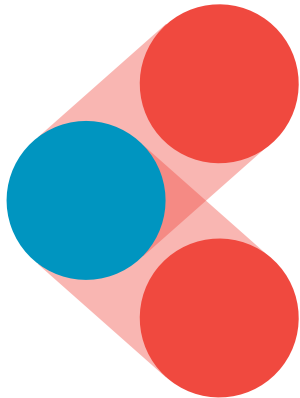


# LEARNING FROM OUR FIRST YEAR



Proudly supported by:



The Edmonton Shift Lab is based in amiskwaciwâskahikan on Treaty 6 territory, traditional meeting grounds for the Cree, Saulteaux, Blackfoot, Dene, Nakota Sioux, Métis, and Inuit.



[edmontonshiftlab.ca/](http://edmontonshiftlab.ca/)

Proudly supported by:



[skillsociety.ca/action-lab](http://skillsociety.ca/action-lab)  
[ecfoundation.org](http://ecfoundation.org)

## SHIFT LAB

The Edmonton Shift Lab is a social innovation lab convened by the Skills Society Action Lab and the Edmonton Community Foundation, which built on the initial research of EndPovertyEdmonton on poverty and racism in Edmonton. From the outset, a guiding principle of the Edmonton Shift Lab was that the lab was going to generate prototypes of solutions, learn from the journey, share what worked and share what needs to be changed and adapted. This report captures the learning from the first year of the Edmonton Shift Lab.

Addressing racism and discrimination continues to be identified as a critical piece of the puzzle in how we reach the big goal of ending poverty in a generation in Edmonton. Building on the work of many local initiatives, the diverse collective making up the Edmonton Shift Lab is stewarding an exploration to develop potential service, policy, system and community action prototypes that will help reduce racism as it contributes to poverty. We want to be bold and explore how to Shift ideas. Shift attitudes. Shift systems and Shift into new ways of solution finding with community.



*Celebrating our launch at the Intercultural Centre with 150 community members*



*Core team testing prototype themes with industry*

“Aboriginal people, immigrants and refugees experience discrimination in workplaces, housing, services and facilities that exclude them from opportunities and put them at risk of poverty.”

**EndPovertyEdmonton Strategy 2015**

*Core team in the early days getting to know each other*

# OUTLINE OF THE JOURNEY OF THE 4 KEY GROUPS OF THE SHIFT LAB COLLECTIVE

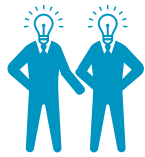
Designed by Melissa Bui

JUNE 2016 ..... AUGUST 2016 ..... DECEMBER 2016 ..... APRIL 2017



## ADVISORY

Leaders with hands on levers in key systems



## CORE TEAM

Diverse team tackling challenge



## STEWARDS

Lab designers, facilitators, adapt process to emergent learning



## COMMUNITY CAMPFIRES

Interface with community

## POST LAB

### Evaluation, Reports, Prototype development

After the end of the lab sessions, the Stewards and Core team continued with a few streams of work:

1. Led by Mark Cabaj: interviews of lab stakeholders to inform developmental evaluation of the lab process and outcomes

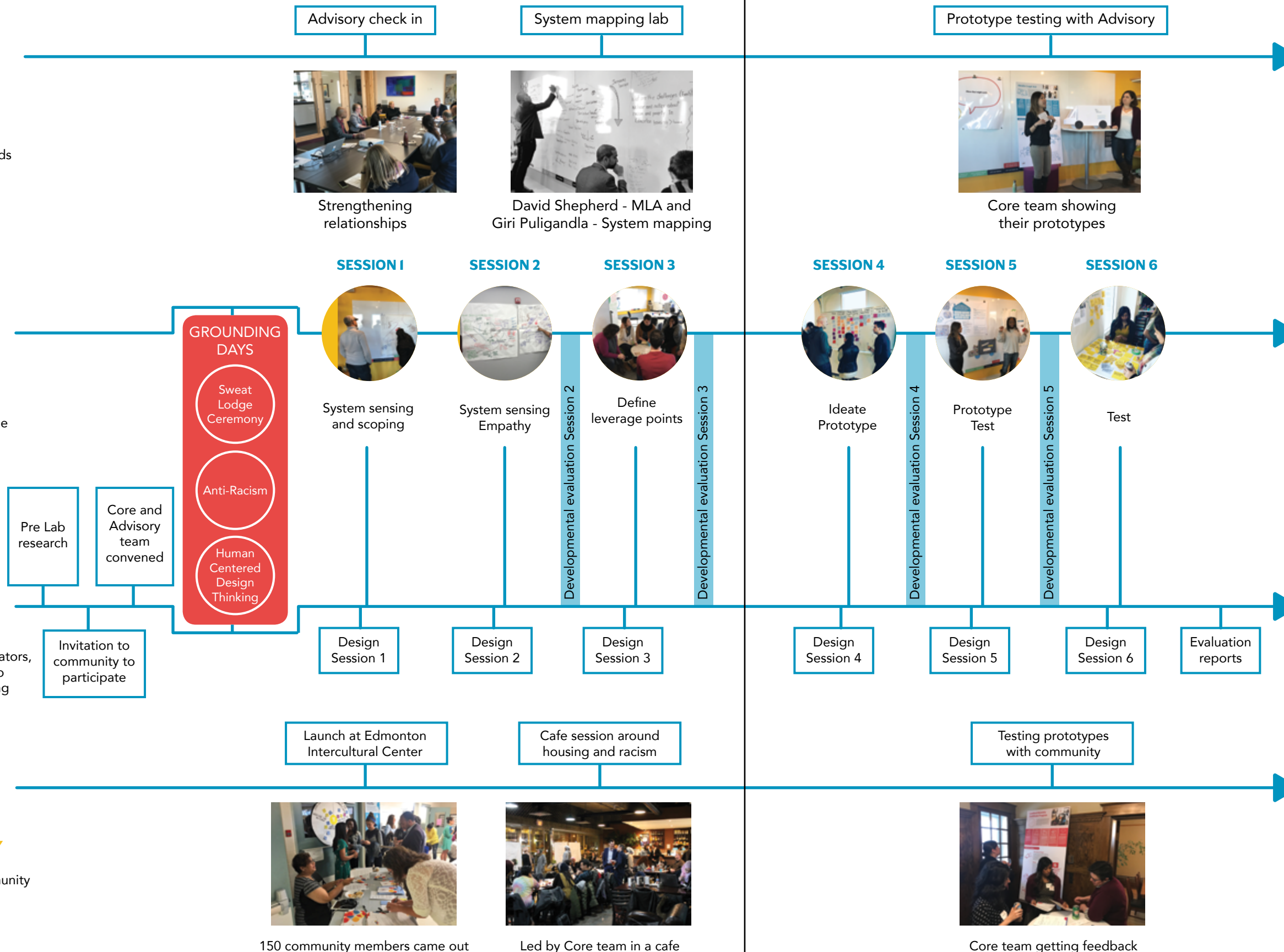
2. Evaluation and feedback on what worked well, less well, and what needs to be different for Shift Lab 2.0

3. Continued prototype development: all three prototypes had enough positive feedback to continue testing, development, and piloting. There is on-going work to incubate the prototypes.

### Design Shift Lab 2.0 based on Developmental Evaluation and Feedback

Shift Lab Stewards have begun designing the next phase of the Shift Lab.

As of February 2018, the pre-lab research phase for Shift Lab 2.0 has begun. The Stewards are sifting through feedback and are designing another robust lab process that will go deeper into the complex problem and will yield another portfolio of prototypes that strive for systemic impact to address racism in Edmonton and possibly beyond.



# A DEEPER DIVE: LEARNING ABOUT FUNDING SOCIAL INNOVATION LABS

by Steward, Ashley Dryburgh



## How did ECF become involved in funding a social innovation lab?

Edmonton Community Foundation (ECF), like many of the other 190+ community foundations across Canada, works with donors (both individuals or organizations) to create endowments that support their charitable aims. A portion of our available granting dollars are discretionary, which allows ECF to respond as we see fit to community priorities.

Currently, much of ECF's discretionary funding can be described as extensive rather than intensive: we support almost all areas of the charitable sector (environment, arts, social services, health, education, recreation) but generally can only provide one-time grants rather than ongoing funding.

In 2014, ECF's Board decided to dedicate some of its discretionary funds and one FTE position to see what kind of impact we could have if we chose to fund more deeply in a focussed area. At the time, the Mayor's Task Force on the Elimination of Poverty (the precursor to EndPovertyEdmonton) was getting underway and ECF decided to base its area of focus on the work of this group. The initial report of the Task Force noted that eliminating racism was a "game changer" in the fight to end poverty and ECF decided to dedicate resources to this focus area.

Concurrently, ECF staff were investigating the best intervention model to use. The practice of social innovation was beginning to pop up in Edmonton and other organizations were talking to us about funding.

Not only did a lab model look ideal for a complex problem like racism, but ECF wanted to see what it could learn about funding labs and prototypes. As no one at ECF had any experience with social innovation labs, we went looking in the community for expertise, which is how the partnership with Skills Society Action Lab was born.

We did not know it at the time, but what ECF was doing was quite different: usually social innovation projects have to chase down funding, rather than the other way around! Also, funders typically have a hands-off relationship with the projects they fund, but in this instance an ECF staff person was embedded as a member of the Stewardship team. Our grant dollars not only supported a project that sought to eliminate racism, but created capacity for innovative approaches in our organization and in the wider community. We hope the leadership we have shown over the course of the Shift Lab inspires other funders to begin to explore new approaches and relationships with their grantees.

Below, we share what we learned and what funders should keep in mind if approached to support a lab or other social innovation project more generally. We recognize funders will not always be embedded with these projects so keep in mind that the first section is more about the experience of an embedded funder whereas the second section has more general advice.

## WHAT DID ECF LEARN?



The first phase of the Shift Lab was a massive learning experience for everyone involved. As it pertains to funding, four key learnings emerged:

### 1. This took longer than we thought

ECF and Skills Society Action Lab began to work together in the spring of 2016. Our original timeline included a summer of research, recruitment, and preparation; a three month lab cycle beginning in September 2016, and support and implementation of prototypes in early 2017. It didn't take long to realize that this was wildly optimistic -- the Stewardship team was not full-time and no one wanted to rush laying the important groundwork for an issue as complex as racism and poverty.

The formal part of the lab began in November 2016 and was slated to conclude in February, but due to the December holiday season and the deep commitment and vibrant intellectualism of the Core Lab team, we did not officially conclude the Lab Exploration phase until June 2017.

### 2. Our current granting process would make it very hard to fund a social innovation lab

ECF's flagship granting program, Community Grants, is a one-stop shop for applications from across the charitable sector and supports everything from

operations to equipment purchases. ECF does not have set priorities for funding; we let applicants tell us why their project is important and evaluate each application holistically. We are repeatedly told by applicants that our application process is easy and accessible and that they appreciate our responsiveness to community needs and our willingness to fund the "unsexy" stuff that others funders generally avoid.

Despite all this, it's possible that we would have had a very difficult time funding something like the Shift Lab if we weren't already directly involved. There are a few reasons for this. Before the Shift Lab, we did not have a lot of experience with social innovation projects and processes so staff and committees would not have had any background on them. Also, our application process (like most) asks about outcomes, something a lab cannot accurately predict at the start of a project. Finally, the idea of failure and risk -- an important part of the prototyping process -- is a sensitive subject in the not-for-profit world.

Since the advent of the Shift Lab, we have funded some other (non-lab) social innovation projects and will likely see more applications in the future.



*Martin Garber-Conrad, Edmonton Community Foundation's CEO, at the launch of the Shift Lab*

### 3. When you are respectful, people want to help.

ECF is not an expert in the field of racism. This is in fact one of the reasons why we decided to pursue racism as our area of focus. We are an unusual player in this field and felt it was important to communicate that racism is a system in which we are all implicated: some of us benefit from it and many of us suffer beneath it, but we're all involved. By publicly stating our commitment to eliminating racism, we hoped to galvanize other organizations, donors, and community members who might also not have considered participating in this conversation.

Nevertheless, we were worried that the organizations who have spent decades working in this area would resent a new player lumbering into the field with broad proclamations about how we were going to eliminate racism; indeed, there are lots of past examples of this very thing happening. In our initial conversations with organizations and community partners, we made sure to highlight the fact that we were new to this field and wanted to build on and support work that has been happening for a long time. This was essential to building solid partnerships; by the end of the first phase, organizations who had initially expressed skepticism and concern were champions of the Shift Lab.

*System sensing in the early days at ECF*



*Core team system mapping*

### 4. Autonomy is key

Social innovation labs are somewhat unpredictable and require the time and space to be able to properly develop effective prototypes without undue outside influence. It's naive to imagine that there are never any political considerations when investigating complex problems, but the more distance a lab can have from an agenda other than its own, the better. For example, although the Eliminate Racism focus derived from the work of EndPovertyEdmonton, the Shift Lab was very clear that we were not a City of Edmonton project and did not seek financial support from them. This meant the Shift Lab didn't need to worry about speaking on behalf of the City, which gave us a bit more freedom in how and what we communicated.

Ultimately, as a funder we had to be committed to the process and what it would produce, without knowing what that would be. Even with an embedded staff person, we couldn't expect to unilaterally guide or steer it. Letting go of these expectations can be difficult, but a social innovation lab is the wrong tool if these expectations of control are present.



*Stewards and Core team in the Skills Society Action Lab*

# WHAT SHOULD FUNDERS KEEP IN MIND?

## I. How to evaluate a social innovation lab application

Although social innovation labs draw from decades of established practices in multiple fields, they themselves are still a maturing practice. For funders who are encountering them for the first time, knowing how to properly assess and evaluate an application for funding can be tricky. You might have to use a different application process or make an exception to some of your guidelines. Whatever your administrative process, here are a few key pieces to assess:

### Is there a specific, complex problem to be solved?

Social innovation labs are designed to address complex (also known as “wicked”) problems. Using a lab to solve a simple problem is like killing mosquitoes with a shotgun. Complex problems are those where there is little agreement on both how the problem should be solved and what effective solutions look like.

### Is the intervention timely?

Complex problems exist all around us, but there are better and worse times to tackle them. Is there a window of opportunity that means movement on this complex issue is possible? At the very least, is there not an insurmountable major obstacle in the way of making change?

## Simple, complicated and complex problems

Adapted from Alberta Co-Lab, Frances Westley, Brenda Zimmerman and Michael Quinn Patton



### Simple Problems

A Rubik's Cube is tough, but there is a single, agreed-upon solution.



### Complicated Problems

It's tricky to send a rabbit to the moon, but there is shared wisdom and rules to follow.



### Complex Problems

Raising a litter of bunnies is hard! Each bunny is different and they don't come with instructions.

### Outputs, not outcomes

One of the many strengths of a social innovation lab is that it doesn't seek to predict in advance precisely what will happen. This means that specific outcomes are not likely to be able to be presented up front. However, a lab should be able to generally describe its outputs. How many people do they anticipate being involved? How many meetings? Planned products and communications pieces?

### Key players involved?

Social innovation labs work best when there is representation from a wide swath of stakeholders with multiple perspectives who are impacted by the complex problem. Does the social innovation lab seem to have a great mix of usual and unusual players from across different sectors, or at least a plan to recruit said players? Does the lab have partnerships with people who have insights and access to the system it wants to change?

### Methodology and evaluation

As social innovation labs are still maturing in practice, there is not yet consensus on overall best practices, though there are some specific methodologies emerging from different organizations (e.g. REOS Partners, Roller Strategies, Waterloo Institute for Social Innovation and Resiliency). Subsequently, you might see different methodologies from different applicants, but nevertheless, there should be a robust description of the specific methodology planned for a lab with an attendant evaluation plan. Developmental evaluation is a common evaluation method, but there may be others that are appropriate.

The field of social innovation can at times be quite jargon heavy. While one would hope an applicant would speak in plain language, we would encourage funders to ask for clarification if they don't. Sometimes an over-reliance on jargon can signal a lack of comprehension on behalf of the applicant.

### 2. Tolerate failure

Failure is a delicate subject in the not-for-profit world. How much risk can organizations take when designing their programs? How do they properly report on failure without fear of losing funding? What even counts as failure? These are questions that funders have a role in answering, but in terms of social innovation labs, it's important to remember that failure is intentionally part of the process. “Failure” in this context is related to prototyping: not every prototype will be worth pursuing; in fact, most prototypes probably won't be. Also, social innovation labs embrace emergence; the original question of the lab might change and shift as the process moved forward. Funders should be prepared to expect these kinds of “failures” and, ideally, support a culture of “failing forward.”

### 3. How much will this cost?

Depending on the scale of the project, costs for social innovation labs can be in the millions of dollars. This isn't to suggest that all labs will cost that much. Common costs might include personnel, research, evaluation, honoraria for participants, design and communications pieces, venue rentals for meetings, technology infrastructure, prototyping support costs, and more.

If you are surprised at the expense, a good question to ask might be the cost of the problem on the system. If the proposed cost of the social innovation lab is only one or two percent of that cost, does that not seem reasonable?



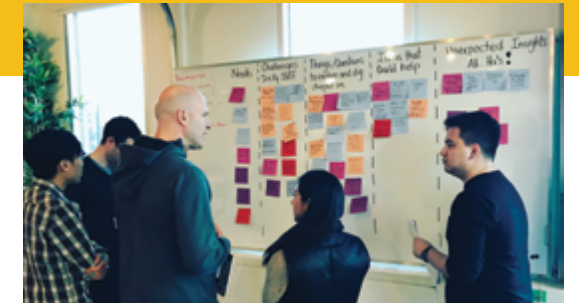
#### 4. Train your staff and review teams

Because social innovation labs are a different beast than traditional not-for-profit projects, it is important to provide context for your staff and review committees so that they are properly able to evaluate requests. This can range from a presentation from someone who has participated in a lab, some introductory articles, or a webinar. If you anticipate that you will receive many applications it might be useful to have someone on staff or a committee who is more of an expert, but otherwise the basics should be sufficient.

**Have more questions about funding social labs or want to learn more about ECF?**

*Check out our website: [www.ecfoundation.org](http://www.ecfoundation.org) or get in touch: [adryburgh@ecfoundation.org](mailto:adryburgh@ecfoundation.org).*

*Steward - Ben Weinlick facilitating the teams in unconvincing leverage points in their system maps*



## Want to be involved?

There are a number of ways to support and be involved with the Edmonton Shift Lab.

- Do you want to be a champion or host of one of our current or future prototypes?
- Are you a funder interested in exploring how to scale either the Shift Lab process or one of the prototypes?
- Do you work for an organization who is interested in connecting with us for some ethnographic research?

- Interested in participating as a Core team member?

If you answered “yes!” to any of these questions, get in touch: [info@edmontonshiftlab.ca](mailto:info@edmontonshiftlab.ca)

To keep an eye on what we’re doing, check us out online ([www.edmontonshiftlab.ca](http://www.edmontonshiftlab.ca)) or on Twitter (@YEGShiftLab).



MAKING  
SHIFT  
HAPPEN.