

## Thinkpiece #1

### *The Infinity Loop Impact Model*

While many enterprises have formal mission statements, it has often been our good fortune to work with organizations seeking outcomes that go well beyond the financial bottom line. Given the current and future challenges that communities and institutions face, the OD4Impact team seeks out and supports organizations with broader change goals, keying on those with robust health, social justice and environmental objectives.

Our unique organizational development (OD) services are tailored to increase the effectiveness and impact of such purpose-based organizations. This brief thinkpiece describes an overarching model of organizational behaviour and performance that we recommend for them.

Whether they are a non-profit society, a university, a school board, a health authority, a for-profit company, a faith-based group, a community association, or a unit of government, a strongly purpose-based organization attracts committed people with strong values and diverse skills. A clear commitment to making positive change is a major attractor and retainer for talented staff and volunteers, as well as a guiding star for everyone involved.

However, such groups have to achieve their ambitious goals in a world with many competing interests, where resources are limited, where competition can be fierce, and where critical beliefs and behaviours are not easily shifted. That world is also getting increasingly “smaller”, more pluralistic, more contested, more uncertain, and increasingly subject to rapid change.

To succeed, purposeful organizations have to be highly strategic, focused and nimble. They also have to continuously draw all of their resources into alignment, efficiently delivering valuable programs, products, and services while keeping an eye on external conditions and trends. Not easy to do while also tracking external impact over time, adjusting as needed.

Fortunately, there is a **transformative ongoing practice** that purpose-based organizations can adopt to help them thrive in the face of these challenges. This practice begins by mapping out and delivering a set of internally-focused capacity-building activities that are grounded in the agreed purpose of the organization. The next step involves the customized design and implementation of a robust set of external engagement efforts also organized around purpose.

The internally-focused work that we recommend effectively engages, strengthens and aligns the organization’s staff, leadership, programs and funding. The externally-focused work ensures a strong understanding of external conditions and trends, and (critically) taps into additional collaborators and their resources. Together, these two linked sets of activities greatly strengthen purpose-based organizational performance and impact.

We call this combined practice the **Infinity Loop Impact Model** because of its ongoing nature, and because one part of the infinity loop symbolizes internal engagement while the other reflects external engagement. The term engagement is used here because you are drawing in and from all parts of the organization and all parts of the larger system that the organization inhabits. The ongoing use of strategic and courageous conversations internally and externally builds a truly collaborative and impact-oriented culture with a range of benefits.

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To harvest the rewards of increased collaboration, working well internally and externally must become part of individual, team, division and organizational culture and practice. Other OD4Impact thinkpieces feature additional foundational practices, benefits, considerations, techniques, and resources needed for this practice. Here we introduce the eight “levels” of the organization to focus on, as well as the key capacities for internal and external engagement.

The internal side of the infinity loop includes four levels: the individual, the team, the division, and the organization (led by the executive).

The individual needs to feel connected to the larger mission, to feel part of a respected team, and to be empowered to excel in their unique area of responsibility. Teams need to have a clear definition of their role and function, but also a mutually-supportive culture and a sense of how they are part of the larger whole. Divisions need to influence and be tied into strategy, with leaders who align efforts and outcomes across divisions and across the organization. Senior leadership have to see and discuss the whole system, actively connecting and communicating what they are seeing both externally and internally.

The internal work requires establishing and sustaining a culture and practice of constructive reflection and discussion about the mission, goals, activities, strategies, tools and skills of the organization. Encouraging people across the organization to continuously talk, think and act as leaders in their areas of focus supports adaptive management, and improves implementation.

When this culture and these practices are in place internally, the organization begins to function as a true learning organization, using focused conversation to ensure alignment on an ongoing basis. At this point, it can engage externally to connect with resources, perspective and capacity that would otherwise not be available, and which support progress on the mission. Core tasks of this phase are building trusting and mutually beneficial relationships, sharing perspectives and information, and aligning resources, strategic initiatives and activities.

The four external levels at which an organization does this kind of work are: partners, affiliated networks, the general public, and larger systems.

Partners are closely aligned groups that share your vision for the future and are willing and able to form close, practical working relationships. Networks bring together a larger and broader set of people and organizations with shared goals and overlapping skills and assets. The general public can be tapped for various kinds of support, but can also help “move the needle” on critical issues by joining larger coalitions. Finally, the practice of systems leadership focuses on creating the conditions for self-sustaining change in the world.

While it may seem daunting to focus on eight different levels in an ongoing pattern, the benefits of this transformative practice are many, and the multiplier effect of building this capacity within your organization are truly transformative. Using the ***Infinity Loop Impact Model*** to increase your focus, cohesion and alignment is our purpose and passion.

Connect with us for a complementary thirty-minute needs assessment of your purpose-based organization, and to discuss how we can provide customized support.