

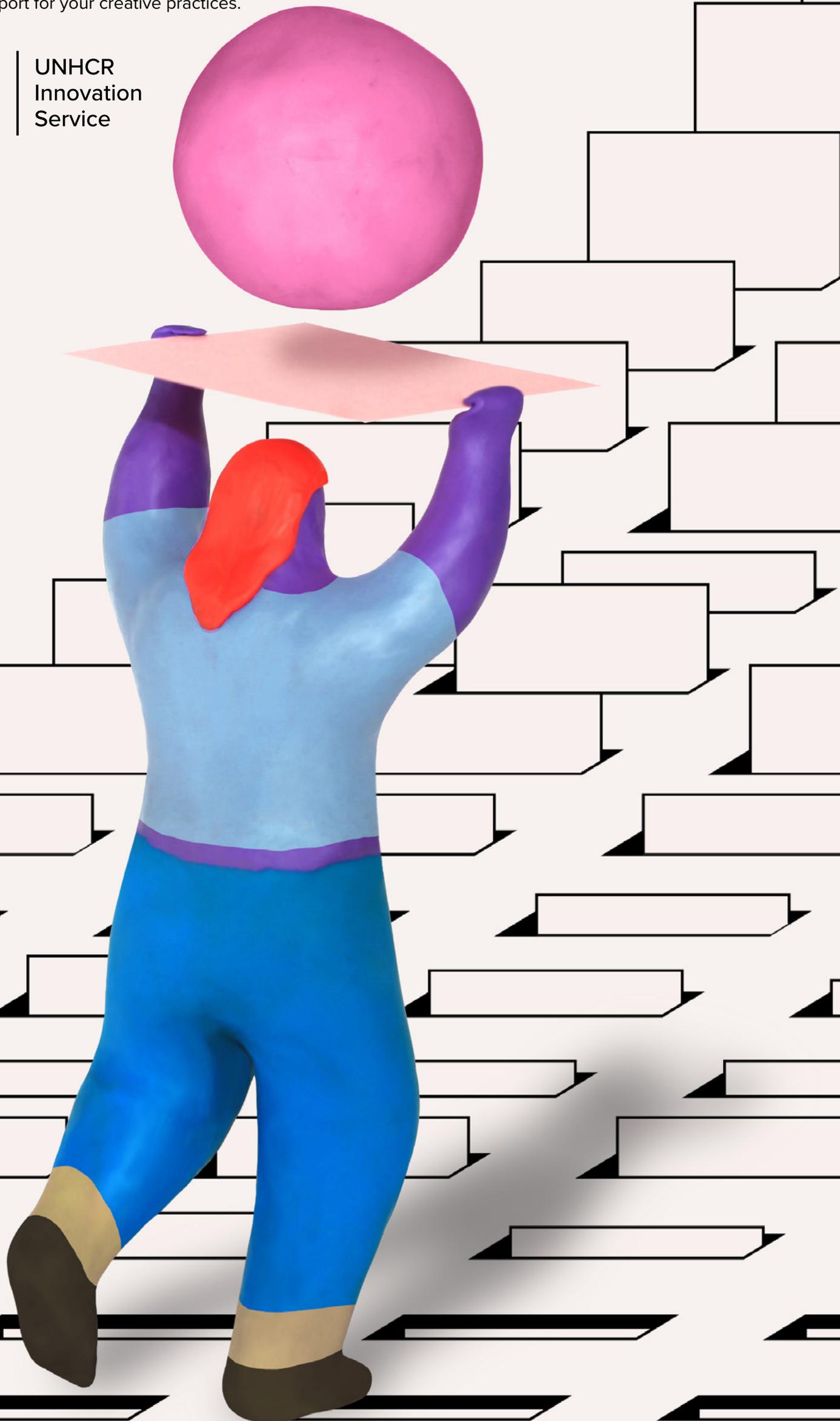
Building Support for Your Ideas:

How to apply social, behavioral and cognitive science to gain support for your creative practices.



UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency

UNHCR
Innovation
Service



Building Support for Your Ideas:

How to apply social, behavioral and cognitive science to gain support for your creative practices.

Ann Christiano; Annie Neimand, PhD; Lauren Parater, Hans Park, Lissette Tolentino

The Center for Public Interest Communications of the University of Florida,

United Nations Refugee Agency's Innovation Service

You've had that moment of blistering insight, when a long-sought solution visits you in the quiet of a walk, or a big idea emerges from talking through a challenge with a trusted friend. Or you've been slogging away to do your research for a project and you come across a solution someone has found elsewhere, and you just know it will work for you. Those moments are elating, and if you're like us, you tear down the hall to share your brilliant insight with your boss, or your colleagues. You excitedly blurt out your idea, and they stare at you like a dog who's been shown a card trick. You. Get. Nothing.

Innovators and change agents are required to do what hasn't been done. That often has us trying to gain support for ideas or approaches that may feel threatening, confusing or overwhelming to the people whose support we need to implement them: our bosses, partners, boards, clients, colleagues and donors. Our potential to make change, however, is driven as much by our ability to get others to support our ideas as our ability to identify the right path.

In the UN High Commissioner for Refugees' (UNHCR) Innovation Service, we witness how difficult it can be for staff around the world to build support for creative endeavors within our institution. Getting an idea past the gates of middle management can be a crusade. The problem of effectively communicating novel or abstract concepts is familiar to people working on innovation, and it presents a huge barrier to developing ideas that look beyond the status quo.

The need to build support and persuade isn't unique to the United Nations--many large organizations struggle with the same core challenge. By relying on the strategies outlined, we can understand how to design effective and tailored approaches to get buy-in for even the most forward-looking ideas.

It's one thing to hatch a brilliant strategy, another to gain the support, time, money and endorsement you need to execute on it. If your courageous and highly strategic plan is met with a collective yawn, antagonism--or even worse, head-patting comments like, "I don't disagree with you, but we can't do that," "I feel this won't work," "we've tried that," "I love your optimism," or, "I love that, but I'd hate for you to be disappointed when it doesn't work," it can be easy to take others' lack of enthusiasm personally. You might assume that your colleagues don't like or trust you, or respect your expertise. Or that people are successful in driving change because they're smarter, better connected or more likeable.

But that's not what's happening. To gain support for your ideas, you have to crawl inside someone else's mind. Once you apply some research-driven insight about how people think, you can use those forces in your favor and get the support you need. By applying the same restraint, curiosity and strategic thinking that led you to your big idea in the first place, you can secure the resources to make your idea happen.

So, let's rewind and build support for your idea like the change agent you are. We'll unpack the reasons you may not be getting the support you're looking for, and show you how to get the resources you need.

Four Steps to Building Support for Your Idea

1. Make your idea concrete.

When you're advocating for change, you have to get hyper-focused on exactly what you want to change, and it can be hard to separate the result you're working toward from the specific actions that can make that happen. That means you have to avoid abstraction when you describe your idea. If you lead with abstract concepts or plans, you leave space for people to insert what they think those terms or processes will look like. Remember, calls to action and goals are not the same thing. Just like with campaigns, we have to give people specific, meaningful and actionable things to do.

If you present your idea without concrete details, people may fill in the missing information with their own assumptions, and may even come to the most extreme interpretations of your idea using their own experience or anxieties. Abstraction is easily exploited or misinterpreted.

For example, in one study, more than 2,000 people were asked how a typical liberal or conservative would answer a question. Both liberals and conservatives were accurate in saying liberals would care more about fairness and protection from harm and conservatives would care more about protection of the ingroup, respect for authority and preserving the sacred (typically liberal and conservative values, respectively). However, both overestimated their concerns about how someone with different political views would solve a social problem, and in both cases, the groups relied on stereotypes to make exaggerated assumptions about others' likely actions.¹

Research on motivated skepticism suggests people examine information that is consistent with their existing beliefs less critically than information that is inconsistent with their beliefs.² In another study evaluating the word phrasing for questions about spending for social programs, social psychologist and survey methodologist Kenneth Rasinski found that people were more likely to support funds for "halting crime" than "law enforcement," drug addiction" than "drug rehabilitation," and for "assistance to the poor" than for "welfare." Rasinski theorizes that this may result from loaded abstract terms evoking different meanings, and, as a result, affect how people respond.³ He writes:

"When a respondent thinks about halting crime he or she may bring to mind a set of uniformly positive beliefs and feelings associated with the personal and social benefits of a lowered crime rate. Conversely, the reference to law enforcement may call up a host of both positive and negative beliefs and feelings, such as those associated with crime prevention, law and order, traffic and parking tickets, corruption, and police brutality, leading to a lowered overall level of support."

1 Graham, J., Nosek, B. A., & Haidt, J. (2012). The moral stereotypes of liberals and conservatives: Exaggeration of differences across the political spectrum. *PLoS one*, 7(12). <https://dx.doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0050092>

2 Ditto, P. H., & Lopez, D. F. (1992). Motivated skepticism: Use of differential decision criteria for preferred and nonpreferred conclusions. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 63(4), 568-584. <https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/0022-3514.63.4.568>

3 Rasinski, K. A. (1989). The effect of question wording on public support for government spending. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 53(3), 388-394. <https://doi.org/10.1086/269158>

Minimize the potential that people will misinterpret your idea by using specific, concrete language to describe the change you're advocating for.

For example, researchers studying how to build a more gender diverse and inclusive workplace found that ambiguity is a major driver of bias. Some research has shown that people will rely on gender stereotypes and assumptions if they aren't provided specific criteria for evaluation or specific actions they can take to address bias in the workplace.⁴ If you're trying to diversify your team, there's a big difference between expressing an objective to hire people from a range of backgrounds and advocating for specific changes in the hiring process like shifting the criteria for evaluation to a candidate's potential rather than their pedigree, leaving positions open longer, changing the marketing plan for the position to activate new social networks or rewriting your position description to make your goals for inclusion obvious to candidates.

To get to an actionable level of specificity, and overcome abstraction, we like to use the [Back-of-the-Envelope Guide to Strategy](#) (we've written about this for the SSIR blog). This is a four-question framework teams can use to focus their strategy.

1. What do we want to be true that isn't true right now?
2. Who has to act or change their behavior to make it true?
3. What would they believe if they were doing that?
4. Where is their attention?

Answering these questions will help you translate your goal into a strategy by identifying the precise difference you're working toward, and identify the kinds of support you need and from whom. You'll also be able to connect what you're asking for to what they already care about, and where they're putting their attention and effort. With those insights in hand, you're positioned to present your concrete idea to the individuals who can offer the support you need in a manner that's consistent with what they already value and pay attention to.

[UNHCR's Innovation Service](#) struggled to communicate their work in the face of abstraction, realizing that many people in the organization were associating innovation with gadgets and famous inventors like Steve Jobs, rather than viewing it as a tool that can build new ways of thinking. They adapted these four questions to build [a communications strategy](#) that moved away from jargon and technical language to one that embraced intentional, deliberate, and meaningful communication that spoke to their audience's worldview. The Innovation Service team realized that to make staff members care about innovation, they needed to reframe it as an approach that not only helped the organization to become more efficient and future-oriented, but as a critical tool to better support refugees and displaced communities.

The framework helped the team move beyond thinking about innovation from their group's distinct point of view and take the perspective of those they needed to reach in the organization, but also to dig into some of the beliefs and behaviors they wanted to change within the organization that supported new ways of working.

⁴ Correll, S. J. (2017). SWS 2016 Feminist Lecture: Reducing Gender Biases In Modern Workplaces: A Small Wins Approach to Organizational Change. *Gender & Society*, 31(6), 725–750. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0891243217738518>

2. Figure out exactly what you need.

Once you've identified precisely what you're trying to change and who can help you do it, you need to think through the resources you need to make it happen. Break these down by time, budget, permission, support and access. Whose time will you need? How much of it? What kinds of unique skills will they bring to the effort? Who has to approve these various changes? Who (or what) do you need access to put these changes in place? Is there a community you need to engage and bring on board? Is there someone whose support will bring you more credibility?

Organizational research suggests that when people face uncertainty or a new context, they seek out more information about their role and what is expected of them.^{5,6} Alleviate this urge by sharing specifics and reducing others' uncertainty.

3. Find the right person to ask --and become an expert in them.

Once you've identified these various resources, make a list of who actually holds those resources. Identify what each can do within their available power and resources to help make your idea happen. Do as much homework as you can. For example, if you're meeting with someone who has a budget available, learn as much as you can about the size of their budget, and how it's intended to be used. If you need time from a colleague to apply their skill set to a particular project, understand what else they have on their plate and how much time they have available to work on the project you're advocating for. You may also find that the success of your project or idea may require buy-in from a specific group or community. Whether you're focused on getting resources from an organizational leader or peer, or a community, you have to become an expert in them. When you've identified who controls the resources you need or the community whose support you need, you need to become an expert in them and how their minds work.

Gaining others' support requires you to understand how people think. This is where cognitive, behavioral and social science is most helpful. Here are four steps that will help you understand their minds:

Identify their anchors.

People rely on mental shortcuts to quickly assess situations and make decisions. One of those shortcuts is what researchers call anchors--when people make decisions based disproportionately on initial information they receive. This point of reference influences what people see as plausible and how they will respond to an idea. When people have a set idea of what they believe, they evaluate new information in relation to that anchor point. In other words, our preferences reflect the information we already have and believe to be true.⁷

A number of factors influence the weight of an anchor, including the source of the anchor. People tend to trust information that comes from in-group members and trusted messengers. What is their motivation for accuracy (seeking out new information needed to make a decision) v. self affirmation

5 Lee, F. (1997). When the going gets tough, the tough ask for help? Help seeking and power motivation in organizations. *Organizational behavior and human decision processes*, 72(3), 336-363. <https://doi.org/10.1006/obhd.1997.2746>

6 Morrison, E. W. (1993). Newcomer information seeking: Exploring types, modes, sources, and outcomes. *Academy of Management Journal*, 36(3), 557-589. <https://doi.org/10.5465/256592>

7 Tversky, A., & Kahneman, D. (1974). Judgment under uncertainty: Heuristics and biases. *Science*, 185(4157), 1124-1131. DOI: 10.1126/science.185.4157.1124

(does this confirm what they already believe)? What is the mood and personality of the individual?

It is important to know the anchor points of the people you need to get support from to know whether you can lean into their anchor points or strategically move them toward new ones. How do we overcome anchors? One study found that asking people to consider the opposite of the anchor--thinking about why an anchor is inappropriate--can reduce the anchoring effect. For instance, this means making them consider arguments against their anchor may reduce confidence in their initial anchor.⁸

Understand their perception of potential for harm.

How does the change you're working toward affirm or undermine the identity of the person whose support you are trying to gain? Does it require a mindset shift? Might the success of this idea diminish their status or expertise? If you can understand the ways others might perceive harm to themselves or their allies, you can also identify ways to mitigate their opposition to your idea.

Research by Kurt Gray, professor of psychology and neuroscience at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, and Chelsea Schein, postdoctoral fellow and Lecturer in Legal Studies and Business Ethics at the Wharton School of Business at the University of Pennsylvania, have found that people have gut emotional reactions to information that guide their judgements and decision making. If information makes people feel bad, they will find a reason to justify why it is wrong or untrue; if information makes people feel good, they will find a reason to justify why it is right or true. In their work, they have found that what guides gut instinct is perception of harm. If someone perceives harm to themselves, their community, their livelihood or something they deeply value, they will find a reason to justify why that information is wrong.^{9,10}

Building support for your idea requires that you uncover where the individual or group perceives harm and design your communications in a way that either acknowledges their concerns but helps them see the benefits of your idea, or avoids triggering perceptions of harm. One way to do so is to observe how they talk about projects and ideas, and the explanation they offer when they have decided against a project. Observing past behavior will offer clues about how they see the world and what drives their decision making.

A project team under UNHCR's Innovation Fund knew that if they did not account for their audience's perspective on potential for harm, they would have critical challenges in gathering support for their idea. UNHCR lawyers currently rely on [refworld.org](https://www.refworld.org/), a UNHCR database of legal documents relating to refugee law, to inform their arguments to support people seeking asylum. However, the database isn't always easy to navigate and documents can be difficult to access and sort through. UNHCR's Refugee Status Determination (RSD) Section wanted to see if artificial intelligence could help them develop quality legal arguments more efficiently. They wanted to meld human intelligence with artificial intelligence to help simplify the process of identifying appropriate documents for each asylum case. This collective intelligence approach raised red flags amongst the project team and the broader organization.

8 Mussweiler, T., Strack, F., & Pfeiffer, T. (2000). Overcoming the inevitable anchoring effect: Considering the opposite compensates for selective accessibility. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 26(9), 1142-1150. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F01461672002611010>

9 Schein, C., & Gray, K. (2018). The theory of dyadic morality: Reinventing moral judgment by redefining harm. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 22(1), 32-70. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1088868317698288>

10 Griffin, L. & Neimand, A.(Hosts). (2017). The science behind this crazy election season. (No. 2). In *Seven Minutes in Heaven With a Scientist*. <https://soundcloud.com/frankgathering/the-science-behind-this-crazy-election-season>

Before launching the idea, they knew building trust in the technology would be critical for its success. Even the project team was apprehensive about relying on such a system to support a process as delicate and consequential as one related to a person seeking asylum. Recognizing this potential for harm in reputation and work that they deeply value, the team is working to build trust from the first phase of the project by speaking to the worldview of UNHCR's lawyers.

The project leads knew that they would have to appeal to how the legal team valued precision and efficiency in their legal work if they were going to get buy-in for the idea. By framing the new addition of the system in a way that appeals and supports their aspirations in being more accurate, efficient, and merely assists them to write the highest quality argument on behalf of asylum seekers, they were able to mitigate some perceptions of harm. These qualities also contributed to their aspirations in being better humanitarian lawyers, focusing in on how they value the positive impact of their work on asylum seekers.

Understand and affirm their role within the organization.

Each of us has our own goals and values. As you think about the person whose support you need, think about what *their* goals and values are, and how what you're working toward will help them achieve those goals or affirm those values. Social psychologists have found that people are motivated to maintain a positive sense of self. If information threatens how they see themselves--creating cognitive dissonance-- they will find ways to maintain a positive sense of self in interactions which may include avoiding or being skeptical of the information presented to them¹¹

When people are prompted to think about the core personal values that provide a sense of personal integrity, they are less likely to feel threatened from information.¹² For example, researchers have found that asking people to reflect on their positive values lowers their inclination to avoid information and opens them up to positive health behaviors-- such as lowering caffeine intake, visiting a doctor, or stances in capital punishment and reproductive rights.^{13,14,15} Understanding the identities important to the people whose support you need and affirming those identities before you seek their support may help them open up to your idea.

At UNHCR, understanding the identities and values of staff was crucial for building support for an internal campaign to improve processes and systems within the organization. Launched by one of [UNHCR's Innovation Fellows](#), the #More4Refugees campaign aims to release resources stuck in time-consuming processes and redirect them to boosting programs that provide more direct value to refugee communities.

The #More4Refugees campaign has multiple phases including asking staff for suggestions on how existing processes can be simplified to maximize impact and UNHCR staff for their ideas on how UNHCR could improve its business processes.

11 Steele, C. M. (1988). The psychology of self-affirmation: Sustaining the integrity of the self. *Advances in experimental social psychology*, 21(2), 261-302.

12 Cohen, G. L., & Sherman, D. K. (2014). The psychology of change: Self-affirmation and social psychological intervention. *Annual review of psychology*, 65, 333-371. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-010213-115137>

13 Sherman, D. K., & Cohen, G. L. (2002). Accepting threatening information: Self-Affirmation and the reduction of defensive biases. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 11(4), 119-123. <https://doi.org/10.1111%2F1467-8721.00182>

14 Howell, J. L., & Shepperd, J. A. (2012). Reducing information avoidance through affirmation. *Psychological science*, 23(2), 141-145. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0956797611424164>

15 Cohen, G. L., Aronson, J., & Steele, C. M. (2000). When beliefs yield to evidence: Reducing biased evaluation by affirming the self. *Personality and social psychology bulletin*, 26(9), 1151-1164. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F01461672002611011>

The team knew that by framing the campaign to speak to the staff's identity as humanitarians who want to support refugees, they were more likely to succeed. The #More4Refugees initiative encourages greater efficiency, transparency, and accountability while also affirming people's role in the organization. The team was also careful to frame the campaign in a way that spoke to these humanitarian goals and avoid undermining or diminishing staff work as unproductive or ineffective.

The intentionality of putting UNHCR values first and demonstrating how the campaign would have a direct impact on refugees' lives mitigated some of these risks and painted a long term positive vision people could buy into.

Another way to activate the power of affirmation is by expressing appreciation for what they've already done. Be sincere about it. Even if you don't like this person, or they have a deeply different worldview than you, find something you can praise them for that you genuinely admire or appreciate.

Understand and speak to their worldview.

People have different worldviews that shape how they see the world and the ideas and information they support. Some people operate from individualistic worldviews, others from more collectivist ones. People who are individualistic value self-reliance and tend to believe "what is good for me is good for everyone else," where people who are more collectivist believe "what is good for the community is good for me," tend to distrust social hierarchies and value social equality.¹⁶ Those who operate from a more individualistic perspective will likely respond to a narrative that employs the hero's journey narrative. Those who operate from a collectivist perspective will resonate more with a discussion of systems change, and how making changes to specific systems in place will result in better outcomes for everyone.¹⁷ It's helpful to think of this as a spectrum--no one fits squarely into any of these boxes.

For UNHCR's Division of Human Resources (DHR), an idea to use Artificial Intelligence (AI) to assist with the recruitment screening process was designed with UNHCR's Innovation Service. With staff across the agency rotating from their positions every few years and external talent pools of thousands of hopeful hires across 29 categories, recruiters spend meaningful time on each posting sifting through interested applicants. The AI system was part of a multi-step process to screen applicants in the agency's talent pools. Humans still, however, validate the machine process or outcome and handle the nuances of recruitment. The team behind the project knew that recruiters would be apprehensive of the idea for myriad reasons including a lack of trust in artificial intelligence and a lack of understanding of how the new system would assist their workflow. Artificial intelligence was perceived as replacing possible positions rather than a tool for new ways of working within the organization.

Additionally, the team identified two worldviews of recruiters within the Division of Human Resources. One group of recruiters was overenthusiastic, occupying a worldview where the AI system and technology would solve all their problems, and the other group, perhaps overly apprehensive, was working within an opposite worldview that the technology would not only not solve their problems, but would likely make the day-to-day manual work even more difficult. The second group worried that the inaccuracy of the system would then reflect badly on them and their work performance.

¹⁶ Kahan, D. M., & Braman, D. (2003). More statistics, less persuasion: A cultural theory of gun-risk perceptions. *University of Pennsylvania Law Review*, 151(4), 1291-1327. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3312930>

¹⁷ Kahan, D. (2013, March 25). *Who *are* these guys? Cultural cognition profiling, part 1*. The Cultural Cognition Project. <http://www.culturalcognition.net/blog/2013/3/25/who-are-these-guys-cultural-cognition-profiling-part-1.html>

Rather than framing their idea as a one-stop-shop solution, the team introduced the new HR screening system as an assistant they could rely on during their day-to-day work. They socialized this framing by visually displaying the early mock-ups as a guide dog. Inspired by artificial intelligence tools from outside of UNHCR, they tested the idea with a small group within Human Resources who reacted positively to the idea of a friendly assistant. The team tested this framing of the AI assistant as a guide dog with a wider group, even holding a competition with the recruiters to help name the assistant.

This narrative became more concrete and allowed the project team to build the trust and understanding of the solution they needed to ensure they could test the idea internally. This approach also catalyzed numerous other opportunities to build support for the idea, including specialized training on the role of bias in the human and machine recruitment process, understanding how external companies were already undertaking ideas similar to their project, and creating the space for continuous feedback with recruiters so they also could meaningfully contribute to the design process.

4. Script your idea.

Once you've done all this background work to understand the mind of the person you're hoping to bring on board, it's time to think about how you're actually going to present your idea.

What's likely to work may be counter-intuitive. Here are **eight** tools to help you.

Tell great stories.

We've [written extensively](#) about how to tell stories that inspire people to act, and why they are so important to helping people gain new perspectives. When people are transported into a compelling story, they are less likely to counter-argue because they do not perceive that the person telling the story is trying to persuade them of something

To achieve this result though, the story has to be a *great* story. Scholars studying narrative transportation suggest immersive stories have the power to transform the perspective of those who experience them. Immersive stories transport us through compelling characters we like and identify with, compelling and unpredictable plots and vivid details that help us feel as though we're experiencing what happens in the story for ourselves.^{18,19,20}

If you wrap your request in a story, your listeners are more likely to remember your points than if you simply share facts and data.^{21,22} Using a narrative structure can also overcome biases that creep in when we share facts and data without context. When people hear data without context, they may use their existing beliefs to make sense of your data in ways that align with what they believe to be true.²³

Of course it is important to have the data to support your ideas, but research suggests it is more

18 Green, M. C., & Brock, T. C. (2000). The role of transportation in the persuasiveness of public narratives. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 79(5), 701-721. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.79.5.701

19 Green, M. C. (2006). Narratives and cancer communication. *Journal of communication*, 56, S163-S183. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2006.00288.x>

20 Green, M. C., & Sestir, M. (2017). Transportation theory. *The international encyclopedia of media effects*, 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118783764.wbieme0083>

21 Bauer, L. M., Olheiser, E. L., Altarriba, J., & Landi, N. (2009). Word type effects in false recall: Concrete, abstract, and emotion word critical lure. *The American Journal of Psychology*, 122(4), 469-481. www.jstor.org/stable/27784422

22 Graesser, A. C., Haut-Smith, H., Cohen, A. D., & Pyles, L. D. (1980). Advanced outlines, familiarity, and text genre on retention or prose. *The Journal of Experimental Education*, 48(4), 281-290. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220973.1980.11011745>

23 Shashkevich-Stanford, A. (2018, June, 8). How to use stats to fight racial inequality, not support it. *Futurity*. <https://www.futurity.org/statistics-racial-inequality-1779492-2/>

effective to tell stories of an individual whose experience illustrates a data point, followed by a data point, or share stories of communities than to share data alone. If you are telling a story about a systems issue, the system should be the setting a character or characters must navigate or the villain that must be challenged.^{24,25}

More than anything, tell stories of how people are being affected by the problem you're trying to solve, or tell a story about how your organization will be better after you succeed.

Make your ideas small.

It's tempting to enthusiastically present your idea as a big, bold breakthrough. But big, bold ideas can trigger feelings of inefficacy, meaning that your idea seems so big that people may not see how their individual action to support can or will make a difference. Research suggests that feelings of efficacy-- a belief that our actions will make a difference-- is critical for motivating people to act. When people feel like they cannot achieve a goal or make a difference on an issue, they are less likely to act.^{26,27} People have to see the benefit of the action to themselves or those affected by the problem you're trying to solve.²⁸ Research also suggests that when we include compelling and tangible details of the intervention, it can increase feelings of efficacy.²⁹ Make your idea small by focusing on specific changes, and talk about them in ways that people feel their action will have impact.

Present your idea as old rather than new.

It seems counterintuitive, but identifying where others have successfully experimented with what you're advocating for, and explaining why a similar approach might work could diminish others' fear of an uncertain outcome. This technique is called using bright spots, and Chip, a professor at Stanford Graduate School of Business and Dan Heath, Senior Fellow at Duke University's CASE center, wrote about it in their book *Switch*.³⁰ "Bright spots" is shorthand for an area of research called positive deviance. Positive deviance asks us to look for solutions that are working for similar types of people or organizations and apply their practice to our own.^{31,32} A coach using this technique would focus on the times their team performed at their best and look for ways to replicate it, rather than how they're failing.

Use gain and losses frames to your advantage.

A loss frame is when you focus your argument on what will be lost if action isn't taken. A gain frame is when you focus on what you gain if there's a positive outcome. A large body of research known as prospect theory suggests that we'll do more to avoid pain than create gain, and that we prefer certainty over uncertainty. Anecdotally, you've likely heard friends express support for an incumbent candidate as "the devil you know." This is supported by prospect theory, which helps us understand how people respond to choices and uncertainty. It suggests that people are more afraid of small losses than they are open to taking risks for gains. Gain-framed messages work best when they

24 Niederdeppe, J., Roh, S., & Dreisbach, C. (2016). How narrative focus and a statistical map shape health policy support among state legislators. *Health communication, 31*(2), 242-255. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10410236.2014.998913>

25 Niederdeppe, J., Bu, Q. L., Borah, P., Kindig, D. A., & Robert, S. A. (2008). Message design strategies to raise public awareness of social determinants of health and population health disparities. *The Milbank Quarterly, 86*(3), 481-513. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0009.2008.00530.x>

26 Lerner, R.M., & Hess, L. E. (1999). *The development of personality, self, and ego in adolescence*. Routledge.

27 Bandura, A. (2010). Self efficacy. *The Corsini encyclopedia of psychology*, 1-3. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470479216.corpsy0836>

28 Erlandsson, A., Björklund, F., & Bäckström, M. (2014). Perceived utility (not sympathy) mediates the proportion dominance effect in helping decisions. *Journal of Behavioral Decision Making, 27*(1), 37-47. <https://doi.org/10.1002/bdm.1789>

29 Cryder, C. E., Loewenstein, G., & Scheines, R. (2013). The donor is in the details. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes, 120*(1), 15-23. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2012.08.002>

30 Heath, C., & Heath D. (2010). *Switch: How to change things when change is hard*. Broadway Books.

31 Marsh, D. R., Schroeder, D. G., Dearden, K. A., Sternin, J., & Sternin, M. (2004). The power of positive deviance. *Bmj, 329*(7475), 1177-1179. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.329.7475.1177>

32 Bradley, E. H., Curry, L. A., Ramanadhan, S., Rowe, L., Nembhard, I. M., & Krumholz, H. M. (2009). Research in action: using positive deviance to improve quality of healthcare. *Implementation science, 4*(1), 25. <https://doi.org/10.1186/1748-5908-4-25>

are associated with certainty. Loss-framed messages are most effective when your outcome is less certain. Gains and losses framing are the result of research by Daniel Kahneman, and he writes about this phenomenon at length in the book “Thinking, Fast and Slow.”³³

Invoke emotion with intention.

One of the most fascinating areas of growing discovery is the psychology of emotion and the ways in which different emotions inspire different kinds of actions (or reactions). Some particularly helpful ones to activate when you’re trying to get others to connect with you are belonging, pride, awe, and—under the right circumstances—anger or outrage.

Activating belonging can create a sense of shared purpose and identity, and may inspire a desire to work toward a common goal. To invoke this sense of shared purpose, identify your common goal, and then use inclusive language like “we, us and ours.”

Pride is a powerful motivator, and research across a range of social issues suggests that people are far more likely to act out of pride than guilt. So as you share your vision with others, consider what they are already proud of, what they want to be proud of and how your idea attaches to that identity. The “Don’t Mess With Texas” anti-littering campaign activated pride among young men—those most likely to throw trash out of their vehicle’s windows—by attaching their strong state pride with putting trash in its place.

Awe is the feeling of being small in the presence of something greater than the self. This is often described as the “overview effect,” which describes the feeling astronauts had as they viewed the earth from space. But activating awe doesn’t require space travel. Researchers at the [University of Pennsylvania](#) noted that astronauts who experience awe describe “ideas like unity, vastness, connectedness, perception—in general, this sense of an overwhelming, life-changing moment.” When people experience awe, they are more likely to be altruistic, self-reflective, open-minded and generous with their time^{34, 35, 36}

Our best ideas may spring from anger or frustration. We wrote [“Stop Raising Awareness Already”](#) out of frustration that those who were investing in communications were focused on awareness goals rather than building support for their work in a strategic and thoughtful way. That article inspired Lauren Parater of the UN Agency on Refugees Innovation Service to email us and explore how we might work together. We shared a sense of frustration — even outrage — that communications funding in the humanitarian and social change sectors is already too scarce and too often ill-used. The shared frustration that launched our partnership is well documented by research. According to a review of [research conducted at Penn State](#) by doctoral candidate Victoria Spring and C. Daryl Cameron, Assistant Professor and director of the Empathy and Moral Psychology lab, over time, outrage inspires collective action. So, a shared sense of outrage among like-minded people can inspire them to work together over time.

33 Kahneman, D. (2013). *Thinking, fast and slow*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

34 Piff, P. K., Dietze, P., Feinberg, M., Stancato, D. M., & Keltner, D. (2015). Awe, the small self, and prosocial behavior. *Journal of personality and social psychology, 108*(6), 883-899. <https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/pspi0000018>

35 Rudd, M., Vohs, K. D., & Aaker, J. (2012). Awe expands people’s perception of time, alters decision making, and enhances well-being. *Psychological science, 23*(10), 1130-1136. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0956797612438731>

36 Shiota, M. N., Keltner, D., & Mossman, A. (2007). The nature of awe: Elicitors, appraisals, and effects on self-concept. *Cognition and emotion, 21*(5), 944-963. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02699930600923668>

But outrage and anger won't win over those who don't share your perspective. In fact, in these cases, showing or activating anger will only increase your divide. Research by Jeremy Yip, Assistant Professor of Management at Georgetown University's McDonough School of Business and a Research Scholar at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School, suggests that when we're angry at someone, we lose our ability to empathize with their perspective.³⁷

Don't present your solution as permanent.

One way to quickly dissolve others' concerns about implementing a new approach is to offer it as a time-limited experiment, or to pilot it for a specific project. You're asking for a smaller commitment, and an opportunity to retain the status quo. Now that you understand prospect theory, you can see why this is likely to work. There's less uncertainty associated with something you'll implement just long enough to see if it works.

Replace abstraction with specific "asks."

As you're preparing to meet with someone who's in a position to help bring your idea to life, spend some time thinking about exactly what it is that you need from them. Even when you think you need something abstract, like their support, it's important to attach that abstraction to a specific behavior. So, if you know their opinion carries weight with someone else who you need on board, then you could ask them to tell that person that they support what you're advocating for. Strong asks are: 1. Within their power. 2. Something they want to do, or that will affirm their identity. 3. Actionable. 4. Further your cause. 5. Build your relationship.

Use "Because."

In a now-famous 1977 experiment, Harvard researcher Ellen Langer had a researcher attempt to cut a line for the library copier using one of three phrases:

"Excuse me, I have 5 pages. May I use the xerox machine?"

"Excuse me, I have 5 pages. May I use the xerox machine, because I have to make copies?"

"Excuse me, I have 5 pages. May I use the xerox machine, because I'm in a rush?"

How did people respond? 60 percent agreed to the first request and 94-95 percent agreed to the second. Even though having to make copies is a ridiculous reason to cut the line for the copier.³⁸ The researchers suggest that "because" is a tool that triggers a mindless response.

A few more tools:

Innovators within organizations may not have a title or resources that allow them to require or force change. They have to operate outside the organizational hierarchy to build credibility and support for their vision. Without a title or credentials that bring them power and credibility within their organizations, they may have to turn to other tactics to get people within their home institutions to take them seriously. Here are some tactics to experiment with:

37 Yip, J. A., & Schweitzer, M. E. (2019). Losing your temper and your perspective: Anger reduces perspective-taking. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 150, 28-45. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2018.07.003>

38 Langer, E., Blank, A., & Chanowitz, B. (1978). The mindlessness of ostensibly thoughtful action: The role of "placebic" information in interpersonal interaction. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 36(6), 635-642.

Outsource your credibility.

You may not have the experience, credentials or title to convince your colleagues to experiment with your ideas, so you may need to outsource your credibility to those who do. One way to do that is to find published academic research that suggests that your idea will work. Another is to identify respected organizations who have experimented successfully with the approach you've advocated for. You might also apply prospect theory and identify cautionary tales from other institutions as a way of activating a loss frame.

Build your credibility with influencers outside your institution.

If you're having a hard time getting people within your institution to take you and your ideas seriously, you may be able to shift their perspective by building your influence outside the organization. Build your credibility among influencers in your field by contributing to their work and giving them something they value. When you see others doing great and meaningful work, praise them effusively and publicly. Present your ideas at professional conferences. Write about them and share them in the publications your field values. And, should you be invited to present at conferences, invite your colleagues to present with you. When it feels like others aren't taking us seriously, it can be tempting to pull away and isolate yourself. But shifting your mindset to praising others' great work forces them to take you seriously. Remember cognitive dissonance? If you're praising someone else's work, they may be likely to resolve their cognitive dissonance by admiring you in return. However, you should only do this when your admiration is sincere.

For UNHCR's Connectivity for Refugees initiative, the importance of building credibility amongst outside influencers to build internal buy-in has also been essential. Often humanitarian organizations cover a broad range of issues and topics, and particularly in times when funding is short, teams can often get dragged into competing for attention (and the resources that go with it) internally. This was a trap UNHCR didn't want to fall into with Connectivity for Refugees.

Instead, the team sought to take a different approach and go to where voices were enthusiastic and persistent – our partners who were working on the same or similar issues. Reaching out to their different stakeholders and partners operating in this space gave them a broad platform for engagement. UNHCR not only embarked on collaborative work together but engaged with partners - such as the [GSMA](#), an industry organization that represents the interests of mobile network operators worldwide, and the [International Telecommunications Union](#) (ITU) - that would champion this work both publicly, and through their own organization's senior leadership. This collective effort has supported the Connectivity for Refugees team's own internal efforts to build buy-in at all levels of the organization, building a critical mass for action, advocacy and more.

Find your people.

Who are your "people"? They may be the people you're assigned to work with — those in your department or unit. But gaining support for your ideas requires you to find colleagues who share your goals but have an entirely different job function. These individuals provide support, and because they have different expertise, they can be a useful and candid sounding board for your ideas. They'll have skill sets that complement yours. They may be in rooms and discussions you're not a part of, and can advocate for you and your ideas when you're not there. They can also connect you to other influentials within your organization. So how do you find them?

Seek out new people and perspectives. Find yourself next to someone you don't know? Introduce yourself and find out what they do. Make a habit of walking the halls of your organization and saying hello to new and familiar faces. Invite others to join you on walks, or grabbing lunch or coffee. The first 30 seconds of every relationship is awkward, but if you can inure yourself to that brief awkwardness, you can open yourself to a range of new collaborators.

Use your network to find people who have particular skills you need. Introduce yourself, tell them why you're excited about their work, and identify ways to work together.

Ask for others' advice. When you ask for advice, help others stay constructive by tying your request to their skill set or expertise. So, if you were to talk to someone about your goals to build diversity in your organization, instead of asking their advice for how to do that, you might instead ask them how they market available positions, and how they might change that to reach a broader community.

And — it should go without saying — be someone else's people, too. It's as important to be an advocate for others and their ideas as it is your own.

The conversations we have in the corridors, in the canteen, or to and from work are opportunities for seeking new vantage points over our daily challenges. The winding anecdotes of an elderly colleague on how things were 'back in the day' could be the essential context for a new solution. A 20-minute coffee break with the person who used to do your job, or who currently does a similar job in a different context, could be the difference between a solution that is an educated guess, and a solution that is dynamic and tested. 'Your people' could be your mother, your sports coach, a colleague in human resources whom you sometimes bump into on the way to work.

One case that demonstrates the power of looking beyond traditional team structures and information-sensors came when the Communication with Communities (CwC) team in the UNHCR Mexico operation were met with the challenge of presenting advice to migrant populations. One colleague who was a core part of the Communication with Communities team in Mexico City recognized the potential of allies in unlikely places. Day-to-day, she works to inform communities on the move of asylum rights and processes, and the team has been able to help displaced people access key services, partly because they managed to 'find their people'.

The UNHCR colleague recalls the day she arrived at the airport to start her new post with the CwC team. A UNHCR driver met her and offered to show some places where migrants tended to gather and interact with the local community, and even suggested some useful places for sharing information with asylum seekers. UNHCR drivers observe their environment to ensure the safe movement of UNHCR colleagues in their operations. They are sensitive to conditions on the road, and often, to patterns of interaction with local communities. This unique perspective proved a rich resource for the CwC team.

Over the course of the colleague's work in the months ahead, the insights and observations of UNHCR drivers proved an invaluable lens for understanding migratory flows from the perspective of the community. This informal support helped the CwC team to find the optimal locations for distributing leaflets, erecting banners, and guiding attention towards key online information platforms. Whether it is the receptionist offering insights on job candidates from their interactions outside the interview

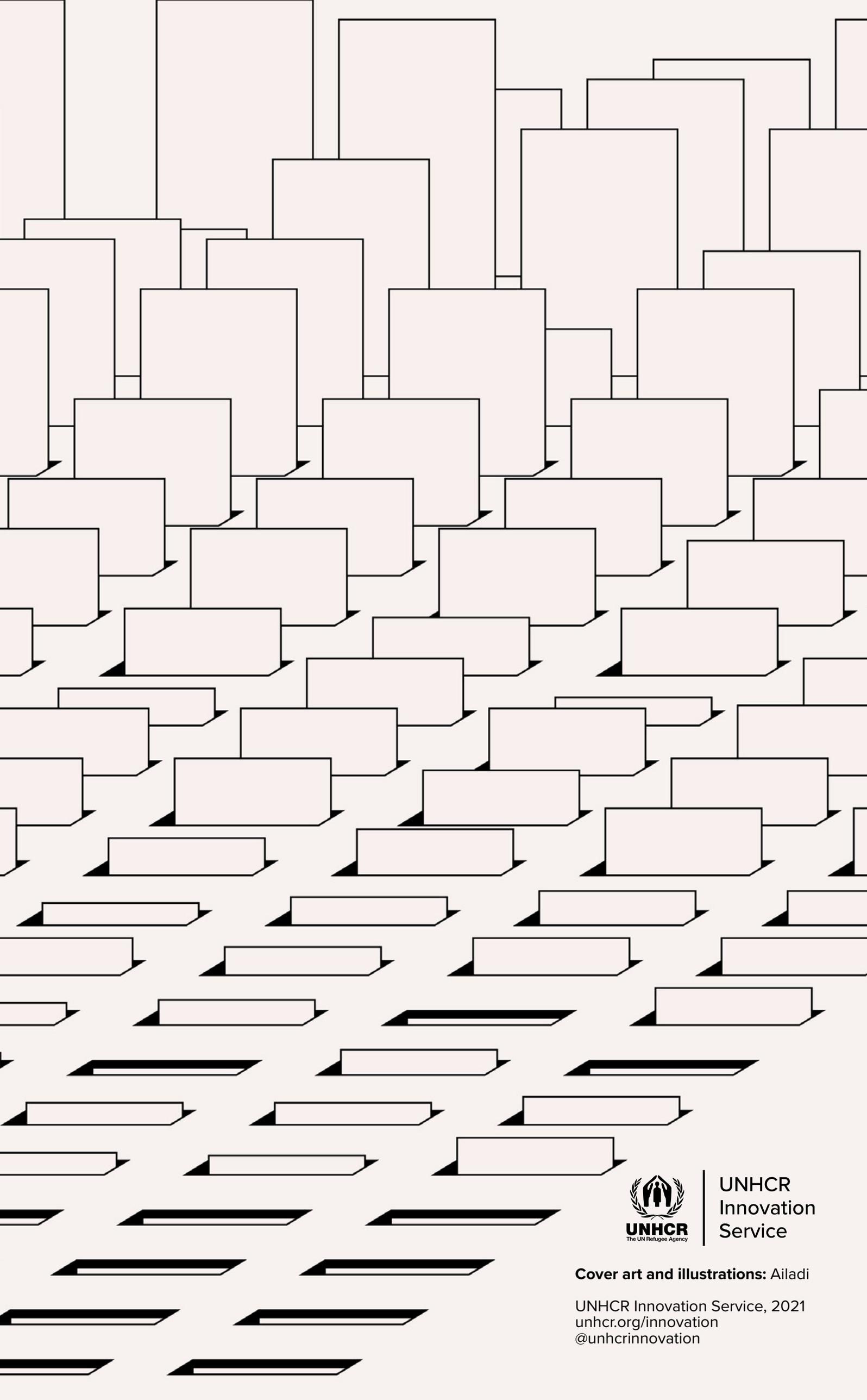
room, the intern reflecting on the challenges of onboarding processes or team inclusion, or the office visitor's perspective on the furniture layout or the atmosphere, the people who are several degrees removed from your responsibilities but whose observations can make visible the invisible levers of innovation, could be your ultimate allies.

Putting it all to work

Feedback is just more useful information. You could apply everything we've shared here, and still get what feels like a hostile or dismissive response. When that happens, you may be tempted to give up on your idea, or write off the people who give you negative feedback. But if you treat that feedback simply as another data point, it can be useful. They are likely offering a window to their perceptions of harm, anchors or worldviews. Listen as carefully to what feel like negative comments as you do to those who affirm your work and ideas. What you hear will help you better tailor future asks to what they care most about.

Adopt an inclusive mindset, and be patient. Whether you're trying to drive change in a field or in an organization, it's habit to adopt an "us" vs. "them" mindset. This is harmful. It leads to zero-sum game thinking in which others' gains feel like losses for you. But if you adopt a spirit of abundance, and acknowledge that when others experience success, they're getting affirmation that may make them more open to new ideas, you may gain an important opportunity to gain them as partners. It's also true that it may take time for others to warm up to you or your ideas. Don't dismiss them if they say no. Maintain your relationship and stay open if they try to reconnect with you.

Becoming a successful change agent within your organization doesn't happen in a single conversation. It's the result of years of effort, decisions and conversations. Be patient with yourself, and your environment, and recognize that adopting these practices will have a cumulative effect that delivers benefits far beyond your single great idea, but on your ability to make change and to support others in their change efforts as well.



UNHCR
Innovation
Service

Cover art and illustrations: Ailadi

UNHCR Innovation Service, 2021
unhcr.org/innovation
[@unhcrinnovation](https://twitter.com/unhcrinnovation)