



# My First Lean Startup Adventure

USING BUILD-MEASURE-LEARN TO SUPPORT STRONG  
CROSS-SECTOR PARTNERSHIPS  
CASE STUDY | MARCH 2014

by ALISON GOLD

Assistant Director for  
Knowledge & Impact,  
Living Cities



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# Table of Contents

I	Background .....	3
II	What's the Lean Startup? .....	4
III	Using the Lean Startup to Help Build Strong Cross-Sector Partnerships that Can Achieve Results .....	5
IV	What Were My Results? .....	9
V	My Three Big Takeaways About Applying Lean Startup Principles .....	11

*This case study was designed to be viewed online. It includes links to resources that will help you build your own Lean Startup experiment.*



# Background

## How do you build the “right” cross-sector partnership to achieve your goal?

It’s a question I’ve been working on a lot at Living Cities over the last couple of years for three reasons:

1. Complex social and economic problems are not the product of one sector, but of systems made up actors and institutions from across sectors. As a result, **solving complex problems is dependent on these actors and institutions working together.**
2. Funders from government and philanthropy (Living Cities included), increasingly require their grant recipients to participate in cross-sector partnerships. But, **we harbor a big assumption that leaders know how to build high-impact cross-sector partnerships and do the hard work of collaboration and continuous improvement.**
3. In our own funding portfolio, including initiatives applying the principles of collective impact like [The Integration Initiative](#) and the [StriveTogether](#) national network, **we have seen how smart and committed leaders struggle to build partnerships where there is trust, resilience, and an ongoing commitment to problem-solving** – the kind of cross-sector partnerships necessary to achieve their goals.

More than two years ago, we started digging into the question. Searching the literature to find out what was out there in terms of the management guidance for cross-sector partnerships. And while we discovered

that there have been a number of case studies about cross-sector partnerships working on specific issues, there has not been extensive inquiry— drawing from work across issues—into the structure and behaviors of effective cross-sector partnerships. So, we set out to start building it.

[Our first assumption in this work, was that if you want to build the “right” cross-sector partnership to achieve your goal, you need a systematic way and shared language to understand its structures and behaviors.](#)

Based on what we were learning from high-performing cross-sector partnerships, practitioners and funders, Living Cities developed and iterated until we had created a [cross-sector partnership strategic framework](#) which describes and defines the traits that make up a strong foundation, factors that influence success, and behaviors of high-impact efforts.

The cross-sector partnership framework, while iterative (and still evolving) took a long time to develop. Fortunately, it was well-received by its intended audiences of practitioners, participants and funders of cross-sector partnerships. But, we also knew that a well-received paper is only as effective as the file it’s stored in. **And that’s where the Lean Startup came in.**



# What's the Lean Startup?

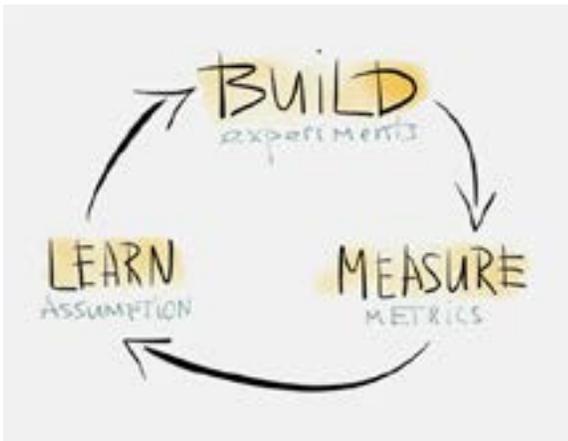
If you are not familiar with the lean startup methodology, I'd encourage you to check out the work of **Eric Reis** and **Steve Blank**.

They advocate that the traditional approach of planning everything up front and then executing is high risk because it's an all-or-nothing proposition. The Lean Startup offers a different methodology, which favors (as Blank describes it) "experimentation over elaborate planning, customer feedback over intuition, and iterative design over tradition 'big design up front' development."

deliver a new product or service under conditions of extreme uncertainty." It can be as apt for a team in a 100-year old business as it is for a 22-year old nonprofit as it is for two grad students tinkering in a garage.

*Image source:* <http://ramlijohn.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/buildmeasurelearn.jpg>

According to Reis, the goal of the Lean Startup "is to figure out the right thing to build" by recognizing that "learning is the essential unit of progress." And you can do this learning by building experiments, measuring the results, which then help you to learn and revise your assumptions.



One note, about the term "startup." Reis has [offered this definition](#), "A startup is a human institution designed to

# Using the Lean Startup to Help Build Strong Cross-Sector Partnerships that Can Achieve Results

## A Frame the problem and the experiment!

The build-measure-learn cycle is a powerful tool, but it's easy to fall into two traps with it. The first trap is that you build, measure, and then you get to the learn part and you are left scratching your head because you weren't clear on what you were trying to learn in the first place. The second possible trap is that you build-measure-learn, but [hindsight bias](#) tricks your brain into believing that the results you got are what you expected all along.

And this is a problem, because as Zach Nies of Rally Software says so eloquently in his [excellent 5 ½ minute video](#) on this very topic: "learning lives at the intersection [where] we confront what actually happens, with what we expected to happen. And if we don't write down what we expected to happen, our brain will rob us our insights and those learnings."

Nies offers that before you build-measure-learn, you need to answer the following questions in writing:

1. What do you want to learn and why?
2. What hypothesis are you trying to test?
3. What are your materials and method?
4. What variables are you going to control?

### 5. How will you measure the results?

I wanted to learn: what does it take to get staff, participants, and funders to determine if their cross-sector partnership is structured and behaving in a way that can plausibly lead to their intended goal? And if a partnership's structures and behaviors can't plausibly lead to their intended goals, what does it take to get them to change their structures and behaviors so they could?

Why did I want to learn these things? Because Living Cities believes that cross-sector partnerships are a promising tool for solving some of our country's seemingly intractable problems.

The hypotheses I was trying to test using the Lean Startup were:

- If a cross-sector partnership uses the [Living Cities cross-sector partnership framework](#) to self-assess, then its staff, participants, and funders will better understand its current behavior and alternatives.
- If the staff, participants, and funders of a cross-sector partnership better understand elements of its structures and behaviors, which are misaligned, then they will want to make changes so the partnership is better positioned to achieve its intended results.

## **B** How I built my experiment!

So, what did I actually do to test these hypotheses?

### 1. Recruited Testers

(Estimated Time: ~4 hours)

From December 2013-January 2014, we used the Living Cities [blog](#), social media (Twitter and LinkedIn) and email outreach to identify 10 testers who met the following criteria:

- Involved in a cross-sector partnership currently working in the U.S. or Canada as a staff member, participant, or funder.
- Able to complete an online assessment about the cross-sector partnership.
- Willing to review the findings from the online assessment and note feedback and questions on the usefulness of the information received.
- Available to do a follow-up interview with Living Cities about the assessment and its findings and how they can be made more useful.
- Committed to spending ~2 hours as a beta tester (between the assessment, feedback report review, and interview).

### 2. Developed an Online Assessment Tool & Scoring Rubric

(Estimated time: ~6 hours—with the caveat that it didn't take very much time since we took existing research and translating it into a different format, weren't building the ideas entirely from scratch.)

I went low tech! After futzing around for an hour or two trying to find an online tool that allowed us to automate

the results, I reminded myself to work lean, and [Google Forms](#), a scoring rubric and some hand scoring would meet my needs. Want to see what these tools looked like?

- [Online Assessment Tool](#) (Created in Google Forms)
- [Feedback Report/Scoring Rubric Template](#) (Created in Word)
- [Beta Testing is Live!](#) (Created in Email).

### 3. Analyzed the Results & Prepared Feedback Reports

(Estimated Time: ~8 hours)

As any teacher knows, it takes a surprising amount of time to grade things! So the early Feedback Reports took a lot of time to put together until I got the hang of it. The parts that were most time consuming were the initial analysis and pattern identification, and [the feedback/questions that the tester's responses raised](#). However, the more I did them, the more easily I saw patterns, and the more there became a stock set of language to provide as feedback.



## How I built my experiment!

How did I measure the results?

### Follow-Up Interviews & Notes

(Estimated time: ~12 hours, including scheduling and reminder emails)

Nine of the ten beta testers who completed the online assessment have participated in follow-up interviews. Almost all the interviews were conducted over video conference unless that wasn't possible, in which case we did it over the phone.

One of the things I was very cognizant of was setting the tone that people didn't have to be nice about the work. I started every interview thanking them and saying that this process is a **minimum viable product** so the tester's honest and critical feedback and input is important to determining if it's useful for practitioners and funders, and if so, how it could be made more so.

I also structured the interview so that in the first 20 minutes they had free reign to react to whatever it is that they wanted to. During this free time, some testers talked about what they liked or did not like about the tool and the report itself, but all of them talked about their cross-sector partnership and what was going on relating to the findings in the report. (I took this as a good sign that it was resonating with them).

For the remainder of the time, I asked them the following questions:

1. What was or wasn't accurate?
2. What was or wasn't useful?
3. What would make it more useful?
4. Will you use it?
5. If so, how?



## What (and how) I learned about my assumptions!

So, what did I actually do to test these hypotheses?

### Using my Learning Log

(Estimated Time: ~2hours)

Throughout the "measure" stage, I took copious notes. But, what ended up being the most powerful and useful tool in this process was my learning log! What's a learning log? **For me it was a spreadsheet where throughout every step of the process of development, I wrote down the date, the opportunity (a meeting, a doc I was developing, a conversation I had), what I learned/what happened, and any implications or emerging hypotheses.** Like many things when you're learning how to apply the Lean Startup, this was challenging at first, but once I got

the hang of it (and started seeing how useful it was to remind myself of where my thinking had started from), it became second nature to update it on an ongoing basis.

As a result, it was really easy to understand the answers to the following questions when the best test interviews were complete.

# What Were My Results?

## A What were my validated learnings?

**Hypothesis 1:** *If a cross-sector partnership uses the Living Cities cross-sector partnership framework to self-assess, then its staff, participants, and funders involved will better understand their partnership's current behavior and alternatives.*

All nine testers who were interviewed agreed that the findings contained in their report were accurate, and useful. Some of the most common themes of the usefulness related to the following:

- The power of being forced to reflect on structures and behaviors, which when in the midst of the work, is often hard to do.
- The **well-defined terminology** in the assessment tool and feedback report (a nice validation of Living Cities' initial assumption that you need a systematic way and shared language to talk about structures and behaviors).
- The **questions/feedback sections** which helped testers continue to reflect and think about what to do next, but did not offer specific answers or resources.
- In five of the interviews, there was a question or point raised that the tester cited as really sticking with them, or being something that they had not thought about or understood in their partnership before.

**Hypothesis 2:** *If the staff, participants, and funders of a cross-sector partnership better understand elements of its structures and behaviors, which are misaligned, then they will want to make changes so the partnership is better positioned to achieve its intended results.*

All nine testers indicated that they planned to use the findings in their feedback report.

But, depending on how thorny their partnership's issues were, and their role in the partnership (staff vs. participant), there was variation in their belief that they had the ability to make those changes based only on the report:

- Three testers indicated they already had plans for how they would share the information with staff or participants in their partnership. While another two testers indicated they were planning to use it as a strategy document for themselves as they staffed their partnerships going forward.
- Three testers indicated that to be able to change structures and behaviors in their cross-sector partnership, they needed a way to raise this conversation within their partnership.
- And almost all the testers indicated that to be able to change structures and behaviors in a cross-sector partnership, they would really value not just the identification of potential challenges and misalignments in structures and behaviors, but being connected to ideas/tools/strategies that can

help them change those things. It was also notable that all those people indicated that the ideas/tools/strategies didn't have to come from cross-sector partnerships, or efforts from similar topical areas.

## **B** What were my ancillary learnings (what I learned that I didn't expect to learn)?

- Patterns emerged quickly—in the beta test responses, and in the interview responses.
- The assessment approach might be more useful for driving change if multiple members of the same cross-sector partnership complete it, and they review the finding together.
- Participating in the testing process activated people to be ambassadors for the work on strengthening cross-sector partnerships. Of the 10 testers, only two were people I knew prior to releasing the work on cross-sector partnerships, two others were people I connected with prior to the beta testing because they had reached out after reading the framework. The rest? They came to the process through social media or other people in the Living Cities network passing the opportunity along to them. But that's not all, in the 3 weeks since the testing has concluded, two of the testers have already connected other partnerships to me who want to go through the process. One of the powerful pieces of the Lean Startup approach is that it helps you build an audience/consumer for the work that you are developing.

## **C** What are my next steps?

Building off of both the validated learnings and the ancillary learnings, I have three next steps:

1. Based on the emerging hypothesis: if multiple members of the partnership participate in the assessment, then it will be easier to talk about and address the challenges and misalignments in structure and behavior, I'll be working with a couple of the testers to adapt the online assessment for multiple participants.
2. Another way that I'll be exploring the emerging hypothesis about multiple testers from the same partnership is during an in-person workshop where we'll be doing an adapted version of this exercise in teams.
3. The third item on my to do list is to clearly articulate the patterns of misalignment and weakness that I've identified as common in cross-sector partnerships. Then I'll begin to crowdsource and curate a set of resources and tools that can help support staff, participants, and funders to address them.

# My Three Big Takeaways About Applying Lean Startup Principles

## 1 You Can Learn A Lot in a Short Period of Time

From late January to late February, I spent less than a week working to build-measure-learn in order to test my hypotheses about strengthening cross-sector partnerships. And honestly, some folks who practice Lean Startup might say that that was way too much. But given the cross-sector partnership research I conducted for Living Cities took about 3-4 months of active work over the course of two years to turn into a framework and associated reports, it was incredibly exciting to be able to learn so much, in such a short period of time.

## 2 Don't Build-Measure-Learn Until You Frame

The build-measure-learn cycle is a powerful tool, but until you can answer these questions, it's just a waste of time:

1. What do you want to learn and why?
2. What hypothesis are you trying to test?
3. What are your materials and method?
4. What variables are you going to control?
5. How will you measure the results?

## 3 IMHO, The Greatest Tool For Doing this Work is a Learning Log

For you it might be a journal or a notebook, for me it was a spreadsheet. But, it doesn't matter the format, what matters is that throughout the work you track:

- What you did.
- What you learned/what happened while doing it.
- And how it was changing or expanding your thinking.

It might seem arduous at first, but it will eventually become an unparalleled resource for both the problem you're trying to solve today, and for identifying problems you want to solve in the future.

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*Are you using Lean Startup principles in your work? Or are you interested in building strong cross-sector partnerships to solve wicked problems? Did you stumble on this case for some other reason entirely? Any way you slice it, I'd love to hear your questions, feedback or experiences. Say hello via Twitter using @AKGold11 and/or @Living\_Cities (hashtags #leanimpact and #xsector). Reach out directly to agold [at] livingcities.org or check out other work going on at Living Cities at [www.LivingCities.org](http://www.LivingCities.org).*

**SPECIAL THANKS:**

Special thanks to the beta testers whose time, feedback, and insight helped advance the cross-sector partnership online assessment tool, and made this case study possible: Evelyn Burnett, Isaac Castillo, Patti Choby, Sean Collins, Nicole de Beaufort, Sharron Dimario, Steve Fritsch, John Moon, Juliette Price, and Russ Rydin.

**AUTHOR:**

**Alison Gold**

 (646) 442-2238

 agold@livingcities.org

 @AKGold11

Join the conversation and find additional resources about cross-sector partnerships at [LivingCities.org](http://LivingCities.org) or on Twitter [@Living\\_Cities](https://twitter.com/Living_Cities), or by using the hashtag [#leanimpact](https://twitter.com/hashtag/leanimpact).

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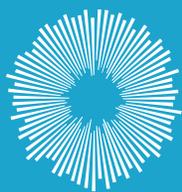
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1040 Avenue of the Americas, Floor 17  
New York, NY 10018

1730 M Street NW, Suite 400  
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