



Q & A with Tony Dickson, Outflow

What does innovation mean to you?

Innovation is two-fold. First, it means looking at a problem and what the current solutions for solving that problem in place are and acknowledging that those current solutions have not been entirely effective. The next step in this part of the process is to be bold about making changes to the way things are done. Second, though, is realizing that not everything needs to be changed. Even if current solutions are not entirely effective, elements of those solutions have been incredibly positive in problem solving. Those elements need to be maintained rather than sacrificed purely for the sake of trying something new. Innovation, then, is knowing when to throw out and replace an old idea, when to adjust an old idea, and when to keep an old idea. Being able to know what the right reaction is the key to creativity.

How does your organization approach innovation?

Outflow is a relationship-based charity that wants people to live full and flourishing lives. Innovative thinking plays a part in this because we walk a fine line between creating space so that the people we work with can take the lead in solving whatever problem they are facing while also being able to have enough of a relationship with people to be able to tell them when we think they are making a mistake. Every innovative idea Outflow has – whether it is our social enterprise Catapult Industry Inc., how we operate our men’s homeless shelter, our housing program, or something else – has the same foundation, which is being a part of the lives of the people we serve. Being with people who are regularly looked at as society’s outcasts shapes our innovation.

Outflow is a group of Christians and we take following Jesus’ lead on this very seriously. Near the end of the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus tells people that his followers help those in need and he claims that helping these folks is the same as helping him. When we look through the Gospel books in the New Testament at how Jesus served people, the characteristic of his ministry that jumps out at us nearly every time is relationship. Following Jesus, Outflow wants to have relationships with our community members. Helping people solve their own problems is a lengthy process and we couldn’t do that if the people we are working with did not trust us and believe that we have their backs. Following Jesus’ model is how we approach innovation.

Why do you think innovation is important for Saint John and the province?

There are lots of good things about Saint John and New Brunswick and we should be proud of these things. There are also significant issues here and we should not be afraid to acknowledge these things. Not surprisingly, homelessness and poverty relief are close to my heart. Innovation is important because the status quo simply is not working to address these issues at a necessary scale. In my mind part of this may be caused by setting insufficient goals. I am not interested in reducing poverty and homelessness. I want to end poverty and homelessness.

What are some simple things people can do to drive change?

Three things. First, do not be afraid to ask the question, “Why is it this way?” There might be a good reason why the standard process is in place, but things might be the way they are simply because that is the way they are. If the answer to “Why is it this way,” is “Because that’s the way we do things,” it might be time for a change.

Second, do not be afraid to irritate people. Don’t go out of your way to do so, but don’t let the possibility of ruffling feathers cause you to not try to initiate change. I hope people see a polite stubbornness in me. If we are going to advocate for people in need, we need to be willing to put our own reputations and whatever social capital we have built on the line for them.

Third, don’t change if your only motivation is change. I don’t believe that change is inherently good or inherently bad. Before changing something, we need to ask what we want to change it into, why we want to do so, and how the new idea is better than the old. If we do not ask these questions, I fear we will lose some good processes that are currently in place simply for the sake of claiming “change”. The goal must always be serving people. It is better for people who need help to get the help they need rather than for Tony to be considered “an innovator”

How is technology changing your business model?

Most of what we do is face-to-face meetings with people, whether donors or people needing help. Technology certainly has a part in what we are doing (online donations for example), but technology is not a major piece in our day-to-day operations. It is a useful tool, but it does not drive anything.