

Framing A Conversation About Taking Social Innovations to Scale: Considerations For Reformers and Funders

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Introduction

Anyone who has directly or indirectly (as a funder) attempted to build a successful social program and then expand it so that a greater number of people benefit from said program knows the myriad challenges inherent in such an endeavor. It is this simple definition of scaling up social innovation that guides this paper. When the Noyce Foundation began to raise questions about how we might support the expansion of some of our own programs or of programs that we had supported through grants, I began an investigation of relevant literature and crafted a short concept paper. That paper built on my direct experience as a reformer as well as the literature that I was perusing. This revised version of my original concept paper is intended to generate conversation. Please note that it is informal, not exhaustive, and not meant for wide distribution. The paper is divided into three sections. First, a set of common pitfalls in dissemination models; second, a set of essential elements of successful dissemination as found in the literature; and finally a set of questions that funders might ask relative to dissemination.

Considering dissemination of our work deserves ample preparation –just as any challenging journey requires of its travelers. It is incumbent upon us to consider the long and somewhat tragic history of scaling up successful social innovations before our fantasies get out of control. What follows are some lessons from research in this arena with ample implications for our work.

Common pitfalls or “instructive mistakes” with social dissemination models

1. Most efforts document and try to *duplicate a program’s technical elements*—not the probable or tacit knowledge embedded in people and organizations that are essential to success (Newman, 2001; Schorr, 1997). For a program to successfully expand, it depends on the more informal knowledge that often resides with the current players.
2. *Transplant dementia*: one cannot simply transplant a program model designed at a particular location. (Asera, 2000) Scaling up is not about models, “...they all have feet of clay.” (Rosenstock, 2001)
3. *Soft money as a virus*. “When programs are started with external funding...the education system develops antibodies to it.” For a program to take root institutional resources need to be invested (Asera, 2000; Tucker and Codding, 1994).
4. *The search for the magic bullet*. Most dissemination efforts have failed to embrace the challenge of helping all those involved with implementing a specific program to see the program in all its complexity, and to recognize that constructing a successful program would require a clear and comprehensive vision that incorporated all the essential program elements. Most efforts have tended to search for and implement the magic bullet.

5. *Importing a solution before understanding the problem.* Many efforts at dissemination have simply been an attempt to capture an interesting innovation without understanding why the innovation was developed. This lack of understanding limits the power and efficacy of the adopted solution when the model is subjected to challenging environmental influences in a new location.

Essential elements of successful dissemination efforts

While the above-mentioned pitfalls seem daunting, there are a growing number of positive examples and research on these examples that suggest a list of key dimensions to consider when designing a dissemination effort. Eleven essential elements are described in this paper. They are interdependent dimensions of what we must attend to when considering replication or dissemination of any social innovation.

1. **Design Principles:** Since most models are not easily replicable, understanding and then articulating the key design principles that underlie the successful examples are a better way of enabling local partners to adapt the model to its own context. Appreciation for both the design principles and the practices that flow from the principles will support more robust implementation. (Rosenstock, 2001) These principles also promote the central beliefs that undergird the effort. Being clear about values and beliefs, which are embedded in the design principles, enables everyone to stay focused on what is important.
2. **Creating norms for practice:** Elmore (1996) promotes the use and creation of strong professional and social normative structures for practice which can provide both a guide and a basis for assessment of practice. This creates a common language and culture for promoting shared practices.
3. **Testing and refining:** Many innovations do not formally articulate products and services that are at the heart of their work. Once they are made explicit, a proving period for development and refining the products and services is essential. This requires studying and documenting the organizational processes that support the success. (Letts, 1999).
4. **Partners :** Local partners or intermediaries are essential for insuring sufficient support to accomplish the intended goals of the program. The continuous backing of an intermediary organization that offers expertise, outside support, legitimation, and clout to help sustain the scaled-up intervention is essential for success (Schorr, 1997; Letts, 1999).
5. **Local adaptation:** It is essential to combine the replication of the essence of a successful intervention with the adaptation of many of its components and the underlying design principles to a new setting or new population. Context matters. One needs to both understand both the program and the setting.

Multiple contexts matter significantly to the success of expansion: systems and institutional context, people context, and resource context. (Schorr, 1997)

6. **“Central office” role:** In well functioning dissemination efforts, a central office dedicates itself to “supporting high performance among program operators, primarily by assuming learning and quality control functions.” (Letts, 1999). The central office becomes a resource for adaptive capacity by supporting learning among local managers to help them sustain or improve their performance. Creating learning among all the “affiliates” once expansion was under way was essential. Further, the central office is uniquely positioned to attend to leadership development. As Tucker and Coddling suggest, the central office role combines the “roles of visionary, catalyst, facilitator, technical assistor, professional development agent, and manager” (Tucker and Coddling, 1994, p.8).
7. **Create formal structures and processes to promote learning:** Social innovations need to create formal structures and processes to promote learning of new practices and systems. Without intentional efforts which both call attention to this need and facilitate the work, the work of dissemination can get slowed or undermined (Elmore, 1996; Letts, 1999; Schorr, 1997).
8. **Produce tools to facilitate learning** Successful replications utilize documented learning tools and best practices to make them easy to share and use. Additionally, communications and technology tools make knowledge more accessible both inside and outside the organization (Newman, 2001)
9. **Focus on results:** From the outset dissemination strategies need to employ an outcomes orientation to judge success. A clear understanding of specific goals must guide definitions of success. To best support implementation, impact must be measured continuously to support learning and adaptation to the new context. Identification of significant factors to assess must be done early and continually. (Letts, 1999; Newman, 2001; Porter and Kramer, 1999; Schorr, 1997; Tucker and Coddling, 1994)
10. **Create community:** One of the best strategies to insure learning, growth and to provide support is to create deliberate communities when disseminating a social innovation. Many activists and researchers have called for creating and maintaining peer learning networks and apprenticeships to learn the nuances endemic to an innovation (Kronley, 2001; Newman, 2001; Wisniewski, 2001).¹
11. **Patience and vision matter:** Given the enormous ambiguity that social innovations face at any scale, patience and vision are essential qualities for endurance. Leaders of successful dissemination tackle, directly and strategically, the obstacles to large-scale change. (Schorr, 1997) They

¹ See above notes on the central office role.

understand that the work is steady and that this requires a combination of persistence and foresight.

First Questions for Funders to Ask

Foundations are natural colleagues in the pursuit of dissemination of successful social innovation. Whether the programs have been initiated by a funder or simply supported and encouraged through foundation resources we have a responsibility to ask ourselves and our colleagues a set of questions. In addition to reviewing the ever-expanding list of pitfalls and essential elements, the following questions might also be considered when engaging in a conversation about dissemination.

1. What is the role of a foundation relative to dissemination or scaling of programs?
2. Who gets to determine the need for dissemination?
3. Does documentation of the program demonstrate verifiable evidence that there is a “there there” to expand?
4. Has the program devised a template/plan for dissemination? Do they have the capacity?
5. Have thoughtful and reasonable timelines been developed?
6. Has the organization responsible for the dissemination considered the organizational capacity needs not just the program dimensions associated with expansion?
7. Is there potential for sustainability?

As we consider the dissemination of some of our more successful programs and grants we will need to be mindful of both the pitfalls and the essential elements of replication and the role of the funder. The work of dissemination, like all other worthwhile endeavors, is time and labor intensive. This paper has focused primarily on strategies that call for replication or adoption of programs. There are, of course, other means which may be easier and less costly. Disseminating our work through means such as writing or distribution of tools may well require fewer resources but may also be subject to similar and different pitfalls. Undoubtedly, these other means of dissemination will also require additional understanding of opportunities and obstacles and means of achieving greatest impact. As we grow our work and consider dissemination, we ought to consider multiple tactics to achieve our goals.

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