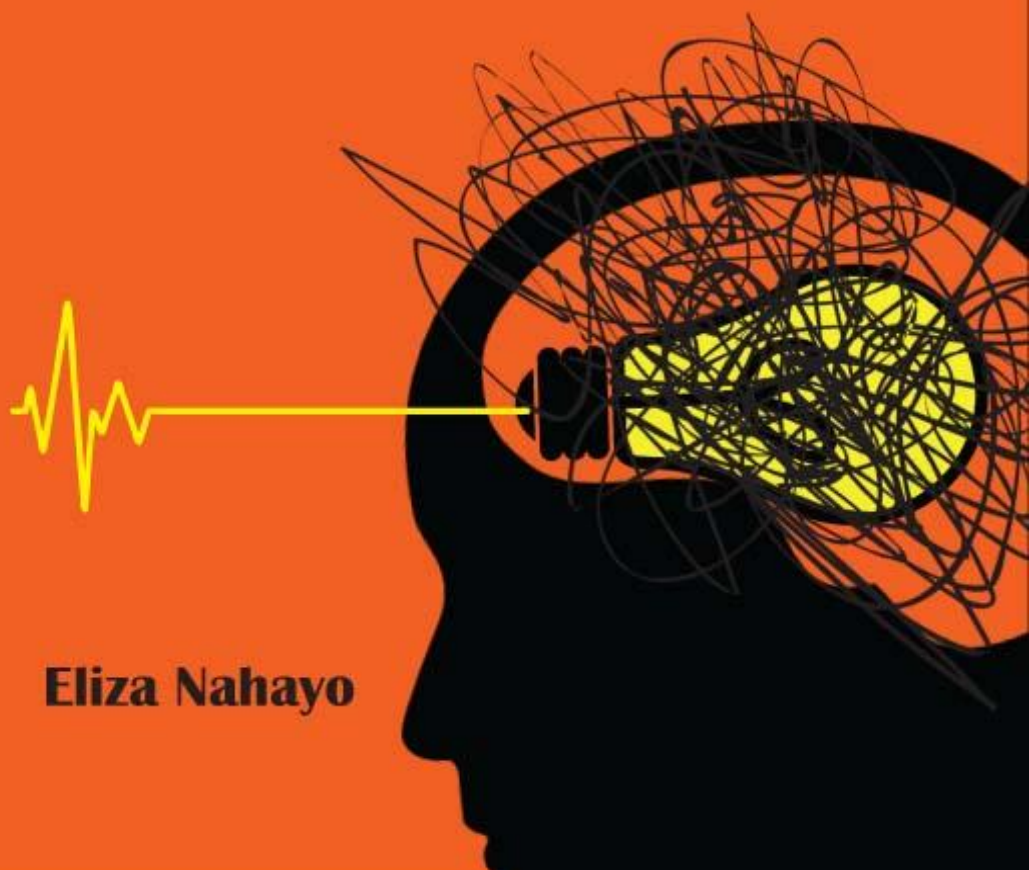


Transcribing Ideas

A *Crazy Simple*

Guide to Writing a Concept Note
for the Workplace



Eliza Nahayo

Transcribing Ideas: A Crazy Simple Guide to Writing a Concept Note for the Workplace.

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CHAPTER 1

Why a concept note

A concept note is one of the medium that may be used to articulate ideas for possible implementation. Through a concept note, one is able to organize and present their ideas in writing with the aim of conveying these ideas to others.

Once in a while, we get struck with what we think is a great idea that would solve all the world's problems. Well, it may not be the solution to all the problems in the world but at least it feels like a great idea. Often times, this great idea presents itself as a snapshot of a solution or an opportunity to bring a desired outcome. Sometimes the idea is so clear in the mind that you could almost touch, smell, hear, taste and see it. You would expect that transmitting this idea that is undeniably crisp and clear from your mind to another person would be easy, but what a task! Often times, as ideas move from one person to another they lose the clarity they had while they inhabited the mind of the person that conceived it. Many things may happen to contribute to the apparent distortion. I find that sometimes I lack the vocabulary to help re-produce what is in my head using words and sentences. Other times, I find that as I start to verbalize my idea, even more additions that I had not thought of earlier start to materialize. Sometimes the idea just disappears, flees the comfort of my boisterous mind that conceived it. An idea in the mind is still fluid, and has no particular form and when it still in your head, it is not yet yours. You have got to find a way to express it in a form that can be re-visited or shared. A fluid idea trapped in the mind is seldom executed.

Expressing an idea in a fixed form provides more opportunities for the idea to be improved. When an idea is expressed in a way that it can cause an effect to our senses, we can quickly form opinions about it, see gaps in it, contextualize it, critique or even try out different combinations. This is the beginning of building it up to the point that it is reasonably feasible.

In my first job as a public servant, I had a lot of freedom when it came to my deliverables. I knew what outcome the organization wanted to see from my office but I had a blank cheque when it came to implementing activities that would lead to the desired outcomes. I was introduced to the concept note, and for a while I did not understand the power of the concept note. I did not lack in ideas when it came to which activities I wanted to implement, but I had to first go through the hurdle of writing a concept note. Once, I sent my boss a concept note for his approval, which was necessary before I could access the resources necessary for implementation, and boy did he have a plethora of questions for me. I knew that I could immediately figure out the answers to most of the questions he asked, and if given time I could figure out most, if not all of them. My boss said to me “if you cannot write down all those details of your idea, you will not be able to implement it”. As you may imagine, I learnt that he was absolutely right. In public service where you have to work with many people in different departments, get approvals from others and align with government plans while contributing to the organization’s mandate, a good concept note can come in handy. First of all, you may not have an opportunity to sit in the rooms where decisions are made to present your idea in person, but there are higher chances of a good concept note getting audience of decision makers. A good concept will generate a lot of interest and attract people who will desire to see the idea in effect. These people may come with more ideas to improve the concept note and making it more feasible, but they could also come in with more confusion. In my experience, interest from many people (the right people especially) generated by a good concept note increases the chance of enactment of the idea.

So, why a concept note?

- *A way to express an idea in a written form*
- *Easy way to revisit and share an idea for purposes of improvement*
- *A great way to gather support for the idea and increase chances of enactment of the expressed idea.*

What a good one is not

I have met many people who consider themselves as doers and the thought of having to sit down to write their ideas down is not very appealing. Having to write down your idea before swinging in to action may seem like a waste of valuable time but it is not. A good concept note is definitely not a waste of valuable time and I will shortly tell you why. Well, when it comes to a bad concept note, that is most definitely a waste of valuable time. So it is imperative that you aim for a good concept note all the time.

A good concept note is not verbose. You do not need to write pages and pages of words in order to make the idea clear. A good concept note is one that speaks for itself. You will know it is a good concept note after you give someone to look at it and it immediately generates great conversation. You will know the conversation is great because the person that has read the concept note has understood the idea and are not confused about what is being communicated. So, a good concept note is definitely not confusing. It is precise and clear and only focuses on aspects that are relevant to the subject matter.

Have you ever been in a situation where you convey an idea and it is not well received and another person shares the same idea to the same people and everyone thinks it was the most brilliant thing they had ever heard? First of all, it is not you, it's everyone else. Everyone has biases to something. These biases somehow cause people to be very selective in the way they receive communication. The biases come in numerous different shapes and forms than I can mention. The most important thing to know is that, because of the existence of these biases in everyone, you must write your concept note to appeal to your target audience beyond their biases. You may want your idea to be well received by everyone, but you surely must know that you cannot please everyone. If you have to share your idea, in most cases there is the most important person or group of

people that you want to impress. Understand your target audience including some of their biases and use this information to write a concept note that will appeal to them. A good concept note is not generic for different categories of audiences. You may have to tweak a few things in a concept note whenever it has to be presented to a different category of audience. For example, if you work for a government agency and have to partner with private sector the concept note that you would present to your bosses should not be identical to the one that you would present to your potential partners. The bottom line of the idea may remain the same, but remember, the idea must appeal to both the government workers and the persons in private sector. From my observations, the decision makers in government agencies are often times more receptive to new innovations if there is a clear demonstration on how they could enhance the agency's mandate. On the other hand, the private sector will often be more receptive to innovation (and the possibility of partnering with a government agency) if they can see it bringing in profit to them. So having two concept notes for the two groups, with each highlighting and capturing strongly the interest of the respective groups would go a long way in garnering the appreciation and support of two groups. But, remember, to be able to know how to tweak a concept note to fit an audience, you must have some basic knowledge about their interests and biases. As I said before it is not you, but everyone else. That other guy does not have a better idea; he may just know his audience a little better making his delivery appear exceptional.

After reading through a concept note, there should be a general understanding of the value being proposed. A good concept note does not fail to propose value in some way. A clear value proposition stemming from the idea is the cornerstone of a good concept note. For value to be appreciated, it must first be recognized. Therefore, you must be clear on what value is being presented in the concept note, who is going to benefit and how they stand to benefit.

So, a good concept note is not:

- *Too wordy to the point of drowning the idea itself*
- *Too generic that no one can connect to it*
- *Unclear on what value is being proposed*

CHAPTER 2

Breaking it down

Have you ever wondered where ideas come from? I believe the ideas we come up with are a result of our interaction with our environment. It is quite likely that it may be hard for you to think about what kind of entertainment value you would propose to say, inhabitants of Jupitar. Whereas my assumption is slightly outrageous, you get the point. Going with my assumption therefore, the value that our ideas may carry are proportional to the understanding we have for our environment. If you want to come up with great ideas in the field of commercial agriculture, then understanding the field is a great starting point. Often times value of an idea manifests in different ways including; as a possible solution to a challenge/ problem, an opportunity to be explored or more attractive alternative. Consequently, to coherently bring out the value of the idea on to the concept note, the problem, opportunity or existing option should be broken down to the point of deep comprehension. But first, you must not only know the problem, opportunity or existing option, they must be real and not imagined. Just think about it for a minute, if it does not exist, you cannot break it down to the point of comprehension. Therefore, by understanding the problem, opportunity or existing option you are able to derive a solid proposed value in an idea. Once this link is clear, the concept note is as good as half way done.

Breaking down a problem, opportunity or existing option begins with having it written down. Writing these down makes it a little easier to break them down for interrogation. Thereafter, you need to identify the key issues in the problem, opportunity and existing option and bring them to focus. These key issues are further examined by asking probing questions. It is paramount that you take time finding probing questions whose answers, or lack of answers would provide an enhanced understanding to the key issues. Try to frame your proposed course of action, or inaction in a way that is delivering value to the issues being interrogated. This is the idea that you will want to translate into a concept note. I will give an example

using a hypothetical problem, opportunity and possible alternative to illustrate the steps.

- i. Writing down the problem, opportunity or possible alternative:

Problem: *We are losing customers at a rapid rate and this is affecting our sales.*

Opportunity: *The demand for organic food is growing and there is a ready market whose needs have not been met.*

Possible alternative: *The team could outsource the marketing function and focus on R&D aspects more.*

- ii. Identifying and highlight the key issues for interrogation

Problem: *We are losing customers at a rapid rate and this is affecting our sales.*

Opportunity: *The demand for organic food is growing and there is a ready market whose needs have not been met.*

Possible alternative: *The team could outsource the marketing function and focus on R&D aspects more.*

Where some may find one key issue, others find two or three at a glance. The most important thing is that you have at least one key issue for interrogation. The quality of interrogation of the identified key issue(s) is of greater importance. Remember, quality over quantity.

- iii. Interrogate the highlighted areas by asking probing questions.

	Issue identified	Possible probing questions
<i>Problem</i>	<i>losing customers</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Why are we losing customers?</i> • <i>Is there a particular category of customers we are losing?</i> • <i>When did we start losing the customer?</i>
	<i>affecting our sales</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>How much have our sales been affected?</i> • <i>What is the consequence of our sales being affected?</i> • <i>What can be done so that the trend of the sales is improved?</i> • <i>How long would it take for the sales to be stabilized?</i>
<i>Opportunity</i>	<i>demand for organic food is growing</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>What was the main source of food before this trend?</i> • <i>Why is the demand for organic food growing?</i> • <i>Who is driving the demand for organic food most?</i> • <i>What advantages does organic food offer?</i> • <i>How is organic food produced?</i> • <i>Is there ready sources of organic food?</i>
	<i>ready market whose needs have not been met</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Why is organic food not readily available in the market?</i> • <i>What are the specific needs of the market demanding for organic food?</i>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>What is required to be set up in order to effectively meet the demand of the market?</i> • <i>Where is the market for organic food and how can one reach it?</i>
<i>Possible alternative</i>	<i>outsource the marketing function</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>is there adequate in-house capacity to perform the marketing function?</i> • <i>How does out-sourcing the function bring value to the team?</i> • <i>Are there any risks associated with outsourcing the function and how can the risks be mitigated?</i> • <i>How will the team communicate with the out-sourced entity and protect the interest of the team at all times?</i>
	<i>focus on R&D aspects</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Why must the focus be limited to R&D?</i>

From the above illustration, you may observe that as you come up with answers to some of the probing questions, you get clear and clearer on the value you want your idea to carry. As you write your concept note, you are able to focus on the value your idea offers for solving the problem, exploiting an opportunity or opting for an alternative and this is the stuff that gets people interested. The appeal of the concept note is in the lucidity of the value the idea presented offers.

Building an idea

Once you reach a point where you are clear on the value that your idea offers, you can consider yourself ready to start building the concept note. You want your idea(s) to flow, without causing confusion. Start by giving a background of the situation, it is a great way to give context to your idea. So, what is happening or not happening? What are the results of what is happening or not happening? Why is a change necessary? Who is affected? What has been tried? What is the ideal situation or goal targeted? When I write my concept notes as a public servant, this is the point at which I try to highlight the government plans and initiatives, how the organization is aligned with the government goals. In public service, it is important to demonstrate how the value of the idea being proposed is in tandem with the mandate of the organization. Because government organizations are established to offer services on behalf of the government. It is at this point that I am sure to highlight how the idea I am proposing contributes to the broader government agenda because I know this detail will go a long way in getting the support required.

Next, blurt out the idea. What exactly are you proposing? Be clear on the value the idea is offering. This should not be too hard if you carefully built your context. Your context should accentuate whichever subject you are bringing value to, a problem, an opportunity or alternative. What is the idea? How is the idea supposed to be implemented? What are the most important components of the idea and how are they connected? Why will it work? Who stands to gain from implementation of the idea? These are some of the questions that could guide you while expressing your idea in writing. It is a great idea to always put at the back of your mind, the mechanics of idea application. At this point you want to appeal to the emotions and biases of your target audience. The more they see the value being proposed, the better. Even better is if they see themselves, directly or indirectly as one of the people that stand to benefit following execution of the idea. Whenever I wrote a concept note that would be seen by my boss, I often felt self-

imposed pressure to make my boss feel like he would transform into a hero should the idea be applied. I was convinced that, if the boss man sees himself as an indirect beneficiary, the brilliant leader responsible for the great new initiative, then I have his support. So, how would he be an indirect beneficiary? Here is a quick example. I may write a concept proposing a new mentorship and coaching initiative to link university students to the more experienced researchers, with the main goal of stimulating innovation activities in the agricultural innovation ecosystem. I may identify the biggest beneficiaries as the students, who get exposure and skills to allow them confidently participate in agricultural innovation. therefore, by going further to describe how my department would be delivering great outcomes in line with their responsibilities, I am trying to sell this idea to the boss, as one that has the potential to make him look good.

Painting a crystal-clear picture

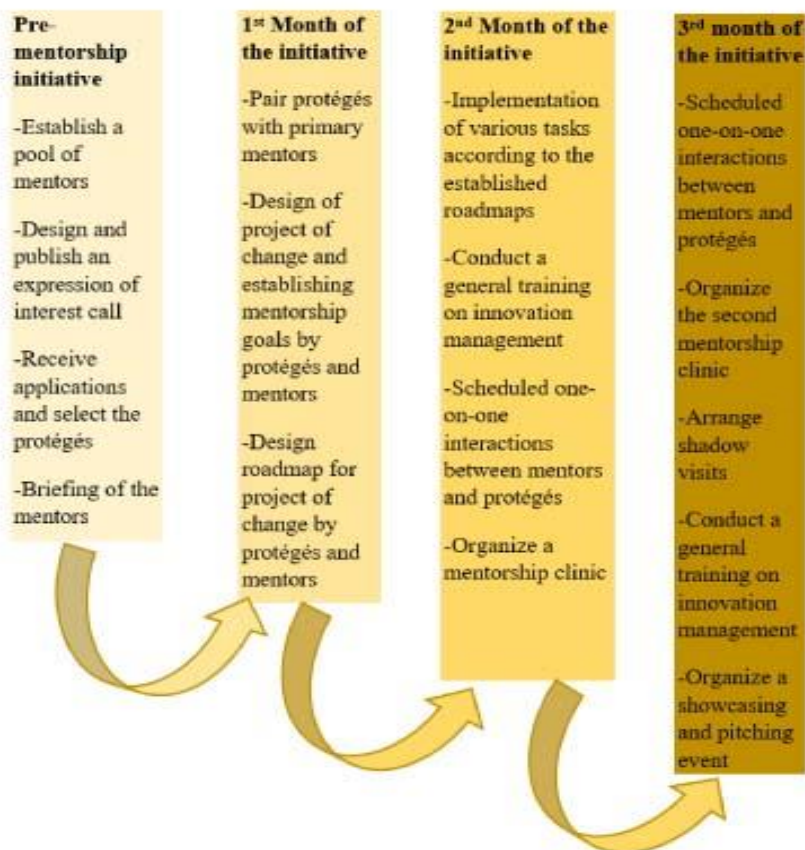
Sometimes, in trying to describe the different connections and interactions that are required for your idea to work, the narrative becomes mangled up and this reduces clarity. You have to be smart in how you can complement what you have already written to bring the point home. You have to be creative in bringing in as much detail as possible without adding even more words to further complicate the narrative. Sounds complicated? Well it is not. I have come to learn that using illustrations like tables, diagrams, flow charts etc. can make communicating some of the complex relationships, interactions embedded within an idea very easy. They did say that a picture speaks a thousand words. For some reason, people tend to be really good at understanding illustrations compared to the equivalent narratives. I will demonstrate using two examples how illustrations can help in painting an even clear picture.

The duration of the proposed mentorship cycle will be 3 months. In the first month, protégés will be on-boarded and mentorship will commence. The on-boarding of the protégés will commence after an expression of interest call has been issued. Interested parties will make a formal application expressing their interest in participating in the mentorship initiative. At the end of the third month, the protégés graduate from the mentorship after having carried-out a project of change, where they will showcase their various innovations, and an evaluation will be conducted to establish the effectiveness of the initiative. The mentorship initiative will target students in tertiary institutions, innovators and individuals actively involved in agriculture related innovation activities. The pool of mentors will be established and will constitute individuals with varying experience in different aspects of agricultural innovations. The mentors will be sought after from among other places: university faculty, researchers from agricultural research and development organizations and agricultural entrepreneurs.

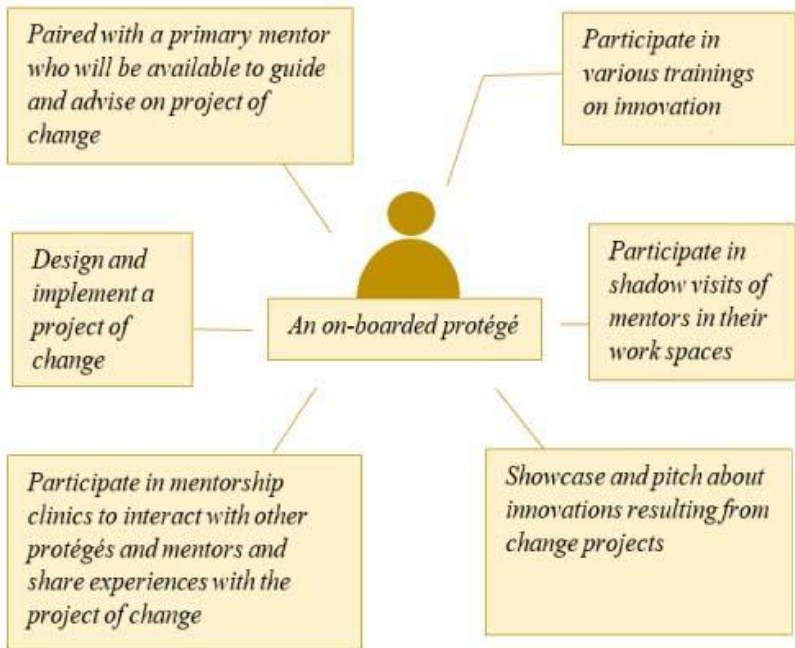
Flash mentoring, a type of modern mentoring that allows an individual to find the information they need to complete a specific task, will be adopted. This type of modern mentoring is focused on the time-efficiency and convenience of knowledge sharing. At the beginning of a mentorship cycle, the protégés will design and document a project of change and detail goals they would like to achieve through the initiative. With the help of a primary mentor, goals are broken down into tasks that must be completed in the due course of the mentorship. Protégés will have access to a number of mentors whom they can interact with in order to fulfill tasks. Mentors may also adopt group mentoring where necessary. Mentoring cycles will involve a general training on innovation management, scheduled one-on-one interactions between mentors and protégés, mentorship clinics, shadow visits and will end with the protégés showcasing their innovations and/or prototypes at a pitching event.

To enhance clarity of the idea I have presented, I may choose specific aspects for further illustration.

- i. The timelines of the proposed mentorship may be illustrated as follows:

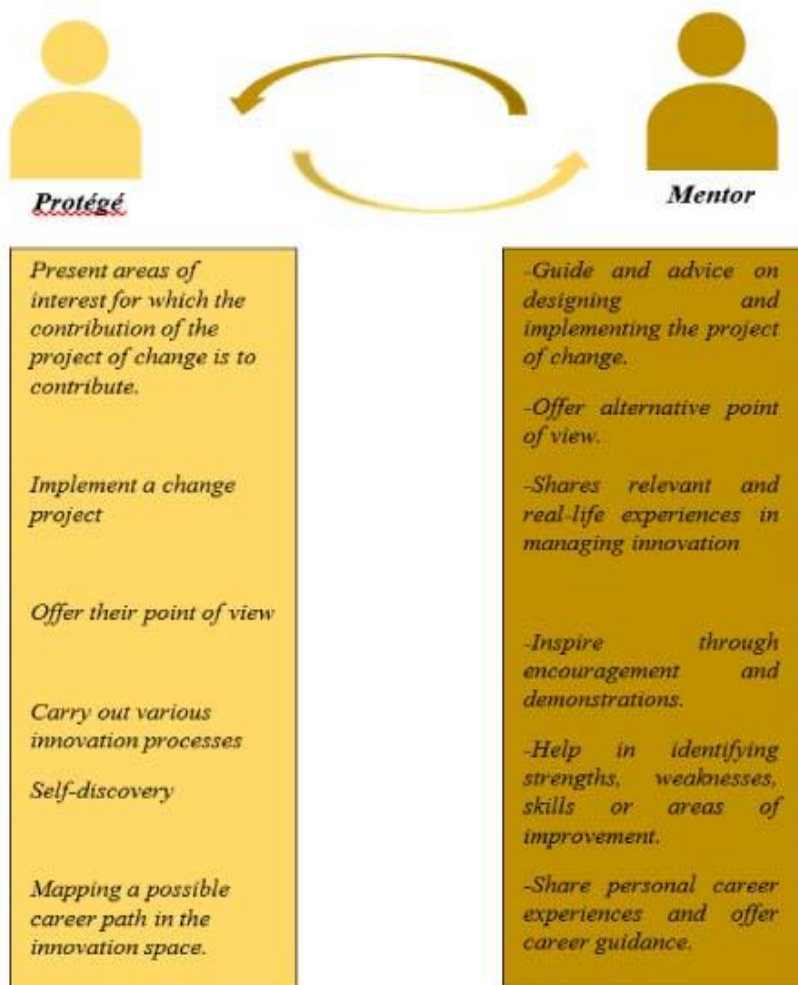


ii. Description of the mentorship experience of the protégés



You may notice that this particular illustration of the idea concentrates on aspects that convey value to a potential participant playing the role of a protégé. This demonstrates that illustrations, if well thought through can be useful tools in communicating the value propositions of an idea to targeted groups of people. Furthermore, observe how certain details have been included in the illustration which was not detailed in the write-up. For instance, whereas the write-up mentions a mentorship clinic, through the illustration, one is able to further appreciate what a mentorship clinic is about, what happens in the mentorship clinic and how the protégés may benefit from the mentorship clinic.

iii. Details of the mentor- protégé interactions



CHAPTER 3

Components of the concept note

There are some key sections that should be included in the concept note. Care should be taken to arrange the different section to enable a smooth flow of ideas. By now it is clear that there is need to have a section that gives context to the concept note. This section may be called “background” or “introduction”. This is usually the first section that sets the stage for the sections to follow. In this section, it is also important to introduce the main idea so that the next sections build on it. You may introduce the idea in form of a description, which should seamlessly complete the section detailing the context of the concept note. For example:

..... The proposed initiative will aim to bridge the gap between the youth and the more experienced players in the agricultural innovation ecosystem. This will be achieved through a mentorship initiative.

It is also important to have a section that details the objective(s) of the proposed idea. Make sure your objectives are specific and measurable targets. Visualize the key targets that need to be achieved in order to carry through the idea, and formulate objectives.

For example, so as to achieve the implementation of the proposed mentorship initiative the following key targets must be met;

- i. A pool of mentors need to be established*
- ii. Protégés need to be attracted and on-boarded*
- iii. Knowledge and skills transmitted from mentors to protégés*
- iv. Innovative change projects must be completed*

Now, make the targets specific and measurable to turn them into objectives.

- i. Establish a pool of at least 50 mentors with specialization in varying expertise in agricultural innovation*

- ii. *Attract and onboard a minimum of 200 Protégés to participate in the initiative*
- iii. *Design and conduct 5 structured events for sharing Knowledge and skills*
- iv. *Oversee the design and implementation of a minimum of 150 innovative change projects in agriculture.*

Another section that is important is the section that details the “how” of executing the idea, the methodology. For the method to be clear make sure the what, where, when, who and when are well established. What is supposed to happen? Where is it supposed to happen? Who is involved in making it happen? And when should it happen? Make use of illustrations to bring all these details out explicitly.

Another section that you may consider is one where you are able to exemplify the possible outcomes of executing the idea. Limit the outcomes to those that are relevant to your organization’s mission. This particular section can be used to sell the idea to the strategic decision makers of the organization.

A well thought through concept note should have a work plan outlining the activities and their associated budget requirements. This section is much simpler if the methodology is adequately detailed. The details of the methodology with regard to the what, where, when, who and when helps one to identify the activities and some key budget items. Do as much research as necessary and have a budget that is as realistic as possible. An exaggerated or grossly under-estimated budget will most definitely communicate an unfavorable message to the decision makers. It cannot be emphasized enough; you need to only stick to relevant budget items. Your work plan and budget should complement the idea you are proposing. If budget items presented do not make sense, you taking away a lot of merit from your idea. The focus changes from the value of the idea to your motivations of presenting a dubious budget, and you most definitely do not want that.

Getting input from others

Believe it or not, there is always room to improve an idea. Ideas can be improved by the person that has conceived the idea or by others. I have learnt that for the person that conceived the idea to improve it, they must revisit the idea several times over a period of time. I think the key ingredient of idea improvement is a difference in perspective. In the instance where the person that conceived the idea improves it, the difference in perspective comes from the period taken before revisiting the idea. Simply put, you need some time to break away from the idea development process, and revisit with a fresh perspective.

In organizations, often times tasks are accomplished in teams or with the involvement of other people within or outside of the organization. It is important therefore that you capture the interest of such key people by offering them a chance to see the draft concept note and give their input. Different people come with different perspectives consequently, the chances of having the idea improved by sharing it with others increases significantly. Do not get me wrong, as much as seeking input has its merits, it comes with its own demerits too. Sometimes, in the process you may receive feedback that is completely out of scope, unrelated, irrelevant, over-ambitious or even useless. Just remember, you conceive the idea and are the captain of that ship. Do not let emotions cloud your judgement, you may end up crushing the ship. Remain objective regarding the changes you will incorporate in the concept note as a result of the feedback you received from your team members. Do not feel the pressure to include every input suggested to you. Maintain them merely as suggestions and objectively consider each of them. By being considerate and seeking the views of your colleagues, you already score favorably on the “wonderful employee” scale.

You could seek the opinions of your colleagues on the drafted concept note at an individual basis or in a group setting. Both have their advantages and disadvantages. When you seek for each

individual's input separately, the wealth and integrity of difference in perspective is upheld, but at the same time, it may take a while to get feedback from everyone. On the other hand, in a group setting, you are able to greatly reduce the consultation time but the risk of diminishing differences in perspective is very high. In group dynamics, there are individuals who are more vocal, opinionated and strong willed and may easily muzzle the opinions of others in the group.

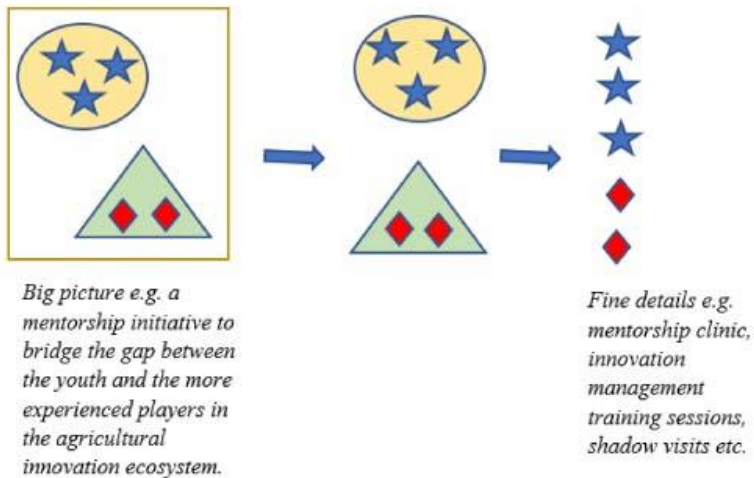
Try to be as open minded as humanly possible when receiving input from others, keeping in mind that improvement of the idea is the ultimate goal.

You will know when it is good

So how will you tell that you have written a pretty good concept note? Oh, you will know! As you continuously write concept notes and receive feedback about them, you gain the capabilities to anticipate in advance the reactions that they will evoke from different people.

There is a natural rhythmic flow to a well written concept that offers clarity in the buildup of an idea. It usually starts with the bigger picture and as the concept note progresses the focus is zoomed in to finer details. The flow is systematic, from the bigger picture to the finer pixels of the image. For every detail presented, its roots can be traced to the bigger picture. These details should make sense when you reflect on different elements of the bigger picture.

Below is an illustration of how the flow of the idea should be presented from the big picture to the finer detail.



A good concept note is precise and to the point. It is clear about the value of the idea being proposed. It answers the what, how, who, where and when in relation to delivering the value of the idea being proposed. When you read through your concept note and it passes these basic checks, you will know you have a good concept note.

If most of the stages make sense to you, I think you will look at concept not development a little differently. Now, go forth and write awesome concept notes and boldly share those wonderful ideas with your colleagues.