



[Episode 54: "Using Standardization & Customization to Navigate Partnerships & Scaling"](#)

Part 2 with Cecilia Sluga, Behaviour Change Senior Lead at Delterra

At Delterra, Cecilia Sluga works with a wide array of partners to create "Real Change, At Scale". In part two of this two-episode series, Cecilia shares strategies for partnering with individuals and organizations. She also shares her advice for scaling, which involves finding the right mix of standardization and customization. Lastly, Cecilia shares the challenges and opportunities of applying BI in the non-profit sector.

Transcript:

KIRSTIN APPELT, HOST: Welcome to this edition of Calling DIBS. I'm your host, Kirstin Appelt, Research Director with UBC Decision Insights for Business and Society or DIBS for short. This is part two of our two-episode series featuring Cecilia Sluga, Behaviour Change Senior Lead at Delterra, an environmental non-profit trying to change behaviour and systems to create real change at scale.

In the first episode, we learned about Cecilia's journey to behaviour change and how she combines tools to change behaviour and systems for positive social and planetary impact. In the second episode, Cecilia shares more about how she works with a variety of individuals and organizations to develop, test and scale solutions. She also talks about how working to change behaviour is different in the non-profit sector versus the private sector. Let's jump right in.

When you're trying to work with organizations on a given project, what works, what doesn't? What's the best way to manage those relationships, to have a successful process that everyone can get on board with?

CECILIA SLUGA, GUEST: There are a lot of learnings into this space because there are a lot of things that need to be taken into account. And let me say that there is something very enriching in working with this many partners and stakeholders that you keep the sight on the complexity of perspectives and needs that need to be addressed in the design of that whole systemic solution. I know that we do human-centred design, but I'm not saying user-centered design, I'm saying human-centered design, because I'm not only centering the user experience, from behaviour change, yes, but there's also another part of designing, not just the behaviour change layer, but the whole system or the whole ecosystem of waste management, that there are many interests to take into account into the design in this human-centered design.

And so having a lot of partners and a lot of stakeholders and building a framework or yes, bringing alive a framework of collaboration between all the partners and stakeholders, helps a lot in keeping sight of the complexity of all the parts and dimensions of the systems that need to be orchestrated into something that's keeping homeostasis on a balance. And it's working without falling apart.

It really works when you really collaborate, when you really take into account, I'm not going to say, like, demagogic approach on like everyone's voice. No, no, no. Yes. There's a way of having to account everyone's

voices. And obviously, everyone's voice has a different way to count in on how you take them, consider into the design or into the decisions that you, that you take into account.

And so, when you work together with this many partners, I know that I'm using a lot of words that are on trend, and sounds like "collaboration" and "empathy", but they're true. It's true because if you're working with the municipal side and then with people financing your project and then with citizens in different civil associations and you know, nucleated around these different interested associations of the community and well, many, many, many, many, many partners.

The people building the machines for the plants. You know, you have a really long processes to buy the machinery, to design the plants, to build the plants. The workers in the plants, some came from working in the informal sector, in the landfill and they are incorporated to our plants. And now they are formal workers, you know, all of these elements, need to collaborate. And need to talk, dialogue, to be able to talk. And what works, is when you are aware of these different languages and these different levels because not everyone is on the same level.

Not everyone has the same power or the same voice to be heard, or interest to be represented. And so, sometimes our role as designers in these types of organizations and in this type of work, it's also orchestrating and directing all the conversation around the project and what needs to be done and how it needs to be done, and in which time frame, on which who's going to put the resources and who's going to be accountable. And, from big decisions to very little decisions, to very small decisions, like who's going to manage the social media? The municipality, the NGOs, the volunteers from the community, who's going to have the ownership of that communication channel?

And, you know, these are really small stuff, but with a really big impact in the outcome, in the delivery of the project. And, well, these are all the challenges and the best practices that we learn how to, or to take into account, you know, to collaborate, to really collaborate, to be really empathetic, and be mature about it. We work from different sides. And we have different interests and we have different ways of working. We were incubated by a consulting company. So this case gives us character as an NGO, an environmental NGO, with a lot of problem solving skills.

We have a really technical approach. We build business cases around what we do. We are interested in the growth and the return of investment of our behaviour change initiatives. We are always taking all these aspects into account, and perhaps a municipal team works with another agenda, in the positive way of agenda, and they need to comply with the timings of the City Hall. We have some processes, and the municipal or the government offices have other processes, and all these things, and the financial assistance needs to come in a different way, with different requirements, and you need to comply with everything.

It's not only that the topic or the challenge that we are addressing or tackling is complex. The whole functioning of all the pieces that comes together to work in a solution is scalable and innovative that can really solve a waste management problem at the city level. It's a lot of work.

APPELT: Yeah. And I think what you're saying about the collaboration and the speaking of different languages and different agendas and goals is really part of what makes it tricky. But then it's so rewarding when you're able to actually pull it off and work together, and things, actual results come out of it.

So building on that idea of the results, and going back to the idea of the tagline "at scale" scaling is traditionally very tough. To take the idea that worked, and you've already said sometimes, you know, the sign

on the bin works in this city and not in that city. So what advice do you have for the scaling piece? What has made it work better or worse? What can you say about scaling?

SLUGA: Well, I welcome everyone listening to this, having an issue with scaling, to reach out, because sometimes we are like, the feeling is that you're going blindfolded into something really unknown and totally uncertain. And so, when I face these types of challenges of, "Okay, this is some uncharted territory for me, I never had this challenge to address and scale", well, you know, we go in design and behavioural and these new disciplines, we all go with fail fast.

But, you know, in the end, no one wants to fail, and it's difficult, also. I know that we are in the fashion of saying that "You can fail, that everything is okay". But I think that those statements are really tricky. We are concept testing. We are iterating, we are optimizing, but "failing" is still a really strong word. So, I'm totally honest on this.

And then, what I always do in these situations is I turn to what I really know, or I'm really certain about. So when we had-- Olavarria was supposed to be implemented by the time that we were going to scale. But then, as you might know, projects can be delayed. You know, mostly when building like industrial plants is involved, most likely the project is going to be delayed. So I found myself having to scale to five cities, having the certainty that in our last pilot, Olavarria, pilot five, behaviour change strategy worked super fine and we reached 40% participation from households in eight weeks.

APPELT: Wow, let's just pause and say, wow, that's very impressive.

SLUGA: Yes, it's truly impressive. Then you have to maintain it. And it was a really, as I told you, it was a massive implementation. It was not a nudge. You won't reach 40% household participation with one nudge. That's not true. I haven't seen it. I haven't read about it. And from my personal experience, I will really not trust that information unless I really see it. Having said this, you know, the whole thing that we tested in Olavarria, we were never able to implement the 100% strategy in another cities because they have other strategies for their mass media other than ours.

when we scale, we just take the parts of our behaviour change strategy that fits and works in synergy with what the cities already have and works. So we kind of merge with what the cities have. What I scaled was the strategy and then the content. You know, I knew that I needed an intervention for the disposal touch point. The point, if it was a wastebasket, the wastebasket. If its a container because it's part of the city, container as well. I know that I need an intervention in containers, because what I strategically need is an intervention in the disposal touchpoint.

This is the type of thing that I'd scale, the strategic role of the intervention in what I'm trying to build as an experience. And then in each of the cities, I use three weeks, a month, to research, to calibrate those elements of the strategy, how do they go in the "in-betweens" of the elements that they already had? And once I kind of had that kind of blueprint design that I'm going to do this, in this week, with this intervention here, and then the field agent is going to knock the door, and then I'm going to put in the radio this jingle so I can reinforce the door-to-door visit, etc. I do kind of a blueprint on scripting how everything is going to work.

Then I test it with users, with residents in the new cities and in that testing I tried to calibrate, to optimize the messaging, the callers. What I found is that the structure of this, the layout, you know, the structural design of the pieces, works. You know, the tagline goes here and the tagline needs to be a call to action. You cannot be poetic. You cannot have, you know, this type of thing. They really work.

And then you have to customize the colouring to be fitting with the city, with the colours of the city. There are cities that are more modern in their static languages, and there are cities that are more like industrial and more serious and more pragmatic. And so they want more kind of I call it, sorry, this is something to be funny, we call it like “the Soviet design”, you know, this municipal Soviet design. Well, there are other cities which this type of approach doesn't work. But the piece, it's the same, you know, the call to action, the little drawings or the little icons for materials and these type of things. So yes, we scaled the strategy and then we tried to calibrate the different elements to localize it.

APPELT: Yeah.

SLUGA: And it's been giving us good results.

APPELT: Yeah. So I like what you're saying, so it's the idea that certain pieces are standardized, but you're not standardizing the whole thing. You're always having to customize and change. I don't know if it's customized standardization or standardized customization, but definitely elements of both pieces, something stayed the same, and some things you have to customize.

And I think that's really important because a lot of times there is this tendency of, “Oh, it worked, it's going to work elsewhere”. But there's no guarantee there's certain elements, that might work the same. But like you said, whether it's the colour scheme or the design elements or something about how exactly the message is phrased might really be different in different places.

SLUGA: Yes, I'm eager to scale to more cities because as you gain experience in more cities, your kind of, my kind of success picture. It's like archetypes of cities. I know that there are like four archetypes that they will respond in some way or another to the same type of stimuli. You know, like I kind of, I'm already sensing these.

I have very industrial cities, like cities which have industrial ports or chemistry industry, and they have the same type of approach and appeal, and they like maybe Soviet styling and this very formal colouring, and this formal language and they do not appreciate that you have interventions in their waste baskets, and like more severe.

And then you have like cities with tourists, touristic cities that they have a very different way of sorting with the public services because there are different elements on the relationships of the citizens with their cities that give you different ideas on how they will receive or how they will process, decode the meaning of a communication piece. And so, the cities with tourists, what we find in Argentina, is that they are kind of more flexible. You know, they are more flexible, but in terms of how they evaluate and they think of their public services, they are kind of used to it. I'm sorry to say this, but they are kind of used to not always be the centre of attention of the government. You know, sometimes public services will kind of build some type of preference around the tourists.

For example, we have one type of tourist city which has a chatbot digital channel -- it's designed for tourists. The transport system of the city, it's explained. You can check the timings of the bus and if the bus is working properly. It's a city with a lot of snow and a lot of forests. A problem, so perhaps in a storm, some roads are closed and tourists can consult all of these in a chatbot designed specially for them. And locals don't. They have to, you know, listen to the radio, see the local news. And so their perception and their answer to our proposal is totally different. It's much better. They feel so supported, so, you know, guided and for the first time seen in the spotlight or public policy, you know, or that they perhaps do not even have a consistent collection service every week, but they still participate.

APPELT: Wow.

SLUGA: And that's totally impossible to think of in more severe cities, more severe cases where expectations of public services and the proper functioning and proper management of the city has nothing to do. And so, I'm starting to see these patterns, and well, perhaps for these type of users, we can, you know, the strategy can be less intensive because they are responding to fewer elements.

APPELT: Yeah, it's an interesting idea too. This idea that in some places, you're going to need to use like all of the tools at your disposal. And then in other places, you might only need to do a few types of messaging or a few types of tools. So that's really interesting to think about.

SLUGA: I'm sure that there are certain factors between cities and intra-cities. How do you survive in a setting, you know, where one house is far away from the other. It's more like a private community layout, totally different with super compact urban density that we have in the city centres. And most-- probably those specific parts of the cities are going to respond very different to different strategies within the city. And gradually, door to door visits are having a totally different frequency and length, etc. in different parts of the city.

There are some cities where we are currently running two different pilots because they are very different urban settings and very different public services accessibility. And so this tragedy, it's different and they respond differently and we are trying to start to understand these differences. Well, it's more what we are trying to understand, and that what we don't know, that what we do. But on the things that we do know we are pretty certain about that.

APPELT: Yeah, so much nuance. It's impressive. But I thought maybe we could switch gears a little bit because the other topic I wanted to ask you about is because you're someone who's worked in the private sector and the non-profit sector and I don't get to chat quite as often with folks in the nonprofit sector, is do you think there's unique challenges to working in the behaviour change space in the non-profit sector?

SLUGA: Yes. And this is my first year and a half in the non-profit sector. I've always worked in the private sector, and the times that I worked in public policy or with the public sector, it was as a consultant from the private sector. So, there are a lot of differences. There are a lot of differences in many, many, many aspects of the job.

First of all, in our design space and behavioural design space, there is the ethics issue, it's totally different. There are practices and there are things that you can do in the private sector with the research, private practices and the timing and the formalities that we have, conducting research for the private sector, and that you have recruiters that you are paying incentives to for participants to participate in your research.

And in the non-profit sector, we are not using those practices. So our participants are there willingly. They are not receiving monetary incentives or any other incentives. If they are testing any of our equipment, we can then give it to them as recognition to participating in our pilot, or testing an equipment. But when they start to participate, they are aware in our consent letter that the equipment is just something that they have to test, but they need to, if asked, to give them back, etc.

So the terms in both research is different. The ethics of the interventions that you can or can't do are different. It's not the same to use behavioural insights to start to do some UX design that use behavioural insights in a nonprofit, working in public policy, in the house hold, you have different responsibilities, different

accountabilities. You have a different contract with the user. And so these topics or these issues that I'm mentioning here arise to me every moment, almost every day.

Financial incentives, oh, they're great. They are going to make your impact, your recovery times go faster and higher than ever, yes. But that's not the type of relationship or the type of contract that I want to have with my user. Why? Well, because I'm a public policy and I'm working in a specific region in the global south where there are, you know, sometimes even now that I'm getting into more interesting zones. Sometimes I'm thinking of the cost of an intervention. It's millions of Argentinian pesos. Is it reasonable for us to spend millions, you know, in a flyer? I don't know, because it's made of composted materials and it's going to trigger behaviour change. Yes. But it's reasonable, it's ethical to spend this much budget on this?

While I'm having, you know, different data. I know that these are not like dealbreakers or questions that have one answer, but this is the kind of thinking that you have in your back end whenever you are taking a decision, whenever you are considering a return on investment, whenever you are fighting for space in the public space to promote your program when the municipality tells you, I do not have resources to do that, I do not have the field team to do that at this point. I have other urgencies. I have other public service that I need to provide that have some critical aspects.

This is working in the non-profit, the difference between the private and I think that in the nonprofit sector, with our mission that bringing good to the people and the planet and rethinking systems and bringing innovative, scalable solutions to complex environmental problems. All these statements, they have a real impact on our everyday decision-making and, I think it's challenging, but it's also rewarding.

You know, when you see we have some what we call special needs households that are households that they will probably need special equipment to comply with our service in Olavarria, what we did, it's like we cut down collection frequency. You know, in Olavarria, they have six times a week collection of mixed waste. Six times a week. So we cut it back down to four times a week.

First it was twice a week mixed waste, once a week organics or compostables, and once a week recyclables. The change in the waste management disposal and the overall habit relating to waste sorting and disposal, it's completely different. I'm not just changing one thing, adding one collection service for recyclables. No, no, no. I'm changing everything.

So, keeping organics or compostables separated at home for a week. You can imagine for someone who's not used to and did not have the curiosity to try to compost at home or separate or segregate the compostables or organics, it's something quite hard to come around, not just actually doing, but going against the intuitive barriers and all the biases on "This is going to rot and this is going to bring rats. This is going to have cockroaches and flies. And this is going to smell and this is going to be disgusting". None of these things happen for having organics segregated for one week. None. Doesn't matter how hot it is at home. It doesn't matter. It doesn't. But these representations are real, are ingrained, are there.

Special needs. This all has something related to this. So, we can have households with babies and diapers. We can have households going through a health issue and do not have the accessibility to manage so, to these households that we detect in our door-to-door visits, we offer them a special needs service and a special needs guidance. And at the beginning, they say, like different partners in our design table, our decision-making table, they were saying to me, "But if you are giving a special bin with a top and wheels so it was easier for this woman to bring the waste outside the home and everything, they are all going to be asking for a nice bin with a top and the wheels."

And, I didn't have an answer at that point. Yes, it could happen. Something inside me said, "I don't think there's that cultural relevance for many households to come to ask for bins". And then it never happened, but you know what really, what did happen, is that the lady, you know, spread that, five special needs homes, replicate the message, that we were specially assisting them and so the whole community was kind of word of mouth that our program was really so committed that we were having also a special program for special needs homes.

So, people with a problem, instead of not complying with the service, start calling us. So, this is also something on working in the non-profit sector. Also, tying the question back, you know, I want to go back to this -- that sometimes you build qualitative, really small things that you try to standardize as a behaviour. Then we have these special needs homes household strategy. This is what we standardize. But it started in a very qualitative, field work reality, being their intervention. And so, this is kind of some crafty, handmade spirit that working in the non-profit sector has, that working in the private sector, I've never encountered this capability of crafting something from nothing, from one household to a whole city.

APPELT: That's so interesting to hear about, and so neat that you're able to, again, going back to this idea of standardization versus customization, you're able to pick the parts that need to be standardized and keep them standardized, but then customizing the rest.

Well, I know we're close to end of time, and you've been so generous with your time today. So I'll ask one last question, which is just do you have a message for people who are newly in training to become BI practitioners, to work in the behaviour change space?

SLUGA: Ah, yes, I have, like one warning and one positive promoting. The positive promoting big fan message would be like, "Keep going". This is a much-needed space of understanding to build effective, fruitful, responsible and ethical and positive interventions. This is the space that it was untapped super recently. How to tackle habits and be able to ingrain in the understanding of behaviour or individual behaviours and habits, all these centuries and centuries of knowledge and social thinking, it's something that is, I think, super inspiring. Super inspiring. And I think that you have there a real treasure.

My only warning, it's that do not forget anthropology. Do not forget. I think that perhaps cultural anthropology would say like this web of meaning that culture is keep taking presence of this web of meaning surrounding each of our decisions. We take decisions in very specific moments of truth. And it's our individual choice. But the mindset, it's being structured, even the psyche, it's being structured culturally. We are still social and how we make these connections. I'm still researching or thinking about these connections but I think that we need both in our public policies.

APPELT: Yeah, absolutely. Yeah, I love that. And I think again, I think it's a little bit of that standardization customization thread coming through again, like we have to think through what's the specific context. Yeah, that's a great final message. Well, we'll wrap it up there. And I want to thank you so much for joining. It's been so interesting for me to hear about the work you're doing. And it's just such great, important work to have a positive impact on people, on the planet. And I can't wait to see what all Delterra continues to accomplish. So, thank you so much for joining us today, Cecilia.

SLUGA: Thank you for listening to me. I really enjoy bringing positivity and enthusiasm to our field and to building better communities. And I think that's important. So, thank you.

APPELT: Thank you. And thanks to our listeners for joining another episode of Calling DIBS.