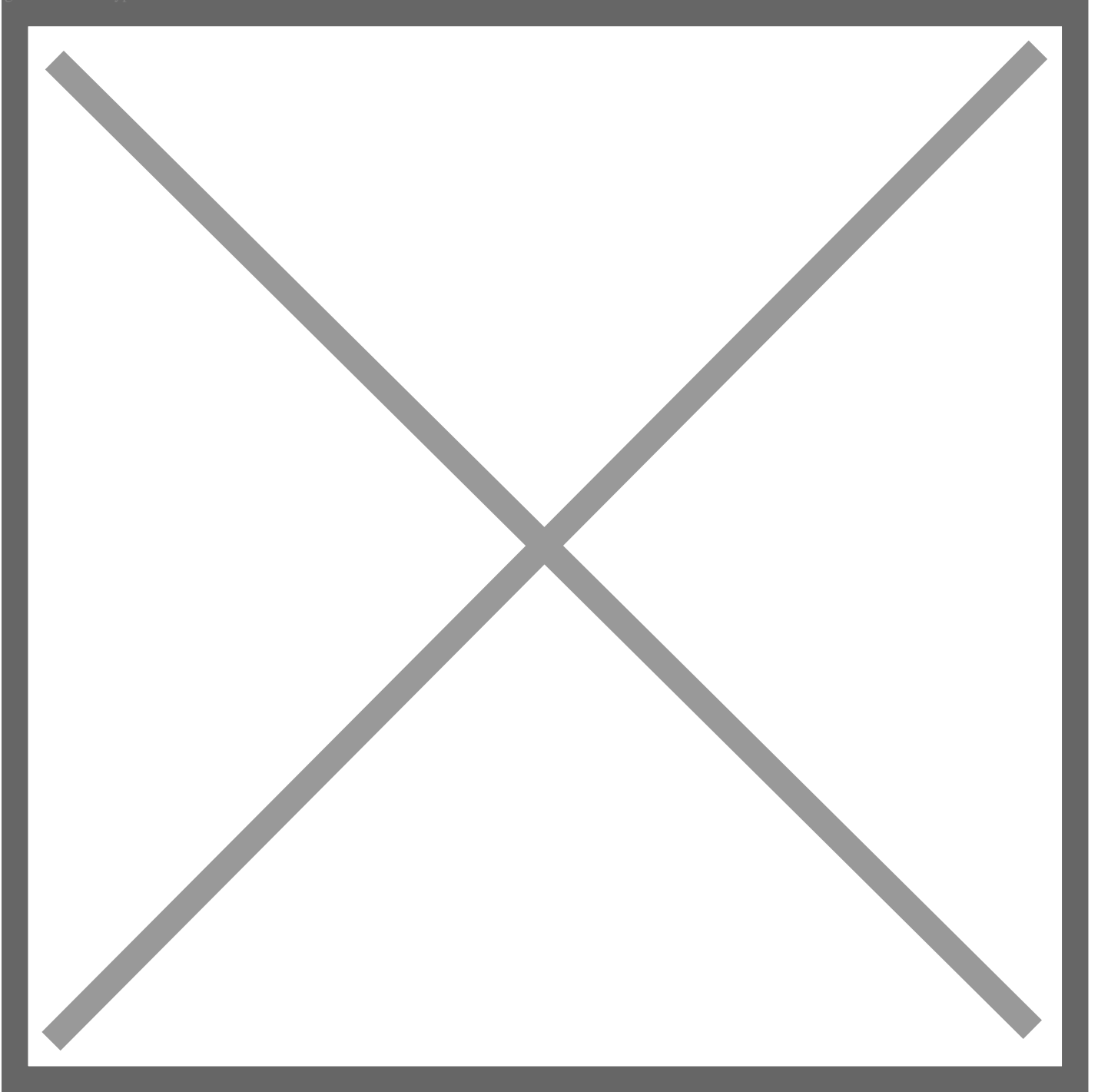


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Increasing the voltage of ideas and their impact

Description

Increasing the voltage of ideas and their impact

My colleague Karissa noted that my blog entry [“Where and How to Scale Non-profit Success”](#) (1/5/22) saw a lot of reader activity. This prompted me to read an insightful book called [The Voltage Effect...How to Make Good Ideas Great and Great Ideas Scale](#) by John A. List. The book looks at voltage gain and loss in program ideas and implementations as equivalent to those in electric lines. I find these nuggets especially useful.

1. **Samples and Populations.** Pollsters, academic researchers, evaluators and many others rely on small samples to reflect much larger populations. List notes that organizations looking to scale a great idea share that reliance. If a program works with ten job counsellors, for example, it may not with a thousand. You may run out of the great staff you seek for the money you can pay them. And a program may run out of participants with sufficient readiness and capacity to succeed with the time and money your approach specifies. List suggests one solution for an educational program with which he was involved: *So, we had to do something very unidealistic but very practical: design the curriculum under the assumption that teachers with only average abilities would be teaching it.*
2. **Is the secret sauce the chef or the ingredients?** The latter scales nicely. Not so with highly talented and often idiosyncratic individuals. A key question is whether the program can rely on its content and process or whether it needs persons exceptional at such tasks as creating client engagement. This is especially important with programs that recreate a program in many locations. In those instances, the chef is not in one kitchen supervising cooks. She or he is multiplied on the ground, directly interacting with participants.
3. **Scaling participant experience.** If we focus solely on scaling a program, we may well miss how to scale what customers get from it. List describes one example of how participant-centric technology can make a huge impact. The Grassroots Law Project organized a call drive to push public officials to act in response to George Floyd’s death. Volunteers are enrolled to call elected officials to urge them to action. Unlike most such programs where volunteers receive a list of names and numbers, in this program volunteers call just one number. The recording first coaches them on what to say and then then transfers them to the office of a public official to apply what they just learned. When that call ends, volunteers press the star key and are rerouted to another public official. How simple. How productive.
4. **Look at last costs, not average costs.** Costs rarely stay the same over time, especially with larger numbers. They often go up or down in ways that average cost over the life of a program mask. On the one hand, economies of scale may

prevail such as spreading the costs of developing a program over many more persons who achieve because of it. Or the program discovers it can achieve results with less intensity or duration. On the other, the program may need more time and money to work or external challenges may arise not experienced in earlier years.

In sum, these guidelines seem useful at all sizes and growth plans:

1. Track new staff and participants as you grow and ask how they may vary from those with which you started. Note limits emerging on applicant pool with the money you can pay.
2. Understand the role of key people and how difficult they are to scale. Design for what you will get, not the ideal staff person.
3. Look at all the apps that now guide individuals to get to weight goals, book choices or almost anything else. Find ways to use similar technologies with your cohort of participants.
4. Base future decisions on costs and gains from your most recent participants, not the average over the life of the program. Your choices will be different.

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