Thinking About Pivots

Why, When, and How to Change Directions in Innovation

Innovation in Teen Pregnancy Prevention

For the Teen Pregnancy Prevention (TPP) program, innovation is expected to produce a broad spectrum of new or adapted products, programming, strategies, approaches, interventions, policies, and practices designed to prevent unintended teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections among adolescents and promote positive youth development. Innovation requires fully understanding the nature of a problem that a population is facing, and then using time and resources to build and test a solution for that problem. Innovative solutions may involve iterating on existing practices to optimize them instead of starting from scratch. Tier 2 Innovation Hubs (Tier 2 Hubs) create structures, supports, and cultures that promote this type of innovation. Hubs have a role in developing and supporting TPP innovation using incubator, accelerator, and hybrid structures that will guide innovation development teams (IDTs).

Innovation requires creative risk-taking, and new ideas will not always work as expected. If an innovation is not working as it was intended, it might be time to pivot and try something new. Knowing how and when to pivot is a necessary part of successful innovation. Hubs and innovation development teams (IDTs) are expected to identify the need for pivots and execute them at various stages of their funding periods. This guide explains pivoting, how to determine whether it is needed, how to do it, and how to learn from the process.

Both those close to an innovation and those a bit removed may identify pivots. Program facilitators can likely identify when an activity is not resonating with youth or accomplishing its intended goal. Alternatively, determining that an innovation overall is not achieving its goal may require someone more removed from its design and implementation to identify the issue. Regardless of who identifies the need to pivot or comes up with a possible solution, all

> **Pivots** are deliberate changes in an innovation, or the approach to developing an innovation. A pivot is the result of identifying a problem, selecting a course of action to address the problem, and executing and monitoring the change. Pivots may be small or large in nature.

parties should be involved in decisions to pivot. In the TPP Innovation work, this means discussing pivots with members of the IDTs, Hub, OPA, and TA providers.

Defining pivots

A pivot is a change in an innovation or in the approach to developing innovations, resulting from an identified problem. Pivoting, therefore, is executing that change. For a TPP innovation, pivoting can include dropping or overhauling an innovation or an approach to developing innovations. We know we need to pivot when we have evidence or data that tells us something is wrong. Although needing to pivot can feel disappointing, pivots can be a positive outcome of innovation work. The need for a pivot likely comes after learning key factors about your innovation, its end user, and your team. "Failing fast," which is the early identification and execution of a pivot, preserves resources for work on other promising innovations.

Pivots for Hubs and IDTs: Why and how?

There are four key overarching reasons why a Hub or IDT might need to pivot:

1. The innovation or process is not working as expected for the people it is designed for.
2. The innovation or approach is not of interest to the intended participants.
3. The innovation team is making little or no progress (forward or backward) on the innovation continuum.
4. Unexpected needs arise.

Although the broad reasons for Hub and IDT pivots are the same, the data used to support the decision to pivot may differ. For instance, Hubs might decide to pivot if their outreach strategy isn't bringing in diverse groups of IDTs; the Hub's IDTs are struggling to complete a grant-required expectation, such as recruiting youth into focus groups; or one or more of the Hub's IDTs are not moving through the innovation pipeline. Hubs might also decide to pivot by tailoring their support to the IDTs needs rather than changing their overall processes, such as hiring staff with the expertise to support IDTs in common areas of struggle.

Alternatively, IDTs might talk with the Hub staff about pivoting if focus groups or surveys conducted with an innovation end user reveal low acceptability or satisfaction. Or, they might decide to pivot if cost data from a pilot of the prototype and preliminary evidence about changes in short-term outcomes from a formative study reveal that an innovation might be too expensive given the expected benefits. Another reason to pivot may be that results from a formative evaluation indicate that implementation of the innovation had low fidelity, poor take-up, or some other marker of low-quality implementation. Alternatively, an outcome study might reveal that outcomes don't improve at all or as much as expected. Faced with data like these, an IDT might discuss with their Hub whether to change an innovation's content or delivery components to improve its acceptability or likeability, potential effectiveness, or feasibility to be implemented with high quality. It might decide to drop or pause work on an innovation that does not appear to affect outcomes or has little potential for improvement. This scenario might also prompt the Hub to make a decision to pivot in their support of IDTs if they feel that there is some change they can, and should, make to support IDTs in having more success with their innovations.

Regardless of the type of data or planned approach to execution, both Hubs and IDTs that have identified a need to pivot have some degree of knowledge, information, or data that something about an innovation isn't working. However, there might be barriers to moving from knowing you need to pivot to executing the pivot.

The identification and decision to pivot should not be made in isolation. The TPP Innovation space is a community comprised of multiple IDTs, Hubs, OPA, and TA staff. Each may have experience that informs the reasons to pivot, decision to pivot, and next steps.

Deciding to pivot

It can be challenging to change the direction of your work. First, pivoting from an idea that took time and energy to develop can feel like a loss. Remember that part of innovation means being prepared to change direction. It can be wasteful to continue moving forward with an idea that is not working when resources could be better spent on something more promising. Pivoting away from something that does not hold promise can also be valuable by informing innovations

going forward. During and after a pivot, refer to your learning agenda and learning questions to guide continued exploration and ideation.

Second, the direction in which you should pivot is not always clear. IDTs might be unsure about how to make an innovation promising. To identify the direction in which you should pivot an innovation, pause your work on the innovation and consult the logic model for guidance. Collect more data, such as user data on needs or usability, or contextual data on gaps in services or access. Consult with interested parties, such as people with lived experience, practitioners, and partners. If these strategies do not provide you with ideas for your pivot, additional conversations with your innovation community may be needed before considering dropping the innovation and focusing on another one that has more promise. For Hubs, it might be unclear how to help an IDT achieve success. Go back to the Hub innovation strategy for guidance and consult with IDT teams about their experiences, needs, and challenges. Design an action plan for support that meets the team where it is. Finally, consider new approaches to capacity assessment going forward, so you can capture these needs earlier for future cohorts.

Implementing a pivot

Step 1: Plan for pivots before you need to pivot.

Identify clear decision points in your strategy in advance. For Hubs, you might do this during the planning stages of your grant. For IDTs, you might do this when designing a testing strategy for your innovations. For instance, imagine that a Hub sets a milestone that each IDT should bring two innovations to prototype throughout their funding period. To plan for pivots, the Hub might also determine a date by which the IDTs must have at least one innovation prototyped. If teams do not meet this deadline, the Hub may decide to gather information on why they didn't meet the deadline and determine whether the IDT should pivot. Similarly, an IDT may identify points during their prototype testing at which they will plan to assess an innovation's promise and make pivot decisions with their Hub.

> **Roles of IDTs and Hubs in planning for innovation pivots**
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> When drafting definitions for milestones and processes documents, Hubs should include the criteria IDTs should meet to continue working on a given innovation. IDTs should then follow these criteria as a guide when developing their plans for developing and testing specific innovations. Refer to the milestones definition and planning guide for more details.◢

By planning, you will be ready to address the concept and option of pivoting when you approach decision points in real time. Of course, it is impossible to plan for everything, but a flexible and responsive approach to unexpected challenges will help you navigate uncharted territory.

Step 2: Seek a shared understanding and agreement between IDT members and with their Hub.

Describe the data the team used to identify the problem, communicate, and discuss the need to pivot based on the identified problem and the planned approach to pivoting. Consensus is the goal when it comes to both the decision to pivot and the plan to move forward. The ultimate decision could be made by a Hub and IDT together or among Hub staff. For example, Hub staff might decide to change in their approach to supporting their innovation community. Hub staff and an IDT might, together, decide that the IDT should drop one of its innovations.

Step 3: Document the planned pivot.

Record your planned pivot in your project materials so you can learn from your pivot later. Documentation will also help you keep your innovation or innovation strategy materials as current as possible.

Step 4: Execute the pivot.

Execute the planned pivot and document any deviations from your plan.

Step 5: Evaluate the pivot and disseminate lessons learned.

After executing a pivot, debrief as a team and document lessons learned. Give yourself and your colleagues the opportunity to process the loss or change resulting from the decision to pivot. Then, disseminate key findings from the pivot internally and externally. Documenting each stage of your pivot will help you conduct this dissemination activity. First, lean on the documentation you developed during Steps 1–3 of your pivot (above) to demonstrate what informed the pivot, such as the signs that the pivot was needed and the approach you took to discussing and agreeing on the pivot with all relevant parties (remember, this will include the Hub staff and may include OPA and TA provider staff). Finally, describe your conclusions about the pivot. For example, is the new version of the innovation accepted or feasible? Does it show signs of changing outcomes in the desire direction or being cost-effective? Or, is the new approach to identifying capacity building opportunities among IDTs capturing more nuanced TA needs from the newest IDT cohort? Sharing this information outside of your team could help other Hubs and IDTs with their own innovation work!

> **Timing your pivot**
> Consider the appropriate time frame for your pivot. Hubs and IDTs operate on different schedules. Pivots related to processes might be implemented between periods or phases. Innovation-focused pivots may be implemented immediately after identifying the need to pivot.

> **How to fail forward**
> Take what you learned from this pivot and use it to inform your next steps:
> - Consider what to include or avoid when developing innovations going forward.
> - Revise the logic model or underlying theories of change to incorporate your new understanding about the processes you tried out and pivoted from.
> - Generate new ideas to address what you learned about end user preferences and needs.

Conclusion

Pivots are a difficult, inevitable, and valuable part of innovation work that can catapult your work in new and fruitful directions. To make the most of your pivots, plan for them in advance so they are easier to execute when the need emerges, document the information you used to decide to pivot, and use conclusions about failed innovations when you return to the drawing board. Finally, remember to share and celebrate your pivots and lessons with the larger innovation community – including OPA, other Hubs, and IDTs.