

THE ECOLOGY OF SUCCESS

The Problem of Scaling Up What Works in CED



Mike Lewis

In a book she completed ten years ago, *Within Our Reach: Breaking the Cycle of Disadvantage*, Lisbeth Schorr described a home-visiting program for high-risk babies and their mothers in New York state. A university-sponsored demonstration project, it assigned a nurse to each mother in the latter months of the pregnancy. An intensive relationship between nurse and family was maintained until the child's second birthday. Incidence of prematurity, child abuse, accidents, subsequent pregnancy, and welfare dependency were all found to decline in the families concerned. Then the pilot project was promoted to a Medicaid-funded program, administered by the health department.

Given the limited funds available, program administrators felt constrained to extend the benefits of home visits "as far as possible." Nurses' caseloads doubled; visits were shortened and curtailed altogether when the child was four months old. No matter; there was not enough money to cover evaluation either, so the new program's performance was never measured. All the original nursing staff resigned, however. They were satisfied that the program would not practice what the pilot had proved.

An example of CED in (or out) of action? Perhaps not. But for me, this ill-fated pilot project is highly indicative of why best practice CED organizations across this country, for all their impressive results, could remain an idiosyncratic blip on the larger screen of the nation's social and economic life. Nourished by flexible funding, political support, or charismatic leadership, they are like hothouse plants. Nothing could endanger them more than to transfer them outside, to survive in the "ecology" of Canada's public and private systems.

What are the forces that make it so hard

for successful community-based initiatives to be expanded to impact tens of thousands of citizens, rather than just thousands? Can single-focus programs, such as funding for technical assistance and organization development, hope to solve this dilemma?

I think not. Even though such programs are a critical component, they are only part of a broader mix. In fact, if our efforts to scale up CED in Canada don't include a significant effort to influence the private and public systems that block successful replication - we will be merely spinning our wheels.

WHAT WORKS

For the lion's share of my ammunition in this issue I turn to the research conducted by Lisbeth Schorr into a wide range of initiatives in America's poverty-stricken inner cities. In her most recent book, *Common Purpose: Strengthening Families and Neighborhoods to Rebuild America* (1997), Schorr reports four major conclusions:

Firstly, successful initiatives take strategic action within a comprehensive "mind-

set." This mind-set serves as the lens through which they survey problems, opportunities, and the building of solutions. The practitioners understand the necessity and the effectiveness of working simultaneously on economic and physical development, on service and educational reform, and on community building. But they are strategic in choosing where to begin, in sequencing their activities, and in deciding how much to take on at once.

Secondly, successful initiatives rely on a community's own resources and strengths as the foundation for action. The specific assets, needs, institutional relationships, and power structures of individual communities are reflected in the design of the change initiatives themselves.

Community building, the heart and soul of these initiatives, is more an orientation than a technique, more a mission than a program, more an outlook than an activity. It catalyzes a process of change grounded in local life and priorities. It changes the nature of the relationship between the specific community and the systems outside its boundaries.

This focus on community building derives from the belief that inner-city residents and institutions can and must be primary actors in efforts to solve the problems of their neighbourhoods.

Thirdly, successful initiatives draw extensively on outside resources, including public and private funds, professional expertise, and partnerships.

While this may seem a contradiction to the second conclusion, it is not. Many of the problems facing inner-city neighbourhoods (and rural communities) arise from powerful economic forces and from deficiencies in public systems - both of which originate far beyond the borders of the distressed communities. To transform these communities, initiatives require a new relationship between insiders and outsiders that allows information and wisdom to flow in both directions.

Outsiders perform three key functions in support of successful community-based initiatives:

- They provide money in amounts and under conditions that are related to the objectives to be achieved. Funding is structured to be predictable over the period of time required to get results.
- They provide clout that can help reduce or remove political, bureaucratic, and regulatory obstacles to an initiative's coherency.
- They provide technical assistance. They can mobilize and broker crucial expertise which otherwise might not be readily available.

Finally, successful initiatives endeavour to achieve concrete outcomes. Even while recognizing the importance of short-term results (particularly for purposes of community mobilization), the primary focus of these initiatives remains the achievement of long-term, durable benefits.

WHEN REPLICATION DOESN'T WORK

Schorr's ground-breaking research also leads us to a far more detailed understanding of why replication succeeds or fails.

Let's start with the bad news. Successful pilots often fail when applied at a greater scale because we underestimate the impor-

tance of local variation, local ownership, and the subtleties of effective community-based initiatives. We have also ignored the critical role of the external environment.

- People-centered initiatives cannot be mass-produced. This is true for family-focussed interventions. It is even more true of neighbourhood transformation efforts. Some parts of the wheel simply have to be locally reinvented. In fact, lo-

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cal adaptation is crucial if there is to be local ownership of the initiative.

- Never underestimate the subtleties of effective interventions. Too many efforts at replication have been made at the expense of the very essence of why the initiative worked in the first place. (One key attribute of the aforementioned home-visiting pilot was the length of time of each visit. How long were they? Long enough so that the mother could start to talk about her personal concerns, as well as the baby's needs.)
- Beware the temptation to dilute an effective program to make it more politically “marketable.” Public reluctance to invest in the poor leads administrators, policy-makers, and funders to acquiesce in a grand deception when they “scale up” by gutting an initiative of its key qualities.
- Merit is insufficient to move “good products” into the mainstream. The greatest challenge facing those who would scale up a successful local initiative is the necessity to change the institutional environment itself.

On this environment the initiative will depend for long-term funding, skilled professionals, and public support. Yet the scope, structure, and culture of mainstream institutions are profoundly out of sync with

the key attributes of community-based success. Scaling up the pilot - popping its protective bubble, as it were - exposes it to conventional financing, accountability, governance, and public perception. What was an interesting experiment essentially becomes a threat to political and bureaucratic arrangements that have held sway for decades. The encounter is likely to be lethal to the pilot.

That will only change when systems and public perceptions themselves become more hospitable to effective efforts to change lives and communities.

WHAT DOES WORK

The odds appear stacked against replication. But Schorr dedicates a good portion of her work to identifying successful efforts to broaden and deepen the impact of initiatives that are achieving results, and to deciphering what sets them apart:

- They both replicate the essence of a successful initiative while adapting many of its components to a new setting or new population.
- They enjoy the continuous backing of an intermediary organization that offers expertise, outside support, legitimization, and clout.
- They recognize the importance of the systems and institutional context. To assure themselves a hospitable environment, the practitioners seek out settings where their activities will be welcome. Alternatively, they seek out institutional vacuums which are devoid of a thicket of rules and other constraints. Lastly, they may invest effort and resources to create a hospitable institutional environment.

- They recognize the importance of the people context. In other words, the people that become involved in the replication effort believe in what they are doing. Not only do they want it to work, they feel they have a lot riding on it working.
- They judge success by outcomes, but not with the detachment of a franchisor. As hard and complex as replication is, the effort itself is more than likely to yield significant outcomes.
- They tackle, directly and strategically, the obstacles to large-scale change. Effective replication happens when program people and funders (philanthropic organizations or government) develop the strategies, make the investments, take the risks, and support the disruptions of the status quo that large-scale change entails. Otherwise we end up with a stifled, diluted, or distorted version of what was once a success.

This latter point is the crux of the replication problem, and the reason that significant public purposes will not be achieved simply through the dissemination of information about discrete innovations and effective practices.

THE BUREAUCRATIC JUNGLE

This challenge of systems change is daunting. As Schorr says:

“Programs carefully developed under the protective bubbles cannot be sustained in the arid soil of bureaucracies that value equity but not intensity; standardization but not flexibility; routine procedures but not discretion; categorization but not comprehensiveness; professional authority but not collaborative relationships; reduction of errors but not responsiveness to urgent human needs.” (*Schorr, p. 30*)

Putting it another way, the prevailing

systems are characterized by fractured mandates, stovepipe delivery, and compliance-driven rules and procedures. They are manifestations of a narrowly-cast, short-term evaluation mind-set.

To move out of the “hot house” and into the mainstream we must find ways to address these awesome gaps in understanding.

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In this regard, Schorr’s work is again a key reference. She notes in the nature of current bureaucracy an eagerness to guard against scandal and malfeasance, to achieve equity and uniformity, and to solve a dilemma by tackling one visible problem at a time. But this approach sacrifices the discretion, flexibility, responsiveness, and coherence essential to success. We must find a new and better balance between rules that protect valued public purposes and rules that prevent valued public purposes from being achieved. To find that balance, we must understand certain tradeoffs:

- Rules to assure equity can undermine responsiveness.
- Rules to assure quality can also undermine responsiveness.
- When resources are inadequate, rules to assure equity undermine effectiveness. From the collision of equity with thinly-spread, inadequate resources issues the dilution which defeats the very purpose of the initiative.
- The controls intended to protect against wrong-doing can seriously inhibit discretion. The auditing mindset mitigates against making things work. The need for discretion in program design and

front-line practices, so necessary for success, is dead against the bureaucratic grain.

- The accumulation of rules leads to paralysis. Both Canada and the U.S. are becoming nations with a profound bias toward solving problems by adopting rules.
- Rules that stem from hyper-categorization interfere with coherence and prevention. Fragmentation merely diverts precious resources away from the effort required to succeed. For people trying to undertake comprehensive, community-based initiatives, that categorical funding is one of the greatest of impediments.

Under the prevailing rules, accountability is almost always at odds with achieving the mission. Compliance and auditors don’t cut it when it comes to building success.

Many commonplace solutions to the bureaucracy problem, Schorr argues, are spurious:

- Devolution will not solve the bureaucracy problem.
- Service integration and collaboration will not solve the bureaucracy problem.
- Privatization and entrepreneurship (including contracting out, reliance on markets, reliance on charities) will not solve the bureaucracy problem.

TAMING THE JUNGLE

How then is the public sector to be renewed, if at all? James Q. Wilson, preeminent scholar of bureaucracy, says it can’t be achieved even if it is desirable.

“If any agency is to have a sense of mission, if constraints are to be minimized, if authority is to be decentralized, if officials are to be judged on the basis of the outputs they produce rather than the inputs they consume, then legislators, judges, and lobbyists will have to act against their own interests ... and it is hard to imagine this happening.” (*cited in Schorr, p. 95*)

GROW?! WHY JES YOU PUT THE WATER TO 'ER & YOU BET SHE'LL GROW!



Typically, as Alan Altshuler points out, authority is fragmented in government bureaucracy, value conflicts are endemic, employee socialization is haphazard, and innovation is risky.

Sounds familiar? But, Steve Kelman, by contrast, says public sector renewal is possible

“... if we are willing to break with the traditions that value the bureaucratic virtues of regularity and impartiality above all else, and if we are willing to abandon the tangles of rules and clearances [that] discourage innovation and lead public employees to believe they have done their jobs as long as they have adhered to the rules.” (Schorr, p. 95)

Clearly we need a new model of human service management that relies less on rules and more on discretion, judgment, and creativity.

One of the things that is exciting about Schorr’s work is the case examples she describes of systems change “trailblazers” in the United States. She describes instances in which public officials mobilized a critical mass of common purpose and managed to relax the stranglehold of regulation imposed on key public sector institutions.

Rather than turning public functions over to the private sector and hoping for the

best (the conventional solution), these officials addressed the bureaucracy problem head-on. They have recognized the distinction between functions that must be standardized from the top down, and functions whose effectiveness hinges on being responsive to specific individuals, families, and communities. They have recognized that in agencies charged with educating children and keeping them healthy, and with strengthening families and communities, the centralized procedural orthodoxy has undermined effectiveness, rather than

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guaranteed it. Through good management, training, and technical assistance, the new policies and practices are assuring quality, equity, and accountability without sanctioning arbitrariness.

In each case, these officials and administrators cultivated among their front-line staff members a shared view of the nature and importance of the organization’s reframed and restructured tasks. They saw themselves as part of a voluntary community of shared beliefs, values, and norms.

Managers had the time to plan, evolve, and learn from their experience. They were able to elicit from their staffs a commitment to high-quality performance that superseded pressures to serve narrow self-interest and freed them to exercise their discretion.

In none of the cases were those who created the bureaucratic changes left to fend for themselves. All were able to draw on outside intermediaries that offered clout and expertise - and sometimes extra funds.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

There is no single model of successful debureaucratization. It is our challenge to build on the lessons being learned and generate new models. All such efforts will find

that achieving a new balance between constraints and effectiveness becomes harder as the scale of the effort becomes larger, more visible, and more threatening to the status quo.


But it can be done. The bureaucratic model, now grown so evidently dysfunctional at the end of the twentieth century, can indeed be modified. With the creation of new public-private-community partnerships and post-bureaucratic models of public accountability, the heavy hand of bureau-

cracy can be eased; community, neighbourhood, and front-line discretion can be achieved; public purposes can be realized.

We have to research, advocate, and leverage what is working. This necessarily includes getting the CED field much better organized and creating alliances with progressive public servants and private sector partners. We also need to ensure that the allocation of resources matches our growing understanding of these best practices.

The launch of the Digby Network (now known as the Canadian CED Network, or CCN) is an important start. (See *Making Waves*, Vol. 9, No. 4, Winter 1998.) Over the next two years CCN is targeted to grow sig-

nificantly beyond its 15 founding CED organizations. A policy and research advocacy agenda is being defined. There is also going to be a series of regional and/or local mini-conferences across the country to highlight best practices and to introduce a policy agenda for discussion. These gatherings will all contribute to a major national conference to be staged sometime late in the year 2000.

This kind of activity is critical. Without organization, our sector's capacity to replicate best practices and scale up CED will be severely limited, as will be our capacity to reshape public systems. As Saul Alinsky once said, "If we ain't organized, we are not going to contend." 

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