Session 2: Wednesday 10/22/2015, 2:45-3:45pm

Location: Griffin

Session Title: Starting up and Starting Over

Organizer: Jake Cowan

Primary Notetaker: Rob Pitingolo

Participants: Jake Cowan, Oscar Villareal, Erica Raleigh, Jennifer Newcomer, Sheila Martin, Leah Hendey, Bob Gradeck, Katie Pritchard, Meg Merrick, CIndy Guy, Rob Pitingolo, Liza Morehead, Tim Bray, Gary Painter, Vicki Mack

Cowan: I have a lot of questions and could make this self serving, but I don’t feel like I need to own any of this, so bring your own interests in what you want to learn. If you’re at this table to learn you probably have something to contribute as well. I’ll start. If you were coming to your first meeting, what are things you’d do differently knowing what you know.

Bray: It’s struck me that we entered as this thing that went alot with an indicators program, not as a thing that goes with who we are as an organization. I’d enter it to it more robustly. It’s not about what we do, it’s about who we are. We don’t all do the same things the same way.

Cowan: What do you mean more robustly?

Bray: At the new partner session, we have some large partners there are some indicators projects that connect to NNIP, even though they do other things that partners are doing. As our conversations get more policy oriented, it doesn’t mean bringing an indicators thing, it means bringing a neighborhoods stuff to NNIP. There are other things to talk about that we do but might not bring them, like IDS. IDS data produced neighborhood data.

Hendey: … or could.

Bray: That’s not something I’d bring if this was just about indicators.

Hendey: People come to NNIP because they want an indicators project. Many partners don’t even have them.

Newcomer: We can’t live on open data work itself, even though it’s a big activity. What is the value we add to NNIP. I don’t think we have a long history of doing applied work. Coming with the light of illuminated the neighborhood work and how that impacts communities and do data storytelling.

Martin: The intention of what to do with information was different. The culture of democratizing information is different now. We are still trying to figure out what to do with population forecasts. We not just looking at data but also community aspirations and things like that. Having it be part of your culture is an important part.

Gradeck: What’s helped us is involving our partners in the work of NNIP. We’re talking about NNIP with the funders, or talking about what’s happening in Cleveland, so they can see the bigger network and benefitting from it. Some people are doing cool things and we want to share that out. there’s a lot of smart people here who can help you in work.

Raleigh: Before we were created, Urban, MCIC and CWRU did a scan of local environment in detroit and wrote a great paper and having a strategy in place ahead of time. I didn’t see that document until 4 years after we were founding. If we had it to do over again I would have insisted that I saw the document. We were already a partner so I’m surprised it didn’t come up. It’s not public, it got pretty in depth about the landscape and what might happen. Kathy predicts the future well so listen and know that the NNIP network actually suffers from the same issues and challenges. Some are further along than others but we can learn and we can help. I find the network very beneficial overall.

Cowan: How have you looked at managing who did the work before you, or you were in a scenario where there was different universities doing aspects of NNIP. How did you manage getting on the same page locally.

Martin: We were doing data work and they were doing engagement. There was confusion about how our atlas was different from their project. Now the atlas is dead or in hiatus. We tried to explain to people differences between projects. We were using a lot of the same data with a different focus. When competing for a limited set of local funding, it’s not easy to do that.

Painter: Neighborhood Knowledge LA lasted for a while then went away. Another organization took over and what they do is unusable. When I try to bring up NNIP, people think this other organization is already doing it.

Pritchard: MIlwaukee’s representation was here (in NNIP) but not in the services being delivered in Milwaukee. Funders said, ‘don’t they do data’? Very frankly, we had activity at this level but not at the neighborhood level. It took a while for funders to get a concept of what this was. We brought a lot of funders to STL. Had they not come they wouldn’t have recognized what’s not being done and what could be done. It’s pretty similar, it isn’t overnight.

Cowan: How do you all think about staffing? DId you have the right staff? Or did you figure out what expertise you need? What are you struggling with now?

Raleigh: Typical startup, we went from 3 people to 27. I don’t recognize that. We wound up being on the forefront of communications. We stumbled into a graphic designer and it’s more important than I could have known. Being thoughtful and knowing the budget can be helpful. Ask good questions and have solid financials.

Pritchard; You gotta start somewhere. Somethings we’ve done for a long time. Others we’ve built into doing. If you know the mandate you can help direct staffing choices.

Martin: I would agree with the graphic design. Some people think it’s window dressing and we should focus on methodology. We brought someone in to do a communications plan. Not it’s a struggle because they were temporary and left and no we have to implement it. I don’t even know the right questions to ask to hire someone. I need a consultant to hire a consultant. That’s where NNIP comes in.

Raleigh: It would be good to get NNIP approved developers. I have two that I work with and I tried a third and it was a failure. My developer left over a year ago and it can be an expensive mistake to have a bad person.

Hendey: We’re trying staff Neighborhood Info DC and they have to fit in the Urban Institute structure which is very rigid. It’s hard when someone wants you to do something and you have no team available.

Bray: Same as at the university. They looked at our titles and tacked on ‘urban’ to it. University structures are hard for the business. Even when we were at the foundation we were more indebted to them. Children’s Health is one of our indicators partners. The investment they make on the data side lets us leverage that down to the neighborhood level.

Cowan: Do you all have a solution you haven’t yet mentioned?

Bray: THere’s no optimal solution. We exist in time. Where we are is not where we’ve been. Building the organization today that we need for tomorrow. We have 11 people and we meet every week. What I find is, not everyone thinks the way I think. This notion of communicating is working. It takes an investment and we have a way we talk about things.

Martin: My frustration is labor distributions. You have to forecast your time spending. It’s ridiculous. The way we learn to juggle depends on context. Your job is tough because drawing out the commonalities is difficult.

Bray: It’s juggling whatever your institutional context is. We don’t have a system to track past work. Once you stop working for me you disappear. There is such a local flavor to how it works. D3 has to find a communication person. I have to juggle with communications people in other parts of the org. We are literally still 7 years later, migrating to be at the university. You’d think you flip a switch and you’re done, but now we re-engineered how we work as a business. We have a project with 13k left in the budget, and the university spent 7 years trying to figure out how to give back 13k that they don’t want back. We spent 50k to figure out how to give back 13k. if we sat down and wrote down the best NNIP model, but the time we got there the best would be different.

Martin: I know there are a lot of NNIP partners that are very advocacy driven. The two centers that I direct are both important to not be viewed as advocates. I can’t answer a ‘should’ question. I can just say …..

D3: Kurt Metzger is an outspoken opinionated guy and there’s a place for that. As far as brand management I’ve taken the stance of not being an advocate. When media calls for opinions we don’t give opinions these days. That’s helpful in terms of brand management and relationship building. It’s a longer term strategy for being sustainable. Now I have a staff to repeat our mission statement but it’s about everyone having access to information and all projects are taken through that lens.

Cowan: As a plug, tomorrow there is a session on performance management. A big piece of that is including all of your staff. Do the new people want to stay on these issues or do we want to switch gears?

VIllareal: We’ve been a guest here for a while. We want to know how to solidify how to make this all official. Some of the challenges you talk about resonates with us, like with regard to staffing. We are launching a new open data initiative. There’s not much sharing happening now. A lot of this has been resonating.

Raleigh: Look for geniuses. Startups have to be able to flex and move. Some people can step in and other people can’t. I have a data rangler and client contact and web developer. So I get a lot out of one person. Once you have passion from someone then you get a lot out of people you wouldn’t have expected.

Villareal: I took on managing a mapping projects and doing property conditions. That ties me to real estate development but also nutrition and child advocacy and everything. We are trying to tie housing with school absenteeism.

Gradeck: Buddy exchange data collection, put it in the welcome packet.

Pritchard: I’d like to hear what you’d never do. What would be the step to skip.

Gradeck: Don’t get too into flashy technology.

Bray: Agree.

Gradeck: Don’t do it. It’s more about the data. The tools are out there. Really flashy stuff that’s one of a kind and groundbreaking isn’t worth it.

Bray: I wouldn’t tie your identity up in a product. You could have made a killing building your own LEHD mapping system, then on the map comes along and you’re useless. I go back to what we are trying to accomplish. Owning that forces decisions and makes them easier.

Martin: When the project got onto some fancy websites, nobody used it. They spent so much time an effort on a single project that it killed them. Not the data is old and the technology is obsolete and they can’t figure out how to make it work for another round.

Gradeck: If you aren’t investing in people or relationships then it better be a good investment. It happens because people make it happen and build relationships. Other than that be careful.

Cowan: We didn’t talk much about partnerships. We’re out of time so put in tweetable form, who is your champion or one kick ass thing you did in the early years.

Bray: United Way and Children’s Health.

Raleigh: Parcel survey got us off the ground, but don’t partner without mission alignment.

Newcomer: Piton was original champion and we were one of the first in the country and went through redevelopment and wound up getting developed technologically in a box. It stat stagnant for a decade until we just relaunched.

Gradeck: Don’t even cause anyone to lose trust in you.

Raleigh: Good call.

Gradeck: If you’re trusted they’ll come back to you.

Cowan: Closing thoughts?

Painter: Is there pros and cons?

Raleigh: We were started by 2 partners and started contract work right away and good thing we did. If we had to rely on those two we wouldn’t have made it.

Pritchard: It was good to get funders feeling involved in launching something. Having them partner in funding helped.

Cowan: Bus leaving soon. Gotta go.

[end of session]

[post-session addition]

Jake: These are the questions I brought to the unconference. Lots of other areas to discuss since we did a nice job of going deep on a few topics. NNIP HQ and I would love to hear any further reflections from this session or in response to any of these questions!

* What scale did you start at? Would you start at a bigger or smaller scale?
* How did you staff up? What expertise are most important at the beginning?
* How did you identify users and users needs? How are you going about that work now?
* What were your priorities, and looking back do you think those were the right ones?
* What was really hard?
* What were your early wins?
* What are you finding success with right now?
* What important changes have you made since you started as an NNIP partner?
* Who were your champions? How did you identify or connect with them?
* Who are your major partners? What are the successes and challenges you experience in partnership?
* What partners are most important at the beginning?
* What else would you tell another city just getting their NNIP partner up and running?