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The Urban Seminar Series

ON CHILDREN'S HEALTH AND SAFETY

Strategies to Ensure the Continued Success of Large-Scale Initiatives

The Urban Health Seminar-convened twice yearly as part of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's Urban Health Initiative-invites researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to share expertise and lessons from the field related to the healthy development of urban children. The two-day seminar in December 2002 focused on the challenges entailed in developing and sustaining large-scale initiatives to improve the quality of life of families and children. Such initiatives must create sophisticated techniques for collecting, analyzing, and presenting critical information on social needs; mobilize policymakers, business leaders, and the public to take responsibility for addressing those needs; and work with public and private partners to secure long-term funding. Ultimately, large-scale initiatives aim for "systems change": realigning the political landscape to focus on solutions to problems besetting disadvantaged groups.

Through papers written for the seminar and general discussion, researchers, practitioners, and policymakers debated myriad aspects of this policy landscape-given new urgency by cutbacks in government funding for social services. Specific topics included the profound risks that leaders of systemic change confront, creative approaches to funding large-scale initiatives, the central role of evaluation in ensuring success, and the role of "rainmakers" in launching and sustaining programs that significantly improve the lives of children and families.

The Perils of Leadership in Creating Systemic Change

Leaders who pursue systemic change are engaged in a "difficult and dangerous business," according to Marty Linsky, lecturer in public policy at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government and presenter of the seminar's first paper-an excerpt from *Leadership on the Line* (2002), a book he recently co-authored with Ronald A. Heifetz. In the seminar discussion Linsky outlined several reasons why systems change inevitably entails "risk, conflict, and instability."

Adaptive change always entails pain and loss. Systemic change requires "experiments, new discoveries, and adjustments from numerous places in the organization or community. Without learning new ways-changing attitudes, values, and behaviors-people cannot make the adaptive leap necessary to thrive in the new environment" (1). However, such change often requires affected constituents to make choices they don't want to make. This entails pain and loss, threatens the vested interests of people already working on a problem, and sometimes means that they discard a "familiar mess" for alternatives they are not sure will work.

According to Linsky, the deeper the change that leaders are promoting, the more resistance they can expect to confront. And the people who are the most resistant have the most to lose. Linsky recommends that leaders stay in close contact with the people they are pushing to "take their temperature," and that leaders let people "know that you understand how hard it is to do what you're asking them to do." However, leaders must also "expect casualties, as some people will not benefit from adaptive change" (1).

To avoid the pain of adaptive change, people often marginalize, divert, attack, or seduce leaders who promote it. "Rather than focus on the content of your message. . . [critics] frequently find it more effective to discredit you," Linsky points out.

People resisting adaptive change may also divert leaders by drowning them in endless demands or programmatic details. Even allies may undermine leaders of adaptive change by seducing them into adopting extreme positions. "Over and over again, we have seen people take on difficult issues, only to be pushed by their own faction so far out on a limb that they lose credibility in the larger community," Linsky says. "Leadership, then, requires not only reverence for the pains of change and recognition of the manifestations of danger, but also the skill to respond" (1).

To surmount resistance, leaders of adaptive change must exceed their authority. "The toughest problems that groups and communities face are hard precisely because the group or community will not authorize anyone to push them to address those problems," Linsky maintains. Thus "the initial challenge-and risk-of exercising leadership is to . . . put your credibility and position on the line to get people to tackle the problem at hand." Because "organizational cultures and norms, standard operating procedures, and economic incentives regularly discourage people from facing the hardest questions and making the most difficult choices," leaders must be willing to challenge people's expectations (1).

Toward this end, Linsky views leaders as orchestrators of a "conflictual process" that convinces powerful people to work together. Such a process may entail "creating a space where people who ordinarily don't talk to each other and really don't like each other" can communicate at lower stress levels-arenas that "don't appear on the evening news."

The most common source of leadership failure is the tendency to focus on technical problems rather than adaptive change. Technical solutions are those "already in an organization's repertoire." Adaptive change, in contrast, "requires experiments, new discoveries, and adjustments on the part of organizations and the community." Linsky finds that leaders too often work in a "technical problem-solving mode" and spend too little time pushing stakeholders to institutionalize more fundamental change.

However, Linsky pointed out, leaders of adaptive change must inevitably modify their own agenda. "The temptation, he says, is to "go down in flames" rather than compromise. "Leadership is about disappointing your own supporters-but at a rate they can absorb," he maintains. This can mean a "change in style, change in strategy, reduction of your priorities, giving up something that you care about: you're going to have to make some movement from where you started."

Mobilizing Communities to Sustain Large-Scale Initiatives

Decrying the cookie-cutter approach to youth services, whereby generic programs fail to consider the needs of local youth, community advocates and service providers have sought more of a say in program development. State and local leaders are also looking for partners to help solve complex social problems. Together "these factors have contributed to a growing consensus: improving results for children, youth, and families requires engaging communities themselves much more directly in decisions about how public dollars are invested, who benefits, and how supports and services are organized and delivered," maintains Cheryl D. Hayes, director of the Finance Project and presenter of the second paper at the conference (2). Local involvement is especially critical in finding and sustaining funding for large-scale social initiatives, and in responding to changing funding needs over the initiatives' lifetime. Hayes pinpoints three types of vehicles for mobilizing the community that have emerged "most prominently": local coalitions, intermediary organizations, and public engagement campaigns.

Local coalitions may operate as interagency councils or public-private partnerships that pool and allocate state and local funding, and pursue grants and matching funds from businesses and foundations. Such coalitions negotiate agreements that allow program administrators to use categorical funding streams more flexibly. In so doing they lay the groundwork for financial and administrative reform. "The bulk of public-sector funding for programs and services for families and children . . . supports highly specialized activities and target populations," Hayes points out. Combining resources across agencies and programs allows administrators to integrate services while reducing costs. Such efforts often require sophisticated technical knowledge: "local partnerships and coalitions need to know the landscape of state and local funding and the rules governing eligibility and application" (2).

Broader coalitions that include local providers, businesses, and foundations can develop a vision and strategies for winning new funding. In fact, leveraging public dollars to attract private funding requires a broader coalition. Foundations as well as federal and state funders often insist that local coalitions apply for and distribute funding, as they help boost the efficiency and effectiveness of large-scale social initiatives.

Private-sector intermediaries facilitate such coalitions and networks, strengthen the capacity of local organizations, and build a broad base of support for large-scale initiatives.

Intermediaries—nonprofit community institutions that serve as brokers among groups pursuing social change—often play an important role in helping local providers gain access to resources that they could not attract on their own," according to Hayes. Intermediaries may help agencies, community groups, and providers apply for contracts, waivers, and grants from federal and state agencies, businesses, and foundations; train local groups in retooling, maximizing, and managing funding; act as fiscal agents; and track the outcomes of programs and initiatives. Intermediaries can also help small community providers fulfill administrative and reporting requirements. Overall, "intermediaries often sing with a louder voice than an individual organization," says Hayes.

Public engagement campaigns mobilize a community to support new priorities for public investment. Such campaigns raise the profile of urgent social needs and help boost public and private support for addressing them. And they are essential in convincing voters to dedicate new and lasting revenue streams such as special tax levies to large-scale social initiatives. Public engagement campaigns may be short-lived or long-term, and range from grassroots organizing efforts to mass-media advertising blitzes.

Effective campaigns also carefully tailor their message to overcome public resistance to establishing new priorities for public investment. For example, advocates of education reform in Kentucky "framed educational improvement as the cornerstone of economic development," says Hayes. "By doing so they were able to get beyond traditional opposition to new spending that was based on racial bias and concerns about big government." And because the campaign "connected children's health and home environment and with their success in school," education reform expanded community-based health and social services (2).

Community mobilization provides a locus of responsibility and ensures accountability for improving outcomes for children and families. Hayes sees these three vehicles for mobilizing communities as complementary pieces of an overall strategy for bringing together unlikely partners and sustaining funding. Overall, the goal is "to create a locus of responsibility that can conduct statewide or community-wide assessments of need; develop a common vision, goals, and agenda, make recommendations for policymaking and financing, and coordinate the efforts of many stakeholders to implement these recommendations" (2).

Such responsibility includes ensuring that public and private investments are efficient and effective—the tradeoff for more local flexibility. Communities can also make a much better case for greater funding for social initiatives if they show that they are making the best use of every dollar. In fact, according to Hayes, "without fundamental changes in the governance, financing, and

administrative systems that underlie public programs, large-scale initiatives will never be more than promising models" (2).

In debating Hayes's remarks, conferees focused on the difficulty of mobilizing constituencies to address challenges that may not directly affect their interests—in particular, convincing white middle-class voters to support initiatives that primarily address the needs of minority and low-income families. To surmount this problem, several conferees recommended that in order to foment participation across class, race and geographical location, coalitions and campaigns must highlight problems that are common to everyone, such as teen alcohol and drug abuse, the dearth of after-school programs for children of working parents, and the need for a well-educated workforce.

Conference participants also stressed that coalitions are often difficult to sustain during economic crises, as participants revert to their core missions. However, hard times can serve as a catalyst for members to collaborate to retain funding and public support. Crises can also provide a litmus test for how well coalition participants have internalized a new working model, and spur creativity in reformulating their mission and message. One participant suggested that coalitions may wield sticks as well as carrots to hold coalitions together, threatening to compete for funding with members who defect rather than expand the pie for all. Overall, conferees concurred that to sustain community support, leaders of large-scale initiatives need to link expenditures to outcomes and alert decision makers that curtailing spending in the short term will only raise long-term social and economic costs.

Evaluation as a Key Support to Sustainability

Demonstration programs and initiatives supported by seed money from philanthropic foundations and government agencies run the risk of becoming obsolete when grants expire. To address this problem, Heather Weiss, presenter of the third paper at the conference, recommends incorporating sustainability as a key goal from the earliest stages of a large-scale initiative, and using evaluation to help ensure that the initiative fulfills that goal. According to Weiss and her co-authors Julia Coffman and Marielle Bohan-Baker, "evaluation and sustainability are inextricably linked" (3).

Evaluation can enable funders of large-scale initiatives to incorporate sustainability into the initiative's strategy. As part of the strategy development process early on in an initiative's life, evaluators can work with funders and grantees to decide which needs in a given social change arena they are uniquely qualified to address. Evaluators can also gather information on which practices in that arena are most effective as well as potentially sustainable.

Evaluators can further help funders and grantees articulate their theory of social change-how they think such change occurs, and what kind of strategies would produce the desired social outcomes-as well as their theory of leverage: which goals, tactics, and tools will create maximum impact. That process can help funders make decisions related to sustainability, such as whether to support startup rather than well-established organizations, and what kind of technical assistance grantees will need to sustain their efforts. Finally, evaluators can analyze funding trends to help funders determine "whether other public or private funders are likely to support an innovation when an initiative ends." This model requires that evaluators support sustainability by becoming "part of the core strategy development team and process" (3).

As the initiative proceeds, funders can ask grantees to incorporate sustainability into their own strategic plans, and to report regularly on progress on that front. Meanwhile evaluators can "inform the initiative's ongoing strategic management by reporting and feeding back information" that, combined with information from grantees' own reports, can be used to fine-tune an initiative's strategy and make midcourse corrections that may ultimately help make an initiative's work and focus more sustainable. Overall, "evaluation should capture and build on [initiatives'] dynamic nature and reinforce them as they are implemented" (3).

Sustainability is about more than just continuous funding. Funders and program leaders often define sustainability as ensuring financing for programs and projects after a specific initiative ends. While clearly this aspect is important, Weiss and her co-authors maintain that continuity in an initiative's core ideas, beliefs, values, and principles-and in the relationships and outcomes it fosters-are also critical aspects of sustainability. Evaluators can help develop techniques for tracking those elements.

Incorporating sustainability into large-scale initiatives requires training and negotiation among philanthropic organizations, evaluators, and grantees. Foundations need to create a culture of continuous learning and self-critiquing while supporting "some degree of risk taking" (3). Evaluators, meanwhile, must carefully manage and maintain their objectivity and independence while at the same time working intimately on issues of strategy and sustainability with funders as well as grantees.

In evaluating a major devolution initiative, Weiss's team helped the funder continually articulate and refine its strategy by orchestrating meetings and at times "uncomfortable conversations" between program officers and grantees. Such efforts are important in ensuring that the burden of securing sustainability does not fall entirely on grantees-those least able to support it, in the words of one conference participant.

Too much emphasis on sustainability can stifle creativity and innovation. In discussing this paper, Beth Weitzman highlighted the inherent tension between the desire of philanthropic organizations to take risks and their interest in sustaining their initiatives. She and other conferees emphasized the freedom to fail as an essential component of initiatives that incubate new ideas. Weitzman also warned that an emphasis on sustaining an initiative could compromise the objectivity of evaluators charged with assessing its outcomes. She recommended focusing on sustaining a program only after finding that it works. Weitzman also pointed to the difficulty of measuring the sustainability of ideas, values, and relationships. And, she asked, how long after funding ends do "we have to see sustained change to declare victory on that outcome?"

Weitzman noted that comprehensive evaluation alone may not ensure sustainability, as initiatives' long-term viability depends not only on what works but also on the political milieu in which they operate.

Conferees acknowledged that measuring the outcomes of large-scale initiatives in complex urban environments is difficult. They also called for more nuanced theories of sustainability, which would shed light on how to address many of these challenges and free foundations, evaluators, and grantees from reinventing evaluation criteria for each initiative. Charles Royer, director of the Urban Health Initiative, opined that "ideas and efforts that grow out of the soil of a community," rather than those prescribed by established social science theories "are more likely to last." Overall, conferees concurred that large-scale initiatives should aim to sustain new ways of thinking and local leadership, capacity, and mobilization rather than specific programs and organizations, despite the difficulty of evaluating the former.

How "Rainmakers" Sustain Large-Scale Initiatives

Rainmakers, according to Ron Ferguson, presenter of the conference's fourth paper, are people and organizations who mobilize large sums of money and ensure renewable financing for large-scale social initiatives. Such actors achieve systemic change, as well as sustainable funding, when "the old equilibrium bends into a new state." Ferguson studied the role of rainmakers in spawning and sustaining youth-development initiatives in six cities. Ferguson found that many different actors can play rainmaking roles, including "elected officials who persuade other elected officials, private-sector leaders who mobilize friends and associates, and grassroots actors who go door to door, mobilizing their neighbors" (4).

Rainmakers assemble compelling information and use it to develop strategies and attract partners. Rainmakers gather, analyze, and promote compelling information "that can convince critical masses of decision makers that increased funding [for large-scale social initiatives] is warranted and practical," says Ferguson. Such advocates persuaded "legislators, private donors, and taxpayers to significantly expand the flow of funding for youth development over the past decade" (4).

In the cities he studied, which included Philadelphia, Boston, Santa Fe, Palm Beach, Oakland, and Seattle, rainmakers "assembled evidence that many youth lacked supervision and positive developmental supports outside of school hours." For example, in Philadelphia, leaders of a large-scale initiative used "easy-to-read graphs and clearly presented indicators" to show that the city devoted only 10 percent of its budget to youth, and outlined how greater spending could exert a marked impact on youth risk factors (4).

Attracting partners with credibility and clout enhances rainmakers' effectiveness. Philadelphia leaders collaborated with reputable local and statewide organizations as well as university partners to survey youth needs and develop a public campaign to compel gubernatorial candidates to take a stand on five youth issues.

Rainmakers transmit carefully tailored messages to decision makers at strategic times. "Knowing how and when to approach decision makers, be they legislators, private donors, or taxpayers," is crucial (4), says Ferguson. Rainmakers consistently link their messages to related issues that arouse deep public concern. Such advocates may connect the need for greater youth programming to high juvenile delinquency rates, the need to boost performance on high-stakes academic tests, a lack of after-school care for children of working parents, the desire to develop the next-generation workforce, and the community risks of substance abuse. In Boston, for example, leaders of a large-scale youth-development initiative are using the urgent need to boost performance on high-stakes tests to push for comprehensive after-school programs, and have allied with a group respected by businesses and conservative policymakers to expand funding for such programs.

Rainmakers consistently monitor public opinion and track shifts in public concern. For example, early in its campaign, leaders of the Philadelphia initiative found that people cared about youth; they simply did not believe that expanding youth-development programs could make a difference. The group later found that public perception of the urgent need to improve children's performance on academic tests had supplanted earlier alarm about the effects of unoccupied youth on public safety. The organization used such information to hone its public engagement strategy.

Rainmakers foster and monitor high program quality. Rainmakers in each city Ferguson studied worked to establish "financial management and program delivery systems that legislators, donors, and taxpayers could regard as effective and efficient." In Oakland, for example, parents, service providers, and youth convinced voters to set aside 2.5 percent of the city's budget for youth programming. The result, the Oakland Fund for Children and Youth, "has a representative and forthright cadre of leaders, operates to minimize expenditures for anything other than program services, shares information about its operations, and makes program evaluation a priority" (4). In Palm Beach, a coalition that included the Chamber of Commerce convinced the state legislature to allow communities to levy a tax to support youth programming. An oversight council publishes a yearly report outlining how it is investing the funds and the resulting benefits to youth, and randomly selected programs undergo an annual evaluation.

Naomi Post, discussant for the fourth session and consultant to the Urban Health Initiative, confirmed that UHI cities have been "consistently vigilant" about "taking the temperature of the citizenry and people in control," and have "gravitated to using poll data to determine how best to frame youth-development issues. All have also relied heavily on relationships with key public and private leaders-especially "unlikely spokespeople"-to boost their credibility and attract new converts to their cause. Such allies have helped dispel the "myth of the futility of working with kids" and develop efficient and effective programs.

Deciding whether to house initiatives inside or outside government is difficult. In forging broad collaborations, rainmakers must think carefully about the tradeoffs entailed in becoming part of the established political system, and consider the turf battles that can ensue. Situating an initiative in a mayor's office can spur officials to concentrate on urgent social needs and leverage other funding. However, initiatives too closely identified with one administration may suffer when new officials take office. Meanwhile independent initiatives may earn enmity if elected leaders resent their lack of oversight of significant social spending.

Large-scale initiatives must collect high-quality data on social needs as well as program outcomes. Post as well as other conference participants emphasized the importance of credible data but noted that obtaining it is difficult. Cities often do not keep careful records of the services they provide to children and families, different agencies often rely on different methods of collecting and analyzing information, and such techniques may change over time. Convincing school systems to provide information is especially problematic, as their techniques for gathering data are often archaic, and they already confront so much criticism that they are reluctant to release results that may hurt them. Post says rainmakers need to convince local officials that negative information can actually reinforce the need for more social spending.

Painting a clear portrait of the well-being of children and families is also challenging because indicators are rarely clear-cut: some measures may improve while others may worsen. Conferees suggested that a few relatively simple indicators of the direction of change can mobilize the community to support large-scale initiatives, while more detailed information can allow leaders and front-line workers to continuously improve their programs.

Local coalitions and intermediaries often form data collaboratives to gather, analyze, and share reliable information and improve decision making. In Philadelphia, for example, some 40 stakeholders in the Children's Investment Strategy meet three times a year to share data on abuse and neglect, violence, and sexually transmitted diseases among young people, and to monitor their participation in after-school activities.

General Lessons

Several general lessons emerged during the course of the two-day conference.

Evaluating the outcomes of an initiative is essential to improving effectiveness and sustaining support. Leaders must show that their programs are efficient and effective to overcome public skepticism regarding social spending. However, linking programs to improved outcomes for children and families is difficult, and overstating results from weak or inconclusive research can do more harm than good. Convincing program providers to collect data-and families to participate-is also challenging. And research on program outcomes is costly and can divert significant funding from actual services. Despite these challenges, leaders need to pay close attention to documenting success in a rigorous way. Partnerships with researchers at local universities can boost the credibility of efforts to establish correlation and even causality between programs and outcomes, and such researchers may seek their own grants to fund those studies.

Leaders of large-scale initiatives must win the support of key public officials. Whether housed inside or outside government, initiatives that aim to effect systemic change must earn the endorsement of elected and appointed leaders. For advocates of systemic change, this entails allowing public figures to take credit for success while accepting responsibility when ideas and programs fail.

Sustaining large-scale initiatives requires winning hearts as well as minds. Promoters of large-scale initiatives must convince decision makers that everyone's children and all families in a community are important. However, appealing only to public and private benevolence will not suffice. Advocates must also cite common concerns such as maintaining property values and protecting all children from the ravages of drugs to motivate support for large-scale initiatives.

Politics ultimately determines the sustainability of large-scale initiatives. Winning support for large-scale initiatives requires compromise and a broad coalition of supporters. However, efforts to forge such a coalition may complicate efforts to put any resulting funds to effective use, as multiple constituencies will lay claim to them. Leaders of large-scale initiatives must wield power with political savvy.

Leaders of large-scale initiatives must adapt promising models to their cities. Advocates need to examine their political milieu to determine how best to mobilize public support. Key considerations include whether the business sector has historically backed social initiatives, whether service providers and advocates have a history of competing or collaborating, the geographical location of children and families in need, and a city's tax and revenue structures. Studies that compare such attributes in different cities can begin to shed light on the most effective strategies for ensuring long-term support for children and families.

Successful large-scale initiatives may go out of business. Sustainability implies that cities explicitly hold themselves accountable for the health and safety of children and families rather than simply continue specific programs or initiatives. However, rainmakers must maintain pressure on public and private decision makers to sustain their focus on children and families.

References

Papers 2 through 4 were commissioned for this seminar. Other references were cited during the seminar discussion.

1. Marty Linsky and Ronald Heifetz. (*Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading.*) Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2002.

2. Cheryl Hayes. "Community Mobilization to Improve Financing for Community and Family Services."

3. Heather Weiss, Julia Coffman, and Marielle Bohan-Baker. "Evaluation's Role in Supporting Initiative Sustainability."

4. Ronald Ferguson and Sarah McCann. "How "Rainmakers" in Six Cities Raised Sustainable Non-School Funding For Youth."

Beth C. Weitzman, Associate Professor of Health and Public Policy at New York University and Naomi M. Post, Urban Health Initiative Fellow and Independent Consultant, were invited discussants for the seminar.

Seminar Brief Rapporteur: Sandra Hackman

The mission of the **Urban Health Initiative (UHI)** is to improve the health and safety of children and youth. Local campaigns in Baltimore, Detroit, Oakland, Philadelphia and Richmond participate in the UHI seek to change the major systems that serve children in order to improve youth health and safety statistics throughout the entire city or metropolitan area. The UHI National Program Office is located at the University of Washington and is headed by former Seattle Mayor Charles Royer.

The **Urban Seminar Series on Children's Health and Safety** brings together researchers, practitioners, and policy makers who have a common interest in improving the health and well being of urban children. The series is sponsored by The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and directed by William Julius Wilson at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government. The seminars are designed to complement RWJF's Urban Health Initiative.

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