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What Business and Social Services Can Learn from Human-Centered Design

By Maricela Rios-Faust

Editor's Note: Maricela Rios-Faust is CEO of Irvine-based Human Options, which has helped thousands of victims of relationship violence.

Several years ago, I attended the Social Innovation Conference expecting nonprofit leadership insights.

Instead, I discovered a framework transforming how companies innovate, improve customer experience and strengthen performance: human-centered design, also known as design thinking.



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Companies were using it to solve complex challenges by deeply understanding the people they served rather than designing from assumptions. I began to wonder what could happen if a sector built around care applied that same discipline to supporting survivors of relationship violence.

At the time, Human Options was already delivering comprehensive services, but we were asking, "How could we do better?" Survivors shared pieces of their experiences throughout their healing journey, yet we were not consistently inviting them to shape the systems designed to support them.

Listening Before Designing

To make that vision real, we partnered with human-centered design experts to train our leadership team and build capacity to sustain the practice. Rather than treating it as a one-time initiative, we rooted the work in listening first, testing ideas with those most affected, learning from their feedback and improving before scaling.

Human Options is one of the first nonprofits in Orange County to embed human-centered design throughout the organization. What began as an effort to improve programs has become a cultural shift influencing how we make decisions, allocate resources and define leadership.

Most importantly, survivors are no longer viewed simply as recipients of services. They are collaborators and advisors rebuilding their lives after trauma, which makes their voice in shaping our response not only valuable, but essential.

Rather than assuming what survivors need, we invite them to participate in listening sessions and design workshops as well as emphasize feedback conversations. We test ideas, learn what works, adjust and improve, applying the same discipline successful businesses use to refine customer experiences.

We've discovered that survivors do not simply want more services; they want meaningful options. Many have spent years in relationships where control and choice were taken from them. Our responsibility is not only to provide resources, but to restore agency by ensuring survivors help shape decisions that affect them. In that way, empowerment is not separate from leadership; it is how leadership becomes more accountable, responsive and effective.

Survivor insights have reshaped therapeutic programming, shelter environments, communications, advocacy and strategic planning, challenging assumptions and revealing opportunities we would not have discovered on our own.

This approach has strengthened philanthropic investment by giving partners confidence that solutions are informed by lived experience and lead to measurable improvement. Survivor-informed planning has helped Human Options secure more than $2.2 million in grants, including a $1 million Samueli Foundation capital award to renovate shelter spaces based directly on survivor feedback.

Those investments led to initiatives including our Survivor Advisory Council, Courage Over Comfort storytelling series and Humanity in Action: a pathway to purposeful service. Each reflects the same philosophy: The people closest to the challenge should help shape the solution.

The framework has also changed how we think about leadership. Rather than asking, "What program should we build next?" we begin with, "What are survivors telling us they need?" That shift has influenced capital investment, program development, communications and community engagement while strengthening relationships with partners who value evidence-based innovation and measurable impact.

Measuring What Matters

Similar to businesses evaluating whether new products create value, nonprofits must determine whether new approaches produce meaningful outcomes for the people they serve.

That commitment led us to develop and evaluate survivoe-informed interventions through our Innovation Lab, testing whether ideas shaped by survivor insight created value in practice.

Among survivors using our Vision Journal, a guided reflection tool, 97% reported a positive experience, 84% said it helped them reflect on their goals and 81% felt their clinician better understood what they were working toward. Additionally, 85% of staff reported a stronger understanding of what success looked like for those they supported.

Another innovation, What Did I Say Cards, strengthens communication between caregivers and children through structured conversation exercises. Eighty-eight percent of families reported feeling closer to one another, while 95% demonstrated active and reflective listening skills.

For children, emotional expression is often one of the greatest challenges following exposure to violence.

Flip It, an emotional literacy activity developed through our human-centered design process, has shown similarly encouraging outcomes, with 90% of participating children reporting a positive experience.

The results matter because they show that when organizations intentionally involve the people they serve in designing solutions, they can improve outcomes, strengthen trust and make better decisions about where to invest time, talent and resources.

A Model for Orange County

Across Orange County, businesses and nonprofits are navigating complex challenges in workforce development, health care access, housing, education and community well-being. The organizations that will be most effective are those willing to move beyond assumptions and listen directly to the communities they serve.

At Human Options, human-centered design has taught us that our greatest expertise does not come from having all the answers. It comes from creating the conditions for others to share theirs and leading with the curiosity, humility and continuous learning that true innovation requires. The organizations that will lead the future are those willing to listen first, learn continuously and build solutions with the people most affected.