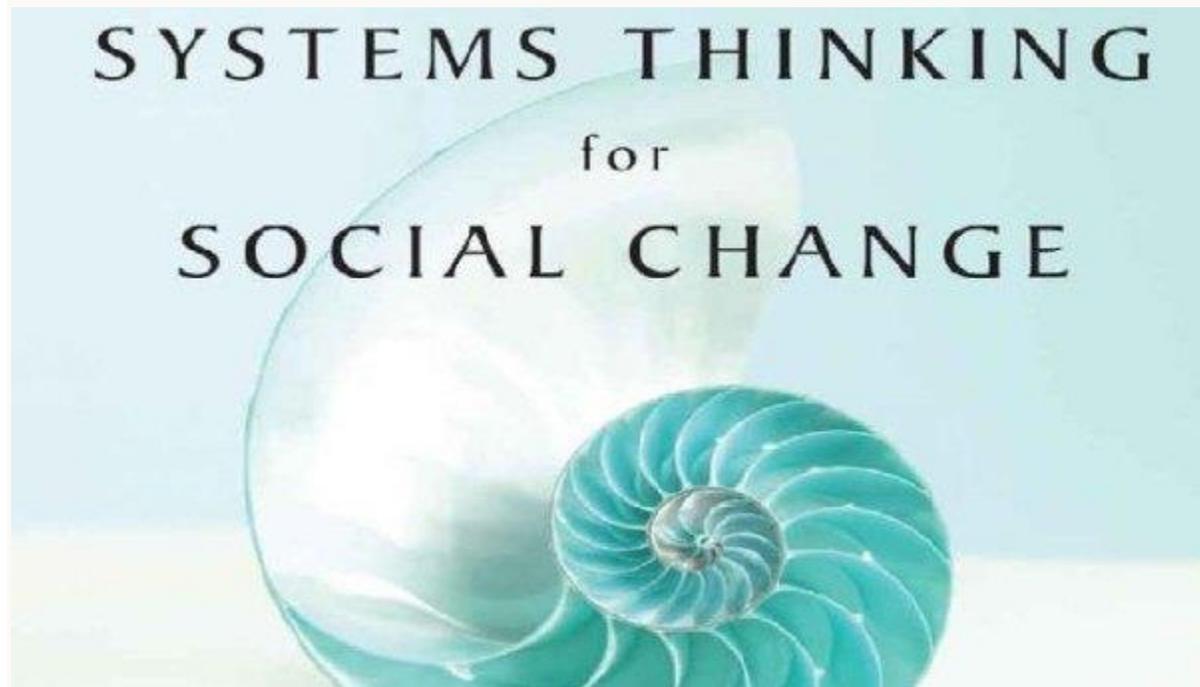


Board Leadership: Relationships Among the Parts

Posted on [June 13, 2017](#) by David Grant



Faithful readers of the Dodge Blog know that I have repeatedly urged practitioners in the social sector to “plan backwards” from a shared vision of success, using qualitative assessment rubrics as a tool. If you make time for the process and keep saying to yourselves, “Be more specific,” you’ll find a lot of important ideas and issues emerge in those little boxes of the rubric.

I recently ran across a line in David Peter Stroh’s *Systems Thinking for Social Change* (light bedtime reading) that seemed to invite such an approach. Stroh writes: “In conventional thinking, in order to optimize the whole, we must optimize the parts. In systems thinking, in order to optimize the whole, we must improve *relationships* among the parts.”

If you see yourself as being part of multiple systems, this observation might add a question to your assessment practices. In addition to asking what makes a great staff and what makes a great board, you ask what makes a great relationship between staff and board. In addition to asking what makes a great program and what people do we serve, you ask what is the most effective and productive relationship we could have with those we serve.

“Quality of relationship” lends itself perfectly to qualitative assessment. People will say “you can’t measure that,” and you respond, “but I can describe it.” And out comes the rubric, and everyone involved in the relationship has a role in shaping it by defining criteria for success and then painting specific pictures of performance in relation to those criteria along a spectrum from low to high, from disappointing to aspirational.

I was in Delaware last week and was heartened to see a great example of this practice at an early stage. Members of the Delaware Alliance for Nonprofit Advancement (DANA) and the Delaware Grantmakers Association (DGA) created a working group to write a rubric titled, “Grantmaker and Nonprofit Relationship for Creating Community Impact.” The title identifies the purpose of the system they are in and why their relationship matters. The exercise rests on a systems-thinking question, “if we changed some aspects of our relationship, might we increase the mission-based impacts we all seek?”

The DANA/DGA draft rubric evokes a spectrum (the columns of the rubric) in four short words. The lowest level is “Transactional.” The second level of success is “Engaged.” The third level is “Partnership.” The aspirational level of success is “Transformative.”

Remember that at the highest level of the rubric, it is not just their relationship that has been transformed; it is the community they serve. As far as criteria to be measured along that spectrum (the rows of the rubric), the task force went to the critical dimensions of the relationship: the *Alignment* of beliefs in the purpose of the relationship; the *Mutuality* of feeling about its importance; the levels of *Trust and Transparency* in their interactions; and the quality of their *Communication*.

Given that structure, it is no surprise that the draft rubric is both honest about disappointments (relation tied only to terms of the grant; power dynamics funder-driven; little transparency or trust and defensive about results; no feedback) and aspirational in its description of the possible (working together independent of funding; leveraging collective influence; full disclosure and transparency; ongoing formative feedback on progress).

It seems to me this rubric is “shaping the path,” as the Heath brothers say in their book on change, *SWITCH*. There are practical matters of staff capacity and numbers of proposals that force many grantmakers to be transactional in their dealings with grantees, but the rubric points the way towards a larger vision of effectiveness in the social sector.

As state-wide organizations, DANA and DGA are appropriate leaders of this effort to “optimize the whole.” I’ll be following their progress closely and will report back courtesy of the Dodge Foundation’s own ongoing efforts to (from the Delaware rubric) “seek each other out and make things happen.”



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