

MIN SPECS:

Foundational for Operating in Complex Systems

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I first heard the term when I was Executive Director of the Vibrant Communities initiative in Canada. We were in the early days of a new network of 15 urban collaboratives who agreed to employ what we would now call a ‘collective impact’ approach to reducing poverty. Brenda was coaching us on how to employ a complexity lens in our work.

We needed it. At the time, each of the local multi-sectoral leadership teams was struggling to develop a comprehensive plan to reduce poverty. Despite a lot of research, consultations, and planning meetings, they never seemed confident enough to land on something they were felt they were able to implement nor confident that it would yield substantive reductions in poverty. “Its so complex that we don’t know what will really work” was a common remark across the communities.

Then Brenda Zimmerman, consulting on the initiative, introduced us to a simple principle: “Build a good enough vision: provide minimum specifications rather than try to plan every little detail”. It broke the stalemate and became the first of three situations in which I have found min-spec thinking to be extraordinarily useful.

We dropped the language of ‘comprehensive plan’ in exchange for min-spec frameworks (a variation on Theories of Change) that included a working definition of poverty, guiding principles or values, key roles for different organizations and ‘starting point strategies’. Groups then jumped into annual cycles of experimentation which culminated in an annual review of the year’s results, insights and shifts in context. Each group would then develop a next iteration of their strategy. Sometimes the changes were superficial. Sometimes they were dramatic. But they got off the ground, generated insights, and results, and evolved. Min-specs thinking made that possible.

Since then, the idea of ‘big vision, min-specs, plus starting point actions’ has been foundational in the use of a variety of other complexity-aware processes. These includes those related to the development of strategy (e.g. emergent, umbrella, strategy as simple rules, boundary planning, innovation labs), key management processes (e.g. problem driven iterative adaptation, agile development methodologies) and learning and evaluation approaches (e.g. emergent learning, strategic learning, action-learning). In each case, min-spec thinking has made these practices stronger.

The second situation in which I have found min spec thinking useful is when a group wants to replicate or scale a successful ‘program’ or ‘model’ developed in one context to one or more other ones. While there are still a stubborn few who still believe that groups can create universal models that work like a recipe in any community, complexity-aware practitioners understand that the ‘recipe’ almost always needs to be adapted to suit the realities of different contexts. The question is: What is the “it” being replicated if not a rigid set of practices?

Employing a principle-based – rather than recipe-based – approach is a game-changing answer to the problem. Rather than try to create very specific sets of rules, tasks and practices that could be replicators in wildly different contexts, the innovation can be organized around the underlying principles of the successful innovation which others can then adapt to their unique context. While this concept has been around for a while, Patton's (2018) recent book, *Principles-Focused Evaluation*, has made the approach increasingly popular.

Min-spec thinking can strengthen the principles-focused approach. It involves identifying effective practices for key principles that are also universally useful enough to usefully transcend different contexts. For example, the participants of Housing First initiative who embrace the model's principle of 'voluntary participation in services but regular visits by support workers who seek to check in on the status of the newly housed', may discover that biweekly visits is an effective and feasible min-spec practice of that principle.

The process of developing good min-spec practice is almost always learning rich. In the case of an initiative designed to scale mentoring programs, for example, one of the leadership group's proposed min-spec practices for the principle of 'safety' was that mentors would have to pass a police check. It turns out that in some vulnerable communities, many would-be mentors would not pass the police check because they have had several encounters with the legal system. Similarly, in some immigrant communities, particularly those arriving from war torn countries, community members so distrust the police that they are understandably reluctant to engage them for even

benign reasons. Given these realities, the group concluded that passing a police check is a well-meaning but inappropriate manifestation of the safety principles and they turned their attention to ‘inventing’ a new set of min-spec practices.

The third and final way I have employed min-spec ideas in situations where stakeholders whose worldviews and interests are so at odds that it is difficult for them to find ways to move forward together. Yet, Adam Kahane, author of *Collaborating with the Enemy: Working with People You Don't Agree With, Trust or Like*, argues, while it may impossible get people to agree on the nature of a challenge and a comprehensive responses, it may be possible for them to agree on even small scale actions they might work on together, which then might create the conditions for future collaborative effort. A chamber of commerce in a coal-mining town and environmental warriors, for example, may not agree on extent of climate change, humanity's contribution to it nor its ripple effects, but they just might agree to establish a lower cost, lower carbon, geothermal plant to power the next decade of town development.

In an increasingly complex, fast moving and polarized world, it's easy to argue that progress – perhaps even our survival – depends in part on the ability of social innovators, evaluators and all those who support them to build the muscle of min-spec thinking and practices.

References

Kahane, A. (2017). *Collaborating with the enemy: Working with people you don't agree with, trust or like*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

Patton, M.Q. (2018). *Principles-Focused Evaluation*. Sage.