

Using Systems Thinking to Build Hunger-Free Communities

Systems thinking tools help teach “the how” of building a collective impact model for hunger-free communities.

Three principles of systems change:

- 1) **Relationships are fundamental.** Foster group reflection and “generative conversations” that focus on each participant’s strengths and how their efforts can complement one another.
- 2) **Slower is faster.** Take time to see the whole system and build a shared understanding of the future you want to see.
- 3) **What you focus on is what you get.** An exclusive focus on analyzing the problems of the present tends to lead a group to discover even more problems and complexities. A focus on co-creating the future helps a group identify and pursue easy wins and builds energy for ongoing collaboration.

Practical Suggestions:

- 1) Good relationships tend to encourage even better relationships, while bad relationships tend to encourage even worse relationships. **To reverse a vicious cycle of worsening relationships:**
 - a. Focus discussion on the purpose and mission of the work, and on what brings everyone together. There is usually a set of common values that bring participants to the table and these can provide the initial common ground for improving relationships.
 - b. Also recognize that systems-change discussions rarely include everyone. While nobody is in favor of hunger, there may be people that fundamentally disagree with the strategies that the group is pursuing. If this is the case, it may be best to part ways on as friendly of terms as possible, ideally by mutual agreement and after a period of honest conversation and reflection.
- 2) The process of systems change emphasizes relationships and co-ownership of a group, which can make it difficult for new people to join. **To bring new people in:**
 - a. Develop an intentional on-ramping process for new people. When someone new joins the group, have another conversation about what the group is doing and why. This will help integrate the newcomers into the effort.
 - b. To save time, it may be best to decide on certain times of year that newcomers can enter as a cohort. This could be done once, twice, or four times a year.
 - c. Before a prospective member joins, it is helpful for a senior member or facilitator to have a one-on-one conversation with the newcomer to orient them to the history and mission of the group and to help ensure they’re a good fit to join.

- 3) Many groups include some members that are more (or less) powerful than average. **To manage unequal power in a partnership:**
 - a. Be very clear about member roles and norms of interaction, and have these conversations early, before problems surface.
 - b. If possible, have the conversation about power. It's often better to talk respectfully about power and how to exercise it, rather than to leave unequal power among partners as the elephant in the room.
 - c. Be sure to emphasize common values and motivations, especially when discussing sensitive topics like power.
 - d. It can be helpful to intentionally take away the symbols and signs of power, and to intentionally mix power levels when assigning seating at meetings and forming working groups. For example, a group that includes members of the business community, nonprofit agency representation, and residents of an economically distressed neighborhood might institute a casual dress code at meetings.
- 4) It is difficult to make the mental switch between analyzing problems and envisioning the future, yet this is often necessary to generate solutions. **To effectively switch between analyzing problems and envisioning the future:**
 - a. Begin by envisioning the future. The positive energy from this exercise will carry over throughout the meeting.
 - b. Frame an analysis of the present using the collective vision: "given our vision, what's happening in current reality?"
 - c. Analyze problems later, and focus that analysis on the subset of problems that is directly relevant to the group's chosen strategies and tactics for achieving their vision.
- 5) **Funding is challenge for this type of work.** While some funders are moving towards support for relationship-building and systems change, it is difficult to show concrete results on a short timeline.

These notes were originally prepared for the Iowa Hunger Directory Newsletter on September 1st, 2015. Notes are based on a presentation to a quarterly [Regional Food Systems Working Group Meeting](#) by Ms. Kathy Zurcher, a consultant who specializes in facilitating systems change.

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