FEATURE 11.3

A Systems Approach to Increasing the Impact of Grantmaking

DAVID PETER STROH AND KATHLEEN ZURCHER

Why do many foundations fall short in their efforts to improve the quality of people's lives over the long run? The reason lies in part in our tendency to apply linear thinking to complex, nonlinear problems. Through research and case studies, this article shows the benefits of combining conventional processes that facilitate acting systemically with tools to help stakeholders transcend their immediate self-interests by thinking systemically as well. Using this approach, a project to end homelessness and a comprehensive initiative to improve food and fitness and reduce childhood obesity managed to achieve lasting systems improvement by making a few key coordinated changes over time. Authors David Peter Stroh and Kathleen Zurcher illustrate how the application of a five-step systems thinking process can help foundations make better decisions about how to use their limited grantmaking resources for highest sustainable impact.



David Peter Stroh



Kathleen Zurcher

n the summer of 2006, a group of local foundations supported the leaders of Calhoun County, Michigan (population 100,000), in developing a 10-year plan to end homelessness.¹ The agreement forged by government officials

at the municipal, state, and federal levels – along with business leaders, service providers, and homeless people themselves – came after years of leadership inertia and conflict regarding what needed to be done to solve the problem. Moreover, the plan signaled a paradigmatic shift in how the community viewed the role of temporary shelters and other emergency response services. Rather than see

"I learned the difference between changing a particular system and leading systemic change."

them as part of the solution to homelessness, people came to view these programs as one of the key obstacles to ending it.

The plan won state funding, and a new executive director supported by a multisector board began steering implementation. Service providers who had previously worked independently and competed for foundation and public monies came together in new ways. One dramatic example was that they all voted

unanimously to reallocate HUD funding from one service provider's transitional housing program to a permanent supportive housing program run by another provider. Jennifer Schrand, who chaired the planning process and is currently Manager of Outreach and Development for Legal Services of South Central Michigan, observed, "I learned the difference between changing a particular system and leading systemic change."

Calhoun County has done a remarkable job of securing permanent housing for the homeless, especially in the face of the economic downturn. For example, in the plan's first three years of operation from 2007–2009, homelessness decreased by 13% (from 1,658 to 1,437), and eviction rates declined by 3%, despite a 70% increase in unemployment and a 15% increase in bankruptcy filings. Readers can follow the ongoing progress of the initiative at the Coordinating Council of Calhoun County website.

The temporary shelters provided by Calhoun County led to the ironic consequence of reducing the visibility of its homeless population, which diminished community pressure to solve the problem permanently.

Why was this intervention so successful when many other attempts by foundations to improve the quality of people's lives fall short? For example, urban renewal programs of the 1960s were backed by good intentions and significant funding, yet they failed to produce the changes envisioned for them. Moreover, the programs often made living conditions worse – leading to outcomes such as abandoned public housing projects and increased unemployment that resulted from what appeared to be successful job training programs.²

Stories of well-intentioned yet counterproductive solutions abound, as we learn that food aid can lead to increased starvation by undermining local agriculture, and drug busts can cause a rise in drug-related crime by reducing the availability and increasing the price of the diminished street supply. In other cases, short-term successes frequently fail to be sustained, and the problem mysteriously reappears. We see this dynamic when civic leaders invest in programs to reduce urban youth crime only to have the crime rate subsequently rise, or when international donors fund the drilling of wells in African villages to improve access to potable water, with the result that the wells eventually break down and villagers are unable to fix them.

By applying a systems thinking-based approach, the project to end homelessness managed to overcome the pitfalls of these other initiatives. Foundations and other partners combined two significant interventions: a proactive community development effort that engaged leaders in various sectors along with homeless people themselves, and a systems diagnosis that enabled all stakeholders to agree on a shared picture of why homelessness persists and where the leverage exists in ending it. In other words, the approach combined more conventional processes that facilitate acting systemically (such as bringing the whole system into the room) with tools to help the stakeholders transcend their immediate selfinterests by thinking systemically as well. Likewise, a comprehensive initiative to improve food and fitness - and in the process address childhood obesity - illustrates how the application of systems thinking can help foundations make better decisions about how to use their limited grantmaking resources for highest sustainable impact.³

The Non-Obvious Nature of Complex Systems

Lewis Thomas, the award-winning medical essayist, observed, "When you are confronted by any complex social system . . . with things about it that you're dissatisfied with and anxious to fix, you cannot just step in and set about fixing with much hope of helping. This is one of the sore discouragements of our time."⁴ The stories above about the failed interventions epitomize this poignant insight. They share other specific characteristics:

 The solutions that were implemented seemed obvious at the time and in fact often helped achieve the desired results *in the short term*. For example, it is natural to provide shelter, even temporary, for people who are homeless and offer food aid when people are starving.



- In the long term, the intervention neutralized short-term gains or even made things worse.
 For example, the temporary shelters provided by Calhoun County led to the ironic consequence of reducing the visibility of its homeless population, which diminished community pressure to solve the problem permanently.
- The negative consequences of these solutions were *unintentional*; everyone did the best they could with what they knew at the time.
- When the problem recurs, people fail to see their responsibility for the recurrence and blame others for the failure.

How can the interactions over time among elements in a complex system transform the best of intentions into such disappointing results? The reason lies in part in our tendency to apply linear thinking to complex, nonlinear problems. Systems and linear thinking differ in several important respects, as shown in Table 1 (p.34).⁵ For instance, a linear approach to starvation might lead donors to assume that sending food aid solves the problem. However, thinking about it in a systemic way would raise concerns about such unintended consequences as depressed local food prices that deter local agricultural development and leave a country even more vulnerable to food shortages in the future. From a systemic view, temporary food aid only exacerbates the problem in the long run unless it is coupled with supports for local agriculture.

Systems vs. Linear Thinking

Because the problems addressed by foundations are exceedingly complex, one step they can take to increase the social return on their grantmaking investments is to *think systemically (vs. linearly)*. Implementing a systems approach involves the following process:

 Building a strong foundation for change by engaging multiple stakeholders to identify an initial vision and picture of current reality

	Linear Thinking	Systems Thinking
Causality	There is a direct connection between problem symptoms and their underlying causes.	System performance is largely determined by interdependencies among system elements that are indirect, circular, and non-obvious.
Time	A policy that achieves short- term success ensures long- term success.	The unintended and delayed consequences of most quick fixes neutralize or reverse immediate gains over time.
Responsibility	Most problems are caused by external factors beyond our control.	Because actions taken by one group often have delayed negative consequences on its own performance as well as the behavior of others, each group tends to unwittingly contribute to the very problems it tries to solve and to undermine the effectiveness of others.
Strategy	To improve the performance of the whole, we must improve the performance of its parts. Tackle many independent initiatives simultaneously to improve all the parts.	To improve the performance of the whole, improve relationships among the parts. Identify a few key interdependencies that have the greatest leverage on system-wide performance (i.e., leverage points) and shift them in a sustained, coordinated way over time.

TABLE 1 Distinguishing Linear Thinking from Systems Thinking

- Engaging stakeholders to explain their oftencompeting views of why a chronic, complex problem persists despite people's best efforts to solve it
- Integrating the diverse perspectives into a map that provides a more complete picture of the system and root causes of the problem
- 4. Supporting people to see how their wellintended efforts to solve the problem often make the problem worse
- 5. Committing to a compelling vision of the future and supportive strategies that can lead to sustainable, system-wide change

Based on the insight that non-obvious system dynamics often seduce us into doing what is expedient but ultimately ineffective, the Food and Fitness (F&F) initiative of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation (WKKF) followed these steps in taking a comprehensive systems approach to planning, implementing, and evaluating the program. Initial planning began in 2004, and the first work with systems thinking in the field started in 2007. Implementation continues today in nine communities throughout the U.S.

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. 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 children from poor families.

WKKF had long supported developing a healthy, safe food supply and increasing consumption of good food. Because the issue was highly complex and prior efforts to address it had been unsuccessful, the program officers determined that a systemic approach would be essential to achieving long-term goals. They believed that applying this kind of process 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.

Applying Systems Thinking to Program Planning

Of the three major foundation programming functions – planning, implementation, and evaluation – systems thinking can play an especially important role in improving planning. Here are suggestions for how to integrate these steps into the program planning process.

Step 1: Build 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 for 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 outreach, 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.

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?

In the ensuing conversation, participants came to realize that no single explanation, including their own, could fully explain the health outcomes they saw.

Step 2: Engage Stakeholders to Explain Often-Competing Views

Ricardo Salvador, program officer at WKKF, 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.

F&F's conversation among community thought leaders was structured using the systems thinking iceberg 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 children's health and fitness?" 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 fastfood 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.

Questions for Engaging Diverse Views

- Why have we been unable to solve X problem or achieve Y result, despite our best efforts?
- What solutions have been tried in the past, and what happened as a result?
- What has been working? What can we build on?



Step 3: Integrate Diverse Perspectives

Systems maps integrate diverse perspectives into a picture of the system and provide an understanding of a problem's root causes. Participants in F&F 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, and public policy such as zoning. 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.

Questions for Integrating Diverse Perspectives

- How do the underlying factors contributing to the problem relate to one another?
- How do changes in one factor influence changes in others?

Step 4: Support Responsibility for Unintended Consequences

One characteristic of social systems 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 and thus decreasing the consumption of good food among that 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 outdoor areas for children to play and be active.

A Shared Vision of Ending Homelessness

n Calhoun County, Michigan, the local Homeless Coalition had been meeting for many years to end homelessness. Their shared desire to serve the homeless had been undermined by disagreements about alternative solutions, competition for limited funds, and limited knowledge about best practices. Although many understood the importance of a collective effort to provide critical services, housing, and jobs to both homeless people and those at risk of losing their homes, they were unable to generate the collective will and capacity to implement such an approach. They lacked a shared vision of the future they wanted to create, an understanding of current reality, and a common appreciation of how they were all contributing to that reality. Finally, the promise of state funding if they could agree on a 10-year plan to end homelessness, the provision of funding for developing the plan by local donors, and the use of a team of consultants experienced in community development, systems thinking, and national best housing practices enabled them to break through years of frustrated attempts.

With the help of consultants David Stroh, Michael Goodman, and Alexander Resources Consulting, the Coalition enlisted and organized the support of community leaders across the nonprofit, public, and private sectors along with representatives from the homeless population. They established a set of committees and task forces as well as a clear and detailed planning process. While they began by articulating a shared vision of ending homelessness, they would not be able to really commit to this result until they fully understood the system dynamics that perpetuated the problem. The consultants led the group in applying systems thinking to (1) understand the dynamics of local homelessness, (2) determine why the problem persisted despite people's best efforts to solve it, and (3) identify high-leverage interventions that could shift these dynamics and serve as the basis for a 10-year plan. Through interviews with all key stakeholders, they analyzed a number of interdependent factors that led people to become homeless in the first place, get off the street temporarily, and find it so difficult to secure safe, supportive, and affordable permanent housing.

We learned that *the most ironic obstacle to implementing the fundamental solution was the community's very success in providing temporary shelters and supports – an example of the "Shifting the Burden" systems archetype (Figure 1).* These shelters and supports had led to several unintended consequences. One was that they reduced the visibility of the problem by removing homeless people from public view. The overall lack of visibility reduced community pressure to solve the problem and create a different future.

The temporary success of shelters and other provisional supports also tended to reinforce funding to individual organizations for their current work. Donors played a role in buttressing existing funding patterns through their pressure to demonstrate short-term success. Such reinforcement decreased the service providers' willingness, time, and funding to innovate and collaborate because it led to:

- Fragmentation of services
- Competition for existing funds
- Lack of deeper knowledge of best practices
- Reluctance to overcome government restrictions that made it difficult to innovate
- A shelter mentality



The community's collective ability to implement the fundamental solution was undermined as a result. In response to this insight, the consulting team helped the county define goals that formed the basis for a 10-year plan subsequently approved by the state:

- Challenge the shelter mentality and end funding for more shelters.
- Develop a community vision where all citizens have permanent, safe, affordable, and supportive housing.
- Align the strategies and resources of all stakeholders, including funders, in service of this vision.
- Redesign shelter and provisional support programs to provide more effective bridges to critical services, housing, and employment.

Today, the county continues to make progress toward these goals. The program has an executive director, in-kind funding for space and supplies, additional funding focused on long-term strategies, and a communitywide board supported by eight committees with clear charters producing monthly reports on their goals. A community-wide eviction prevention policy was changed to enable people to stay in their homes longer, and a street outreach program is going well to place people into housing.



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.

Questions for Exploring Unintended Consequences

- What well-intended actions in the past have led to where we are now?
- How might we as a community or foundation be unwittingly contributing to the problem?
- What unintended consequences can we anticipate that might arise from our work together?

Step 5: Commit to 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, systemwide change. This step entails

- 1. committing to a compelling vision,
- 2. developing and articulating a theory of change,
- 3. linking investments to an integrated theory of change, and

 planning for a funding stream over time that mirrors and facilitates a natural pattern of exponential growth.⁶

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 citywide 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.

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 existing goals at the same time?
- What is the shared vision that people commit to work toward together?

Social vs. Competitive Advantage

Our continued work in applying systems thinking to social change in such areas as homelessness, early childhood development, K–12 education, and public health affirms the importance of integrating approaches for acting and thinking systemically. We have seen people deepen their understanding and empathy for other's viewpoints, communicate their own experiences more honestly and transparently, and create more robust strategies together that serve their collective – though not necessarily their own immediate – best interests.

Acting systemically is perhaps better understood than thinking in this way, and many people have become familiar with tools such as stakeholder mapping and community building, and methodologies for getting the whole system in the room to bring together the range of interests and resources vital to social change. These are positive steps toward overcoming the pitfalls of the failed interventions referenced at the beginning of the article.

However, unless we drastically shift the way we think, all too often, bringing diverse stakeholders together fails to surface or reconcile the differences between people's espoused (and sincere) commitment to serving the most vulnerable members of society and the equally if not more powerful competing commitment to optimizing their individual contributions and maintaining their current practices. For example, shelter directors want to end homelessness, but they actually get paid according to the number of beds they fill each night. Donors want to end homelessness, but their benefactors get more immediate satisfaction from housing people temporarily. Service providers who specialize in helping the homeless may find themselves competing for funds that might otherwise be allocated toward prevention, even though research suggests that \$1.00 spent on keeping people in their homes saves \$6.00 in treating and then moving homeless people back into permanent housing.

Integrating thinking and acting systemically is increasingly important given our country's growing income inequality and additional threats to social safety nets.

As one nonprofit noted, the greatest challenge in creating social change can be mustering the courage to ask different kinds of questions, such as, "What is our organization willing to give up in order for the system as a whole to succeed?" Thinking systemically helps people answer that question in a way that serves their higher intentions. It does so by enabling them to see the differences between the short- and long-term impacts of their actions, and the unintended consequences of their actions on not only other stakeholders but also themselves. The result might be that one shelter director decides to close his facility, while another reinvents her organization to focus on helping the homeless build bridges toward the safe, permanent, affordable, and supportive housing they ultimately need to heal. The net outcome is that people act in service of the whole because it naturally follows their thinking about how the whole behaves.

Integrating thinking and acting systemically is increasingly important given our country's growing income inequality and additional threats to social safety nets. People committed to helping the underprivileged are challenged by growing demand and declining resources. It can be difficult for them to accept that there might be relatively little leverage in the part of the system where they

reflections.solonline.org

have committed their efforts, or that their wellintended actions might actually make problems worse.

At the same time, the challenges represent opportunities for thinking and working differently. In cases where a systems approach has been successful, growing budget pressures have actually motivated people to collaborate in new ways and reassess their distinct *social* (vs. *competitive*) advantage.

A Few Coordinated Changes

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 and then work over time to integrate systems thinking into the core function of planning followed by implementation and evaluation.⁷ One strategy we have highlighted in this article is asking 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, co-director of the F&F program in Northeast Iowa, summarized the benefit of using systems thinking: "The tools helped us put a pause on the quick fix." Systems thinking provides frameworks and tools that can enhance philanthropy's efforts to achieve lasting systems change results by making a few key coordinated changes over time. By following the five-step change process for achieving sustainable, system-wide improvement as spelled out in this article, we can increase the chances that our interventions will have the results we fervently desire. ■

ENDNOTES

- 1 Stroh, D. P., & Goodman, M. (2007). "A Systemic Approach to Ending Homelessness," Applied Systems (Topical Issues No. 4). This article is available online at http://www.appliedsystemsthinking.com/supporting_ documents/TopicalHomelessness.pdf
- 2 Forrester, J. (1969). Urban Dynamics. Pegasus Communications.
- 3 Much of the first part of this article was adapted from Stroh, D. P. (2009). "Leveraging Grant-Making: Understanding the Dynamics of Complex Social Systems," *Foundation Review* (Vol. 1, No. 3). This article is available online at *http://www.bridgewaypartners.com/FR1-print.pdf*
- 4 Thomas, L. (1979). The Medusa and the Snail: More Notes of a Biology Watcher. Viking Press. P. 110.
- 5 For example, see Senge, P. (1990). The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization. Doubleday.
- 6 For details about each of these processes, see Stroh, D. P., & Zurcher, K. (2010). "Leveraging Grant-Making—Part 2: Aligning Programmatic Approaches with Complex System Dynamics," *Foundation Review* (Vol. 1, No. 4). *http://www.bridgewaypartners.com/FR2Color.pdf*
- 7 See Stroh and Zurcher, 2010, for details on these latter phases.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

David Peter Stroh, Master's Degree, City Planning, was a founding partner of Innovation Associates. He is currently a principal with Bridgeway Partners, an organizational consulting firm dedicated to supporting social change through the application of organizational learning disciplines. Dstroh@bridgewaypartners.com

Kathleen A. Zurcher, PhD, Educational Psychology, partners with communities and organizations to achieve their desired future by applying and building capabilities in organizational learning and systems thinking. In 2008 she retired from WKKF. She was previously a senior administrator for Family Medicine, and a faculty member in the University of Minnesota's extension service and at Lehigh University. *kzurcher33@gmail.com*



The SoL Journal on Knowledge, Learning, and Change

Volume 11, Number 3

EDITORIAL TEAM

Managing Editor Janice Molloy

Publisher Claire Sherry Immediato

SUBSCRIPTION OPTIONS

To order online and for a full description of subscription options, visit our website: reflections.solonline.org.

Receive *Reflections* as a SoL Connections member:

• USD\$125 U.S. (electronic edition only)

One year individual subscription: • USD\$75 U.S. (electronic edition only)

- University/Non-profit Institution
- USD\$175 United States
- USD\$195 International

For-profit Institution

- USD\$275 United States
- USD\$295 International

Reflections: The SoL Journal is published quarterly by the Society for Organizational Learning. Inquiries regarding subscriptions, address changes, back issues, reprints, and permission requests should be directed to:

reflections@solonline.org Reflections: The SoL Journal PO Box 425005 Cambridge, MA 02142-0001

+1.617.300.9515 (phone) +1.617.812.1257 (fax) E-mail: reflections@solonline.org reflections.solonline.org



ISSN 1524-1734 EISSN 1536-0148

© 2012 by the Society for Organizational Learning. SoL is a registered trademark of the Society for Organizational Learning.

Design & Production: DG Communications (NonprofitDesign.com)

