



# Beyond professional development to impact: insights from 3 years of the Impact Collaborative

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The [Impact Collaborative methodology and process](#) fosters the incubation of innovative ideas to accelerate into projects toward implementation for local impact. Since 2016, the eXtension Foundation has been focused on helping Extension professionals increase innovation across Cooperative Extension System (CES) programming. eXtension created the Impact Collaborative to address this need and scale professional development opportunities focused on innovation across CES. Since 2016, the Impact Collaborative (and its predecessor the Issue Corps Designathons) have delivered 23 professional development events for 211 project teams both locally and nationally, trained 107 Innovation Facilitators, and equipped 3000 Extension professionals with skills, tools, and resources focused on increasing innovation for greater local impact.

The Impact Collaborative is designed to be useful for CES professionals and community members to address issues often fragmented across multiple states and counties. It uses proven techniques to build on the social capital of Extension professionals and their local partners: community leaders who have a passion to lead real solutions, stakeholders who can articulate their needs and challenges, and people with influence who can catalyze change.

The Impact Collaborative provides a unique, structured, and supported process, enabling communities to leverage the expertise of CES to find and implement the kind of solutions that will work for them. The process is designed to foster the incubation of innovative ideas and to accelerate them into projects for local impact.

The Impact Collaborative process is built upon six phases: *Commit, Catalyze, Engage, Collaborate, Empower, Impact*.



As opposed to a linear approach, the Impact Collaborative process is designed to meet Extension professionals where they are currently at with their project or program development. Extension professionals can join the Impact Collaborative at any stage of their development. Of 51 teams that attended our signature Impact Collaborative Summits in 2018 and 2019 and/or received extra support from eXtension consultants, 25 teams join the Impact Collaborative as brand new teams needing assistance with initial ideation and strategic planning, 26 teams joined with developed programs and projects and are looking for strategic support in engaging partners. Regardless of



where the team is at in its development, the Impact Collaborative process is designed to serve everyone.

## Impact Collaborative Theory of Change Model for Project Teams

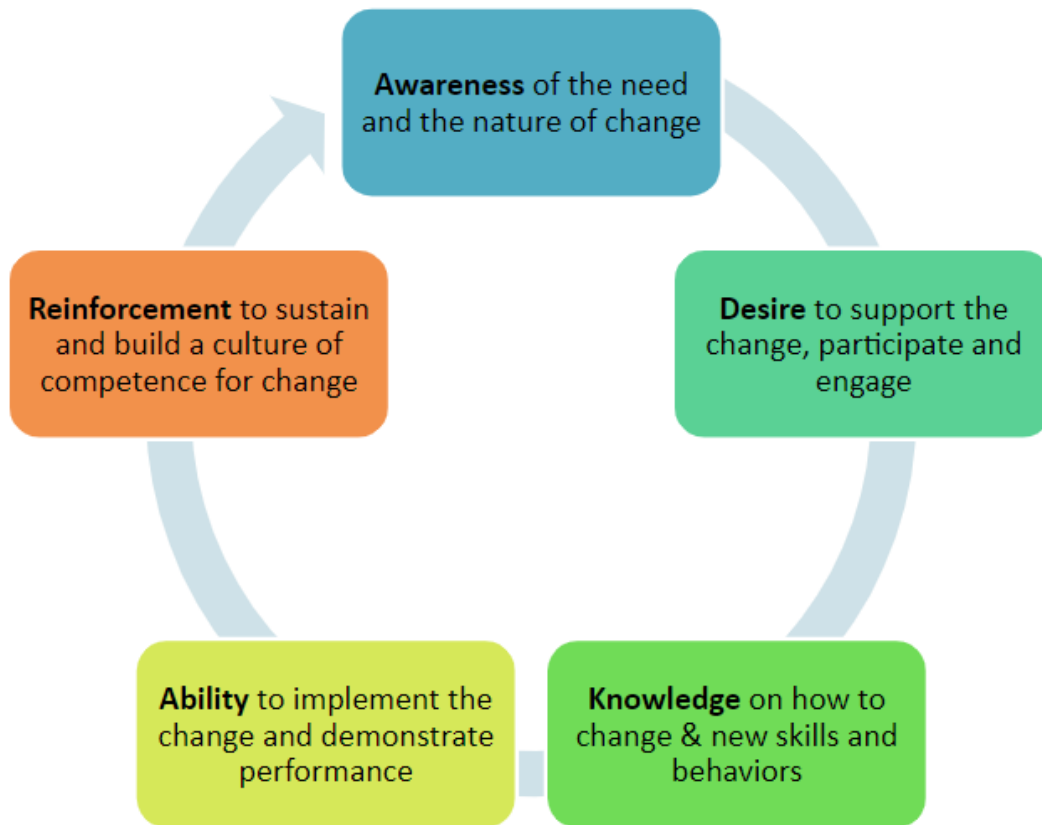
Working within the basic Impact Collaborative methodology, eXtension piloted and prototyped activities, tools and events since the first Designathon in 2016. No two events were exactly alike. Using the rapid lean processes from the Impact Collaborative methodology, we used validation data to make revisions and iterations to the design of the Impact Collaborative activities in the pursuit of strengthening Extension personnel's effectiveness for local impact.

Following the October 2018 Summit, we recognized that innovation and local impact required more than great professional development. To this end, eXtension team members created a Theory of Change model adapted from [Prosci ADKAR Model](#) in the beginning of 2019 to more explicitly describe the desired changes that could strengthen innovation and local impact for project and program teams.

A continuous 5-step cycle

1. **Awareness** of the need and the nature of the change, progressing to the
2. **Desire** to support change, participate, and engage, and onto
3. Acquiring the **knowledge** on how to change & **new skills and behaviors**
4. **Ability** to implement the change and demonstrate performance
5. Reinforcement to **sustain and build a culture of competence of change**

## Impact Collaborative Theory of Change for Project Teams



There are many factors that need to be present in order for the change sought to progress. Inspired by [Organizational Learning for Strategic HRD Practices Theory of Change](#), the eXtension team developed a Logic Model.

Inputs:

- **Organizational need for change is articulated.** Organization culture, complementary activities, and programming and strategic goals integrated into the

design, evaluation and action plan accountability.

- Director/Admin, leadership team, line manager and program leader **commitment, partnership and engagement for change.**
- **Assigned and engaged leadership project champions** to align plans, resources, and policies to enable success.
- New and existing **situational scanning is integrated into the process** to increase organizational and project adaptability.
- **New knowledge, skills, competencies and capacity-building partners** leading to greater local impact.

#### Process (Activities):

- **Inspiration** through situational scanning and new possibilities with capacity-building partners.
- **Knowledge acquisition, interpretation and application, and practice** to real work issues and opportunities.
- **Organizational problem solving** that enables project success.
- **Tools, Skills, Support and Time** for Project Team Planning, Iterations and implementation.
- Tools and accountability for **project evaluation for impact**
- **Trained Innovation Facilitators Network**

#### Outputs:

1. **Increased number of capacity-building partners.\***
2. **Projects implemented successfully.\***

#### Outcomes:

1. **Strengthened organization culture**, complementary activities, and programming and strategic goals to nurture a climate of innovation.
2. **Stronger leadership practice** of situational scanning and adaptation.



**3. Evidence of increased local impact.\***

**4. Innovation facilitators influence organizational change.**

\*The Impact Collaborative targets for 2019.

## Professional Development Activities

To meet each phase of the process, the Impact Collaborative delivers its methodology through four primary activities:

*1. Innovation Skill-Building Experience - State & Institutional Events (Catalyze)*

The Impact Collaborative is a professional development experience/resource. Its baseline for delivering professional development is the *Innovation Skill-Building Experience*, utilizing the Innovation Skill-Building workbook. Evolved from the Adobe Kickbox, the Innovation Skill-Building workbook was developed for, and is catered to, Extension professionals. Delivering the *Innovation Skill-Building Experience* can be done through local statewide or institution-wide events, or virtually through an online version of the workbook/tool.

Prior to the holding an *Innovation Skill-Building Experience*, the Impact Collaborative works with leadership teams to understand their goals and what is needed to help with program impact.

During the Innovation Skill-Building Experience, the Impact Collaborative works with Extension professionals in these three areas:

- Building skills in innovation,
- Ideating with project and program teams using our design thinking and lean experimentation methodology, and
- Creating action plans for projects and programs ready for implementation



## *2. Innovation Facilitator Training (Catalyze)*

The Impact Collaborative trains Extension professionals in Innovation Skill-Building methodology, known as Innovation Facilitators. Extension Directors and Administrators appoint individuals to be trained as Innovation Facilitators. These Innovation Facilitators are the backbone to scaling the Impact Collaborative and enable it to reach a larger audience for delivering professional development.

Upon completion of the training, Innovation Facilitators are able to return to their states and institutions and incorporate the tools and skills they've learned from the methodology to assist colleagues with finding more innovative ways to design and deliver Extension programs. Additionally, Innovation Facilitators work hand-in-hand with the Impact Collaborative on delivering professional development nationally through face-to-face and virtual events, and provide coaching support to teams working with the Impact Collaborative.

Facilitators have monthly meetings which includes ongoing professional development. Past topics have included Conducting and learning from facilitator-led experiences, Encouraging buy-in from leadership and colleagues, Determining readiness using the propeller framework, Coaching Why and Zen, Determining scope, purpose, outcomes and design of events, Supporting teams after the event as well as training to use the new online Innovation Skill-Building Experience performance support tool.

## *3. National Impact Collaborative Summits (Collaborate & Impact)*

The Impact Collaborative hosts national Summit events to bring teams from across Cooperative Extension to take a deeper dive into program and project development with greater access to program development resources, and partnership opportunities. The national Summits provide a collaborative environment where teams can work together to co-create solutions for community impact.

## *4. Engage & Empower Online (Engage & Empower)*



Using online tools and services, the Impact Collaborative leverages technology to continue working with project and program teams. The service called *Engage & Empower Online* allows Extension project and program teams to have access to additional tools, resources, and professional development opportunities to assist them in their journey towards implementing their projects and programs. Partners also share their insights, expertise, and resources online.

Within Engage & Empower Online, eXtension provides the Online Innovation Skill-BUILDER as a tool to build more impactful programs. The Innovation Skill-BUILDER is based upon the same methodology that the Impact Collaborative uses at statewide and institution-wide events.

Additionally, eFieldbooks are part of *Engage & Empower Online*. An eFieldbook is a digital resource that provides interactive communication between individuals, teams, eXtension Fellows, authors, and other contributors. They help begin discussion, help establish processes, and assist with the delivery of new programs. These eFieldbooks are topic-focused and created by eXtension-funded Fellows jointly with partnering JCEP organizations.

## Team and Project Progress Indicators

We have gathered data from a variety of [instruments including evaluations, interviews, coaching observations](#), and more. In addition to informing the design of the Impact Collaborative, we have identified patterns to better meet the goal of innovative, visible and measurable local impact.

We tracked progress indicators of 51 teams that attended one or more of the two Impact Collaborative Summits (October 2018 & April 2019) including targeted interviews of 19 team leaders/members. We had 38 teams with enough available data to draw conclusions. Our results suggest that teams making progress exhibit the following patterns.

1. **Implementing teams participated in more than one Impact Collaborative event.** The 13 Teams who are currently implementing their projects (of the 38 with available data), attended an average 1.9 Impact Collaborative Events.
2. **Implementing Teams have clearly identified targeted impacts.** 10 of the 13 teams (77%) currently implementing had clearly identified targeted impacts. Only three



teams without clearly identified targeted impacts (8%) are currently implementing any part of their project.

3. **Progressing teams have members who are passionate about the topic/issue/problem.** Teams that have shown the most progress (20% of 19 interviewed) shared that the team, or at least a core part of the team, is so passionate about their project that they make the time and effort to help it progress without additional support, time, etc.
4. **Progressing teams have members who see the project as integral to their work, not an add-on on top of other priorities.** Teams that have shown the most progress (26% of the 19 interviewed) mentioned that their project is directly related to team members' work. About 50% of teams interviewed mentioned they have Director/Administrator support. However, even with that support, 13% shared that this is "add-on" responsibility and it is still hard to prioritize with their other work. Only one team mentioned release time being given to help prioritize this project work.
5. **Implementing and progressing teams find time to meet.** 28% of the 38 teams with available data specified that they are holding regular team meetings. 50% of 19 teams interviewed mentioned how hard it is to meet once they all go back "home." 100% of multi-institution teams interviewed mentioned how difficult it was to find time to meet.
6. **Progressing team members have knowledge, skills, and abilities in both the project topic/issue and basic program development skills, including community development - or are actively learning these skills.** Most teams interviewed do not have all of these skills among their team members. 33% of the 19 teams interviewed identified the need for additional knowledge, skills, and abilities related to program development and/or delivery. We have discovered through our coaching of winning teams, that the vast majority struggle to define the impact they are trying to make; they struggle to answer "...to what end?" of their project or program.
7. **Even exemplary teams need more support to process funding.** eXtension awarded mini-grants for six teams in April 2019. Half the teams used the grant dollars to attend another Summit for more professional development. The rest used the funds to

expand their project at the local level to increase or enhance impact. We learned that most team members do not understand the correct internal department to contact, or how to navigate the internal process when receiving grant dollars. We observed that this is not unusual. It has taken three funding cycles of the Pesticide Safety Education Funds Management Program (PSEFMP) we administer, for Extension professionals to navigate the internal institutional systems smoothly. We also observed, with the Impact Collaborative and PSEFMP, that most Extension professionals are used to operating on a lean budget and do not readily know how to spend extra funds that are provided through grants, despite making a budget and having a written plan.

8. **Implementing and progressing teams create a project timeline with milestones and objectives.** Teams with a clear project timeline, 71% of the 38 teams with available data, are currently implementing their project. 26% of teams interviewed showing the most progress had timelines: 2 short-term (1 year or less), 2 long term (2+ years).
9. **Implementing and progressing teams test assumptions, pilot portions of their project ideas, validate findings, and iterate based on those findings in succession thus creating a project/program that is more likely to succeed.** 36% of the teams currently implementing (13) or nearing implementation (8) identified formal prototyping or pilots are part of their effort. 26% of 19 teams interviewed that have shown the most progress have completed a pilot so far.
10. **Implementing teams have publicly stated institutional leadership support.** Of the 13 teams currently implementing their IC projects, 77% state they benefit from publicly stated leadership support.
11. **Implementing teams use eXtension's Impact Collaborative Consulting Services.** Of the thirteen teams currently implementing their projects, eight (62%) benefitted from eXtension IC Consulting.
12. **Progressing teams move beyond professional development to action for impact.**

## Discussion

Between the October 2018 and October 2019 Impact Collaborative Summits, we focused on achieving two outputs and one of the outcomes of our logic model.

### **1. Increased number of capacity-building partners.**

We invited 34 external-to-CES partners to engage, advise, and learn about team projects. Additional coaching opportunities for partnership readiness and for crowdfunding were awarded to 8 teams from the October 2018 Summit. Two of the coached teams were approached by national partners to share curriculum resources following the April 2019 Summit. When asked via surveys, 22 of 51 teams (43%) self-identified that at least one partner is engaged in their team project.

The Impact Collaborative partnership team observed that the teams' projects were not mature enough to attract funding or capacity partnerships. We surmise that this is at least partly due to the fact that we are fostering innovations and these need time to develop and show results. We also observed that many of the 38 teams with available data did not have clear targeted impacts and other key information partners are seeking. For the April 2019 Summit, we developed the Propelling Community Impact framework to help teams self-assess whether their project incorporates aspects that potential partners are looking for. The additional framework helped teams focus and find gaps in planning during the April Summit when conferring with their assigned Impact Collaborator Coach/Facilitator and the onsite Key Informants.

### **2. Projects implemented successfully.**

Currently, 13 of 38 teams with available data (out of a total of 51 teams attending the two Impact Collaborative Summits) are currently implementing their projects; 9 are nearing implementation. We observe that teams and their projects who are not implementing are missing many of the patterns of progressing teams listed above.

### **3. Evidence of increased local impact.**

Not yet. We believe that teams that are currently implementing and nearing implementation will show initial impact indicators soon.

The following potential progress indicators have emerged from direct observations, verbal comments from participants, and discussions about the outputs and outcomes to date. We are making plans to track these additional progress indicators going forward.

1. **Team's engagement with Engage and Empower Online (EEO).** New in 2019, Engage and Empower Online has the potential as both a learning/professional development platform for team members but also a virtual portal into a team's resources and work. 800 Extension professionals from eXtension member institutions have leveraged EEO in 2019 accessing 21 exclusive publications and presentations, and participating across 16 virtual events and learning circles.
2. **Publication and/or presentation of the project.** One team shared that this was a driver of their timeline and raised visibility and urgency to their project. We think that this may help more teams if they identify a publication and/or presentation outlet to present project outcomes as part of their project outputs.
3. **Team attrition/changing membership.** We identified 8 teams that attended both IC Summits had a significant change in membership due to changes in roles and responsibilities as well as attrition. Change in team members can be a barrier to forward progress, but may also breathe new life into a stagnant project. Outside of the Summits, there were many team membership changes from local events as well. A few participants from a local state event shared that they never thought that they would actually continue working on the project they helped ideate during the local event.
4. **Community members included in the team.** An integral part of the Impact Collaborative methodology predicts (and encourages) team membership change. The guideline is to expand team membership to include additional community member stakeholders to co-create and co-implement projects This is important because co-creation with the community respects the community's expertise as well as builds a more sustainable model. We support the projects that we create. Yet, only .04% (2/51) of teams attending the IC Summits included community members. Only one local Innovation Skill-Building Event included community members not as team members but as advisors and judges. Understandably, there are many reasons for not having community members in the initial team attending an event including cost, availability,



etc. As part of the Impact Collaborative methodology and what is known to Extension as good community development practice, it is important to co-create and collaborate with stakeholder community members. One community partner attending the April 2019 Summit as a team member shared that the Summit was one of the best conferences he had ever attended. A team member stated in the After Action Review that their partnership was strengthened by attending the Summit together.

5. **Grant-funding secured.** Grants often require the key indicators of progress as part of the reporting structure. Anecdotally, many Innovation Skill-Building Experience participants have expressed that they intend to use the ISBE process to help with grant proposal writing.

## Actions for eXtension Foundation

### ***Lesson 1: Focus on meeting teams locally to foster innovation and local impact.***

While the Impact Collaborative Summits helped 51 teams, it was still a small fraction of potential teams/projects that could be turbo-charged for innovative, visible, measurable local impact. Travel costs, community partners, etc. may be mitigated by a hybrid (virtual and local) approach in 2020.

### ***Lesson 2: Continue to incorporate additional tools and resources into the Impact Collaborative to help all teams make progress to implementation and local impact.***

***Lesson 3: Based on these findings, be even clearer about what the Impact Collaborative is and how we can help. Invite Directors/Administrators to consider the 12 Success Factors to select teams to participate in the Impact Collaborative.***

***Lesson 4: National capacity-building partner are looking for more mature, scalable projects than most of those who have engaged in the Impact Collaborative Summits.***



***Lesson 5: Strengthen the existing 107 Impact Collaborative Facilitators to support their local teams rather than train more facilitators in 2020.***

## Actions for Directors/Administrators

***Lesson 1: Consider the 12 dimensions of implementing and progressing teams when identifying project teams to be part of the Impact Collaborative.***

1. Implementing teams attend more than one Impact Collaborative engagement.
2. Implementing Teams have clearly identified targeted impacts.
3. Progressing teams have members who are passionate about the topic/issue/problem.
4. Progressing teams have members who see the project as integral to their work, not an add-on on top of other priorities.
5. Implementing and progressing teams find time to meet.
6. Progressing team members have knowledge, skills, and abilities in both the project topic/issue and basic program development skills, including community development - or are actively learning these skills.
7. Even exemplary teams need more support to process funding.
8. Implementing and progressing teams create a project timeline with milestones and objectives.
9. Implementing and progressing teams test assumptions, pilot pieces of their project ideas, validate findings, and iterate based on those findings in succession thus creating a project/program that is more likely to succeed.
10. Implementing teams have publicly stated institutional leadership support.
11. Implementing teams use eXtension's Impact Collaborative Consulting Services.
12. Progressing teams move beyond professional development to action for impact.

***Lesson 2: Encourage and support the inclusion of community members as part of project teams, especially in early team/project stages.***

***Lesson 3: Engage and use the Impact Collaborative in all of its forms online and locally at your institution.*** The Impact Collaborative is ready to help Cooperative Extension Professionals advance their already leading position in community development through an innovative process tailored for each team and their community's needs.