

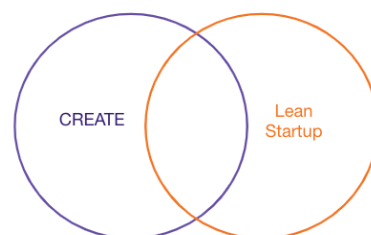


How GripTape leverages learning and design methodologies to dream bigger, iterate quickly, and continuously scale our impact.

When we launched GripTape, one thing was certain: We didn't know the solution. We knew the problem: All across the country, young people were passive recipients of an education that they found increasingly irrelevant and disengaging. We knew that we wanted to flip that on its head — to put youth in the driver's seat of learning. We just didn't know how. We looked across the country for examples that would illuminate the path, but we came up short. So, we decided to build it ourselves.

Starting with a sense of both urgency and ignorance was deeply formative for us. It prompted us to make two commitments: 1) to not guess what young people needed but to co-create with them from the jump and 2) to learn as fast as possible, ensuring we weren't going down the wrong road too long.

In looking for methodologies that would enable us to do both of these things, we came across Cambiar's co-creation and user-centered design approach and *Lean Startup* — two frameworks that felt powerful and complementary. **We started leveraging and melding their lessons out of necessity, but have since built our entire organization around a blend of these two approaches.** The impact far surpassed our expectations, enabling us to learn, grow, and strengthen our model in ways we've never experienced before GripTape. A couple years in, we wanted to capture that magic (spoiler alert: it isn't magic at all) as an offering to other leaders and teams tackling big challenges in the face of great uncertainty.



Cambiar's Co-Creation + User-Centered Design Approach, CREATE

In our early days of establishing GripTape, we were fortunate to have the support and guidance of [Cambiar](#), an organization that provides catalytic support to bring bold, new education efforts to fruition. Through a mix of coaching and facilitation, they helped us employ their CREATE approach, which weaves together user-centered design, change management, and coalition building. In contrast to other philosophies, we were particularly struck by how their methodology makes an ongoing commitment to co-creating alongside those you aim to serve — not isolated to a single stage of the process, but always.

Here are the big ideas underneath the CREATE method:



- | 1. | 2. | 3. | 4. | 5. | 6. |
|--|--|--|--|--|---|
| Every new endeavor begins with courage and curiosity and the belief that change is possible. | Research helps zero in on the root cause of a problem and often reveals unexpected opportunities to improve people's lives. | Investing the time to engage a broad community creates space to learn from people with different perspectives and ways of thinking that contribute to the process and solution. | These insights become inspiration for brainstorming many possible ideas and tangible prototypes to assemble ideas into solutions. | Experiments and feedback help test and iterate ideas (often many times over). | You do this until a level of the transformation effect desired is achieved in the lives of others. |

EXPLORE FURTHER

To learn more about Cambiar's unique approach on their website [here](#) and reach out to Create@cambiareducation.org. Underneath each of these big ideas, they've developed a wealth of practices and methods that one can leverage in pursuit of launching new ventures.

What we pull from Cambiar's CREATE model:

While there are many tools and practices we employ from this approach, there are two concepts that are especially pervasive in how we work:

1. Empathy + Co-creation

Every new idea or shift we make is grounded in insights from the young people with whom we work. Our entire model was birthed from conversations with hundreds of youth. We've invested in meaningful and enduring relationships with the individuals who have participated in our Learning Challenge, and we're constantly texting and calling them to get quick feedback. But it's not just about listening — we've established structures such as our Youth Leadership Board and Design Days that ensure we're actively co-creating with young people at every turn.

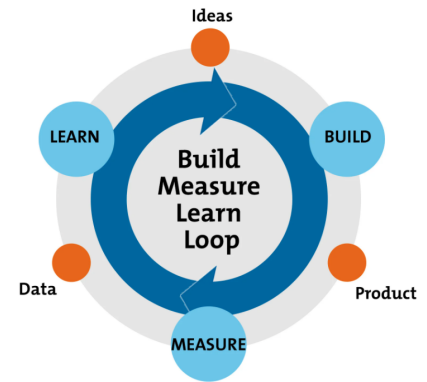
2. Ideation

Ultimately, we're trying to develop an empowering learning experience that is nearly unprecedented in our education system. This means we're tackling challenges that don't have easy roadmaps and generating ideas that go beyond tweaking at the margins. This happens in big ways, like bringing together our staff and Youth Leadership Board together for design sprints. But it also happens in small ways, like pausing in a meeting to ask: *what are all the ways we might address that?*



Lean Startup

Once we identified opportunities through deep empathy and generated ideas we thought were promising, we needed a way to test them quickly. *Lean Startup*, by Eric Ries, offered us a way to do just that. While written for the business world, the principles and practices it outlined offered a powerful way to think about launching new ideas amidst great uncertainty. While we won't do justice to the nuance of the book, the framework can be summarized as follows:



1. Define an opportunity and idea:

Ground in a problem you are trying to solve and your hypothesis/idea for how to solve it. Once you have that in mind, ID the riskiest assumptions that you want to test and validate before continuing.

2. Build an MVP

Determine the smallest way you can authentically test the assumptions you prioritized. Build that “minimum viable product” (MVP). This will be far from a final product/process, but a scrappy start that lets your users begin to engage with it.

3. Measure the impact

Before testing, define what success would look like and how you will measure it — it'll be harder to suss this out after the fact. Set up those assessments to collect rigorous data to make informed decisions and confront reality.

4. Learn: pivot or persevere

Once you've tested the MVP, assess the data you've gathered and make some decisions. If your assumptions are right, identify your next set of assumptions and launch another cycle to continue refining the approach (“tuning the engine”). If one of your key assumptions is wrong, you may need to pivot. Either way, continue the cycle of defining the next phase of ideas/assumptions and iterating through the Build - Measure - Learn cycle.

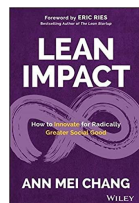
EXPLORE FURTHER



[The Lean Startup](#)

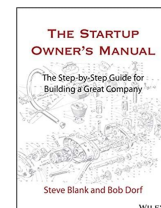
This was the original text that started our journey and outlines the lean startup approach. Want the 3-minute overview?

[Check out this video.](#)



[Lean Impact](#)

This contextualizes the Lean Startup approach for efforts of social good, adding in nuances that are specific to mission-driven organizations.



[The Startup Owner's Manual](#)

This is a big collection of practices and resources that gets super tactical about bringing these principles to life.

What we pull from Lean Startup

As a team of leaders with experience leading schools, districts, and non-profits, this *Lean* approach represented a stark departure from how we'd seen new ideas roll out in other contexts (including efforts we had personally led). We were accustomed to arduous planning processes. More often than not, we'd invest a ton of time and money in efforts that might succeed but might just as likely lead to mediocre results. Having invested so heavily in it, we often keep plugging away with the idea, even as teams grew disenchanted and even at the expense of pursuing potentially breakthrough efforts. **The *Lean Startup* approach has proven different in important ways:**

1.

Validated learning as the goal

In most places we had worked before, the aim of rolling out new ideas was for them to work and be undeniably successful. In this approach, that's not the point. In fact, we're testing new ideas explicitly because we're not sure if it works and need to be prepared to accept if it doesn't. A learning cycle is successful if we've gathered meaningful data to assess our hypothesis and assumptions. If we learn something doesn't work, that's great — thank goodness we figure it out when the stakes and investment are small!

2.

MVPs, not finished ideas

Instead of spending our energy thinking through all the kinks and building out every element of our idea, we're distilling the smallest, simplest version that's just enough to validate our assumptions. This pushes us to be scrappy and prevents us from entering analysis paralysis.

3.

Getting out of the “office”

In the spirit of MVPs, we don't spend our energy sitting around a table debating whether an idea is going to work. We let our users — in our case, generally the young people engaged in our [Learning Challenge](#) or our [Youth Leadership Board](#) — tell and show us. We're in a constant state of testing new ideas through mini pilots and using the data we gather let us know whether we should keep on this idea or scrap it. It also ensures we're in a constant state of co-creating with youth.

4.

Speed

The aim is to go through the cycle as fast as possible, allowing us to quickly scale up ideas that are working, but just as quickly sideline things that aren't strong winners so we don't sink any more time or money into them. We've been floored by how quickly you can get a sense of whether a new effort or tweak has legs when you get really specific about how you'd know it was successful, and just get into action testing it.

5.

Voluntary

Lean Startup, built for the business world, is built to test whether you have an idea that will acquire customers — in other words, are you creating enough genuine value that people will show up? This concept has been hugely important for us. We obsess with putting out offerings that are both high impact for young people *and* that they will be clamoring for, not that they will be forced into or grudgingly accept. This keeps our testing authentic and our bar for impact high.

6.

Value and Scale

When we run tests, they are grounded in either increasing value to the user or scaling our work (without losing value). Having these two filters keeps us honest — providing guardrails to ensure we're not just testing ideas because we think they sound good. If it doesn't help us do one of those two things, we don't test it.

HOW THIS LOOKS AT GRIPTAPE

The way we leverage rapid learning cycles is a beautiful hybrid of these two philosophies. The reality plays out in an organic interplay between them, but for the sake of simplicity, we tend to lean on CREATE as we identify opportunities and imagine new ideas. Once we have ideas in mind, we leverage Lean Startup to validate and improve the idea. Here's a window into what this has looked like, starting with how we initially launched the organization and then how we have continued to strengthen the model over the years.

Our origins

Research + Engage	Mark, our founder, had spent years in hundreds of schools, having conversations with thousands of young people. He saw a generation going through the motions — disengaged from learning even when instruction was solid. Young people felt school was critical, but something you had to “make it through” to do what you wanted down the road. But these same young people would light up when talking about a passion they had or an idea they wanted to try. There just wasn't space for this type of learning at school and they didn't have the pathways (money, programs, decision-making) to pursue those passions on their own. The opportunity was clear: We needed to empower young people to be in the driver's seat of learning.
Assemble Ideas	We had the need in mind but no idea how to address it. We looked for proven examples around the country, but came up short. So we went about imagining it. We enlisted young people to help determine the ingredients that would enable them to drive their learning. Through design sprints and youth interviews and teenage work sessions, we zeroed in on three key ingredients: 1) financial resources (\$500) to support their efforts 2) a person to encourage them/take an interest in their interest/help them think while not telling them what to do (we call them Champions) and 3) total decision-making on what they learned, how they learned it, and what success looks like.
Build an MVP	Young people had developed these ingredients, but we still had no idea if it would work. So we elevated two key assumptions to test: 1) that young people would <i>want</i> this experience and 2) that these three ingredients could successfully enable them to drive their learning. Clear on what we were trying to test, we built an incredibly simple, small way to authentically validate these assumptions. We created a 1-month Learning Challenge in which a small number of young people could have these (and only these) three ingredients to pursue a learning passion of their choice — one that somehow connected to their definition of success now and/or in the future.
Measure	Before we launched the MVP, we named the key measures of success we would see if the assumptions proved true: We were looking to see that 1) young people chose to apply 2) they self-reported that the experience was successful and valuable to them and 3) they would refer friends to also participate. We set up surveys and interviews at the beginning, throughout, and end to capture data and rich feedback on all three.
Learn	<p>After running this first MVP, the results were undeniable, if not a little unbelievable at first:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- 100% achieved the learning goals they set out to achieve.- 100% found the experience valuable to their future.- 100% said this was the first time they'd truly driven their learning.- 100% said they wanted more of this and that they would recommend it to a friend. <p>With that data on hand, we clearly knew we were on a path to validate our first two assumptions, that young people were hungry for this type of experience and that these ingredients could lead to youth successfully driving their learning. But we had only done so with 9 individuals. So we decided to move forward, continuing our learning cycles but starting to test ideas that would help us strengthen the experience and scale to more students.</p>

Tuning the engine

After that initial learning cycle, we felt confident (if not a bit surprised) that we were onto something. But we were far from done. Before every Learning Challenge that we've launched since, we collaborate as a team to identify the biggest opportunities/ideas we want to pursue and set ourselves up to quickly test them. In the early days, while the model was still coming together, we were testing many ideas at once. Over the years, we've narrowed that to testing 3–5 hypotheses per learning cycle. These new ideas come from all different places — from suggestions from our youth and adult teams, to inspiration we get from other programs, to pain points we have to address. However, they always fall into two buckets: Hypotheses for how to 1) strengthen the **value** of the experience or 2) **scale** to serve more people.

Below is a small sampling of the many hypotheses we've tested over the last four years:

	<u>Hypothesis</u>	<u>How we tested it</u>	<u>Kept it?</u>
To strengthen the value of the experience	<u>Longer Time:</u> If we extend the length of the Challenge, young people will have a more fulfilling experience	In our second Learning Challenge, we extended the approach from one month to up to 10 weeks and observed the journey they took and surveyed/interviewed youth at the end of their Challenge with specific questions about the length of the experience, if they met their goals, and whether they liked the experience	✓
	<u>Peer Navigators:</u> Support from a Learning Challenge alumni in addition to their Champion will enhance the experience of Challengers.	In our second Learning Challenge, we matched alumni with new Challengers to check in and offer peer support throughout the 10 weeks.	✗
	<u>Youth Squad:</u> Having access to a network of young people who can help them with specific parts of their Challenge will enable youth to support and encourage one another's learning pursuits.	Over two years, we co-designed different approaches to enable GripTape youth to connect with each other based on shared interests, needs, or pursuit — tech platforms, curated lists of connections. In every iteration, there was expressed interest, but none took off.	✗
To Scale	<u>Virtual Check-ins:</u> We can make the check-ins with Champions virtual instead of in-person without sacrificing the quality of the learning experience and the ultimate outcomes (<i>Note: This was in 2016-2017, long before the Covid-19 pandemic brought us all online</i>).	We built systems and processes to move all documentation and support online. We taught Champions how to facilitate effectively over video platforms and provided guidance on how to successfully engage with youth virtually. We very closely monitored outcomes and compared them to when we met in person with youth.	✓
	<u>Multiple Paths to Apply:</u> If we create multiple options to apply beyond the written word (specifically video submissions and interviews with our Youth Leadership Board members), we will broaden accessibility and equity within our selection process.	We recrafted the process to underscore the ease of applying. After providing basic info, applicants chose to submit a written application, share a video application, or be interviewed by a Youth Leadership Board member (and have that interview serve as their application). The result was more applications aligned to our target audience and a more effective experience for them.	✓

Other structures that support our learning

As you can see, our GripTape team is in a constant state of iteration — the anchor of which are the rapid learning cycles that we embed into every round of our Learning Challenge, which run three times a year. However, these cycles are supported and supplemented by other practices that we've adopted to support our ongoing learning.



1. **Design Days:** Our team and the Youth Leadership Board come together, in-person, 3–5 times a year for design days. These 2-day intensive work sessions have become a critical lever to advance our strategy. During these weekends, we do accelerated learning cycles to help build the vision for where we go next — we generate ideas to strengthen our work, build prototypes, test them with fresh users, and determine what we want to integrate in the coming months. All of this happens in an intense, but high-energy, fun, and wildly efficient weekend.
2. **A Calendar Mapped To Learning:** We've spent a ton of time aligning the workflow of the year to maximize for learning cycles. Specifically, we've calendared the three rounds of the Learning Challenge to ensure that we have just enough time in between them to gather data, synthesize it, make decisions about what to continue, and prepare for the next round of experiments. There's a just-right balance here between time to conclude these learning loops, but not creating too much space that we end up perseverating. It was uncomfortable at first, but necessary to keep us moving quickly.
3. **Sensemaking Days:** At the end of each cycle, this is a full day of learning and decision-making for our team. We regroup in what we were testing, immerse in data, make meaning, and ultimately decide which ideas we've validated and will continue and which we will scrap. It always feels like not enough time, but that's part of the point: to force us to make "good enough" decisions and keep moving.
4. **Weekly Team Meetings:** The full-time GripTape team meets at the beginning of the week to set and share our individual 3-4 goals for the week, why they matter, and how we'll know if we are successful. We then color-code whether we met them at the end of the week. In these meetings, we also create space for team members to share ideas they'd want to test (ex: "before we launch selection, I had this idea...") and, in real-time, figure out how others can help support them in running with those ideas. These spaces enable us to take the principles of ideation, data-informed decision-making, and constant iteration into the day-to-day ways we operate.
5. **The Kitchen:** Our Champions (who support GripTape youth in their Learning Challenge) gather every seven weeks for what we refer to as "The Kitchen" (i.e., let's meet in the kitchen, where all the important family conversations happen). The purpose of this space is to learn together, similar to a professional learning community. As part of this, we hold space to reflect on the hypotheses we're currently testing.
6. **Research Partnerships:** In addition to our rapid learning cycles, we've established a longer-term research partnership with Cornell University to study the impact of the model in a more comprehensive manner. What we're finding is that our rapid learning cycles provide a powerful complement to this type of research — capturing ongoing data but quickly elevating insights and questions that can field more expansive analysis.

WHAT WE'VE LEARNED

- **This approach unleashes possibility:** By having permission and processes to test unproven ideas, our whole team is empowered to ask, *what if?* It gives space to generate new ideas without needing full confidence it will work. MVPs help us shrink the stakes and move into action.
- **It's uncomfortable, but gets easier over time:** If you're doing this right, you are, by definition, testing uncertain ideas in very short time periods and pushing yourselves beyond what people might perceive as possible. For most of us, this goes against our muscle memory and can be, at times, scary. That said, the more practice you have, the easier this gets (also, the more cycles you've done, the more confident you are in the core parts of the model and the tweaking phases are just easier).
- **Get ready to scrap things:** We've all worked in places where new ideas just get added on top of old ones. As we're engaging in these cycles, we're disciplined about not just prioritizing what new things we're testing, but also in determining whether these ideas truly "work." If there's clear evidence it doesn't work, we cut it. If the impact is basically the same, only marginally better, or isn't more efficient we still will likely relinquish it.
- **Don't get attached to the solution:** For this to work, you have to be willing to drop your ego and attachment to specific solutions. You have to trust the data you're collecting and be willing to move on. That's not always easy — we, like anyone, get attached to ideas that are hard to let go of. But it's better to stop something that doesn't have a solid impact early than lose more time and money.
- **The leader must walk the talk:** It is critical that the leaders of the organization or team are fully engaged in these cycles. It both sets the tone for this type of testing and learning for others, but ensures they are getting first-hand experience with the lessons learned and able to quickly make decisions about the direction the team goes next.
- **Rapid learning cycles shift power:** In education, decisions are frequently made with little to no input from young people. Through our commitment to testing MVPs and grounding in concrete data and reactions from our youth, we ensure that every decision we make is anchored in their experience.
- **Culture drives all of this:** You can have all the structures you want, but without building a *culture* that supports curiosity, risk taking, celebrating learning, and constant improvement, they won't take you very far. These approaches work at GripTape because we've developed a collective ownership in making our work better and a sense of empowerment to act and not wait to be given permission. This starts with the leadership and looks like a bunch of big and small actions, such as:
 - *Invite innovation:* "I'm seeing this in the data, what does that make you want to do?"
 - *Break it down:* "Let's lay out the full process. Where do you see opportunities to strengthen this?"
 - *Celebrate it:* "Everyone, I just want to shout out the way X did ____"
 - *Add lift:* "I love that. How can I help?"
 - *Tear down barriers:* "What might get in the way, how can we fix that?"
 - *Coach towards it:* In one of our three evaluations a year "I'd love to see you take more initiative in ____"

Hotspots to navigate:

As we've worked to implement this approach throughout our organization and talked to our colleagues in other schools and nonprofits, we've uncovered some barriers to be mindful of and guard against:

- **Pressure to deliver on outcomes immediately:** Especially when doing critical work like serving young people, there can be a lot of pressure to achieve outcomes urgently. When overdialed, this can stifle innovation and the time it takes to test out a new idea. Instead, define your cycle, let the test play out, and reaffirm that learning is the aim.
- **Desire for polish:** Creating MVPs inherently means the product won't be perfect or refined. This can often rub against performance culture that values polished products. Reinforcing "good enough" is what matters for us to get into action and have users start interacting with it.
- **Wed to solutions:** There can be a lot of reasons to want a specific solution to work — from it being a personal favorite to trying to please other stakeholders. But these cycles only work when you are truly laser-focused on the data coming from your users. Don't slip into "selling" your idea. Let the data speak for itself.
- **Long cycles:** Many organizations and schools operate on a year-long planning timeline (plan the work for the year and then execute it). This is too long for most build, measure, learn cycles. You need to create multiple touchpoints to pause, assess, and figure out what's next. Start small and chunk the work (ex: let's first just test this part of the idea for a few weeks).
- **Planning, planning, planning:** Often driven by external forces (school improvement planning, grant proposals), there's a focus on developing elaborate long-term plans. Teams will spend weeks creating these elaborate documents. Instead, focus on velocity of learning. Get your best thinking down and then jump in. You'll get further faster.
- **Users that aren't "voluntary":** In some social ventures, education especially, the services aren't "opt-in." For example, students are mandated by law to attend school. This can mess up the data and learning and bring you into the land of "this is better than usual" rather than "this is adding enough value I would show up for it." If you find yourself running into this, consider how you can really give agency to the user to engage with your idea or not (i.e., put it after school, create an opportunity to sample and then opt out, make a microschool and see who enrolls).
- **Expecting quick transformation:** This approach represents a significant shift in operating for most organizations. But it's easy to get discouraged if it doesn't take hold right away. Shrink the change. Test this approach in discrete ways (with a specific problem or in a small team) before expecting it to scale broadly.

A WORK IN PROGRESS

When we initially got started, it would be an understatement to say that we were humbled by the need in front of us. We were trying to reverse centuries of conventional wisdom that young people were supposed to learn what they were told, how they were told. But the combination of CREATE and *Lean Startup* was the exact prescription we needed to get moving. They have kept us proximate to youth, constantly curious, rigorous in our reflection. They've helped us be bold, but smart. They've helped us scale rapidly, but with intention. And they've helped us to build a team that is empowered and having a ton of fun.

We offer all of this in hopes that it gives you a window into the art and science of how GripTape learns and grows, but hopefully ideas that can spark or fuel your own innovation journey. If you check in a couple years from now, much of this will likely be outdated. And that's the point, to be an organization that is always a work in progress, continuously striving for new heights.

