



WEBINAR RESOURCES

UNLOCKING SYSTEMS THINKING: TOOLS FOR TRANSFORMATION

Included within is a collection of resources to review before the Unlocking Systems Thinking: Tools for Transformation virtual education session. The resources include books and reports, articles, and a webinar providing background on the topics and sessions.



Books and Reports

- *Changing Systems, Changing Lives: Reflecting on 20 Years*
- *Leading Systems Change in Public Health: A Field Guide for Practitioners*
- *The Water of Systems Change*

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Articles

- “A Framework for Creating Systems Change”
- “Where Strategic Philanthropy Went Wrong”
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Changing Systems, Changing Lives: Reflecting on 20 Years

<https://thenicholsonfoundation.org/changinglives/?back-to-main>

The Nicholson Foundation. Newark (NJ): The Nicholson Foundation, 2021.

The Nicholson Foundation began work in 2002 with the goal of improving the lives of vulnerable populations in New Jersey by addressing shortcomings in the array of systems meant to help them—in social and human service systems and education. The Foundation aimed to make a difference for people whose lives are dominated by a struggle to obtain the basics—nutritious food, adequate housing and transportation, quality education, work, sufficient and appropriate healthcare, and the assurance of safety.

Changing Systems, Changing Lives: Reflecting on 20 Years describes the Foundation’s journey, from its early days, through its decision to spend down, to its closing in December 2021. The heart of the book is its six theme-based chapters, which embody the components of the Foundation’s approach. Each chapter includes a rationale for the theme, stories of illustrative projects, and key takeaways from these experiences. The book also includes a chapter on the Foundation’s support for arts projects in New Jersey and North Carolina, and a final reflection on the Foundation’s work and legacy.

The Nicholson Model



Leading Systems Change in Public Health: A Field Guide for Practitioners

<https://debeaumont.org/books/leading-systems-change-in-public-health/>

Risley K.Y., Welter C.R., Castillo G., Castrucci B.C. New York (NY): Springer Publishing Company, December 2021.

The world is increasingly complex, and the COVID-19 pandemic only accentuated the deepening racial, health, and social inequities. The authors argue that a traditional behavioral change approach is not sufficient to address systems challenges; more is needed. Creating genuine, effective, equitable, and lasting change in systems and institutions requires an expansion of who is involved and what questions to ask to get to the root of problems and lead to solutions that work for everyone — especially those who are most affected by current systems.

Written for public health practitioners and partners, *Leading Systems Change in Public Health: A Field Guide for Practitioners* provides an inclusive process and framework with tools for implementing change that leads to transformation. This comprehensive resource translates academic and practice experiences into a roadmap that is approachable and easy to use. *Leading Systems Change* also features actual public health systems change initiatives that apply concepts explored in the book.

The Water of Systems Change

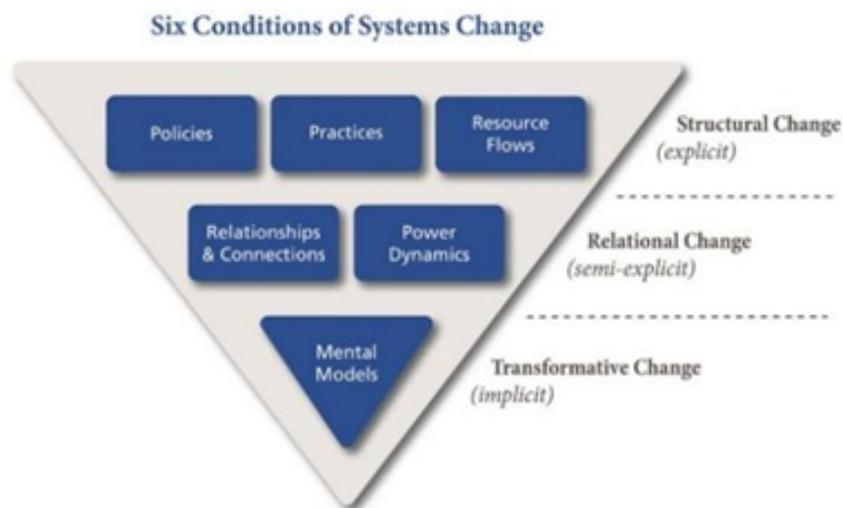
https://www.fsg.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/The-Water-of-Systems-Change_rc.pdf

Kania J., Kramer M., Senge P.M. Boston (MA): FSG, 2018.

Foundations involved in systems change can increase their odds for success by focusing on the least explicit but most powerful conditions for change, while also turning the lens on themselves. *The Water of Systems Change* aims to clarify what it means to shift these conditions. This report and its associated resources offer an “inverted triangle” framework as an actionable model for funders and others interested in creating systems change, particularly those who are working to advance equity.

This approach embodies several key principles:

- Systems change is about advancing equity by shifting the conditions that hold a problem in place.
- To fully embrace systems change, funders should be prepared to see how their own ways of thinking and acting must change as well.
- Shifts in system conditions are more likely to be sustained when working at three different levels of change: explicit, semi-explicit, and implicit.



Additional links for a deeper dive into this approach:

Website: https://www.fsg.org/resource/water_of_systems_change/

Learning Exercise: <https://www.fsg.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/The-Water-of-Systems-Change-Action-Learning-Exercise.pdf>

“A Framework for Creating Systems Change”

<https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1678&context=tfr>

Brown W., Rosser W. The Foundation Review 2023;15(4): 50-62.

This article draws on a systems-change framework developed by The Nicholson Foundation, a New Jersey-based foundation. Over 20 years, the Foundation worked to substantively improve the state’s health and social welfare systems. The authors integrate a results-based accountability approach into the model to draw attention to the importance of monitoring and evaluating population-based outcomes.

Drawing on extensive literature from systems change and performance management, the article provides insight and perspective on contemporary frameworks in systems change and the role of grantmaking foundations. It also modifies and expands a single case study on system change to align with related ideas and concepts. The case study highlights the importance of partner capacity and acknowledges the need to build organizational and individual capacity as part of effective systems-change efforts.

The authors review the Nicholson Model, focusing on seven components: performance measurement, system expertise, nurturing partnerships and collaboration, using complementary approaches, scaling and replicating promising practices, building organizational capacity, and developing leaders. The authors conclude by noting that the framework can be useful to scholars, researchers, and consultants in building systems-change initiatives and understanding their applicability to grantmaking investments.



Source: Based on Nicholson Foundation (2022). Shaded elements saw significant modifications and additions from original Nicholson Model.

“Where Strategic Philanthropy Went Wrong”

<https://ssir.org/articles/entry/strategic-philanthropy-went-wrong#>

Kramer M., Phillips S. Stanford Social Innovation Review 2024; 22(3), 28–37.

<https://doi.org/10.48558/J9QB-AB63>

Despite dramatic advances in the scale and sophistication of “strategic philanthropy” (i.e., philanthropic initiatives intended to create lasting solutions to societal problems), the authors of this article note that societal conditions at a national level have not improved. They posit that, to date, strategic philanthropy has been guided by three assumptions:

- Beneficiaries of philanthropic support are incapable of solving their own problems.
- Wealthy donors have the wisdom and incentive to solve society’s many challenges.
- The social sector is an effective alternative to government in building an equitable and sustainable society.

However, the authors argue that mounting evidence shows these assumptions to be wrong:

- Individuals, even those living in poverty, are able to improve their lives with modest amounts of unrestricted cash payments and support from their peers.
- Wealthy donors often lack the lived experience to understand the problems they attempt to solve and may sidestep deeper solutions that undermine their own wealth and privilege.
- Only government has the capacity to address social and environmental problems on a national scale.

The authors propose a new direction for philanthropy, called “empowerment philanthropy,” which enables individuals economically and politically to make choices for themselves. By celebrating their successes, these individuals can inspire others, thus creating an opening for faster, more widespread, and lasting social and environmental progress. Examples of this strategy include funding efforts to mobilize voters to elect a representative government that passes policies that benefit the entire population, and universal basic income (UBI) payments, economic facilitation, and peer-driven change that encourages individual success while neutralizing destructive and racist social narratives. The authors elaborate on these ideas, concluding “Empowering individuals economically and within the political process is the most effective way for funders to contribute to a more just and sustainable future for our nation.”

“Investing for Systems Change Means Refining How We Think About Impact”

<https://ssir.org/articles/entry/philanthropy-impact-systems-change#>

Balakrishnan R., Kumar S., Reddy P.L. Stanford Social Innovation Review December 9, 2024;

<https://doi.org/10.48558/M9EQ-DC70>

This paper suggests a way forward for funders who are trying to comprehensively evaluate the impact of long-term investments. This kind of evaluation involves achieving a balance between understanding the complexity of the systems being changed while obtaining continuous feedback that can signal progress toward goals for long-term impact. A major difficulty in achieving this balance is the dearth of metrics for measuring long-term impact. As a result, philanthropy tends toward short-term projects that are more easily evaluated. The authors present an approach that funders committed to long-term investments can consider. It involves a self-reflection exercise centered on mapping three issues:

- The System: What is the system that we're trying to change? What specific parts of the system have actually changed, and how substantially?
- Contributions: Did our efforts actually help bring about these changes in the system? What role did we play in making that happen?
- Pathways: Did we choose the right ways to push the system forward at the right times? Were the strategies and actions we took the most effective ones for moving the ecosystem in the right direction? Should we change or refine our investment approach based on the stage of the system?

The authors conclude by noting that such an approach “not only provides a framework for comprehending systemic shifts but by consistently assessing intervention effectiveness at each stage...organizations can dynamically adapt their approaches,” thus enhancing their ability to drive enduring change.

Graceful Exits: A *Chronicle of Philanthropy* Webinar about The Nicholson Foundation's Sunsetting

<https://www.thenicholsonfoundation.org/news-and-resources/graceful-exits-chronicle-philanthropy-webinar-about-nicholson-foundations-sunsetting.html>

Nicholson J., Boller K. The Nicholson Foundation. November 2021

During this webinar, Jan Nicholson, President of The Nicholson Foundation, and Kim Boller, Executive Director, discussed the process the Foundation used to manage its closing and how it worked with grantees, staff, and partners throughout the process. The aim was to help other foundations considering closing entirely or shutting down some portion of their work. Another goal was to help grantees prepare for possible loss of support from a funder.

The webinar covered various themes, such as why closing is such a big decision, how to know that the time is right for the decision to close, how to handle pushback or controversy around the decision, and how to clearly and respectfully transition partnerships with government and nonprofits. Ms. Nicholson and Dr. Boller also discussed the nuts and bolts of closing and why careful planning and clear communications are essential to a successful process.