

Cassidy: Clay Christensen sees Silicon Valley non-profits' dilemma as the innovator's dilemma

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Posted: 01/21/2012 06:00:00 PM PST

Updated: 01/22/2012 06:15:48 AM PST

When it comes to Silicon Valley non-profits finding better ways to care for the region's most vulnerable, Clay Christensen has an idea: Scare the hell out of yourselves.

OK, that's not precisely the way he put it. But the author of "The Innovator's Dilemma" is all about new ideas. Not just new -- but different, unorthodox, radical, uncertain, frightening and disruptive. You don't solve old problems with old ideas. The other day, Christensen held a one-man teach-in for non-profits and their supporters at San Jose's Mexican Heritage Plaza, preaching the gospel of "disruptive innovation." It's an idea that is embedded in Silicon Valley's DNA. It is also an idea that is a lot easier to talk about than to actually deploy.

"It's very hard," he says about practicing what he preaches.

I caught up with Christensen during a break after his opening lecture, in which he methodically, but not without a dab of humor, walked through how disruptive innovation has changed whole enterprises and industries. (Remember minicomputers, film cameras, console radios? Or for that matter, video stores, CDs and land line telephones?) Think of disruptive innovation as a notion that keeps established enterprises up at night and gets start-up entrepreneurs out of bed in the morning.

Christensen, who is a Harvard professor, is something of a pop icon in the business world, but this guy is no infomercial man or bro-mide-spewing motivational speaker. While it would be nice if he did, he does not have a magic pill, a silver bullet, a bullet-proof answer or whatever other cliché you'd like him to possess.

"I don't want to get too much ahead of ourselves in thinking, 'You guys. We have the answer,'" he tells me between bites of salmon. "Because the answer will never happen unless we've defined the question in the right way."

So, there is work ahead if non-profits, many of which rely on government grants, are going to figure out how to survive in an era where government is slashing spending and their organizations' budgets are being hammered.

The good news? Those who work for non-profits are not afraid of hard work. It's what they do. The idea is not to solve non-profits' problems overnight, says Fred Ferrer, CEO of The Health Trust, based in Campbell. The Health Trust invited Christensen to speak as part of an ambitious long-term plan to get non-profits and those who fund them -- government, foundations and other philanthropists -- to start thinking about new ways to deliver services.

New ways how? Who knows? Combining agencies doing similar work. Finding ways to bring the needy to services rather than bringing services to the needy. Or maybe the opposite when it makes more sense. Encouraging funders to allow more flexibility for non-profits to experiment, to be adaptable, to think long-term.

The key, Christensen says, is to get all the players together -- non-profits and those who fund them -- and teach them all to speak the same language as they grapple with the challenge of declining budgets and increasing demand.

"And I really believe in the deepest parts of my heart that that is the fundamental problem," he says. "If we don't invest to have a common language and a common way to frame the problem, we will never get any answers."

The notion -- disruptive innovation, frameworks, common language -- might all sound a little academic or even a little loopy. But we have to try something new. No more are the days of doing more with less when it comes to feeding the hungry, housing the homeless, nursing the sick, promoting healthy habits, counseling the addicted and aiding those with disabilities. It's time to do more with different.

"What I'm suggesting is that we have to increase our tool kit," Ferrer says. "We don't get the luxury of saying, 'Oh well, there is much more we can do.'"

And so in the coming year The Health Trust will review innovative ideas from health-related non-profits and provide grants for some of the best innovations. The idea is to encourage big thinking -- and to just maybe take a little of the fear out of daring to be disruptive.

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