


Organizational Change & Innovation with Kids Help Phone

Case Study




Embracing Innovation and Navigating Change




In a rapidly evolving world, organizations need to continuously adapt to meet growing demands. For the charitable sector, in particular, many charities are experiencing dramatically increased demand often without corresponding financial and staff resources to respond.

This case study explores how Kids Help Phone (KHP) embraced innovation and technology, rethought their service delivery model, and led internal change management to ensure they could address the growing needs in youth mental health.



Alisa Simon

Executive Vice President,
E-mental Health
Transformation and Chief
Youth Officer



Kids Help Phone is Canada's only 24/7 e-mental health service offering free, confidential, multi-lingual support to young people.

Alisa Simon is Executive Vice President, E-mental Health Transformation and Chief Youth Officer at Kids Help Phone. She brings more than 30 years of leadership experience in health-care access and non-profit management.

The Problem



In 2019, KHP was experiencing unprecedented demand for their services, supporting 1.9M interactions with young people. They'd already begun focusing on the digital infrastructure that would end up being critical in their response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In March 2020, when the world shut down, Kids Help Phone did not. In fact, demand for their services grew exponentially, as did their ability to be there for young people who reached out. Since 2020, KHP has supported young people more than 18M times, and this number grows every single day.

The organization was wrestling with the question, "What else can we do to meet this massive growth in demand year-over-year?" Like all charities and all health systems, simply throwing money at the problem was not a feasible option nor was it strategically creating sustainable and good outcomes. At the same time, the mental health needs of children and youth across the country were not being sufficiently met. As a 35-year old organization that operates in many ways like a start-up, they knew they had innovation in their DNA, but the challenge was to unlock it.

The Strategy

Embracing Change

Before 2017, KHP provided phone and chat counselling but could not keep up with demand. Alisa Simon, working with the organization's President and CEO, Katherine Hay, saw texting, technology, the use of Artificial Intelligence, and utilizing a trained volunteer model as a viable option to both support a higher volume of cases as well as evolve the service to meet youth where they were at. The organization's research had found that 42 per cent of young people would rather write than speak about their problem, and 71 per cent of young people prefer a non-verbal form of communication such as texting.

However, as often occurs at charities, they were struggling with internal apprehension. Employees were open to new ideas, yet needed to see and adapt to a new service communications channel and new workforce. It was a significant change to the service model.



Pushing Forward

With limited resources, the pair made the decision to push forward with their texting concept as a side project. They sought external funding to ensure the organization's core operations were not financially impacted. Having a strategic board of directors that was open to innovation and testing was crucial to moving forward.

Alisa and Katherine brought risk-averse colleagues along using the philosophy of "**trust with verification**" – that is, "give us space to explore, and we'll bring you evidence." They looked for opportunities to pilot new ideas, then would gather data and validate the effectiveness of ideas before integrating them into their core operations. This approach allowed them to minimize risk while exploring unconventional methods.



The Outcome



KHP launched their Texting Services as a pilot in Manitoba in February 2018 and the value of the program became undeniable. By the end of that year they launched the program nationally, and since 2018, KHP has supported over one million conversations in that service alone. KHP's Texting Services became the cornerstone to responding to crisis in real time, such as the pandemic, wildfires, suicide clusters, mass casualty situations and so on. It also enabled 24/7 bilingual, national, free crisis response for all ages (adults, youth and children).

The successful implementation of these new initiatives helped shift mindsets within the organization. People became more open to new ways of doing things, and the organization continues to innovate to solve problems and deliver better services.

That same year, KHP began leveraging machine learning and artificial intelligence to more effectively parse the language used by texters to triage cases based on risk level, ensuring kids most urgently needing support received responses first. This was a first in Canada – supporting people in crisis based on severity rather than queue order.

While innovation and growth at KHP was critical, quality and efficacy of services was equally important. The organization was able to grow its services while also ensuring they remained impactful for the young people they serve.

Key Learnings

KHP has been sharing their learnings and their different “ways of work” ever since the success of texting in 2018. Within a full change management framework, **one of the key learnings was understanding and defining the importance of different roles within a team.** They realized that successful teams needed a mix of visionaries, those focused on compliance and process, and those who concentrated on current operations and immediate needs.

This mix ensures the core operations are never at risk, but also makes intentional space to have others exploring new approaches that will drive impact. Importantly, having people willing to challenge new ideas is critical for evolving ideas, we well as learning how to fail (something that KHP is still learning how to do) are essential to get the best possible outcome.

The second key takeaway is that **innovation requires intention.** They were able to make the investment in hiring support to create an innovation team, and supported leaders to shift their mindset toward innovation and technology that would ensure the organization would propel forward and not “steady state” or stagnate.

“It is critical as leaders that we make time for the work needed to drive innovation,” says Alisa. “We have to be strategic and ask what we will let go of and what we will say no to.”

Alisa also learned that it is essential for leaders to make space in the schedules of those who are supporting innovation: finance teams, support teams, operations teams, etc. as innovation cannot happen in a silo. To be successful, innovation cannot be its own engine, rather it is part of the whole.



Looking Forward

As the organization moves forward, they continue to balance their focus between immediate operational needs and future innovation. Alisa now looks for innovation mindsets when hiring, regardless of role. She also meets with new staff to share both the history and the vision of where the organization is headed, ensuring everyone understands the importance of innovation in their growth.



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Alisa Simon

TIPS

10 Tips to Embrace More Innovation in Your Charity

1. Support Thinking Differently

Having a champion and a leader who supports thinking outside the box is crucial for innovation. The CEO doesn't need to be the innovator or doing the work, but has to make space for new ideas and for enabling the change-making work to happen. Encourage creative thinking and be open to new ideas, even if they don't fit within your current operating framework.

2. Pilot New Initiatives

Test new ideas on a small scale before implementing them across the board. This approach helps manage risk and validates the effectiveness of your strategies. It also allows an innovation to fail without too much downside.

3. Embrace Different Perspectives and Leverage Resistance

Different types of people are needed in teams, including visionary thinkers, compliance-focused individuals, and those focused on current operations. Each team

member brings unique strengths, and the natural tension can provide valuable insights and help refine your strategies. Use it to your advantage.

4. Change Mindsets

When people see new ideas working it can help alleviate fears. Celebrate successes, no matter how small, and use them to encourage a culture of innovation.

5. Schedule Time for Innovation

Block out time in your calendar solely for brainstorming and innovative thinking. This could be a regular whiteboard session where the only agenda item is "what's next?"



6. Prioritize Innovation

Prioritization and making space for innovation is important. Not all tasks are created equal. Be intentional with your time and energy, focusing on activities that drive change and foster innovation.

7. Delegate Some of the Day-to-Day

Part of doing innovation is thinking differently, and that requires leaders to get themselves out of the operations and delegate some of the work that they may have been doing simply out of habit.

The day-to-day work is so important to an organization. It is mission critical. You cannot just chase new innovations, but you have to find a balance between new and core work, which means, as a leader, trusting others to do some of the day-to-day work.



8. Hire Big Thinkers

Bring people into your organization who can think beyond their core job responsibilities. These individuals can offer fresh perspectives and stretch your team's thinking.

9. Use Open Office Hours to Reduce Meetings, Free-Up Time

If people book a meeting, chances are they will use the full time. Rather than scheduling a half-hour meeting for every discussion, offer regular office hours for open conversations where anyone can show up with questions or issues.

10. Make Training Relevant

Not everyone needs to know everything, and getting people excited about technology training, in particular, can be a challenge. The key to successful training is relevance. Choose someone on the team to learn new tools or processes and then have them train others within the context of the team's work to make it more meaningful.



Charity Growth Academy

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The platform invites organizations to complete a free assessment that reviews their current unique mix of tools and technologies as well as how they manage and sustain those tools. The assessment then generates a free, customized Action Plans that organizations can use as a roadmap towards a more sophisticated digital future.

www.charitygrowthacademy.org



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Kids Help Phone

Kids Help Phone (KHP) is Canada's only 24/7 e-mental health service offering free, confidential, multi-lingual support to young people. As the country's virtual care expert, we give millions of youth a safe, trusted space to connect by phone, text or self-directed supports in any moment of crisis or need. Through our digital transformation, we envision a future where every young person is able to feel out loud and get the support they need, when they need it most.

Kids Help Phone gratefully relies on the generosity of donors, volunteers, stakeholder partners, corporate partners and governments to fuel and fund our programs.

www.kidshelpphone.ca