice. Ideally, activation plans are developed after a more extended period of refinement, including consultations with users and securing support from those needed to resource the innovation. Often, however, draft plans for activation are initiated prior to community feedback and pilots. This is common in organizations that have limited opportunities to convene lab participants. In these situations, groups are reminded that initial activation plans must be modified as refinements continue.

In all cases, a distinctive element of the activation process in my labs is the integration of my Ecosystem approach to D&I transformation. [23] This technique is designed to help groups successfully launch and sustain meaningful, lasting, business-relevant impact addressing users' unmet needs.

Driving activation through an ecosystem approach

When I partner with teams to pursue D&I innovations, I encourage them to think about their organization as an ecosystem. Grounded in business strategy and oriented toward business results, this approach is notably different from common piecemeal approaches to D&I. Piece-by-piece approaches tend to focus on resolving isolated incidents and symptoms through individual awareness (e.g., training) or via other initiatives not fully integrated into the broader business (e.g., an isolated policy). Although common, piecemeal approaches tends to deliver disappointing, short-lived results as individuals and organizations prove remarkably resilience to change. In contrast, my ecosystem approach weaves change throughout the organization to achieve comprehensive, sustainable, and business-linked outcomes. The ecosystem elements are described below, along with a graphic illustration of how they are interconnected[24].

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[23] My colleague Tim Galusha and I developed our ecosystem model in 2012, building upon earlier models we have used and refined. You can read more about it here: https://hcexchange.conference-board.org/blog/post.cfm?post=6483&blogid=1

[24] As groups develop competency with this approach, I often challenge them to also consider their work in the context of dynamics *external* to the business. You can find this graphic in the appendix.

Seven, Intersecting Elements of the Ecosystem Approach

Business strategy	The competitive plan to win in the market or fulfill a purpose, plus business vision, mission, values, and operating principles
Leadership strategy	The clear, consistent leadership approach to deliver desired employee experience and both D&I and business outcomes
People capability	Required skills workers need to achieve your strategy
Organization structure	Structure to clarify responsibilities and decision-making to successfully implement your strategy
Processes & Systems	How work gets done formally (policies, processes) and informally (practices, habits)
Beliefs & Habits	What people in the organization believe; the norms, habits, and patterns of beliefs & assumptions driving behaviours that bring about results
Metrics and Rewards	What is measured, recognized/ rewarded or sanctioned. Evidence of D&I's contribution to mission-critical business results

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Any D&I initiative or strategy we develop must thrive within this interconnected system. Therefore, we must consider and engage with every element of the business when we design and implement our D&I innovations. As lab participants envision this network of dynamics structures and components, I challenge them to consider:

- What impacts of their innovation will be experienced across all of the elements?
- What existing elements might be in conflict with their innovation?

- What will naturally support and reinforce the change?
- What will impede the innovation if not altered?
- What else needs to change simultaneously?

Premised on this need for a *synchronous,* whole system change, the ecosystem approach guides lab participants to identify gaps and take action to ensure that every part of the ecosystem supports their innovation. Failure to assess and address these dynamics can stall or severely constrain the activation process, leaving even the strongest, most promising innovative idea to flounder.

To help illustrate the value of the ecosystem approach, I often share the metaphor of how an acorn becomes a thriving tree. In *Outliers: The Story of Success*, Malcolm Gladwell explains that people might assume the tallest oak tree in a forest starts as the strongest acorn. In reality, while a strong acorn is a necessary condition, a tree's growth also requires adequate sunlight, sufficient rainfall, fertile soil, and no pests and predators. To cultivate the tallest oak in the forest, these interdependent components must work together, in balance. You cannot focus on rain in year one, add fertile soil in year two, sun in year three, and ignore blocking out predators altogether. Similarly, to move a D&I innovation forward, we must ensure that it is able to thrive within the ecosystem. Integration must be comprehensive, cohesive, and concurrent. A workplace example can be helpful here.

For many organizations, it has been challenging to engage employees in flexible work options, despite strong policies and communication efforts. An ecosystem approach helps leaders address this challenge as it guides them to grow beyond their piecemeal efforts to systemically consider how flexibility is enabled or constrained by their broader organizational ecosystem.

Undertaking an analysis of each of the 7 internal ecosystem elements, a leader might find that despite a strong policy (Ecosystem component: Processes & Systems), employee engagement in flexibility is being limited by a legacy promotions process (Metrics & Rewards) that benefits those spending long hours in the office. And/or, they might find that uptake is constrained by a lack of skills in working virtually (People Capability). And so on. Simply, any ecosystem element that reinforces the status quo or works against flexibility can be a potent signal to employees that they are better off *not* engaging flexible work options, no matter how strong or clear the policy.

To cohesively foster flexibility, leaders must identify and *simultaneously* make adjustments within each ecosystem element (while retaining those already working well). This approach can enable a superstructure for widespread, sustainable workplace flexibility that supports business strategy and results.

As illustrated, the ecosystem approach breaks a seemingly intractable challenge into a set of manageable questions. Through careful analysis and a step-by-step process, answers can be thoughtfully combined into a cohesive solution.

Even more critically, the ecosystem approach provides leaders with a way to weave change directly into the organizational fabric. This helps to ensure that D&I innovations are *naturally* enabled by the broader system. This helps even the boldest new ideas become a core part of daily organizational life and success, not add-ons or optional initiatives that can be dropped when budgets are tight or focus shifts in response to business changes. As this approach also helps an organization to assess, maintain, extend, or reinforce what is already working well, it makes change feel less unsettling and onerous for those experiencing it.

When well designed and executed, the ecosystem approach can powerfully bring D&I breakthroughs to life for lasting, business-linked impact.

Lab outcomes

When I began designing and coaching D&I Breakthrough Labs, I worried about resistance. Would executives, scientists, engineers, and other professionals object to my invitations to compose poetry about barriers and opportunities? Would they object to materializing their bold visions and innovations with Play-Doh and Tinker Toys? I know this process can be challenging for those accustomed to traditional modes of solution building. But every time I have led a lab, a full-range of participants have eagerly engaged with these creativity-enhancing activities. And they relish the outcomes. As I continue to challenge participants to extend beyond the familiar, I have watched as concerns about the process and potential outcomes are soon replaced by sincere excitement with new ways of thinking and working.

New ways of working

As lab participants pursue implementation of remarkable new ways of working, they are challenged to become relentlessly practical, examining their bold and promising prototypes through the lens of what can really work. In this careful and thoughtful balance, lab participants have created a rich array of exciting new products and ways of working. Here are a few samples:

Inclusion App	Enabling real-time data about inclusion behaviours for inclusion performance management and development
Inclusive M&A Integration Strategy	Leveraging D&I to increase engagement, performance, and global sales following an acquisition
Product Innovation Generation	Structuring routine ways to leverage D&I for product innovation by organizing systemic crowdsourcing & cross-fertilization across functions, lines of business, and identities
Reinvented Business Resource Groups	Running each Business Resource Group as a regular business unit. This includes BRG leaders as full time roles focusing group members on generating business results
Bold Experiential D&I Learning	Breaking through barriers with new experiential learning for business leaders working to build diverse, inclusive organizations
Intersectionality Toolkit	Providing pairs of leaders and employees with a toolkit to get to know each other as intersectional individuals, each with distinctive mix of preferences and styles. This informs an individualized, formal agreement about how to work together.
Elevated D&I Metrics	New measurements reflecting progressive frameworks for diversity *and* inclusion and their impact on innovation and other business results.

And much more…

New ways of thinking

The impact of these labs is even greater than the valuable prototypes created, innovations implemented, or related user impacts and business results. In these labs, participants learn about themselves and others as they experience optimal ways of working across differences for collective intelligence. This exploration and engagement of diversities as strengths and the productive value of complementary assets has relevance far beyond the lab, and even beyond the workplace. In the lab's positive and safe environment, participants gain confidence in their creativity and learn skills to integrate innovation, as well as diversity and inclusion, into daily work. This development can elevate organizational capacity.

One of the most profound impacts for me has been seeing participants reimagine D&I strategies or initiatives and the value they can create. I have witnessed those who have become

disengaged, disillusioned, frustrated, and/or resigned to the limits of conventional D&I become reinvigorated and enthusiastically recommitted.

In participants' own words…

Business Impact
"What struck me was that once we realize the business case for D&I, then accepting that change is slow is irresponsible to shareholders. I'm going to carry that message forward so that we go after results more quickly and effectively with innovative approaches."

Next Practices
"I came into this wanting to be told what best practices to do. We need to move from best practices to innovative "next practices" for meaningful results. That includes letting go of what is not working today and creating and executing new ways of working."

Broad Inclusion
"D&I is not about 'them.' It is about all of us. We need to include a broad mix and cross-pollinate different thinkers and identities to help the business grow."

Cohesive Integration
"We need to blend D&I into the way work gets done every day and for every function (not just HR) instead of producing a bunch of segregated programs."

Positive Momentum
"After seeing D&I come and go over the years, I was feeling hopeless and I wasn't getting involved. Now I feel refreshed with a renewed and positive energy to take action that will make a difference."

Collective Intelligence
"I really value this opportunity to sit and think and talk and connect and cross-fertilize. We never get this much time together, but it is really valuable, and we should do more of this. We need to make time to get diversity in a room together and create creative solutions."

Widespread Transformation
"You lose a lot when you try to fit square pegs into round holes. We need to redesign a whole system that works for everyone instead of trying to change outliers to fit in to our current environment."

Creativity
"New ideas can come from anywhere. What I will do differently is break the mold in my idea gathering methods and try new approaches."

No two labs are the same

The overlapping design thinking components – explore, define, refine, and activate – are guidelines, not rigid rules of a linear process. Depending on the challenge and desired outcomes, labs can extend over multiple sessions or be focused to engage the core experience over the course of a single day or two. Even an express, 90-minute session can valuably *introduce* participants to the core components of design thinking for D&I.

Across any single lab, design thinkers modify the process, as needed. There might be value in leaping back to a previous component to ensure clarity, functionality, and ultimate impact. For example, teams might revisit and revise their design question after a pilot test, generate completely new ideas, and more. Although built around a backbone of design thinking and D&I principles, each of my labs is necessarily custom designed. Furthermore, each evolves as it unfolds to remain agile and responsive to what emerges in real time.

No matter the particulars, participants engaged in this design process are challenged to trust one another as they move forward without knowing where they will arrive. On this emergent path, failures and setbacks are expected and accepted as a valuable source of learning[25] and critical to a pursuit of something truly distinctive. For those willing to embrace ambiguity and possibility, the opportunities for transformative change and elevated impacts, both for the organization and the individual, are significant.

Through these labs, I have had a chance to reaffirm my understanding that we truly are smarter together.

When we are willing to let go of our assumptions and thoughtfully, deliberately work together on creating something better, we can build the new, more inclusive organizations and society we need to thrive.

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[25] See Jon Kolko's article, *Design Thinking Comes of Age,* for more on this.

These labs create value by…

Replacing fatigue, frustration, resistance, and distraction with renewed optimism, commitment, and courage. They can spark the energy to make real shifts in organizational readiness for change.

Increasing participants' capacity to make the most of the productive interplay between innovation, diversity, and inclusion.

Engaging leaders and a diverse mix of change agents in addressing the barriers that constrain the value of D&I. They join in crafting innovations with meaningful, sustainable, business-linked impact. Remember: people support what they help create.

Cultivating continuous innovators prepared to unleash potential for organizations to make the most of a full mix of employees, customers, investors, and other stakeholders.

Turning fresh, progressive D&I strategies into business success stories.

And more

Take action today

Whether you are just starting in D&I work, or need to reorient or accelerate an existing D&I strategy, take some time *today* to draft a path forward. Consider:

YOUR CHALLENGES

What are the wicked challenges facing D&I or your organization as a whole? Where have you struggled to make change despite repeated efforts? Where is incremental change just not good enough?

YOUR OPPORTUNITIES

What could your organization gain by boldly addressing your most difficult challenges? What are the risks your organization faces if you do *not* act? Which is the greater risk: the status quo or innovation?

YOUR PARTNERS

Who needs to be engaged in your design process? Who are critical users and stakeholders? As you consider these partners, challenge yourself to look beyond your familiar networks, and envision teams that include a wide range of experiences and perspectives including across identities, roles, departments, cultures, and more. What are creative ways to reach out? How will you get buy in?

YOUR RESOURCES

Do you have design thinking expertise within your organization? If you don't have internal resources, is it time to develop this knowledge and experience, or should you bring in a design-thinking expert to help you accomplish your goals?

A Call to Action

For more than 6 years, I have developed and facilitated human-centred design labs to co-create D&I breakthroughs in organizations as diverse as multinational corporations, worldwide governmental collaborations, international non-governmental organizations, global financial services companies, retail developers, multinational healthcare companies, tech start-ups, and more. The Breakthrough Lab is my own craft, but the participants are the actual creators.

As they bring together their similarities and differences and tap into their collective intelligence, these collaborators are doing the essential work of re-envisioning our work and re-designing our D&I strategies for greater, ever more meaningful impact.

Design thinking is not magic. As with any solution-building approach, strategic or tactical, impact depends on the commitment and accountability of participants and the quality of implementation. Design thinkers are those who have, over time, developed expertise in both the spirit and practice of the approach[26]. Even the most proficient designer, though, will be challenged to spark change without an engaged team and organizational support. Not all participants need be experienced in the method, but they must accept the responsibility of bringing something to the process. And they must be supported by their organization to do this important work. This is not an individual exercise, and the work does not end at the close of the facilitated lab experience.

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[26] Check out Di Russo's article for more on this

D&I faces critical challenges

As we find the courage to take on the critical challenges D&I faces, we must set aside outmoded assumptions and approaches resulting in limited impact. We must reject slow, piecemeal gains as good enough. Instead, we must pursue innovative new strategies that achieve and sustain workplaces where *all people* have the opportunity to bring their best into organizations, unfettered by signals to adapt to ill-fitting mindsets and systems that suppress ideas and limit contributions. As we build on our D&I legacy and overcome persistent challenges, we must think and work differently.

To fulfill users' unmet needs and the promise of D&I, we must resist an impulse to stick with what's familiar. To oversimplify our challenge with a focus on what's easier instead of what's optimally effective. To standardize when customization is required. There is no past practice, single solution, simple formula, or off-the-shelf approach to D&I that takes us where we need to go in this transformative work. How can we make the most of a full mix of people to sustainably solve our most complex challenges in business and society?

We must be trailblazers.

We must design the future.

We can design a future that makes the most of a full mix of people to sustainably solve our most complex challenges in business and society.

We can do better.

About the Authors

Rebekah Steele

Rebekah believes we can make the most of a full mix of people to sustainably solve our most complex business and societal challenges. She is a business strategist who turns breakthrough D&I strategies into business success stories. When leaders are not achieving meaningful results in what they care about most, Rebekah helps them design new, inclusive ways to achieve groundbreaking outcomes through innovation, integration, transformation, and impact. Rebekah creates fresh value with D&I by working with progressive leaders around the world to:

- Design custom strategies and measure the value they create
- Lead innovation labs and propel deep, lasting change
- Connect vanguard people and practices via speaking, coaching, teaching, and writing

Rebekah is also the co-author of INdivisible: Radically rethinking inclusion for sustainable business results (with Alison Maitland). More information at Indivisible-book.com

See more here, including Rebekah's other writing: www.rebekahsteele.com

Lisa M. Wenger, PhD

Lisa has held a variety of research positions within university, government, and community-based organizations over the past two decades. As an Independent Researcher, Lisa lends her research, writing, and strategic expertise to projects focused on enhancing diversity and inclusion within corporate and non-profit organizations. Passionate about enriching understanding and enhancing processes and systems to support a diversity of individuals and complex needs, Lisa has published her peer-reviewed research in subject areas including gender and health, psychosocial oncology, pharmacy practice, health disparities, community-engaged research, and more. Lisa obtained her BA and MA from the University of Waterloo, a PhD from the University of Guelph, and completed a CIHR-funded postdoctoral fellowship in psychosocial oncology at the University of British Columbia.

Appendix

D&I Dirty Dozen[27]

1. **Disregard Goal Alignment:** Leaders fail to align D&I strategies with overarching company goals, orienting instead toward D&I award criteria. It is of little surprise, then, when business leaders see D&I as a distraction from critical business goals.

2. **Copy Strategies from Competitors:** Leaders copy and paste strategies from companies similar to theirs rather than designing customized approaches that take into consideration the specific context and needs of their own organization.

3. **Declare Best Practices Despite Suboptimal Results:** Leaders declare a set of best practices despite these approaches producing suboptimal results, even when well-executed.

4. **Select Leaders on Passion or the Experience of Exclusion:** Too many companies still select D&I leaders based on their passion or experience of exclusion rather than on their expertise to lead this complex work.

5. **Expect Volunteers to Deliver Results on Top of Day Jobs:** Business leaders expect volunteers (e.g., members of employee/business resource groups and diversity councils) to deliver D&I results on top of intensive core jobs.

6. **Expect ROI Without Investing:** We know you can't get something for nothing. However, some business leaders expect a D&I ROI in absence of a meaningful investment.

7. **Require Unreachable Standards for the Business Case:** Business leaders repeatedly ask for exceptionally and unreasonably stringent proof of the business case for diversity and inclusivity.

8. **Assume Results Will Take Generations:** Leaders assume results will take generations, and this reduces their expectations for impact.

9. **Avoid Addressing Uncomfortable Issues:** Business leaders avoid addressing uncomfortable D&I issues, choosing silence over the opportunity to tackle tough challenges.

10. **Accept Blind Spots as a Reason to Do Nothing:** By not holding business leaders and middle managers accountable, executives accept blind spots (including a lack of expertise and lack of willingness to develop D&I insights) as a reason to achieve nothing for D&I.

11. **Limit Analytics to Simplistic, Surface Metrics:** Business leaders often limit analytics to simple or surface metrics (e.g., representation metrics or numbers of participants in D&I initiatives). They are content with skimming the surface and operating with a limited understanding of dynamics.

12. **Fail to Lever Drivers of Innovation:** Business leaders content with familiar practices that produce the same results fail to explore how D&I can potently drive innovation.

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[27] Originally presented by Rebekah Steele, May Snowden, and Jörg Schmitz to D&I Executives during a June 2016 meeting in New York

The Ecosystem Approach, integrating external factors

When we consider how our organizations sit within a larger framework, interacting with a variety of significant factors beyond the walls of any single institution, we see that there are additional external factors to consider, including:

- **Social sustainability**: Education, health care, etc.
- **Environmental sustainability:** Clean energy, resource consumption, etc.
- **Economic sustainability:** Employment, diversification, etc.
- **Connective sustainability:** Media, public policy, etc.
- **Market sustainability**: Customers, investors, etc.

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