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# **Humanitarian Innovation in Action: A Symbiotic Approach**

**The Case of the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre, Melbourne,  
Australia**

**Summary of full report  
December 2015**

**By Romy Faulkner and Louise Bloom, Humanitarian Innovation Project**



## **Humanitarian Innovation Project**

The Humanitarian Innovation Project is a research project based at the Refugee Studies Centre, University of Oxford. Founded in 2012, the project seeks to conduct multi-disciplinary research that rethinks the frontiers of the humanitarian system.

A core research stream within the project is 'bottom-up innovation' – looking at the innovative capacity of crisis-affected communities to contribute to humanitarian solutions. It is through this research stream that the 'Symbiotic Innovation' approach at the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre has been explored.

To find out more about the Humanitarian Innovation Project please visit the website [www.oxhip.org](http://www.oxhip.org).

## **Acknowledgements**

The Humanitarian Innovation Project would like to thank all of the staff, volunteers, and members at the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre for the invitation to partner with them on this project, and to host Romy Faulkner and Louise Bloom (co-authors of this report) for the duration of the research. A special thank you goes to Courtney Green, the Innovation Hub Director, and Gavin Ackerly, former Innovation Hub Director, for coordinating our visit, and for the many hours of great discussion.

*“The Hub focuses on everything people were before they sought asylum and everything they can be.”*

*ASRC Annual Report 2014*

*“The basic idea was that outside, we can start getting the service user to be their own resource, and our job is just to complement them, rather than us being the big system that fixes everything.”*

*Gavin Ackerly*

*“I want to join my background and my future”*

*WORCs Graduate*

*“I am doing things I was never capable of doing before”*

*Youth Program Participant*

*Symbiotic Innovation is...“mutual learning by mutual action”*

*Gavin Ackerly*

*“SI made sense to me because I am from a refugee background and we do this in our Afghan community already”*

*Innovation Hub Staff*

*“Here in the Hub SI principles drive what is done, success is when members move on and get a job and don’t need us.”*

*Innovation Hub Staff*



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# What is Symbiotic Innovation (SI)?

## 8 Principles

1. Shared Purpose
2. Integration
3. Recognise
4. Create
5. Influence
6. Feedback
7. Regulation
8. Reinforcement

**Step 1** People and Purpose – Building the Symbiotic Relationship  
Principles 1 & 2: Shared Purpose & Integration



**Step 2** The Cycle of Innovation: Assess, Adapt, Act, Ask  
Principles 3-6: Recognise (Assess), Create (Adapt), Influence (Act), Feedback (Ask)



**Step 3** – Time and Trust  
Principle 7 - (Self) Regulation



**Step 4** - Grow  
Principle 8 - Reinforcement

Source: Ackerly, G. (2015a), Humanitarian Symbiotic Innovation - Theory and Practice, Conference paper presented at the Humanitarian Innovation Conference 17-18th July 2015, University of Oxford.



# Research method

- **4 weeks** research on-site at the ASRC from July-September 2015.
- **64 qualitative interviews** with staff, volunteers, members and member-volunteers.
- **74 responses to online survey** from staff, volunteers, members and member-volunteers.
- Several observations of meetings and events.

## Number of Qualitative Interviews

	Total number of interviewees
Member volunteers	11
Member staff	1
Members	5
ASRC Staff	16
Innovation Hub Staff	19
Volunteers	8
External*	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>64</b>

## Number Online Survey Respondents

	Total number of respondents
Members	12
Staff - Footscray upstairs	6
Staff - Innovation Hub	9
Volunteer Member - Footscray upstairs	11
Volunteer Member - Innovation Hub	9
Volunteer Non-Member - Footscray upstairs	24
Volunteer Non-Member - Innovation Hub	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>74</b>

# Other organisational approaches similar to SI

- **Participation**

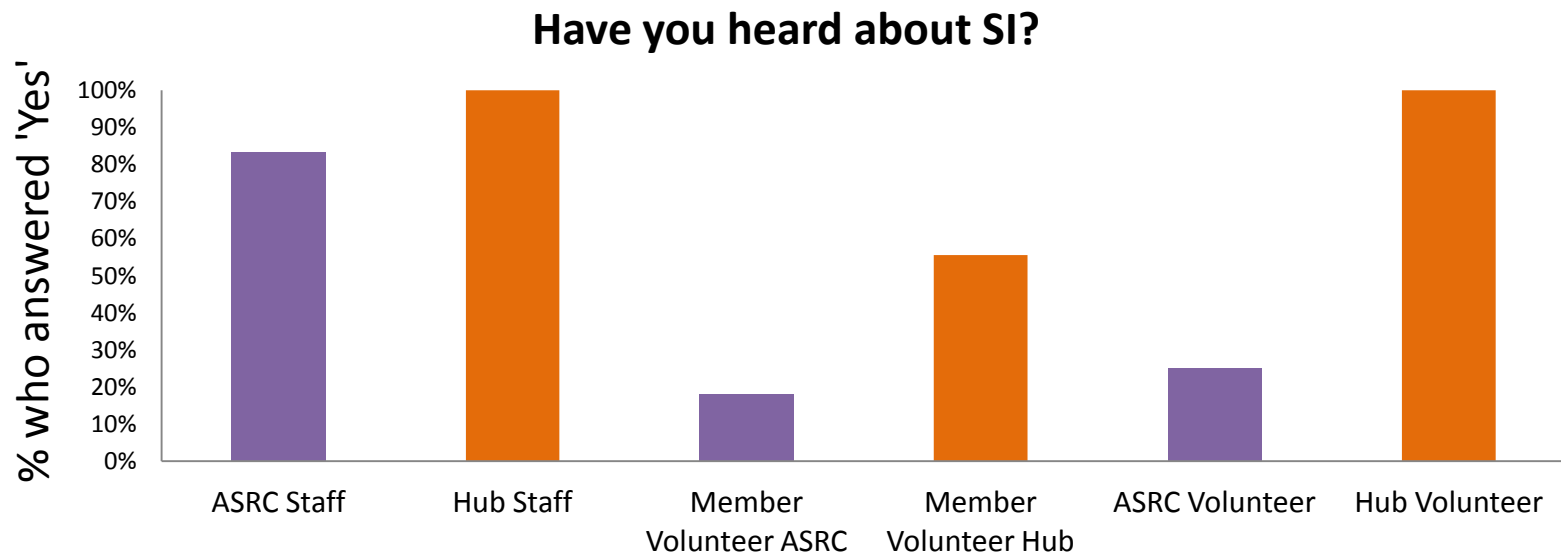
- Used in development since 1990's.
- Some critiques include it being used as a 'tick-box' exercise, and it risking reinforcing negative community power-dynamics.
- Similar to SI but different context where organisation can symbiotically work with community to integrate into society, compared to traditional organisations who intervene in new countries.

- **Humanitarian Innovation**

- Emergence of 'humanitarian innovation' since 2009.
- Research conducted on 'innovation labs' in the United Nations which house innovation.
- SI is home-grown and has more of a focus on community co-working than any other innovation approach elsewhere.

# Observations of SI theory

- Discussions and workshops are good, but they need to **involve more members**.
- Need to make sure the theory and 8 principles **don't become a 'tick-box' exercise** (also criticism of participatory approaches in the past).
- **Demonstrating practice** will help people to understand.
- SI comes **naturally to some** . "SI is intuitive, you knew it already, it's about bringing to the surface what you already know" (Consultant to Innovation Hub) However **the theory doesn't speak to everyone**.





# SI is being implemented in some Programs

Examples of SI in practice (not exhaustive)

“The SI thing is really real, it is something I do every day...  
when you come into this building everyone is equal.” (Member volunteer, Innovation Hub)

## Dandenong Centre

- Was the inspiration for SI, but SI has not formally been rolled out there – so it is dependent on champions rather than structure.

## SI Showcasing Event

- Estimated 200 attendees to see examples of Hub activities, speeches, and music.
- Designed, set-up and run by members and volunteers. It took “a life of it’s own.”

## Info Hub

- New task sign-up system helps collaborative working.

## Youth Program

- Newer initiative so had SI in mind from the start. Youth own activities, but more work needed for ownership of roles rather than one-off tasks.

## Health Program

- Not Innovation Hub specific, but peer-led model is a common and vital approach for public health.

## Business Program for Entrepreneurs

- Aligned with SI by its nature – peer-to-peer learning, networking
- Potential to provide scalable opportunities for people seeking asylum through new member businesses.

## Mentoring Program

- Peer-mentoring – objectives aligned with SI.
- New lessons triggered by Si roll-out: organisation still in control of ‘matches’, so how can that be given to mentees and mentors?

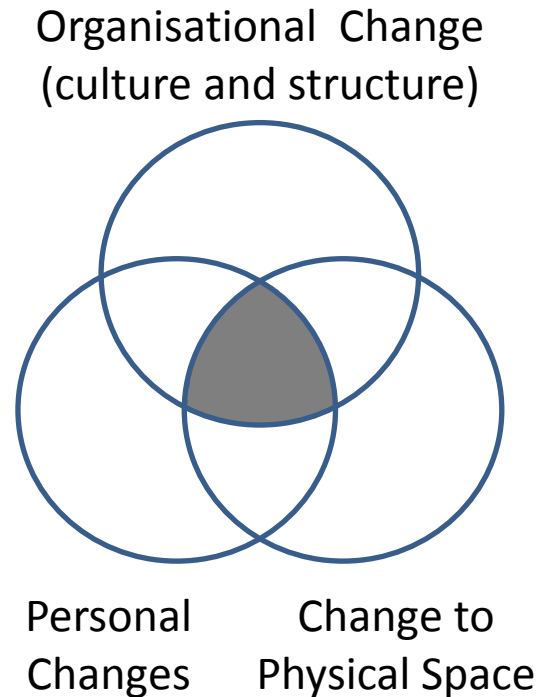
## Soccer

- Early example of SI, as the team is led by members.

# Research analysis of SI in practice

The analysis of our findings is organised into themes that need to be considered for innovation and change to be embedded in to an organisation.

- Organisation
  - Culture change
  - Structural change
- Personal identities and interaction
- Physical space

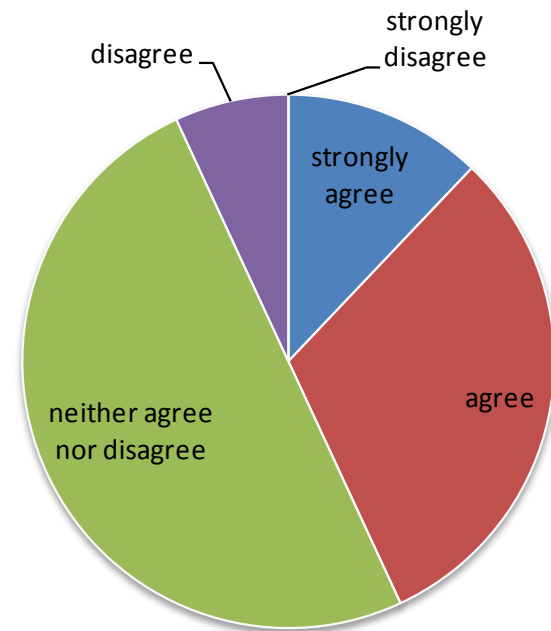


# Organisational cultural change

“We have to re-learn everything that we have learnt” (Gavin Ackerly, former Innovation Hub Director)

- SI is easily adopted if it resonates with someone’s **previous personal experiences**, whereas for others it **needs nurturing**.
- Small tests are being used to **showcase SI** to the rest of the organisation.
- Workshops and discussions on SI are helping to **break down people’s fears** about change.
- Cultural change also includes **changing perceptions that members hold**, especially after long periods in detention.

The involvement of members in the design and provision of services at ASRC improved the quality of the services?  
(In the last 3 months)



# Structural change

“You will not fail if you invest in people; if you see the potential of people” (ASRC Director)

- Key structural **changes so far**: new Innovation Hub, new programs, and members formally recruited as volunteers.
- Already volunteer-based organisation: **‘expertise’ is already seen as democratic** and ‘bottom-up’.
  - But “SI is about **creating the capacity for people to be experts**, compared with people accessing experts” (Volunteer, Innovation Hub)
- Still requires **support to members for leadership**, and to embed symbiotic working into core programming.
- **HR changes** needed
  - Recruitment to prioritise social and cultural capital
  - Jobs align with lives of people seeking asylum – i.e. Leave allowed for visa appointments.
  - Decision on whether a member can volunteer or not still lies with non-member program coordinators.
- Not everyone wants to volunteer
  - Volunteerism is culturally relative.
  - Member inclusion **needs to go beyond only having members as volunteers.**
- ...but building up member volunteer numbers is a **good place to start**
  - Until then staff will speak *for* members.
- **Separate ‘control’ from ‘accountability’.**
  - RACI Matrix (business management model) or similar tools could help to think about who is Responsible, Accountable, Consulted, and Informed for each activity. (see report annex for example).

# Personal identities and interaction

“I don't have word for the ASRC to express my ideas, [but] if you were asking me in my language I have a lot to say.” (member, online survey)

Space for reflection is created in workshops, presentations, and events, but **more are needed**.

Some **treat SI as an 'add-on'** to existing work.

## Feedback...

- ...**is more regularly sought** from member volunteers. through informal channels.
- ...must not be one-off or unidirectional (member to staff).
- ...needs to be structured to allow for **negative as well as positive** (very positive up until now according to some staff)
- **'Ideas Jam'** has been used to get peer-to-peer idea generation and feedback going and worked well so far.

## Personal communication

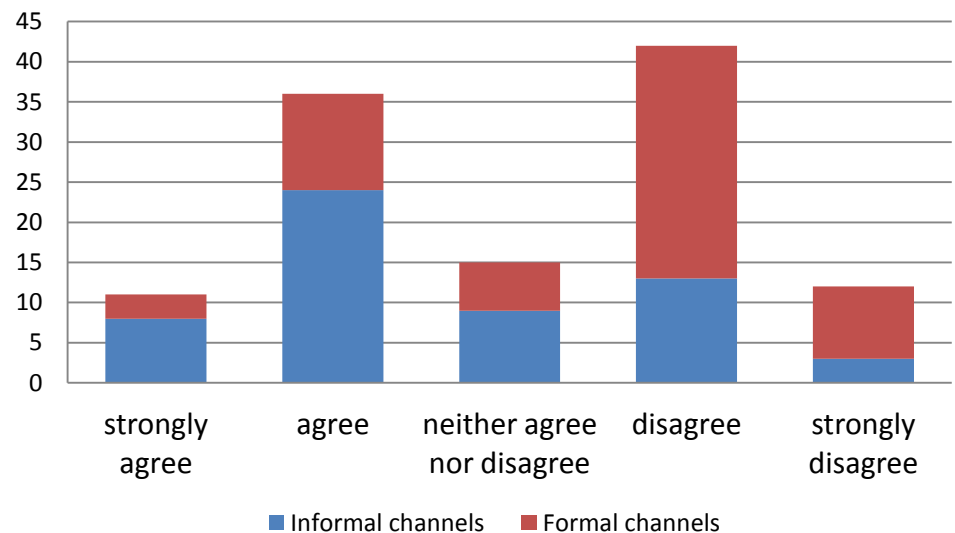
- **Face-to-face communication** and trust-building helps the Member-Volunteer Coordinator recruit members into volunteer roles at the Hub,
- Speaking the same **language is important** – and should also be considered in future staff recruitment.

'Shared purpose' will be better achieved with **more members in leadership roles**.

**Labels** need to be broken down

- “I don't like to be recognised in different categories. Don't try to create more terms to define levels. There is an opportunity to act as humanitarians – but labels prevent that from happening.” (member, Innovation Hub)

**Feedback and ideas were regularly sought from members through informal / formal channels (In the last 3 months)**

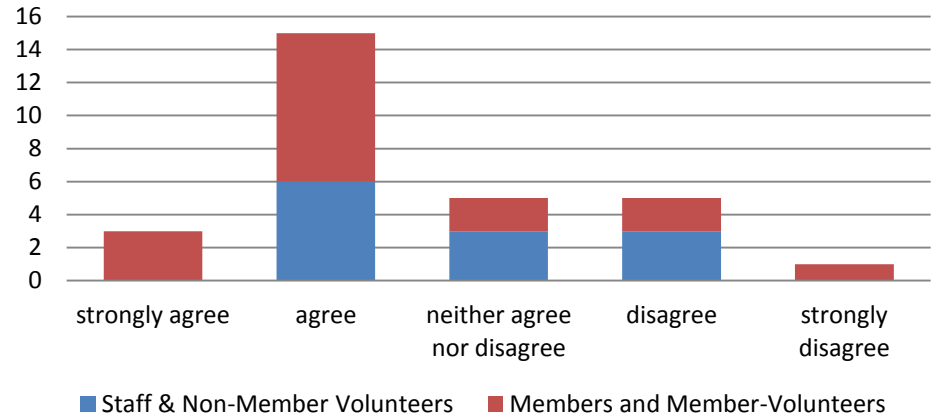


# The impact of physical space

“The space downstairs feels like an office, I don’t want to intrude.” (member at SI workshop)

- In humanitarian work, **innovation is often ‘housed’** separately from main organisation.
- **Physical space can facilitate or discourage** interaction between people – and therefore influence the success of SI.
- People are conscious of an **‘upstairs’/ ‘downstairs’ divide**.
- The Innovation Hub does something different to upstairs
  - Programs will always have different objectives upstairs and downstairs.
  - **SI is being incubated in the Innovation Hub.**
  - SI is intended to **spread throughout the organisation.**
- Physical space still **not quite right**.
  - **Tensions between multi-use** space to be office, event space, and member-owned.
  - Locked doors, computer screens and reception desk all contribute to **feeling of exclusion for members.**
- **In contrast, common space upstairs brings people together**
  - Volunteers said they have the **most opportunity to interact with members** upstairs in the common space

Members/You were comfortable using all areas and rooms of the Hub Space? (In the last 3 months)



- **Creative suggestions** starting to be made
  - Hub director is **conscious of need to adapt** the space
  - Workshop participant suggested having desks around the edge of the space with middle open for activity.
- **Dandenong**
  - Limited space there
  - Being re-designed by a member who is an architect – but at time of research being **led by single member rather than symbiotic in design.**
- **Reaching out to communities**
  - Not being bound to one location is important.
  - **External spaces are used** for meetings and events in the Mentoring and Business Programs.

# Challenges

“This Hub has to go further, and work as a community. There are a number of barriers to symbiotic means. For example – take this group of school children ...They want to see the image of people in need....it’s like a zoo with animals to come and look at.” (member, Innovation Hub)

- **Resistance to change**

- Creative thinking still a struggle for some in thinking about using SI in their Programs.
- **Risk of ‘tokenism’** – rather members must be included in an honest way.
- SI has a role to play in **external perceptions** of people seeking asylum, and not only internally.

- **SI struggling in ‘frontline’ humanitarian services**

- Staff are **unsure** what SI means or how it could be implemented in frontline services.
- Concern that if members get used to dynamic of receiving aid upstairs, will they find it hard to take on responsibilities in the Innovation Hub?
- However some believe that ‘survival’ aid (upstairs) and empowerment to ‘thrive’ (downstairs) **complement each other**.
- **Creative suggestions** for SI to be implemented in ‘frontline’ services include: member paralegals or country experts in legal program, men’s support group, peer-to-peer working.

- **Perceptions of power**

- **Hard** for staff to let go of power.
- Should also consider **power dynamics among members**.

- **Professional boundaries**

- Difficulty reconciling ‘professional boundaries’ with the SI aim of building trust, personal relationships and shared purpose.
- “The rules may protect the organisation – but they are also frustrating for members. People need to have relationship to generate natural and deeper conversations. When there are these categories, then everyone is not equal.” (member, Innovation Hub).
- Agree **‘professionalism’ is vital**, but space for friendship is needed.
- **‘boundary’ terminology builds walls between people**.
- Is creating more of a division between upstairs and downstairs.
- Open-plan office **means confidential discussion** is hard – ways of resolving this could help staff feel more comfortable having members working in counselling or ‘frontline services’.

# What is the future of SI?

“SI is still a theory. There is a long way to go, to put it into effect, in terms of our internal and external relations” (ASRC Staff)

## The impact of SI

- Measuring and showing impact will be useful in future (also useful for other organisations).
  - **Dynamic Feedback is** already a core principle of SI, and needed to **feed into program improvement**.
  - Also needed to **understand impact on the organisation and community**.
- Not much measurement currently
  - This has also meant coordinators have some freedom to assess success themselves.
- **Non-traditional methods** of measurement are needed
  - **Qualitative measurement is not enough** for SI.
  - **What members say** is more important for some programs.
  - Started to consider Theory of Change, but not yet used.
  - **‘Outcome Mapping’** could be explored further: ‘Progress markers’ about behaviour change are written at the start but can be adapted. Behaviours are observed against these – qualitatively recording events that demonstrate the change.

- What needs to be measured?
  - SI **not about ‘output’** but **is about a results** in the organisation and the community.
  - Members expected to go into communities and share experiences from the ASRC – but currently no awareness of if or how this happens.
  - Capturing **stories of SI** change could be useful.
- **Involve members** in measurement (starting to see this in Mentoring Program).

## SI growth

- SI could become **part of recruitment** criteria.
- **Rhetoric still uses ‘them and ‘us’** – but needed in the short-term to define symbiotic working.
- Mechanisms to implement **SI may adapt** over time.
- There are suggestions that **SI will spread more widely** -
  - Ackerly thinking about in new role at another organisation
  - People are reflecting on what SI means in their daily lives, even outside of the ASRC.



# Recommendations (1)

The recommendations are grouped into the three core areas of change that are also analysed separately in the main research report. Organisational change (including cultural and structural adaptations), personal changes that individuals engaging with SI are making, and change to the physical space at the Innovation Hub to help create an enabling environment for SI.

For full explanations of the recommendations please see the full report, or recommendations document.

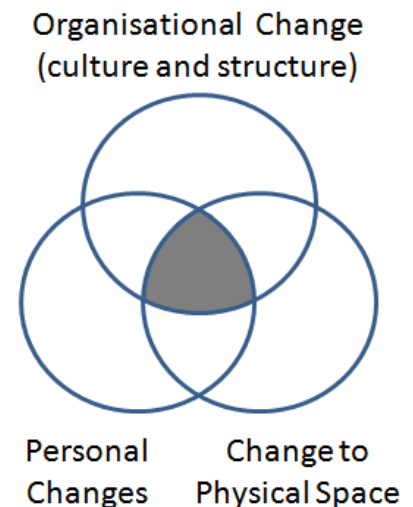
*\* Indicates recommendations captured from staff, volunteers, and members during interviews.*

## Personal Change: Identities and Interaction

- \* Hold more workshops or opportunities to discuss SI  
Consider a buddy system/mentorship in every program
- Where possible, facilitate volunteer members' intra-team communication
- Be aware of power dynamics at all levels
- Allow space for community-led projects and not only individual-led projects
- \* Create multiple and multi-directional channels for communication
- Create a sense of freedom to fail
- \* Review negative feedback/reflection
- \* Have orientation sessions for members

## Changes to the Physical Space

- \* Decide what sort of space is best for the Hub, and how that affects people's roles and interactions
- Make the Innovation Hub space more inviting and less intimidating
- Collaboratively re-think the physical design of the Hub
- Don't forget about space outside of the Innovation Hub
- Set-up an interactive 'Ideas Board'



# Recommendations (2)

## Organisational Change:

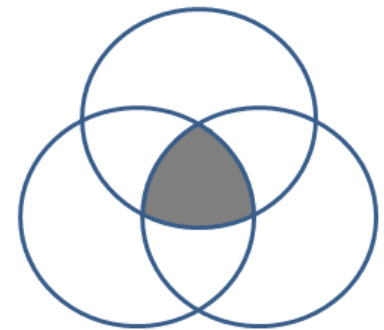
### Culture

- Recognise the innovation and symbiosis that is already occurring everywhere in the organisation
- Enhance opportunities for member volunteers' personal and professional development
- Support peer-to-peer learning
- Prioritise supporting members in leadership roles
- Regularly showcase SI
- Create more opportunities for people upstairs to come into the Innovation Hub
- Maintain an awareness of barriers to member involvement
- Be aware of 'us' and 'them' terminology

### Structure

- Integrate SI into roles and training
- \* Reconsider HR procedures for members
- Create pathways to full employment at the ASRC for members
- Involve members or former members in fundraising for the ASRC
- \* Need to have members involved at the planning phase of programs
- Enhance opportunities for members to teach
- Fund member-led activities
- Challenge the management processes in place: not the legal status/label of a 'member'
- Match desired skills with existing skills
- Hold 'creative thinking' sessions for SI challenges
- Explore ways to measure impact in a symbiotic way
- \* Ask yourself 'what?', 'so what?', and 'now what?'
- Accountability does not equal control
- Assess SI practice against SI principles

Organisational Change  
(culture and structure)



Personal Changes      Change to Physical Space