Elevate your Changemaking with LEAN + Design for Social Impact

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Are you an agile or UX professional or community minded person looking for something more? Discover how we experimented with organizing and addressing social issues with lean, agile, and design thinking by allowing us to lead you through our experience that could help you improve the odds of implementing your social change initiatives.

1. INTRODUCTION: AWAKENING

Social change is complex, messy and often overwhelming even to determine a place to make a measurable impact. Many change makers know the ins and outs of feeling inspired only to lead to failure and burnout. Often many activist and nonprofit projects take a traditional approach that involves a big design process up front. Successful social change is often designed and introduced incrementally and addresses the root cause.

Maya Angelou so eloquently stated "the need for change bulldozed a road down the center of my mind". That resonates with us as we live in a time where there is a craving to become more engaged citizens and to find new ways of creating and organizing for social change.

2. BACKGROUND

Brielle grew up in a family of entrepreneurs and wore different hats in creative industries from fashion, art to film. Studying design and business at Parsons seemed like a natural choice as she began to see design as the link between business and creativity. She is passionate about design as a driving force to create social change with a human-centered design approach. Since 2008, she led a design collaborative to explore matching passionate designers with nonprofit design challenges called Live with Design.

April was educated at Michigan Technological University, has worked in IT for many years. She embraces the moniker of a positive disruptor as an independent lean agile coach and consultant for businesses. The positive change focused worldview she holds within organizations she brings to her communities. April was taught that she had an ability to make a local impact and she believed it. Her positive mindset and servant's heart keeps her active in her community. April is a serial volunteer that leverages her talents learned from agile and lean when the opportunities present itself while speaking at meetups, leading scouts, coaching robotics, helping shelters or rotary club projects.

3. OUR STORY

In 2015 after living in New York City, Brielle returned to her roots in Detroit. She felt it was time to explore a new version of the Live with Design collaborative, with the goal of creating and funding local projects with a design focus on social change. Detroit posed a new set of social issues and challenges and is known as a fertile place for grassroots change. Inspired by trends in collaboration, crowdfunding and the ability to bring her design toolkit to local problem she put out a call to action.

The initial hypothesis to test was during a 12-week design challenge could we take a complex social issue such as police brutality or improving education and lead participants with design thinking to begin

implementing a prototype of a potential solution.

The pilot began with the expectation to test whether a design challenge on a social issue utilizing solutions that are actionable and fundable using a crowdfunding model with design thinking in mind could be successful.

April first connected with Brielle before at time in her life when she needed a trusted advisor. However, it was at this moment we had our first aha moment that we have similar but complementary approaches of making a local impact. Brielle brings her background in human centered and social design approach, April builds on this approach with her knowledge of being Agile with a Lean focus to change and creating alignment from a diverse set of stakeholders.

Together we decided to partner on this social design challenge and together leverage our professional gifts for social impact. We identified the pain point that Design Action Lab aims to solve is that many people want to take action but don't have accountability, capacity when working alone, or know where to begin to identify a root cause of a complex problem and how to turn it into viable solutions. We wanted to create a network, learning environment and structure that could fill the gap by using our professional backgrounds in human centered design, agile, and lean. Being in environments where design thinking was often celebrated but abandoned when the fun collaborative ideation was over and resources were short we were inspired by grassroots crowdfunding. We wondered how it might help bring new prototypes to life and have real impact in the world by helping support others to create projects around social issues.

The open call of participants attracted people interested in positive change across the community. There was a good response from a diverse set of cultural, economic, and professional backgrounds.

3.1   What We Did: Co-Creating Change Differently

Figure 1. **Change agents silently brainstorm around the root problem of police brutality.**

Embarking on the collaboration, we knew we would need to discover how to keep people engaged, how to appeal to a variety of experience levels, and how to manage conflicts between people with different motivations. April began to leverage her background in positive coaching, alignment with collaboration agreements, and keeping one another accountable for a solution focused and not blame-oriented collaboration.

We met with participants twice a week in downtown Detroit and adapted a lean startup approach; whereas, after each meeting we retrospect to reflect on and adjust what was working.

The first collaborative action was to determine which problem from a short list of local issues the group of change agents should focus on. Police brutality had the greatest interest with respondents, being that in summer of 2016 a string of events including the police killings of Alton Sterling and Philando Castille and the ambush of officers in Dallas were headline news.

In order to get inside some different perspectives with people from different viewpoints we started with empathy mapping. By facilitating an empathy mapping exercise we challenged participants to gain

understanding by putting themselves in the shoes of those affected by the issues. Participants picked a persona and mapped what they are seeing, saying, hearing and feeling. Empathy mapping call one to map the senses, influences and immediate surrounding by asking questions: What do people feel? What do they say to neighbors, family or friends? What do they hear on social media, at work, and at home? What do they think about daily and what occupies their thoughts? The activity helped see the landscape of influences and the full picture of issues from inside another person's shoes.
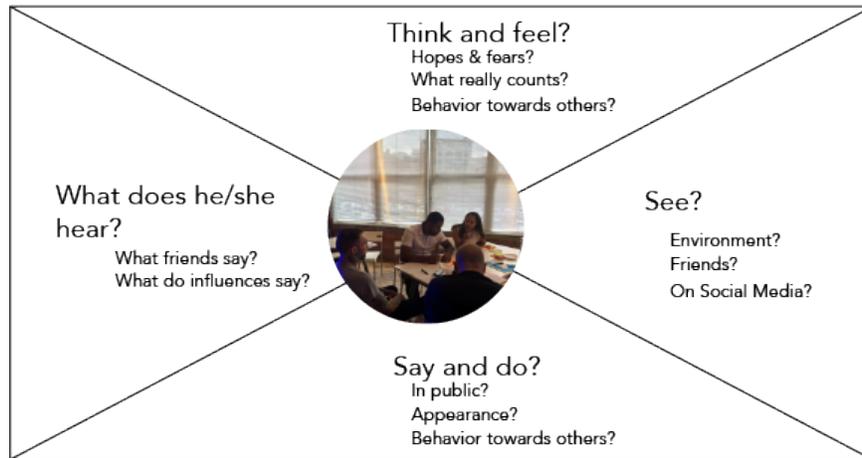

Figure 2. **Change agents creating Empathy Maps and a template of Empathy Map Diagram.**

Through empathy mapping, it was quickly discovered that people were on completely opposite sides of the issue, some participants voiced their first hand unequal profiling and met tension from participants that had close relationships with law enforcement whom sought to protect the police's reputation and service. April began coaching participants to focus on a path forward and away from who was to blame in the current state of heightened tensions on both sides.
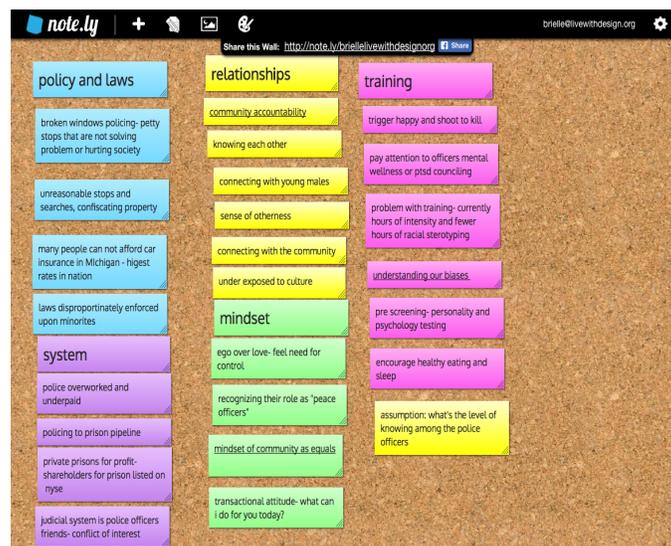
Figure 3. **Our virtual post-its recreate the result of the problem definition with relationships in all categories policy, relationships, training, mindset, and system.**

For our solution focused path forward, we set out to define the problem we were looking to solve by asking a powerful question around the root cause. The change agents (participants) ideated around what the problem was by silently brainstorming each of their individual thoughts on sticky notes. Then we organized and grouped sticky notes with similar ideas into categories of the problems. Categories were system, policies,

training, relationships and mindset. Taking a step back we identified a common theme emerged around relationships between officers and residents, seeing the underlying relationships aspect in every category created an aha moment and became a focal point all participants could identify with.

We then led them through a visioning exercise to identify a shared strategy for the change the group was trying to make around police brutality. This was done with a lean change strategy canvas, which is a conversational tool to align all those impacted by a change, and allow them to be an equal contributor to designing it. Each session we had design thinking conversation around our purpose that defined our scope, what change we were trying to make, why this was important to the community, how we would measure it, who would be impacted, how we could make the changes visible and adjust it, and what help we would need to support it.

Figure 4. **Change agents prioritizing ideas around the lean change canvas.**

We set our scope to "Create a positive change through relationships between communities and police officers - that they know each other in at least one precinct affected by crime".

We mapped responses back to the change we were trying to make to validate they were aligned with colored dots and limited responses that were solutions at this point and were blame-oriented. To do this we grouped like ideas around the questions and pulled thoughts in that had the most similar ideas then refactored the language with one another. This method allowed everyone to have a voice in creating the vision, participate with a sense of empathy for one another and feel a sense of ownership in the path forward.

Figure 5. **Community change agents working together on the lean strategy canvas.**

It was energizing to watch people on different sides of the issue of police brutality create a shared vision using the lean change strategy canvas. That vision became the new purpose for gathering, which was that we wanted to determine how to improve the relationship with residents, businesses, and police officers so that all were again, considered a part of their local community.

Completing the strategy canvas was a big milestone for the team and we could see the initial tools worked for creating alignment across team members. Both sides of the issue were actively participating and police representation was often in attendance collaborating with the team.
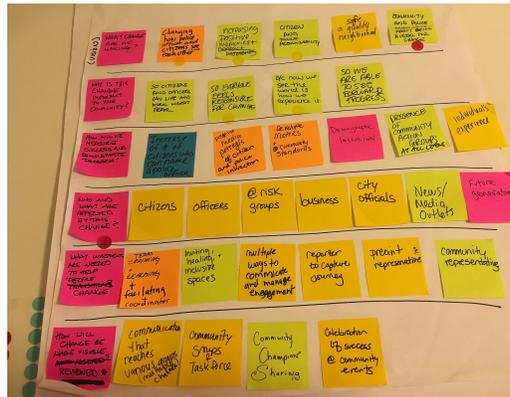
Figure 6. **The finished lean strategy canvas defining the vision and how we would measure the change we wanted to create.**

3.2   Problems: Lions, Tigers, and Redwings Oh My!

One challenge that became apparent was the prime downtown location. We were adjusting our meetups due to traffic from the Detroit sports schedules. However, we found changing our meetups due to this was unsustainable once three Detroit sport teams' seasons were active. Moreover it prevented consistent engagement by our volunteer change agents. We had to spend a significant time recapping due to inconsistent attendance. Despite this, our meetings were energizing and had a feel-good vibe, accountability and focus to get things done.

To have more consistent meetings we decided to experiment with having remote meetings. When we moved to remote meetings, the social connections and energy we were thriving on was sacrificed, also the engagement of volunteer change agents dwindled. We also tried to raise engagement a remote collaboration with a Slack channel for a collaborative messaging tool to no avail. As we moved into the implementation phase the team decided to have us lead the charge to engage the police and then they would engage once we held the community meeting.

3.3   Results: Partnering with a Precinct

Figure 7. **Change agents creating talking points to discuss our work with Neighborhood Police Officers, businesses and residents.**

When our vision was complete we invested time in researching what precinct and community would be the best to partner with. Change agents paired to create communications to reach out with precincts, businesses and community organizations to gain interest in the work. We coached change agents on how to share our vision and have positive conversations with precincts, businesses, and community members. We identified a shortlist of potential police precincts and each change agent went out and started having conversations with those selected precincts. We shared learning when we reassembled and collaboratively identified the precinct to pilot. The group decided to go with a precinct that would more likely have the bandwidth to engage with us, so we selected one that wasn't the highest in violent crime but still had struggles. The next step was to work with the precinct to start the conversation at an open forum to begin solution building.

The police precinct we identified had recently lost an officer and they were looking for ways to foster community engagement. We pitched to the neighborhood police officers (NPOs), the case for change, our vision of the strategy canvas and our story of how it was created, as well as, how our toolkit could start the conversation. The next step was to continue the method to create a community change canvas along with residents, businesses and police officers by facilitating a forum for all to validate and refine the vision. Which would set the neighborhood up to safely identify improvements and experiments in building relationships that they could implement together.

The NPOs confirmed the need for the case for change, that the root cause resonated with them, and our pathway forward they believed would create value and be something that residents would be happy to actively participate in. Moreover, they were enthusiastic to begin the journey to improve the relationship with residents they serve. The pitch was successful and they agreed to partner with us in a pilot project of open forums to activate our methods with the community.

We had several meetings with the NPOs and left with clear action items on both sides each time. Our meetings with the NPOs appeared to be going well and the pilot project was in the planning stage when suddenly the precinct suggested tabling the idea until warmer weather, thinking a better community turnout would occur in the spring. We shared that due to the energy around this topic that we believed people would still come out to participate. However, we recognize the priorities and other circumstances that caused them to pause such as, the outside impacts the police faced being understaffed and grieving the loss of an officer in their precinct. We slowed to applying a soft touch to checking-in with them; however, they suddenly halted all communication with us.

4.   OUR LEARNING

So we were left with figuring out how to pivot. After trying to engage other precincts with no response we retrospect on our learning. We were able to confirm our hypothesis that we can share an idea that will get people to join you in creating an impact. That getting people curious and aligning them around empathy can get people on the same page to identify the root cause that can create a vision for people to be unified around; therefore, opening them up to collaboratively develop the path forward.

During the process we learned how to design the engagement as an incremental learning experience to support collaborating. How positive coaching was pivotal for engagement, collaborating, and successfully navigating ideas to those impacted and to gain alignment on the root cause of a design problem; as well as, avoid blame and look to solution-focused problem solving and mutual accountability. We learned that this is an incremental journey and good facilitation was instrumental to keep change agents aligned to their vision. Moreover, as business professionals, filled with buzzwords, we learned how to adjust our language when facilitating our meetups with our volunteer change agents from the community.

We learned how volunteer engagement is hard over a long term project and that we should consider a phased approach with phase one consisting of researching and solving the root problem; phase two consisting of identifying solutions and prototyping; phase three consisting of crowdfunding and community engagement. Participants shared how balancing work and the desire for change that has a social impact feels insurmountable at times. However, they did walk away with the realization that social change doesn't have to be too big to solve and they formed positive relationships with those not initially likeminded.

As change agents we are forward thinkers and see the future state of the world, and often desire to get there as fast we can, with us figuratively and literally dragging people along with us. However, we were able to validate that adopting a human centered approach to social change calls for empathy, curiosity, collaboration, and co-ownership of solutions and that an invitation to collaborate is best served with people on different sides of an issue to work towards shared goals incrementally. Moreover, we knew that we could make an impact using our professional gifts.

4.1   Where are we today?

Though our first application of our design challenge fell flat at implementation, we were still passionate about our successes with driving consensus with people that are not like minded to rally around a common cause and identify a path forward we wanted to invest in. So we decided that through telling this story we could inspire action in professionals in the ways they can create change.

We are now starting a nonprofit with a mission empowering people to collaborate and identify viable solutions to social issues. In the meantime you can find us speaking out at conferences and hosting local workshops to share with others how to gain alignment around a complex issue, identify a root cause and potential solutions using lean and agile methods. We are connecting the dots to bridge how methods are used in tech to how they can be successful in creating change in complex social issues.
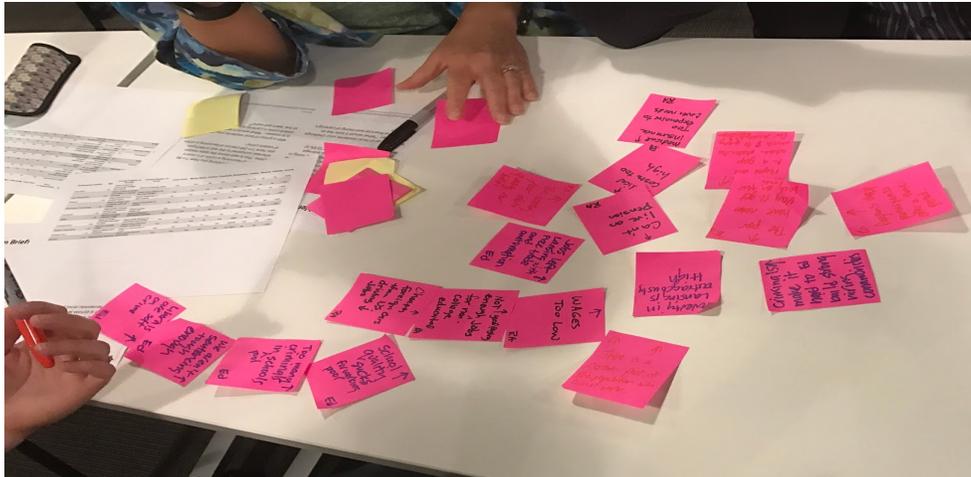

Figure 8. **Cause mapping is a root cause analysis method that visualizes all causes that contribute to an issue. It was new to us and exciting to watch it develop in real time among the participants of our workshop in East Lansing at Mid-Michigan Agile Groupies.**

We have been able to leverage and refine the methods we used during the police challenge in order to lead workshops and respond to briefs for a rise in poverty and high crime in East Lansing, high crimes in Metro Detroit Jewish and Muslim communities, and from a 33% increase in hate crimes in Columbus. We use real data for local issues, build stakeholder personas and current positions that require role playing, and do brainstorming exercises that identify then utilize methods from participants own professional toolkit such as, fishbone diagrams, five whys, empathy mapping, the core protocols, powerful questions, and cause mapping approach.

Through a commitment to expand and grow our impact, we hope to uplift many communities by sharing our engagement methods to help support, iterate and sustain change. We desire to identify local learning that we can adapt and take elsewhere and experiment in hopes to raise the accessibility of these innovative methods to change agents in new places. We have design challenges planned throughout Michigan that will teach people these methods, allow them to ideate around a problem, and for some potentially compete for start-up capital to implement a solution.

As we move along our journey, we aspire to tell these stories and continually capture the experiences that can make this local impact into a change movement to that of a movement that highlights successes locally to trigger a viral change and interest with surrounding neighborhoods. Our experience is an open call to action to interest investors, sponsors, and change agents in activating this type of social change as we perfect the way to build our collaborative engagement attracting professionals and activists to join us in the future.

4.2 In a Nutshell
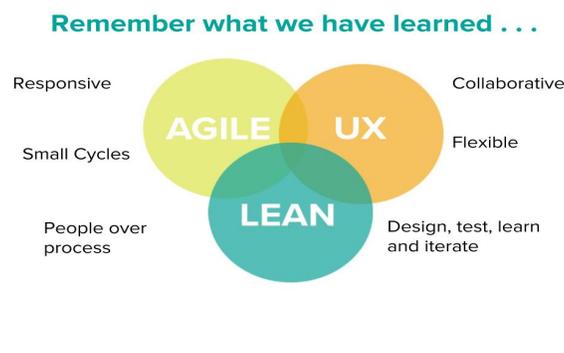
Figure 9. **The intersection of Agile, UX and lean leverages responsive, collaborative, flexible, iterative thinking.**

Every day we saw the increasing divide between people who relate with different issues. Instead of just thinking of solutions we decided to focus our impact by looking past our immediate ideas and aligning around finding the root cause. We partnered with those impacted - so change was co-owned and it is not pushed upon people - so that it was transparent, engaged and supportive.

When we partnered with people on different sides of a social issue we discovered they look a lot like our lives and that our preferred solution may not address the root cause or address the issue for everyone. In the complex web of social change we saw pressing issues that were actually symptoms of the root cause. If we were to focus on those peripheral issues such as focusing on the reduction of petty crimes rather than the root cause then we waste a lot of time and energy that doesn't go to solving the problem.

We know that we already learned these things from agile, lean, and design within business and the experiment was to validate if the learning could occur when with applying them to social change initiatives. We began with curiosity and leveraged the methods that we practice in our professional space.

How has our hypothesis changed? We know lean design influences positive change more rapidly. That working on a solution targeting the root cause could start a ripple effect that can impact multiple issues. Even delivering small and incremental changes at the root, may not be so small after-all. We believe that this type of dynamic change is the mindset for the people, a foundation that is necessary for a cultural shift. The power of grassroots in change can create the consensus from the ground up because it's naturally human centered. It's part of an lean UX mindset we know. Where we continually reflect on and adjust on what is working for change initiatives, where we go and see. One where we take a human centered design approach coupled with lean to understand it, digest it and sustain it. To work towards that shared small win that gives all joy and is something to celebrate so that change is not simply there for a moment and gone. We believe that doing this sets the stage for our mission of fostering real lasting change that is part of the fabric of how people live, work, think, play, and protect; whereas, its adopted as a cultural norm.

4.3 Call to Action

Today's world could use more active creative thinkers and doers creating consensus, fostering collaboration on the frontlines of social change in their community. So use your gifts to surface ideas that can connect one another around a shared vision. Apply your experiences to determine what methods from your toolkit will work best for you to identify experiments to test in real communities.

Remember to partner with those impacted, use agile, lean and UX methods, leverage your talents in all things, keep it small, and stay energized by celebrating the wins along the way to increase your success.

5. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS