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# Leveraging Grant-Making—Part 2: Aligning Programmatic Approaches With Complex System Dynamics

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# Leveraging Grant-Making—Part 2: Aligning Programmatic Approaches With Complex System Dynamics

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*Key Points*

· The purpose of this two-part article is to enable foundations to increase the leverage of their grant-making resources by working effectively with the dynamics of complex social systems.

· This article examines how foundations can align planning, implementation, and evaluation efforts with the behavior of the social systems they seek to improve.

· Asking powerful questions of staff, board, grantees, and other stakeholders helps to transform how they think about their goals and strategies.

· In addition to using the power of questioning, foundations function more systemically by suspending their assumptions about their effectiveness and what is possible, creating the cultural shifts needed, learning from others, and developing their systems thinking capabilities.

## Introduction

A number of foundations have begun to apply a systems approach to parts of their work, but far fewer have taken a comprehensive systems approach to all aspects of a single program. The Food and Fitness (F&F) initiative of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation (WKKF) provides a concrete example of what a comprehensive systems approach might look like.

F&F began as a response to staff and board member concerns about the rising rate of childhood obesity and early onset of related diseases such as type 2 diabetes. Instead of focusing on "curing" individual behavior and reacting to symptoms, the program officers who led this work intentionally began by examining the interrelated systems that were producing these symptoms and asking, "What is the future that WKKF truly cares about creating for children and their families in communities?" Their experience will be woven throughout this article to illustrate what systems thinking looks like when applied to a foundation's programming.

Whereas Part 1 of this article focused on the dynamics of complex social systems, Part 2 addresses the implications of those dynamics for foundations by answering several key questions:

• Why is it important for foundations to develop a systemic approach to their programming?
• How can foundations integrate systems thinking into their core functions of planning, implementation, and evaluation?
• What powerful questions can we ask ourselves and others to generate a more systemic approach to our work?
• How can we move toward thinking and acting systemically?

## Making the Case for a Systems Approach

A systemic approach contributes to philanthropic effectiveness by enabling foundations to take complex dynamics into account, anticipate resistance to change, and tailor best practices to specific situations. These outcomes contribute in

turn to more comprehensive planning and better results.

Ricardo Salvador, program officer at WKKF, points out that social systems are very complicated, and it is important to acknowledge and work with this complexity. Systems thinking enables diverse stakeholders with different points of view to integrate their perspectives, monitor how many parts of a system interact simultaneously, and trace the implications of different solutions over time. Without a more complete appreciation of system complexity, he believes that you cannot produce desired or lasting results.

### The F&F Business Case
The WKKF program officers who initially led F&F, Linda Jo Doctor and Gail Imig, knew that many well-intentioned programs had attempted to address childhood obesity by focusing on nutrition, education, or exercise. Some targeted policy change, whereas others focused on individual behavior, but data clearly showed undesirable outcomes continuing, especially among vulnerable children.

WKKF had long supported developing a healthy, safe food supply and increasing consumption of good food. In addition to their previous education and community change experience, the lead program officers recently had participated in an intensive organizational learning capacity-building program. They believed that applying a systems approach to F&F would increase the likelihood of engaging a diverse group of people and organizations, fostering collaboration and finding innovative strategies to change the underlying systems, and thereby creating and sustaining the healthy results everyone seeks for children and families. Because the issue was highly complex and prior efforts to address the issue in simpler ways had been unsuccessful, the program officers determined that a systemic approach would be essential to achieving long-term goals.

### Integrating Systems Thinking Into Planning
Of the three major foundation programming functions—planning, implementation, and evaluation—systems thinking can play an especially

important role in improving planning effectiveness.

Part 1 of this article described five steps in applying a systems thinking approach (Stroh, 2009):

1. building a strong foundation for change by engaging multiple stakeholders to identify an initial vision and picture of current reality;
2. engaging stakeholders to explain their often competing views of why a chronic, complex problem persists despite people's best efforts to solve it;
3. integrating the diverse perspectives into a map that provides a multi-partial and more complete picture of the system and root causes of the problem;
4. supporting people to see how their well-intended efforts to solve the problem often make the problem worse; and
5. affirming a compelling vision of the future and supportive strategies that can lead to sustainable, system-wide change.

> *Of the three major foundation programming functions—planning, implementation, and evaluation—systems thinking can play an especially important role in improving planning effectiveness.*

This section suggests how to integrate these steps into the program planning process.

### Step 1: Building a Foundation for Change
Building a strong foundation for systemic change involves engaging diverse stakeholders in the planning stage. This is a cornerstone of the F&F initiative. WKKF developed its knowledge base by bringing together researchers and theorists from around the country in fields such as public health, nutrition, exercise physiology, education, behavior change, child development, social change, and social marketing. The foundation also assembled

a group of "community thought leaders," practitioners from around the country, to have a conversation about the current realities in their communities, as well as their visions for communities that would support the health of vulnerable children and families. In addition, WKKF engaged with other foundations throughout the U.S. in conversations about their collective thinking on childhood obesity and the roles foundations might play. From all of this, a collective vision for the initiative began to emerge — not as a reaction to the immediate circumstances, but from an enriched understanding of current realities, as well as deeply shared aspirations for the future:

> We envision vibrant communities where everyone—especially the most vulnerable children—has equitable access to affordable, healthy, locally grown food, and safe and inviting places for physical activity and play.

*Asking powerful questions is an especially effective way of inviting people onto a level playing field and surfacing and strengthening everyone's mental models. Throughout this article we offer questions to ask at different stages to improve people's abilities to see more clearly and create what they want.*

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**BOX 1    Questions for Building a Foundation for Change**

· Who needs to be engaged in this conversation? Who has been historically excluded but needs to be invited into this conversation?
· What is the future we and our partners truly care about creating?
· What is our intended impact? What long-term results do we want to achieve, and for whom?
· What events and patterns of behavior over time do we notice that are related to this vision? What are the key gaps between our vision and current reality?

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## Step 2: Engaging Stakeholders to Explain Often Competing Views

Ricardo Salvador notes that one characteristic of social systems is that different observers view

them differently. Jillian Darwish, executive director of the Institute for Creative Collaboration at KnowledgeWorks Foundation, adds that conversations in which people clarify their own mental models, listen deeply to others, and find a way forward together are essential to creating sustainable change.

Building on the results of Step 1 above, systems mapping is one tool to help stakeholders see how their efforts are connected and where their views differ. This tool extends the more familiar approaches of sociograms or network maps to show not only who is related to whom, but also how their different assessments of what is important interact.

Part 1 of this article presented the iceberg model. F&F's conversation among community thought leaders was structured using that model. Examples of questions included, "What is happening now regarding the health and fitness of children in your communities that has been capturing your attention?" "What are some patterns related to health and fitness of children that you're noticing?" "What policies, community or societal structures, and systems in your communities do you believe are creating the patterns and events you've been noticing?" "What beliefs and assumptions that people hold are getting in the way of the health and fitness of children?" This conversation ended with the question, "What is the future for supporting the health of children and their parents that you truly care about creating in your community?"

Initially each participant's comments reflected his or her own work and the competition for resources that typically accompanies community engagement. Some believed the lack of mandated daily physical education caused childhood obesity. Others faulted school lunches. Some hoped parents would prepare more meals at home rather than eating out. Several blamed the rise of fast-food establishments. In the ensuing conversation, participants began to consider one another's thinking. They came to realize that no single explanation, including their own, could fully explain the health outcomes they saw. The conversation revealed different perspectives and experiences but also began

aligning participants around common beliefs and a deeper, broader understanding of the issue.

### Step 3: Integrating Diverse Perspectives

Systems maps integrate diverse perspectives into a multi-partial picture of the system and provide a deeper understanding of a problem's root causes. Participants in F&F, both at WKKF and in grantee communities, came to see that the obesity epidemic in children was the result of national, state, and local systems failing to support healthy living, rather than a consequence of accumulated individual behaviors. They began to recognize the interrelationships among systems such as the food system, the quality of food in schools and neighborhoods, the natural and built environment and its role in supporting active living, safety, public policy such as zoning, and a myriad of other factors. They also started to understand how individual organizations' good intentions and actions could actually undermine one another's efforts. These conversations paved the way for collaboratively creating strategies and tactics in later phases of the work.

### Step 4: Supporting Responsibility for Unintended Consequences

One characteristic of social systems introduced in Part 1 is that people often unintentionally contribute to the very problems they want to solve. Systems thinking enabled communities working in the F&F initiative to uncover potential, unintended consequences of their efforts. For example, marketing the concept of eating locally grown food without developing a food system that can provide it can lead to increased prices for that food, putting it out of reach for schools, children, and families in low-income communities, thus decreasing the consumption of good food among F&F's target population. By focusing on documenting the incidence of disease and health problems, the public health and medical community could unintentionally pull attention and resources from supporting communities in creating environments for healthy living. Pushing for policies to allow open space to be used for community gardens could have the unintended consequence of reducing access to open space for children to play and be active.

If people understand how they contribute to a problem, they have more control over solving it. Raising awareness of responsibility without invoking blame and defensiveness takes skill—yet it is well worth the effort.

### Step 5: Affirming a Compelling Vision and Developing Strategies

Once a foundation for change has been developed and the collective understanding of current reality has deepened, the last planning step is to affirm a compelling vision of the future and design strategies that can lead to sustainable, system-wide change. This step entails

1. affirming a compelling vision,
2. developing and articulating a theory of change,
3. linking investments to an integrated theory of change, and
4. planning for a funding stream over time that mirrors and facilitates a natural pattern of exponential growth.

*Affirming a compelling vision.* Part 1 of this article noted that that a system is exquisitely designed to achieve its current purpose—no matter how dysfunctional its behavior appears to be (Stroh, 2009). One implication of this principle is that people can only commit to a shared vision of a desired future once they have clarified the benefits of the current system that they might need to give up.

Talking only with people who think alike and speak the same professional language is easier and quicker than developing a common language with people from all parts of the community, and it allows specific individual goals to be achieved, often economically and efficiently. Yet working together to create and commit to a shared vision can result in powerful outcomes and typically unleashes both energy and resources that ultimately lead to the achievement of shared goals with significantly greater depth and breadth.

Examples of early drafts of shared visions created by New York City and Northeast Iowa F&F collaboratives indicate the potential of a collective vision:

> *New York City 2015 (excerpts).* All New Yorkers share an equal quality of life and have access to healthy and affordable food and opportunities for active living through physical spaces that accommodate all needs. Low income and communities of color have markets, gardens, and institutions that provide fresh, affordable healthy foods as well as recreational facilities and a built environment that supports daily active living, like interconnected bike paths, reduced traffic, additional green spaces and parks that will help draw communities together socially and safely. Children attend schools that foster healthy lifestyles through a curriculum that supports daily physical activity, food and fitness oriented education and healthy and locally procured food options.

New York City leads the country in progressive policy reform with respect to food and active living in a diverse, urban setting and is positioned as a national and international model.

*Northeast Iowa Food and Fitness Initiative.* Northeast Iowa is a unique place where all residents and guests experience, celebrate, and promote healthy locally grown food with abundant opportunities for physical activity and play EVERY DAY. Healthier people make stronger families and vibrant communities.

Although these two vision statements differ in length and detail, each reflects the commitment of the diverse community members who created them. As Jillian Darwish says, "We love what we create; if someone else is doing the creating, we don't necessarily embrace it."

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**BOX 5   Questions for Affirming a Shared Vision**

· What goals is the system currently designed to achieve (i.e. what are the benefits of the way things are)?
· How can we reconcile differences between espoused goals and current benefits? For example, can we align people around a meta-goal or achieve both espoused and actual goals at the same time?
· What is the shared vision that people commit to work toward together?

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*Developing and articulating a theory of change.* We have focused so far on applying systems thinking to understanding the root causes of chronic, complex problems. The same tools can be used to clarify and test theories of change about how we want things to unfold in the future. A theory of change articulates how to bridge the gap between vision and reality. It specifies

- vision and goals,
- strategies, and
- how these strategies are intended to support one another over time to achieve the desired goals.

**FIGURE 1** Building on Strong Relationships in Rural Iowa

## Reinforcing Feedback Constrained by Limits to Growth
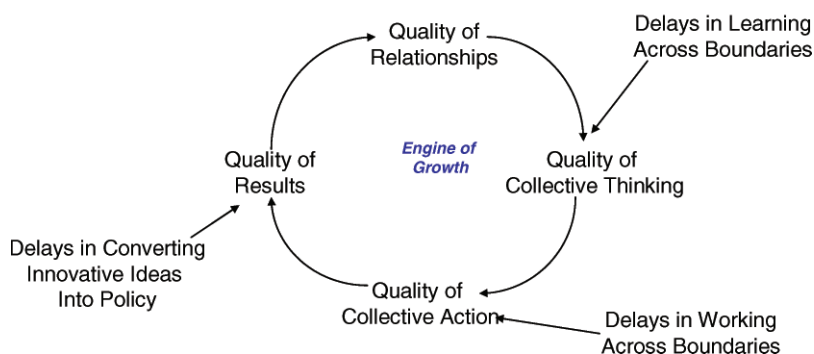


Most of the issues foundations address are complex. Using systems thinking to develop theories of change enables the integration of multiple perspectives and factors into one explicit picture of how the many elements of these complex issues need to work together over a period of time to take hold and be sustainable. Because different stakeholders are likely to begin with different assumptions about how to achieve their goals, it is useful for foundations to collaborate with stakeholders to align their change theories and build a single more robust and supportable theory.

Unlike logic models that are suited to mapping solutions to simple problems, system theories describe how levels of performance, inputs, and outputs are intended to interact with each other over time. Theories of systems change can be based on either a core reinforcing loop or a core balancing feedback loop, as introduced in Part 1 of this article.

Core theories of reinforcement focus on how to amplify what is already working in the system and grow this desirable performance over time. Participants in the regional F&F initiative in Northeast Iowa believed that establishing and cultivating high-quality relationships in their rural communities would help them move toward more collective thinking about how to take advantage of their agricultural base and open space, as well as more collaborative action, better results, and

even better relationships. They also recognized potential limits to growth, acknowledging that delays in learning and working across boundaries, as well as in converting innovative ideas into new policies, would try people's patience. They invested in collaborative technologies, engaged policymakers early in the process, and set realistic expectations around what could be accomplished in a given time frame. Figure 1 summarizes their theory of change, which is based on Daniel Kim's Core Theory of Success (Kim, 2001):

The second theory of change is based on investing in corrective actions to solve an existing problem or reduce the gap between a current and desired state. This balancing structure specifies the goal of the system, actual performance, and corrective action(s) intended to bridge the gap. Additional reinforcing loops sustain investment in the corrective actions over time. Reinforcing loops counter people's tendency (described in Part 1) to take their attention off a solution that is working and reallocate resources to more pressing problems, only to have the original problem return.

A child welfare agency developed a theory of change with the goal of maintaining children in safe, nurturing homes. Their programs or corrective actions focused on

• preventing children from being separated from safe, nurturing family environments in the first place; and

FIGURE 2    Child Welfare Agency's Theory of Change
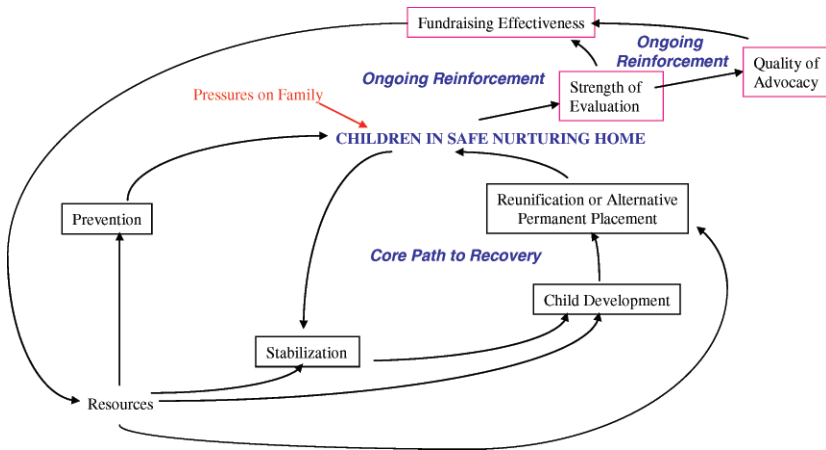


## BOX 6    Questions for Developing and Refining a Theory of Systems Change

· In order to achieve our vision, what factors are key to our success?
· How are those success factors causally related to one another?
· What is our theory of systems change?
· What theories of change do our grantees and collaborators hold?
· What do end users believe needs to be done?
· How aligned are the above views? How can we integrate different views to strengthen the theory?
· If the core theory is intended to amplify what is working now, then how will multiple success factors reinforce one another over time and create one or more virtuous cycles? What are potential limits to growth, and how might these be addressed?
· If the core theory is designed to take corrective action, what is a balancing loop that specifies the goal of the system, the actual performance, and the corrective action(s) we plan to use to bridge the gap? What reinforcing loops will be put in place to ensure that solutions are sustained over time?
· How will we test and refine the theory of change over time?

· supporting children who had to leave their homes through a process of stabilization, development, and reunification or placement in a new safe, nurturing family environment.

The agency also specified reinforcing loops to sustain an ongoing resource stream by

· highlighting successes through careful evaluation and
· using evaluation to stimulate additional fundraising and create effective advocacy campaigns.

*Linking investments to an integrated theory.* Having an integrated theory of systems change can help a foundation shape its investment strategies. First, it provides a framework for explicitly defining impact and better identifying programs and grantees to support. Roberto Cremonini, chief knowledge and learning officer at the Barr Foundation, observes that, although Barr funds individual organizations, it does so within a larger context set by its program areas, goals, strategies, and theories of change.

Second, a clear theory of change can help you assess the likely value of specific proposals. Decision criteria can include not only a proposal's alignment with the theory, but also the opportunity a proposal presents to test and strengthen the theory. Explicit theories of change that incorporate systems mapping have helped board members and program officers at WKKF reach clarity about proposed programs as they make invest-

ment decisions. Moreover, grantees report that mapping their theories improves their ability to both obtain foundation support and allocate their own funds more productively.

Third, the theory can support a foundation to expand the mix of its investment strategies. Jan Jaffe, senior director at the Ford Foundation and project leader at GrantCraft, points out that grant-making is only one way in which foundations can further their mission. Other approaches to leveraging limited donor resources include: mission-related investments, making loans, convening diverse stakeholders, developing grantee capacity, providing technical assistance, and communicating for impact and advocacy (see references at www.grantcraft.org).

F&F provided planning grants to communities but also offers a host of other resources. A technical assistance team is available to support grantees with using a systems thinking approach to their own work. Community initiative leaders are convened for capacity building and learning sessions. Annually, 20 people from each of the nine communities attend a networking conference where they share strategies, learning, and successes. Meanwhile, a group of foundations meets to build on one another's commitment to the goal of all children having access to healthy eating and active living. The mix of investment strategies is critical to the initiative.

*Planning for a natural funding stream.* Systems change takes a long time, but most foundation funding does not take this time delay into account. Many foundations set inappropriately high expectations for how much can be accomplished in a 2- to 3-year period and fail to plan for funding streams that match natural growth patterns.

Instead, Jan Jaffe points out that funding itself must be understood as a system to be cultivated. There must be sufficient patient capital up front to fund the normal early stage of slow growth. In order to ensure scale up and support the rapid growth that characterizes later stages of successful innovation, foundations need to plan for funder collaboratives involving multiple funders —including the private and public sectors along with networks of foundations—as well as funding for different needs such as research and development, capacity development, technical assistance, and small as well as big parts of a system.

One approach to balancing the long-term pace of meaningful change on complex issues and foundation needs for results and stewardship of resources is to support work in phases—planning, implementation, and transition to sustainability. For example, the first phase of support for F&F communities (currently coming to a close) centered on creating collaboration for aligned action in the nine funded communities, as well as among partner foundations. The result will be

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**BOX 7   Questions for Linking Investments With Your Theory of Systems Change**

· What investments can we make to achieve maximum leverage and sustainability (positive ripple effects over time)?
· How do individual proposals
  · improve information flow and relationships among different elements of the system?
  · address underlying beliefs and assumptions?
  · specify goals that focus on results desired by diverse stakeholders?
  · enable us to strengthen and test our theory of change?
· Conversely, how might specific proposals
  · undermine our ability to either prevent or permanently solve the problem?
  · create negative unintended consequences?
  · minimize potentially negative unintended consequences?
· If quick fixes are required, how might they be designed to ensure movement toward a more fundamental solution?

F&F community action plans that are far beyond WKKF funding.

The systems approach to this work resulted in unanticipated positive consequences. Developing relationships, engaging in high quality conversations, and committing to a common vision during the "planning phase" produced immediate results in many of the communities. In Northeast Iowa, Luther College, the public school district in Decorah, and the city council created a proposed community recreation plan under which Luther College would grant a no-cost lease on 50 acres of land for a city-wide sports center and would raise the money to build an indoor aquatic center; the city would build soccer and tennis courts; and the school district would raise money for maintenance. Documenting these results during each phase of work is critical to maintaining momentum and funding for long-term system change.

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**BOX 8    Questions for Conversation About the Appropriate Funding Timeline**

· What is our funding plan over time?
· How does this plan align with natural growth patterns and our own theory of change?
· How do we plan to involve different partners to meet different needs over time?
· How will we document results and stewardship of resources over time?

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### Integrating Systems Thinking Into Implementation

Because social systems are impossible to control and tend to produce unintended as well as planned consequences (both positive and negative), the most useful mindset to cultivate during the implementation stage is one of continuous learning. Cultivating this learning orientation often involves expanding a foundation's role and continuing to refine the theory of change.

One of the most important roles foundations can play in facilitating systemic action is to convene others. Because foundations are typically a third party with high credibility, they can use the power dynamic to constructively bring together, in vari-

ous combinations, grantees, other stakeholders in the private and public sectors, experts in particular content or skill areas, and other foundations with similar missions. Grantees can also use a foundation's convening power to bring together their own stakeholders and employ a systems thinking approach with them. For example, the Northeast Iowa F&F initiative was able to engage a broader set of stakeholders in capitalizing on their interdependencies thanks to the credibility and experience offered by WKKF.

A key strategic approach of the Barr Foundation is to strengthen connections within and among networks. Their commitment evolved out of former Executive Director Marion Kane's experience at the Maine Foundation, where foundation staff spent significant time connecting people and helping them see aggregate patterns. Convening grantees and/or stakeholders enables them to gradually move from a competitive to a collaborative stance. It builds social capital to complement the human, fiscal, and structural capital the foundation also works to develop. Funding learning networks and providing "network weavers" enables Barr to facilitate new connections, insights, and behaviors over time.

Foundations also can serve as useful system monitors, staying alert to the blind spots in all systems —especially around race and gender assumptions —and communicating with clarity about their own roles in the system and the change process. For example, the Open Society Institute invited 100 of its grantees – including former prisoners, social justice lawyers, and academics – to test and refine its theory of change about reducing recidivism among recently released prisoners (Stroh, 2007). A central tenet of the F& F initiative is the importance of engaging the populations most vulnerable to poor nutrition and fitness as active participants in the planning as well as implementation process. The community effort to end homelessness described in Part 1 recruited homeless people to participate throughout its project in similar ways.

Finally, foundations committed to working systemically continuously challenge and refine their

theories of change based on new information from pilot project findings and inputs from additional stakeholders. Both internal and external learning and developments have influenced the evolution of F&F's theory of change at the national level. A clarified mission and new vision statement for WKKF resulted in a clear directive that F&F work must demonstrate results for vulnerable children and their families and that actively engaging historically excluded people as partners is essential to success. Early learning also identified the importance of the quality of food in schools to achieving the F&F vision.

> **BOX 9   Questions That Support Foundations to Implement Their Plans Systemically**
>
> · In what ways will the roles we are planning to assume affect the results we are trying to achieve, both as a help and as a hindrance?
> · What capacities, if grantees had them, would improve their likelihood of success in the long term?
> · What role could we play as a convener on this issue? Who would come to the table because we are the convener? Who might not come because we are the convener? Who else needs to be involved?
> · What capacities and resources do we need that aren't part of our repertoire? Who might we engage to provide those?
> · What quality of relationship among us, grantees, and collaborators will enhance the success of this work?

## Integrating Systems Thinking Into Evaluation

From a systemic perspective, evaluation is best viewed as a continuous process punctuated by milestones for monitoring and modifying the theory of change. It begins with identifying the patterns to track in the planning stage and clarifying how these patterns are expected to shift over time if the strategies are successful. Effective evaluation takes natural growth patterns and time delays into account. It looks for consequences of interventions along multiple dimensions: short-term versus long-term,

intended versus unintended, and positive versus negative. As the theory of change is tested over time, new system maps of how relationships among different factors have actually evolved and what new factors have become influential can be developed.

> *In addition to encouraging more frequent feedback, a systems approach to evaluation tends to involve a more diverse group of stakeholders (GrantCraft, 2007).*

Laurie Lachance, evaluation director for the Center for Managing Chronic Disease at the University of Michigan and member of the F&F evaluation team, emphasizes the importance of evaluating progress toward the vision, capacities built, and resources used and developed, as well as how the work reflects the goals of diverse stakeholders.

President of Signet Research and Consulting Marilyn Darling has developed a structured process for ongoing evaluation and learning called *emergent learning,* which is used by foundations such as Barr and The Hartford Foundation for Public Giving (Darling and Parry, 2007). It cycles through four steps:

1. Collect behavioral data on an existing issue.
2. Determine the root causes of that behavior by analyzing the systems structure that produced it.
3. Develop a new hypothesis or theory of change about how you want to see the issue shift over time.
4. Identify opportunities that enable you to test this theory and gather new data.

Steps 1 and 2 support foundations to drill down the iceberg model described in Part 1 of this article in order to understand why a problem exists, while Steps 3 and 4 help them move back up the

iceberg by clarifying how they believe the future can unfold.

In addition to encouraging more frequent feedback, a systems approach to evaluation tends to involve a more diverse group of stakeholders (GrantCraft, 2007). It engages end users, grantees, program officers, and intermediaries as well as external evaluators in generating engaged and multifaceted assessment.

> **BOX 10    Questions for the Evaluation Stage**
>
> · How will we monitor progress toward our shared vision?
> · What patterns do we expect to change over time? How and when will we track them?
> · What are the short- and long-term results we are looking for in light of what we know about natural exponential growth?
> · How do we plan to measure success, particularly where key desired outcomes tend to be qualitative?
> · How will we take into account the fact that most quick fixes make no difference or actually make matters worse in the long run? How will we manage our own desires for immediate results?
> · What small successes can we target that are deliberately designed to build toward positive and sustainable long-term outcomes?
> · How will we track both positive and negative unintended consequences of interventions and learn from them?

## Shifting to a Systems Approach

Here are five steps to take to begin or accelerate the journey toward thinking and acting more systemically:

1. Suspend current assumptions about how effective you are now and what else is possible.

Look critically at the foundation's current effectiveness and appreciate how much money has been spent pursuing outcomes that were not accomplished or that were achieved in the short run only to be neutralized later.

2. Identify cultural shifts to make in the philanthropic approach.

Ann Mansfield, a co-convener of the Northeast Iowa F&F initiative; Kathleen Enright, president and CEO of Grantmakers for Effective Organizations; Jillian Darwish; Lisa Wyatt Knowlton, a founding partner of Phillips Wyatt Knowlton; and Linda Jo Doctor suggest that the cultural changes described in Table 1, below, are needed to use a systems thinking approach to philanthropy.

3. Ask questions designed to cultivate a more systemic approach.

One way of making these cultural shifts is to ask a different set of questions. The questions in this article stimulate a more systemic way of working.

**TABLE 1**   Cultural Shifts

| From | To |
|---|---|
| Knowing | Learning |
| Arms-length funder | Partner |
| Individual expertise | Collective thinking |
| Control | Collaboration through engagement, shared visioning, and aligned action |
| Giving grants | Using a mix of investments: convening, capacity building, technical assistance, grants, loans, and others |
| Short-term funding for quick fixes | Patient investment for long-term, sustainable results |

4. Learn from others who are working more systemically.

Jan Jaffe suggests that people doing social justice work provide good examples because they are willing to confront core issues (such as structural racism), make waves, and help people deal with resistance to change. Working systemically takes patience, strength, and courage, as well as insight, precisely because it challenges people's deeply held biases and underlying intentions.

5. Build your capacity in systems thinking.

Kathleen Enright suggests that a needed skill set for systems thinking includes testing one's own assumptions, engaging others in conversation and action, exploring mental models with others, and facilitating leadership. Grantmakers for Effective Organizations offers two especially helpful resources (2007, 2008). You can hire people with expertise in systems thinking as staff or consultants. Another alternative is to develop competencies in-house with existing staff.

## Closing

There are many ways in which foundations can align their programmatic approaches and systems with the behavior of the social systems they seek to improve. It is useful to begin by clarifying the reasons for applying systems thinking, then work over time to integrate systems thinking into the core functions of planning, implementation, and evaluation. One strategy we highlighted is to ask staff, board, grantees, and other stakeholders systemic questions that help transform how they think about their goals and approaches.

From a grantee's perspective, Ann Mansfield summarized the benefit of using systems thinking: "The tools helped us put a pause on the quick fix." In concluding why she chose the path of systems thinking for F&F, Linda Jo Doctor quotes W.K. Kellogg from a letter he wrote in the 1930s: "It is only through cooperative planning, intelligent study, and group action that lasting results can be achieved." Systems thinking provides frameworks and tools that can enhance philan-

thropy's efforts to achieve lasting systems change results.

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