

# Building a Foundation for Change



Imagine engaging a group of community stakeholders to address an important social issue—such as ending homelessness, strengthening K–12 education, or improving local public health. You would want to identify who to bring together and how, establish common ground among the participants, and support them to collaborate with one another.

Now imagine your first group meeting and being confronted by the fact that people have actually come with two different agendas: their public one to address the issue and their private one to optimize their part of the system. John McGah of the homelessness initiative Give US Your Poor and I developed [table 6.1](#) to distinguish these two agendas for participants in a typical homeless coalition meeting.

How would you address the challenges of different interests and perspectives to build a strong foundation for change? How would you ensure that you invite the right people in the first place, establish common ground, and develop their abilities to work together?

## Engage Key Stakeholders

Key stakeholders are people and organizations that affect and are affected by the issue. They include anyone that can make a contribution to the effort, or anyone that can possibly derail it if not on board. Broadly, participants might include nonprofit organizations representing community interests and/or specific populations, government agencies that are charged with developing or implementing social policies, law enforcement, health providers, schools, businesses concerned with the impact of an issue on economic development, the media, and members of the target population. Diversity is key because systems depend on it to innovate.

**TABLE 6.1. THE HOMELESS COALITION MEETING**

Role	Espoused Purpose	Hidden Priorities
Elected Official	Permanent housing with support services and jobs are important.	This takes a long time and is expensive; the community has other more immediate issues; I need to be reelected shortly.
Business Leader	It's important for everyone to have shelter.	Our primary concern is homeless people downtown who hurt business.
Homeless Shelter Director	Giving people shelter is humane.	The more beds we fill, the more money we get.
Director of Health Care for Homeless	Homeless people need basic health services outside the ER.	We have to compete with other providers for limited funding.
Affordable Housing Advocate	All people need permanent housing first.	We need to attract people who can afford to pay for housing and have less complex needs.
Funder	We are committed to helping homeless people.	Our board wants to show results <i>now</i> .
Concerned Citizen	No one should be homeless, and shelters provide a humanitarian solution.	I don't want homeless people living near me; taxes should go to more pressing problems.
Homeless Person	Permanent housing gives me ongoing security.	My community is other homeless people; I don't know if I can make it in mainstream world.

Source: Bridgeway Partners and Give US Your Poor

In order to engage key stakeholders, a convening organization or group such as a foundation or community-wide board needs to clarify who should be actively involved and then develop a strategy for getting them to work together. It helps to include the following core group members:

- Executive sponsors and key decision makers representing the key constituencies who have a deep interest in the issue and opportunity.
- Activists with a personal passion for the issue.

- Ultimate beneficiaries who usually have little or no voice in the current system, such as patients, students, homeless people.
- A professional consultant or facilitator.

A stakeholder map is a simple tool to guide the engagement process and expand participation (see [table 6.2](#)). For example, in applying the tool to end homelessness, use column 1 (NAME) to identify the groups or individuals who need to be involved because they impact or are impacted by the issue. In column 2 (CURRENT SUPPORT), consider how supportive each stakeholder currently is of creating a new reality, on a scale of -3 to +3. A -3 indicates that they are strongly motivated to block efforts to end homelessness (for whatever reason), a 0 indicates neutrality, and a +3 indicates that they are fully motivated to take the lead in ending homelessness.

**TABLE 6.2. ANALYZING KEY STAKEHOLDERS**

Name	Current Support (-3 to +3)	Desired Support (-3 to +3)	Their Motivation	What You Can Do

Source: Innovation Associates Organizational Learning and Bridgeway Partners

In column 3 (DESIRED SUPPORT), write down how you as a convener want each stakeholder to be involved in ending homelessness. For example, you might want to move a group that is currently a -3 (looking to block the effort), -2 (strongly opposed), or -1 (somewhat opposed) to a more neutral 0 position. Or you might want to motivate a currently neutral group to become a +1 (somewhat supportive) or +2 (strongly supportive) contributor. Since it helps to have only one organization or group such as a multisector leadership board in a formal leadership role, identify one stakeholder whom you want to see in the +3 role.

In column 4 (THEIR MOTIVATION), clarify the motivators for each stakeholder to participate in the way you described in column 3. Some motivators are likely to be the same for many stakeholders, while others will be unique to specific groups. If people are resistant to change, clarify in this column the nature of their resistance as technical, political, or cultural. Note in column 5 (WHAT YOU CAN DO) how you intend to engage each stakeholder depending on why they would want to be involved. Some groups might be best engaged initially through individual outreach, while others might be glad to be involved through a community-wide coalition. If people are resistant to change, recognize that you still have several options. You can legitimize and address their concerns directly, influence them through others, engage them at critical phases in the process, or work around them.

The form of collective gathering will vary according to the nature of the issue. For example, in the case of the Collaborating for Iowa's Kids project, a core group of leaders from the state Department of Education and Area Education Agencies convened a larger group of representatives from both organizations, and subsequently invited in representatives from Local Education Agencies (LEAs) as well when it became clear that LEAs needed to be part of developing a new collaborative process.

In efforts to end homelessness, stakeholders are likely to include individuals and organizations that make up the Continuum of Care, the coordinating body defined by the Department of Housing and Urban Development to address homelessness in a geographic region. It is important to think about people who provide not only shelter and housing for the homeless but also related services—such as child welfare, criminal justice, health care, transportation, and education—that impact and are impacted by the problem. Perhaps less obvious but equally critical are businesspeople, because they affect and are affected by the economic health of the community, which in turn impacts homelessness; public-sector officials at the municipal, county, state, and federal levels, because they influence funding streams and policy related to homelessness; and homeless people themselves. It is also important to consider how to involve the media and shape citizen opinions about the issue.

Conveners need to address several challenges in engaging larger groups of stakeholders:

- Onetime events, such as the retreat used in The After Prison Initiative, are less likely to be effective than longer-term processes. Although face-to-face processes are more expensive to manage, especially when people are widely distributed at a national or global level, they can be increasingly complemented by virtual work that's supported by improved communications technology. Technology reduces overall costs, and the combination of face-to-face and virtual collaboration produces the benefits of sustained collective attention.
- Asking people to propose reforms to an existing system can lead them to think that they are not part of the system, and hence not part of the problem. Systems thinking enables people to see how they are part of the problem, which ironically increases their ability to develop effective solutions.
- Reformers often blame powerful stakeholders who represent the status quo and are not part of the redesign process for their own inabilities to effect change. While certain stakeholders do resist change, it is important to realize that there are several ways to work with this resistance, including: legitimizing and addressing their concerns directly, influencing them through others, and engaging them at critical phases in the process. Alternatively, it might be necessary to work around them or use more activist strategies such as political advocacy, active opposition, and legislation to change policy—although these are not the focus of this book.

## Establish Common Ground

Establishing common ground involves developing an initial appreciation of why people are coming together, a shared sense of direction, and agreement on some of the key aspects of current reality.

What brought people together in the Collaborating for Iowa's Kids project was a common concern that, despite reform efforts implemented over the past decade, student performance was not increasing in relation to the state's own high standards and relative gains demonstrated by kids in other states and counties. The Open Society Institute convened The After Prison Initiative retreat to clarify why incarceration and recidivism rates remained so high despite participants' extensive efforts to reform the criminal justice system. Leaders in Calhoun County came together to

capitalize on an opportunity to receive state funding for developing a ten-year plan to end homelessness in their community.

One useful tool in establishing a common rationale for coming together is to ask people to identify a *focusing question* they want to answer. The focusing question is a way of helping people define the boundaries of a systems analysis. Since everything is ultimately connected to everything else, the question enables them to develop a rich yet manageable level of insight into the root causes of a chronic, complex problem. It asks, “Why, often despite our best efforts, have we been unable to achieve a certain goal or solve a particular problem?” The question “why” is essential because this leads people to uncover root causes; by contrast, “how to” questions mobilize them to implement solutions to problems they often do not fully understand.

The use of a focusing question points to a paradox of systems mapping: *The purpose of systems mapping is to answer a focusing question—not to map an entire system.* Answering a focused question is a bounded objective that yields actionable insights, while mapping an entire system can be an unbounded task that produces confusion and paralysis in the name of comprehensiveness.

Developing a shared sense of direction involves clarifying the mission, vision, and values of the convening group on behalf of the stakeholders they represent. For example, my colleague Kathleen Zurcher helped the convening group for Collaborating for Iowa’s Kids to define “the Hallmarks of Our Partnership” and “the Future We Will Create Together.”<sup>1</sup> The hallmarks were people’s mission and core values in coming together. They described their desired future in terms of both a vision statement and a detailed picture of their end result. Their rich picture answered two questions: “What will we experience in Iowa when this vision is achieved? What difference will it make?”

The members of the 10-Year Planning Committee to End Homelessness in Calhoun County summarized their vision as:

- A comprehensive, integrated implementation plan to reduce homelessness and chronic homelessness in Calhoun County.
- A strong coalition of service providers, homeless individuals, funders, and community leaders with a community-wide commitment to end homelessness.
- A system that fosters collaboration efforts and a team approach to end homelessness.

Several factors influence how much time to spend on visioning in this first stage. Kathy points out that when the quality of relationships among stakeholders is very fragile or people are too overwhelmed by current circumstances to be creative, it can help them to spend more time on cultivating a shared vision before moving to inquire deeply into the way things are. On the other hand, if people are feeling disconnected from what is happening now or frustrated by their inability to implement “obvious” solutions, then it makes sense to move to Stage 2 faster.

The final step in developing common ground is to highlight key aspects of current reality in relation to the vision. For example, the community leaders in Calhoun County contrasted their vision with the following observations about the way things are:

- Although we have many agencies working on different important aspects, we need stronger team approaches.
- There is not a lot of public education about homelessness.
- Our current coalition is made up of primarily service providers without the needed community, resident, and monetary support.
- Not everyone is aware of other agency services.

You can use the iceberg tool to highlight current reality at multiple levels:

**Level 1:** Important events that have triggered people’s desire to come together—such as Calhoun County’s onetime opportunity to receive state funds to end homelessness.

**Level 2:** Relative changes in key indicators over time—such as growing incarceration rates despite declining crime rates.

**Level 3:** Critical pressures, policies, and power dynamics that affect the issue or opportunity—such as the impact of structural racism on efforts to reform the criminal justice system.

**Level 4:** Underlying assumptions or mental models—such as the assumptions in Calhoun County (and elsewhere) that “people want to be homeless” and “the individual is the problem, not the system.”

Creating a common context for collaboration and establishing creative tension through initial statements of a shared direction and contrasting current reality help provide a strong foundation for change.

## Build Collaborative Capacity

The last cornerstone of a strong foundation is developing people's abilities to work with one another. Introducing these skills at this stage is important because optimizing the system requires improving the *relationships* among its parts, not optimizing the individual parts as is often assumed and rewarded. Improving the whole also requires that people feel comfortable sharing information that is as timely, accurate, and complete as possible.

One capacity to develop is thinking systemically. Supporting people to use the language of systems thinking increases their abilities to see the bigger picture and speak in ways that take this picture into account. It can be especially helpful at this stage to introduce several of the principles and tools covered in earlier chapters of this book:

- Good intentions are not enough.
- Characteristics of failed solutions.
- Conventional versus systemic thinking.
- The iceberg.
- Reinforcing and balancing feedback.
- Time delays.
- Common systems archetypes.

When people come to understand that they are connected in non-obvious and often counterproductive ways, they begin to appreciate the bigger picture and not just their part of it.

A second capacity is to develop productive conversations around difficult issues. As the metaphor of the blind men and the elephant illuminates, people seeking to work together often have very different views of reality. In addition, the example of the homeless coalition at the beginning of this chapter shows that even people with shared aspirations can have very different secondary agendas. People who want to achieve social change need to learn to engage and bridge differences.

The core skill for productive conversations is to recognize that the world is much more complex than people think. Our assumptions or mental models are at once useful, limited, and capable of becoming more accurate. For example, assuming that "street people prefer to be homeless" might be useful in that it acknowledges that they might have difficulties in adjusting to living in a permanent home. The same assumption is limited in the sense that most chronically homeless people who are given the opportunity to live in permanent housing with support services take advantage of it; in one case 96 percent were still living in

the same housing one year later.<sup>2</sup> Hence, a more evidence-based and accurate assumption is that most street people prefer to live in permanent housing if it is safe, is affordable, offers community, and is coupled with counseling services.

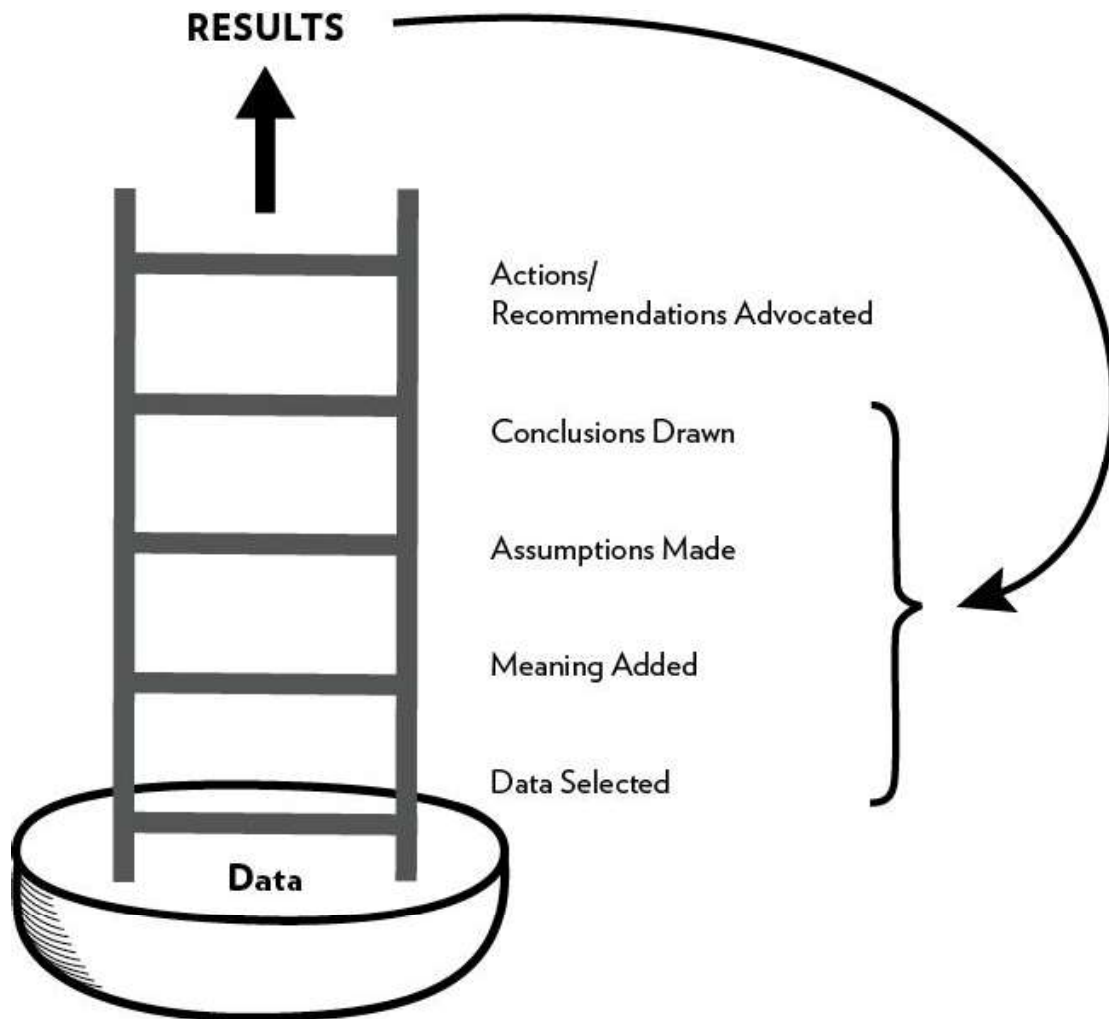
The Ladder of Inference (see [figure 6.1](#)) is an excellent tool for helping people distinguish what they think from the larger reality around them. It shows how people select certain data out of an almost infinite pool of available data, make assumptions and draw conclusions based on the data they select, make recommendations and take action based on these conclusions, and then look for new data that reinforce their original assumptions.

Another useful tool is what Peter Senge describes as “balancing advocacy and inquiry.”<sup>3</sup> Most people are more accustomed to advocating than inquiring, so it often helps to begin with inquiry—the art of asking others how they see the world and then listening to them deeply. As my colleague Bryan Smith told me many years ago, people need to know that you care before they care what you know. Ask others:<sup>4</sup>

- What do you see (the observable data)?
- How do you feel as a result of seeing those data?
- What do you think or tell yourself as a result of those data?
- What do you want?

Then really listen. Otto Scharmer distinguishes four levels of listening: listening for what you already know, listening for what surprises you, listening with empathy for the other’s experience, and listening from a deeper source that seems to embrace your truth and theirs.<sup>5</sup>

Once you have established that you care about others’ views, you can be a more effective advocate for your own. Since each of us sees part of a more complex world, it is also important that you be able to contribute to people’s understanding by advocating your view. In order for your advocacy to be heard and used most effectively, it helps to learn to advocate so as to both share what you know *and* invite others to comment on and potentially enhance your knowledge. Effective advocacy involves understanding and making transparent your own Ladder of Inference so that others can add to and improve upon the data, reasoning, and conclusions you have drawn.



**FIGURE 6.1 THE LADDER OF INFERENCE.** The Ladder of Inference shows how people unconsciously jump from data to conclusions. Based on the work of Chris Argyris and Don Schon

By balancing advocacy and inquiry, you create not only a more accurate picture of what is and how to work with it, but also more support from others for taking effective action.

The third capacity is to cultivate a viewpoint of responsibility. Both thinking systemically and holding productive conversations develop a deeper capacity to understand how you are responsible for a situation as it currently exists, not just for solving it. Taking responsibility for the problem as it exists does not mean blaming yourself for it. It means empowering yourself. You see how your intentions, assumptions, and actions have unintentionally contributed to the problem you want to solve. It is ultimately easier to change how you think and behave than to try to change others in the system.

Even if you are not responsible for the problem, you can use this perspective to ask how your efforts to solve the problem might unintentionally be undermining your ability to do so. For example, if your intention is to convince others that they are wrong and must be the ones to change, then you can activate or embed an adversarial relationship, which is even more difficult to resolve. You create unnecessary opposition when, in the words of master therapist Terrence Real, you “oppress from the victim position.”<sup>6</sup> It helps to remember that respect, inquiry, and empathy are often the best keys to use first to open the door of social change.

## Closing the Loop

- Begin building your foundation for change by identifying and involving important stakeholders.
- Recognize that there are multiple ways to engage people who resist change—not just those who support it.
- Establish common ground by identifying a common reason for coming together, developing a shared direction, and sketching an initial picture of current reality.
- Build people’s capacities to collaborate by introducing skills and tools for thinking systemically and holding conversations that bridge differences.
- Cultivate a viewpoint of responsibility for the problem (where it makes sense) and for how people are choosing to solve it.