CLIMATE STRATEGY ACCELERATOR

Innovation – in technology, business, governance, finance, and civil society – will be essential in order to solve a problem as complex as climate change. Innovation is also essential in the design and implementation of philanthropic, NGO and civil society strategies to address climate change. For good reason, philanthropic donors and NGOs coalesce around what they perceive to be “winning” strategies based on their understanding of the context and opportunity. However, to the extent that resources and staff capacity are concentrated on a small set of strategic approaches, there is a lack of resources and capacity to enable the exploration and design of novel and potentially transformative approaches and to help build the capacity of new strategic leaders.

Our research led us to examine the best real-world examples of institutions that do just this albeit in the realm of technological innovation. By all accounts, technological innovation was dramatically accelerated in the U.S. by the creation of the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) in 1958 (which significantly contributed to the creation of weather satellites, GPS, the Internet, etc.). That model of innovation has subsequently been replicated successfully for energy technologies in the case of the Advanced Research Projects Agency-Energy (ARPA-E) within the U.S. Department of Energy, and for commercial technologies in the case of the Advanced Technology and Projects (ATAP) group within Google.

How do DARPA and ARPA-E drive Innovation?*


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model of innovation in depth through research and interviews with leaders at DARPA, ARPA, and ATAP. We have identified four core elements common to these programs that we believe can be applied to the development of innovative philanthropic strategies to address climate:

1) **World class talent working for short (3 year) terms.** These institutions identify outstanding individuals (referred to as “Program Managers” or PMs) that have expertise in the areas where the institution is looking for breakthrough advances and retain them through their home institutions. The PMs are given considerable scope within the program areas to develop a strategy for pursuing new breakthroughs. The PMs interact intensively with other PMs and with experts, and there is an intense vetting of their proposed plans within the organization, but once approved they are given significant leeway in implementing the plan over their short tenure.

2) **Right-Left thinking and ‘white spaces’**. To avoid the trap of thinking only of the next marginal gain, the PMs are encouraged to think about the ‘breakthrough’ needed (the right side of the plan) and then work back to the left side to see what steps are needed to advance toward the breakthrough. There is also a top-down element: the institutions continually are looking for “white space” areas where breakthroughs could be transformative but where there is not yet focused research (e.g., invisible planes).

3) **A community of talent interacting in a crucible of innovation.** The PMs issue RFPs to fund a set of researchers in their program area and sometimes also launch prize competitions (e.g., the robot challenge, the self-driving vehicle challenge, etc.). They then bring the researchers together repeatedly over their tenure to create a highly interactive group both collaborating and competing under time pressure to solve the problem.

4) **Avenue to Scale.** The institutions recognize that some breakthroughs may take more than the tenure of one PM so some areas of work can continue beyond the term of a PM. In general, though, they seek to quickly link the emerging technologies to a source of demand. ARPA-E, for example, built a “Tech-to-Market” program to link technology innovators with sources of venture capital funding and other resources.

Over the next year Packard Foundation, Good Energies, and Oak plan to pursue the creation of a new institution – a Climate Strategy Accelerator - that draws upon these core elements with a mission to identify and empower world class strategists to develop break through strategies in novel new areas that significantly address climate change mitigation. We will focus our resources on high-risk, high-reward opportunities we hope can be incubated into successful mature strategies that occupy a place in a balanced philanthropic portfolio. In order to identify potential PMs we will develop a worldwide network of scouts we will tap for annual nominations that will form our talent pool. We will then select 3-5 of the best PM nominees for participation in a three year program that empowers them with $1-2 million in grant dollars to achieve break through strategy innovation for addressing climate change.

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