

By taking a bold, generous, and inclusive approach to knowledge building, foundations can equip community organizations, service providers, and policymakers at every level with actionable information that will enable them to more effectively achieve their objectives.

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From knowledge management to knowledge building: An essential foundation journey

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AN INCREASING NUMBER of foundations are determined to contribute to the solution of some of America's most urgent and complex social problems. In these efforts, money is not the only resource they can draw on. There is also knowledge. Foundation leaders are eliciting justifiable enthusiasm for their growing investments in knowledge management activities. As foundations capture and organize their own knowledge resources, they will be able to make a vastly greater store of information available, at first internally and then to a wider audience.

Current foundation knowledge management efforts are typically focused on collecting and disseminating the knowledge extracted from the organization's own activities. A few, like KnowledgePlex,

Note: Tom Kern and Ralph Hamilton provided particularly helpful comments on this chapter.

founded by twenty organizations operating in the affordable housing and community development arena, including the Enterprise Foundation, LISC, the Brookings Institution, and the Fannie Mae Foundation, make available an industry-wide collection of information. But even they make no effort to synthesize the information or use it to provide guidance to other practitioners, policy-makers, academics, and the press. Thus, current knowledge management activities have only a very indirect impact on actions that could lead to major societal improvements, such as better outcomes for the children, families, and neighborhoods that American prosperity is leaving behind.

Because so many of the most intractable societal problems will not be solved by circumscribed interventions delivered by individual organizations operating in isolation, the need to assemble knowledge across disciplinary, political, and bureaucratic boundaries, across funding sources, and across the public and private sectors becomes increasingly acute. It is now widely recognized that it takes more than child welfare services to keep children safe, that it takes more than the police to keep neighborhoods free of violence, that it takes more than family support services to strengthen families, and that it takes more than good preschool programs to prepare children for school. But when it comes to designing and evaluating interventions, we act as though each funder, each system, and even each individual program could, in isolation, achieve valued outcomes on its own. We even act as though the causal connection between each intervention and the desired outcomes could be proven, and we shy away from efforts to establish plausible connections through an accumulation of empirical evidence. Instead of remaining as stymied as we are in the face of many complex social problems, a critical mass of foundations could take a giant leap forward by taking the lead in ensuring that the knowledge management enterprise evolves into knowledge building.

It is my contention that foundations seeking to support the implementation of effective strategies that will improve lives must harness available knowledge in ways that will for most represent radical departures from past practices.

They must aim deliberately to assemble, synthesize, integrate, and make widely available information that comes not only from their own experience. They must combine the lessons from their own experience with that of other funders, public and private, and with available research and theory, in order to provide decision makers with the knowledge they need to act effectively and achieve important social outcomes.

Matching available information to change efforts

We have learned a great deal in the past decade about how families, neighbors, and social institutions can improve the life chances of children and youth growing up in tough neighborhoods. However, most of the information that is readily available is not well matched to the task facing communities, service providers, and policymakers who are trying to bring about fundamental change.

Prevailing information usually comes in small, isolated, and disjointed pieces; arrives too late; rarely identifies the essentials of what made the intervention work; and is typically derived from a severely limited range of interventions that are sufficiently circumscribed and standardized to allow for elegant evaluation. These flaws in the available knowledge are the results of overzealous efforts to be “scientific.” We are applying a kind of rigidity to methods of extracting information that is appropriate only to some. Of course, foundations have frequently departed from the most rigid evaluation paradigms when they have sought to address specific problems in domains where research evidence was scarce, by assembling commissions and expert panels that were charged with putting together the best available information to guide departures in both policy and programmatic realms. I am suggesting that foundations go further in reexamining and modifying what counts as credible knowledge for at least three reasons.

First, the experimental method that is considered the gold standard in programmatic evaluation can sometimes—but not always—be the appropriate method for assessing impact. Random

assignment approaches are rarely the method of choice in assessing the effectiveness of the complex, multicomponent initiatives and strategies that seem to be most promising in accomplishing complex ends such as revitalizing communities, reforming education, strengthening families, and protecting children. But although these broad-based efforts most frequently cannot be evaluated in the most rigorous way, they often offer crucial models for action, provide valuable lessons about how to structure interventions, and promote understanding about the elements that make actions work. The lessons that come out of more inclusive approaches to knowledge building are also often the basis for the hypothesis building that can inform not only program and policy design, but also the next generation of research questions.

Second, because the most elegant evaluations tend to be conducted in artificially favorable environments, they may not provide the best information for understanding how the program will fare under quite different local conditions. In such circumstances, as educator-psychologist Jerome Bruner (1990) argues, “Plausible interpretations [are] preferable to causal explanations, particularly when the achievement of a causal explanation forces us to artificialize what we are studying to a point almost beyond recognition as representative of life” (p. xiii).

But the primary reason that it makes sense to expand the criteria for determining credible knowledge is that communities must still make decisions about what to do, even when they lack full or scientifically rigorous information about what works. In those circumstances, as a report from the National Research Council concludes, effective service delivery and informed policymaking will have to rest on the ability to make reasonable judgments and avoid irresponsible practices in the face of incomplete knowledge (Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000). The challenge is how to develop and provide the information that can help local decision makers, service deliverers, program managers, and their funders make the best possible decisions despite the lack of absolute certainty.

A more inclusive approach to knowledge building

Thus, even as service delivery and funding continue to operate predominantly within self-contained silos, our knowledge-building activities must cross systems and disciplinary boundaries, and our energy and analytic capability must shift away from making yes-or-no judgments about individual interventions and move toward discerning patterns from an accumulation of research and experience.

This is an ambitious task, and those of us who have called for this kind of knowledge building have been greeted with much skepticism, grounded primarily in two reservations: first, that the task is too large and unmanageable, and second, that it requires a higher ratio of judgment to certainty than many participants in the social policy process are comfortable with.

The Project on Effective Interventions at Harvard University, with the support of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, addressed the “unmanageability” concern by creating the Pathways Mapping Initiative (PMI). Over a period of four years, with a modest budget and small staff, we have been able to pilot a more inclusive approach to knowledge building. (Our findings are now displayed on the Web site, www.PathwaysToOutcomes.org.) Although operating at an extremely small scale, compared to the kind of effort needed to realize the potential of this approach, we believe we have been able to show that it can be done.

We dealt with fears of arbitrary whims and fads displacing hard evidence through a rigorous process we call mental mapping.

Creating a pathway

We began our work with the premise that any attempt to assemble a large amount of information that would strengthen the capacity of community groups and agencies to act effectively would have to be organized around widely agreed-on outcomes. We did not seek to specify what communities should do, but thought they could

plan more effectively if they did not have to start with a blank piece of paper and make up a theory of change from scratch. We wanted to enable users to adapt existing theories and practical knowledge accumulated elsewhere to their own circumstances and resources.

Our prototype pathway was aimed at raising community rates of school readiness. To this end, we have distilled a broad array of information about what works to achieve the outcome by incorporating lessons from experiential knowledge and evidence as well as findings from rigorous research evaluations. We have organized and presented the information in a way that helps communities to think coherently and systematically about:

- A complex of actions that work together to produce a desired outcome
- The key ingredients of actions that make them effective
- The funding, policy, and regulatory context that supports or undermines that effectiveness
- The research rationale that identifies the connections between activities and outcomes
- The research evidence, where it exists, that supports the conclusion that specified interventions are effective in contributing to the outcome

In addition, we have made it easier for local communities to combine local wisdom and their understanding of local circumstances with accumulated knowledge about what appears promising and what has worked elsewhere.

Mental mapping

Our process of mental mapping, which is similar in concept to the National Institutes of Health Consensus Conference, is defined as “a vehicle for moving beyond the piecemeal presentation of evidence from diverse bodies of literature and for ensuring the unbiased synthesis of findings that can inform broader discussions of

effective strategies” (Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000, p. 410). The goal of the process is not only to elicit useful information but also to make it easier for policy and program people to think about their work more rationally and coherently.

To do the mental mapping, we convene groups of highly knowledgeable, experienced individuals, including researchers and practitioners, who are steeped in their respective fields and diverse in their perspectives and beliefs. Drawing on their accumulated wisdom, we ask them to make explicit their mental maps of what works to reach the outcome under consideration. Participants are asked to respond initially to the question, “Considering the evidence from the research, theory, and practice experience you have been exposed to over the years, what could a community most effectively do if it were committed to achieving the specific outcome under consideration, for example, higher rates of school readiness or family economic success?”

As they respond, we encourage participants to dig deep and put on the table issues that might otherwise remain hidden and are often neglected. Thus, mental mapping participants often focus less on the need for new or additional programs and more on the connections among existing programs and institutions that would make them more effective. Examples are connections that would make it easier and more routine for child care staff to obtain developmental assessments of a child they are concerned about or to mobilize housing assistance or substance abuse treatment for an overwhelmed mother.

Because we take great care to ensure a rich mix of backgrounds and outlooks among mental mapping participants, we have been able to protect both the process and the product from bias. We distinguish claims for which there is strong consensus from those that fail to stimulate consensus. We discard conclusions drawn exclusively from a single program or organization’s experience or that represent an idiosyncratic point of view.

PMI supplements the information generated by mental mapping meetings by asking other experts to fill any remaining gaps. For example, the initial mental mapping groups on school readiness did

not include enough researchers and practitioners steeped in child welfare, housing, or neighborhood development, so we solicited additional information in those domains. We also field-test the information with groups of potential users to make sure it is readily understood, useful, and relevant.

Actionable versus certain knowledge and the role of judgment

The knowledge base that emerges from our early efforts at assembling, organizing, and disseminating information about what works across domains, disciplines, and institutions is arguably wider, deeper, more coherent, and more actionable than most similar collections of information. But will the products of this more inclusive mind-set be credible? Does the important role that judgment plays in the mental mapping process and knowledge building threaten to discredit the product?

We believe that when the process generalizes from a preponderance of rigorously analyzed evidence, it can come to represent a significant degree of credibility. Once we agree that there is knowledge that is worth having and analyzing because it is actionable (even though it is not certain), we are in a better position to incorporate the lessons to be learned from both the successful and unsuccessful intervention efforts of the past two decades. We will be able to update our vocabulary, our traditional, compartmentalized ways of thinking, and our institutional arrangements to meet changing needs and address the new complexities of how to make what works actually work.

This approach to knowledge building implies a trade-off. It suggests that the knowledge-building process should shift from predominant reliance on a knowledge base consisting of either a few narrow, circumscribed change efforts—even when that knowledge is certain, final, and “true”—or the lessons learned by a single funding organization from its own work. Instead, our knowledge-building efforts should be tilting toward enabling the people who are making

daily decisions about policies and programs in the face of incomplete knowledge to make more useful decisions by providing them with access to knowledge that is integrated, coherent, accessible, and deep and deals with a broad range of promising change efforts—even if some of that knowledge is tentative, contingent, and approximate. (See Table 5.1.)

The time may be ripe for a conceptual shift in our analytic work—a shift that would honor multiple ways of knowing, allow us to address more fundamental questions, and encourage us to assemble useful data about the effects of promising interventions even in the absence of absolute proof. There is increasing interest in a more inclusive paradigm for knowledge building—a paradigm that does not give up on searching out the patterns that connect activities to results, even in the absence of certainty. Far from being

Table 5.1. Types of information

<i>Information from Current Sources</i>	<i>Actionable Information</i>
Comes in small, isolated, disjointed pieces	Is broad, deep, coherent, integrated, and related to desired outcomes
Is typically limited to a single domain	Crosses disciplines and systems
Arrives too late, after formal evaluations have been completed	Is real-time, drawing on lessons learned contemporaneously
Is based on a small fraction of current experience that can be elegantly evaluated	Is based on an accumulation of research, theory, and experience
Sheds little light on what makes the intervention work	Includes key elements that account for effectiveness
Sheds little light on the community context or the funding, policy, and regulatory environment	Includes key elements of the community context and the funding, policy, and regulatory environment that account for or undermine effectiveness
Requires users to start from scratch in crafting a theory of change and in identifying what works	Allows users to know what has worked elsewhere and why, as a way of getting started

unscientific, a paradigm that combines theory, logic, and evidence with intelligent judgment, analogy, insight, and creativity is the combination that the Nobel prize-winning biologist David Baltimore (1997) identifies as the basis for “the most fundamental progress in science” (p. 8). This less linear approach to systematic learning could begin to produce the practical knowledge needed to improve outcomes while simultaneously combating the prevailing nihilism, which holds that nothing can be known because the certainty we demand is unattainable.

The potential of a more inclusive approach

The knowledge management activities now under way in foundations could, with the encouragement of relevant leaders, readily flow into knowledge building. Once the collection of internal knowledge is intelligently filtered and organized, it is likely to point up gaps in understanding, opportunities for improvement, and the need for new knowledge. This will become even truer as the fruits of knowledge management become more widely shared.

A wider distribution of family stability and economic security, universal school readiness and school success, and the dramatic reduction of racial and income gaps in education and economic achievement are all within reach.

Foundations could provide the underpinning for an action agenda bold enough to make our social justice aspirations into realistic goals by moving their knowledge management activities into knowledge-building activities by pooling the lessons learned from their own work with that of other funders, public and private, extracting actionable information from the knowledge they assemble from experience as well as research, and privileging the contributions of actionable information alongside of the contributions of proven knowledge.

At a time of little enthusiasm in the United States for governmental action to solve urgent social problems, America’s foundations could lead the way toward the kind of knowledge-building

enterprise that will add confidence to funding decisions and equip community organizations, service providers, and policymakers at every level to act far more effectively than they have in the past.

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