

—CHAPTER 11—

Systems Thinking for Strategic Planning



The emphasis in this book so far has been on applying systems thinking *retrospectively*—to determine why people have not been able to achieve the results they want despite their best efforts. Insights into deeply embedded dynamics and leverage points reduce the likelihood that they will repeat past mistakes or “reinvent a broken wheel.” It is also easier to test the validity of a systems map based on known history because the analysis should be able to predict what has happened until now.

However, being able to identify leverage points does not necessarily help people organize their thinking about how to move forward. For example, once the agencies committed to Collaborating for Iowa’s Kids understood why partnering with each other had been difficult, they still needed to clarify a way forward that would enable them to take advantage of their insights. It is important to connect leverage points into a coherent path forward—one that links and sequences interventions over time, accounts for time delay and long-term as well as short-term consequences of possible actions, and shapes intentional reinforcing and balancing feed-forward relationships into the future.

Moreover, there are times when people want to create something new and do not necessarily have the benefit of hindsight. While it might be easy to conceive of what needs to be done going forward, it is not so easy to integrate these critical success factors into a coherent strategy. For example, when an oversight group committed to increasing the health of its rural county developed its first strategy road map, it realized that the many strategies, tactics, interim outcomes, and end results that people identified did not form a clear path of action. Questions of scope, priority,

timing, time delay, unintended consequences, and sustainability of proposed improvements still remained.

Sometimes organizations are simply overwhelmed by too many choices and too few resources. The problem is compounded by the high expectations people place on themselves and a tendency to assume that doing more automatically leads to accomplishing more. Organizations may have more programs than they can support and no clear way of rationalizing among them. They may have what feels like a laundry list of priorities and no way of deciding among them without getting caught in dysfunctional conflicts about organizational turf and who gets what piece of the pie. By contrast, when the management team of a major child welfare agency sought to make sense of the organization's multiple programs and support functions, it recognized the need for a coherent strategy that would justify—and if necessary prune—its many commitments.

In all of these cases, it can be helpful to apply systems thinking *prospectively*—to create a road map going forward that accounts for the complexity of having to navigate so many interdependent factors over time. The circular road maps produced by planning systemically have several benefits over more common linear input–output models. They:

- Incorporate the dynamics of reinforcing and balancing loops into cause–effect relationships that feed forward—thereby representing how social systems actually behave and unfold.
- Clarify a path for optimizing the relationships among the parts of the system instead of the parts themselves.
- Integrate multiple success factors into a logical and sequenced set of actions over time.
- Take time delay into account.
- Include plans to make both short-term and longer-term sustainable improvements.

By incorporating these features, circular theories of change create pictures that quickly communicate a lot of readily understandable information. The maps have been very effective in fund-raising, orienting and engaging other stakeholders quickly, and providing clear navigation for many people over long periods of time. For example, the officers of the new Food & Fitness program at the W.K. Kellogg Foundation created such a map to sell their initial nationwide proposal to the board. The map summarized the program's intentions and strategic plan so clearly and

succinctly that the board took the unprecedented action of approving their proposal at its very first review meeting. A group from northeast Iowa that subsequently developed a comparable map for their regional Food & Fitness project (see [figure 11.9](#), later in this chapter) still uses the map to orient their work more than five years after creating it.

So in moving to prospective systems thinking, it is time to introduce two core theories of systemic change and describe how people used them to develop strategic plans that meet these three challenges:

- Organizing the leverage points determined by a root cause analysis of chronic, complex problems.
- Integrating the numerous critical success factors required to create something new.
- Streamlining choices among too many programs or priorities.

We'll also look at some guidelines for refining your theory over time to accommodate new information and changing conditions.

Two Systemic Theories of Change

My colleague Michael Goodman, a co-developer of the system archetypes, noted that there are two distinct branches of archetypes—those based on reinforcing feedback and those based on balancing feedback.¹The former describe stories of success compromised by limits, and the latter tell stories of improvement disabled by negative consequences. There are two corresponding core theories of change using the systems thinking tools in this book.²The first seeks to amplify success, while the second seeks to correct a shortcoming and achieve a goal.

The Success Amplification story begins with one or more reinforcing loops—the factors of success that build on one another over time to create more success (R1 in [figure 11.1](#)). You can learn what is already working in the system through informal anecdotes or by using more formal approaches such as appreciative inquiry or positive deviance.³ Alternatively, people may first list what they perceive to be critical success factors or, as in the case of articulating the prospects for partnership between the Iowa Department of Education and the state's Area Education Agencies, describe how a core success loop should work (for an example, refer back to [figure 7.10](#)). In order to ensure sustainable growth, it is also important to plan beyond the initial engine of success. The success theory needs to also consider possible limits to initial

improvements (B2 in [figure 11.1](#)) and anticipate how these limits might be overcome by generating new engines of success over time (R3). Finally, it is vital to identify key time delays in cultivating and sustaining success.

If people cannot easily identify successes to build on, or if the prospects for creating a positively reinforcing dynamic are tenuous, it makes more sense to develop a systemic theory of change that bridges the gap between reality and a desired goal or vision. The Goal Achievement theory, mapped out in [figure 11.2](#), begins with one or more balancing loops that identify the correction(s) required to close this discrepancy.⁴ In order to determine what corrections are likely to be effective, it helps to first clarify the underlying structure that causes the gap (B1 in [figure 11.2](#)). Kathleen Zurcher points out that such an exercise is asset-based instead of deficit-based as long as the discrepancy is driven by a strong vision. In addition, because of the time delays usually required to close the gap, it is important to exercise persistence and stay the course in making the corrections (B2). At the same time, if progress is not occurring even after taking time delays into account, it helps to gain perspective on the reasons for the shortfall and rethink the nature of the challenge (B3).

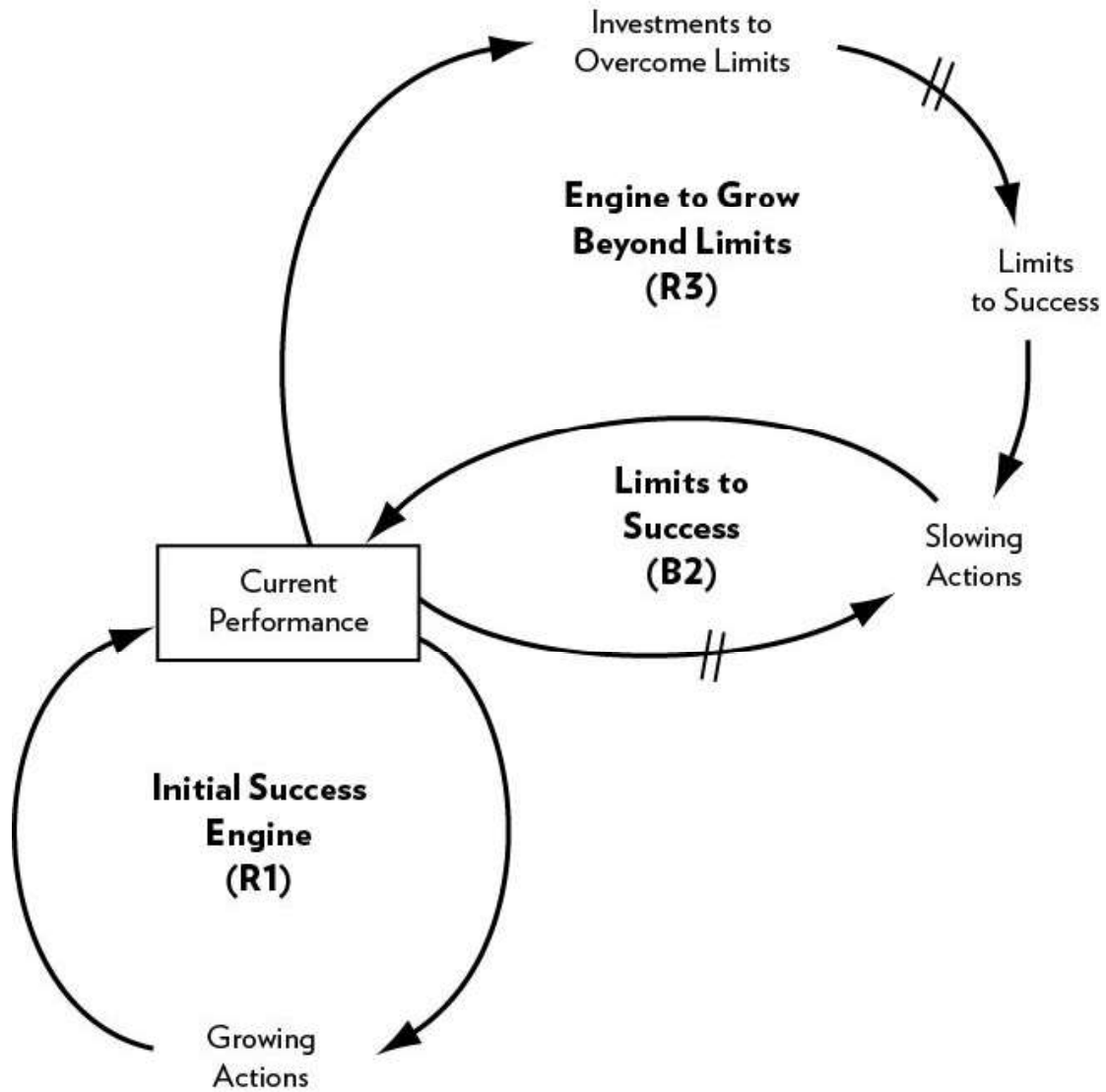


FIGURE 11.1 THE SUCCESS AMPLIFICATION THEORY. This theory clarifies how to build on existing successes, anticipate limits to even greater success, and create new engines of growth over time.

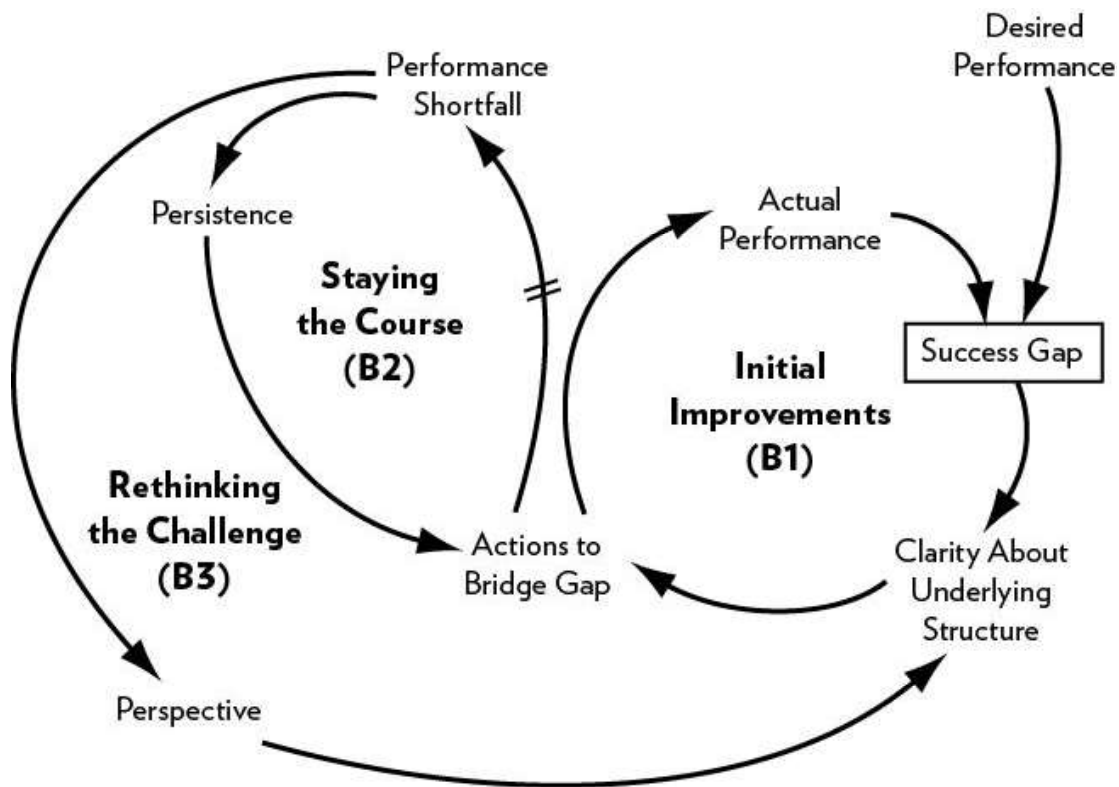


FIGURE 11.2 GOAL ACHIEVEMENT THEORY: MAKING INITIAL IMPROVEMENTS. This theory identifies initial improvements to accomplish a desired goal and recognizes the importance of both staying on course and rethinking the challenge to be effective.

Because people have a tendency to take the pressure off as they make progress toward achieving a goal, it is equally important in developing a systemic theory of Goal Achievement to define how people will sustain and reinforce improvements over time. Sustainability is a major source of concern for funders who want to ensure that beneficiaries are able to continue if not expand their work without ongoing financial aid. The need for reinforcement is further evidenced by the emphasis in the quality movement on continuous improvement and observations by high performers that continuing to work hard is essential to sustained success.

[Figure 11.3](#) provides a template for three engines of reinforcement. R4 encourages people to expand their aspirations as their actual performance increases. By experiencing their initial dreams come true and affirming new possibilities, they can raise their goals. By raising their goals, they can become clearer about new growth opportunities and take actions to realize them (R5). For example, growing actions available to the social sector include fund-raising based on demonstrated successes, investments in organizational capacity, partnerships that enable each

organization to do what it does best while contributing to a larger result, creative ways to scale up successes, and advocacy for policy change.⁵ Finally, improvements in actual performance can redirect money previously required to treat problem symptoms toward new investments in the growing actions above (R6). For example, the annual savings of ninety-five hundred dollars per person achieved by keeping people in long-term housing in Massachusetts (thereby reducing the use of emergency rooms and temporary shelters) can be reinvested in programs that prevent or end homelessness.⁶

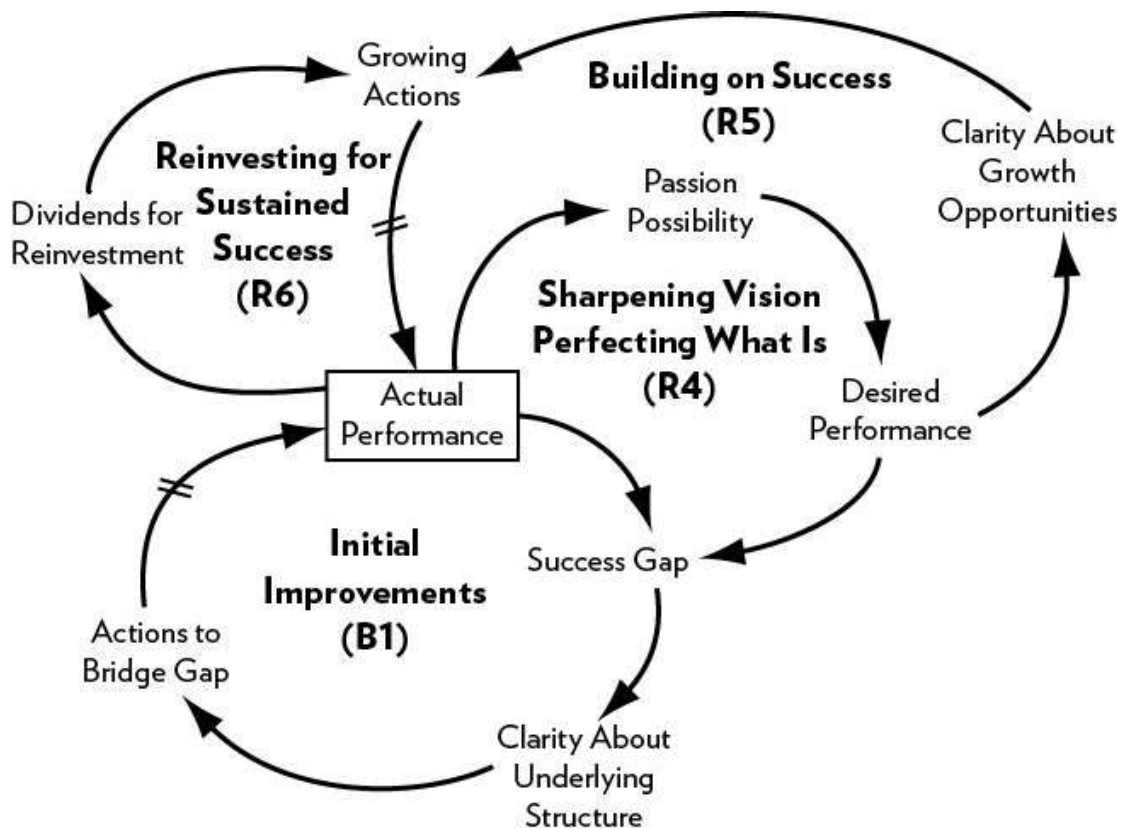


FIGURE 11.3 GOAL ACHIEVEMENT THEORY: REINFORCING IMPROVEMENTS. The second part of the Goal Achievement theory emphasizes the need for continuous improvement through sharpening the vision, cultivating additional growing actions, and reinvesting success dividends.

The next three sections give examples of how these core systemic theories of change provided road maps for organizations and communities committed to improving K–12 education, public health, and child welfare.

Organizing Leverage Points

The following two cases demonstrate how planning groups developed strategic road maps based on systems analyses of their core problems. The first revisits the agencies working to increase Collaboration for Iowa's Kids and uses a Success Amplification approach. The second introduces a coalition in a rural county committed to increasing public health, especially for its most vulnerable populations, and describes a Goal Achievement strategy.

AMPLIFYING STRENGTHS IN THE COLLABORATION FOR IOWA'S KIDS

Developers of the Collaboration for Iowa's Kids based their theory of success on the core reinforcing loop that described how the Iowa Department of Education and Area Education Agencies would capitalize on their prospects for partnership. The theory they developed and used as their road map is reproduced in [figure 11.4](#). The central loop was the core theory underlying their partnership (as previously shown in [figure 7.10](#)). The right reinforcing loop provided a framework for AEAs across the state to increase coherence and equity within their own system, and the left reinforcing loop detailed how to increase effective collaboration between the IDE and AEA system. Although the theory does not explicitly map potential limits to success and ways to overcome them, developers did address these factors in their joint planning. They identified major implementation challenges to redesigning the AEA system and five strategies for overcoming these obstacles.

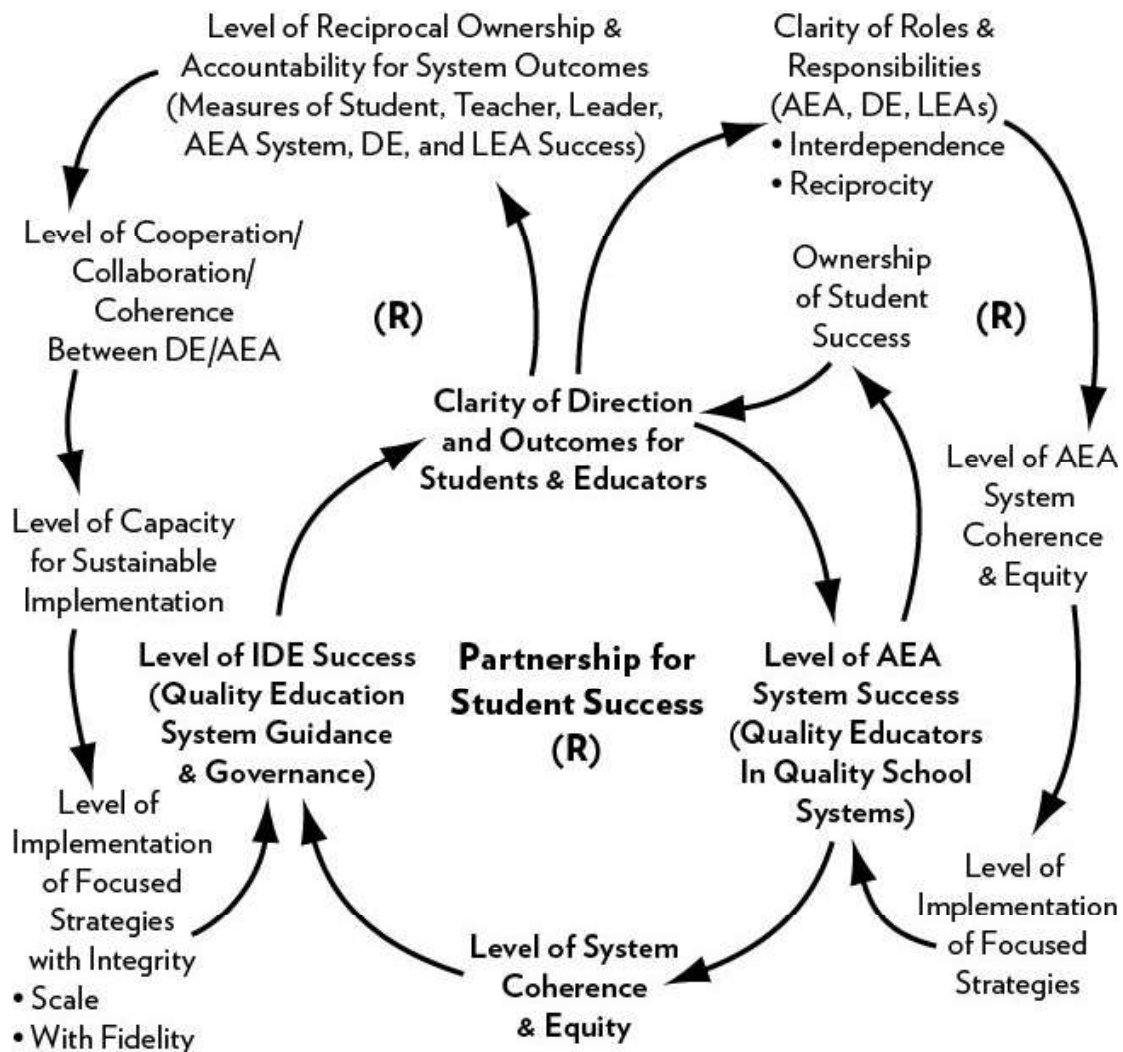


FIGURE 11.4 AMPLIFYING SUCCESS IN COLLABORATING FOR IOWA'S KIDS. This map was used by the Iowa Department of Education and the state's Area Education Agencies to explicate their theory for building and sustaining an effective partnership. The central loop describes broadly how collaborating benefits IDE and the AEAs, the right loop focuses on increasing coherence within the AEA system, and the left loop emphasizes improved implementation by both parties. **Collaborating for Iowa's Kids: A Partnership Between the Iowa Department of Education and the Iowa Area Education Agencies**

ACHIEVING THE GOAL OF A HEALTHY COMMUNITY

The Eagle County Public Health and Environment Department (ECPHE) shared a related commitment to the InteGreat! coalition introduced in chapter 10. It wanted to increase health equity in the county by focusing on the health of the county's most vulnerable populations, including children living in poverty, and incorporating the social determinants of health into all community decision making. ECPHE also engaged a group of diverse stakeholders, including some of those participating in

InteGreat!, and developed a Goal Achievement theory of change. Their theory came out of a desire to discern the root causes of poor health in the county using a systems analysis and then design a strategy that would effectively integrate the identified leverage points.

The group described a common dynamic that I would call Treading Water, where strong forces dragging people down are barely compensated for by equally strenuous efforts to help them stay afloat. It identified five vicious cycles that led to the deterioration of the financial stability and health of vulnerable populations over time. The group also listed more than twice as many initiatives (in the form of balancing loops) that the community was taking to help break these cycles. The most powerful insight was that, despite the fact that there were many organizations providing services to improve the health of vulnerable populations (directly and indirectly), their efforts were significantly hampered by a failure to work together. Like oars in a crew shell that do not dip in the water simultaneously, this lack of coordination wasted resources and made it even more difficult for both providers and their intended beneficiaries to move forward and break the vicious cycles of poverty and sickness in the community.

This insight surfaced the need for several high-leverage interventions:

- Developing a map of current community health assets to both communicate the availability of these assets to vulnerable populations and identify opportunity gaps to be bridged.
- Increasing collaboration among service providers.
- Engaging vulnerable populations as equals and developing an effective support system for the community's undocumented immigrants, who make up a significant portion of the people at risk of getting sick.
- More effectively engaging the people who influence these individuals—including their families, employers, educators, churches, and political leaders.
- Better planning for the built environment, such as quality affordable housing and accessible recreational opportunities.

The advisory group also affirmed the need to continue to work toward longer-term poverty reduction strategies such as increasing the number of living wage jobs and the availability of affordable and effective health insurance. Finally, they recognized the importance of shifting mental models in the community that reinforced the status quo. These included:

- Classism, racism—“*They* are the kind of people who . . . aren’t motivated to take care of themselves, learn, et cetera.”
- “We can’t change because of limited resources.”
- “One size fits all.”
- “The system is too big to change.”
- “Health care can’t be fixed.”

The group first integrated the leverage points into several core balancing loops. These are shown in [figures 11.5 to 11.7](#). B1 in [figure 11.5](#) emphasizes the critical role that community health asset mapping has in improving access to low-cost health opportunities, which in turn increases the effective engagement and education of vulnerable populations, thereby increasing the level of their healthy activities and overall health as a result.

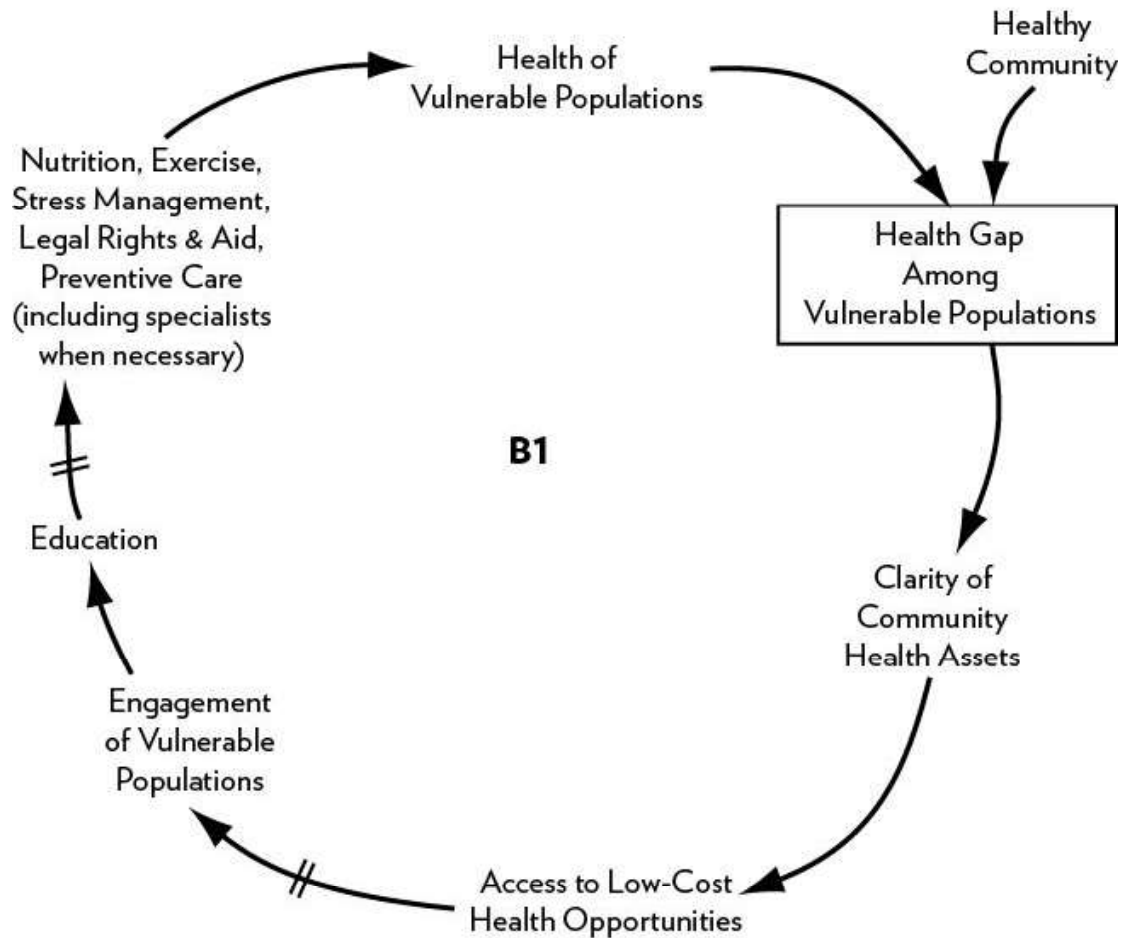


FIGURE 11.5 CORE IMPROVEMENT TO INCREASE HEALTH OF VULNERABLE POPULATIONS. The core theory of improving community health focuses on developing a map of the community's health assets as a way of engaging and educating the population, especially those most at risk, about the many existing resources they can use to improve their health.

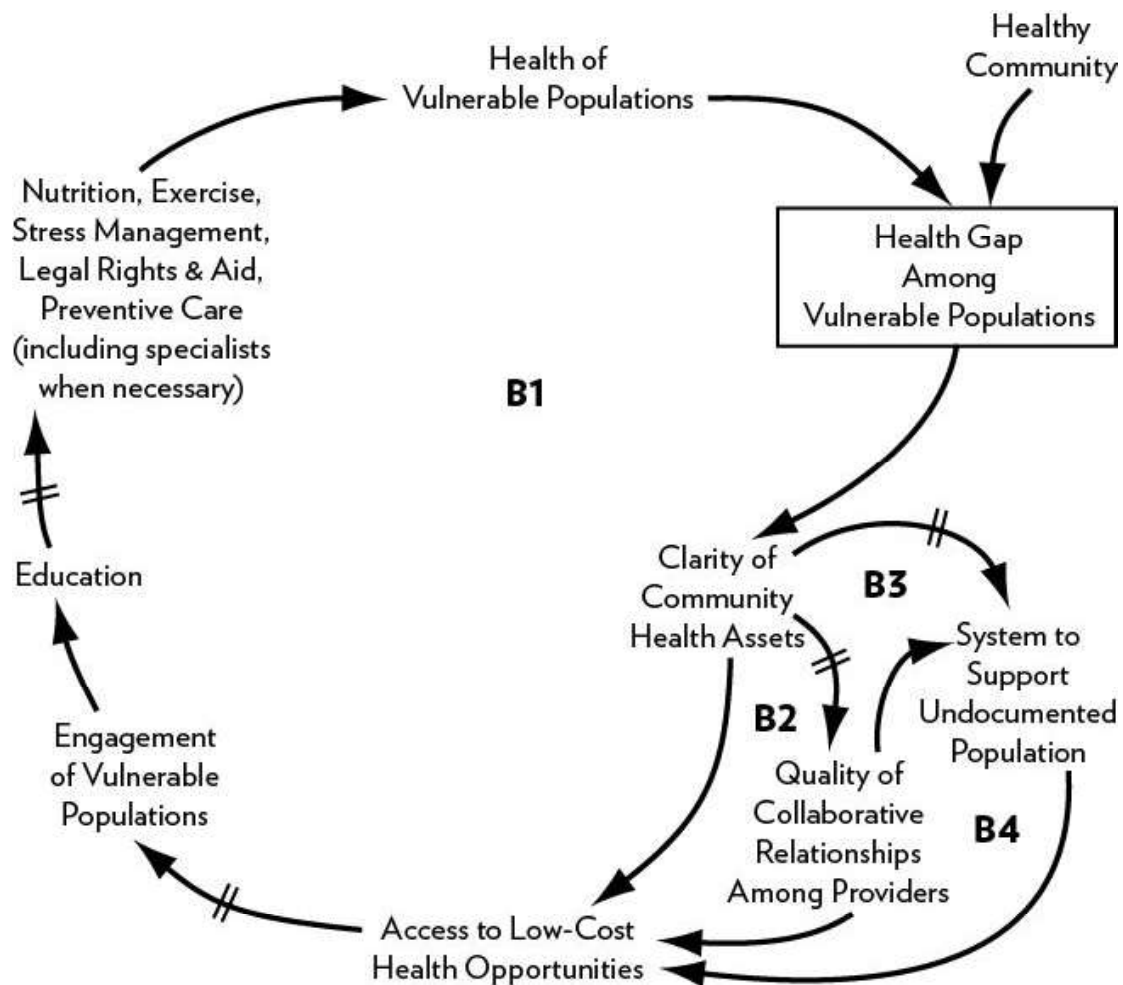
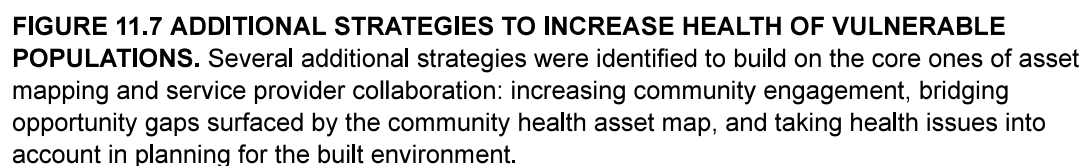


FIGURE 11.6 INCREASING COLLABORATION AMONG PROVIDERS. The group recognized the pivotal impact of increasing collaboration among service providers to both increase access to low-cost health opportunities and develop a support system for the county's undocumented population.

In [figure 11.6](#), B2, B3, and B4 show how community asset mapping contributes to increasing collaboration among service providers and enables them to develop a support system for the county's undocumented population.



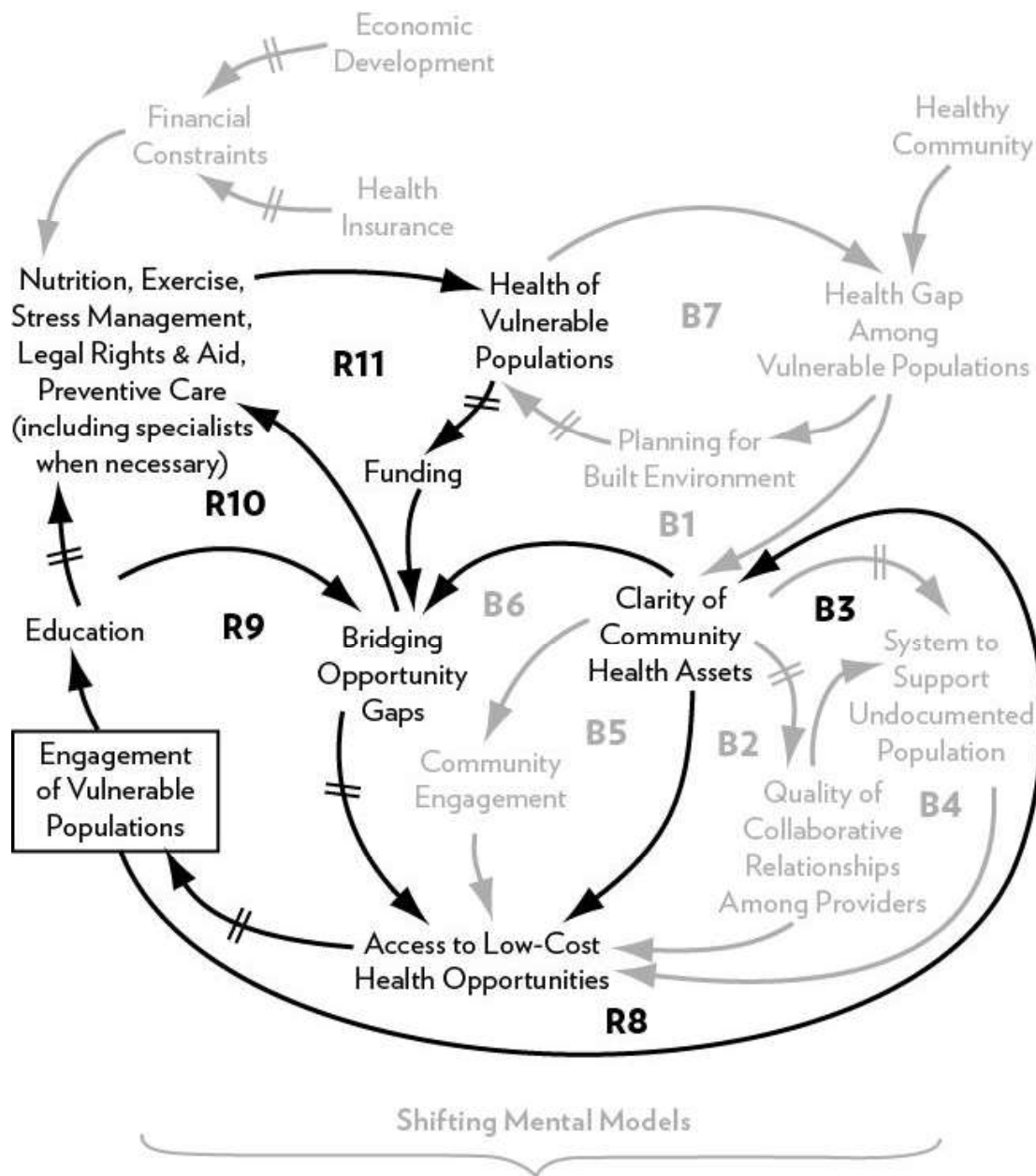


FIGURE 11.8 REINFORCING PROGRESS TOWARD A HEALTHY COMMUNITY. The group identified four ways to reinforce the initial improvements in community health over time: developing even greater clarity about the community's health assets by engaging vulnerable populations, illuminating and bridging opportunity gaps through the educational process, taking advantage of new opportunities to foster healthy activities, and using improved health indicators to attract additional funding.

The advisory group also identified several additional strategies as shown in [figure 11.7](#). B5 focuses on the importance of community engagement. B6 captures the value of asset mapping to identifying and bridging opportunity gaps. B7 affirms the importance of planning for the built environment. Factors in the upper left corner of the diagram that

impact the target population's financial constraints are also shown. Finally, in its line at the bottom of the diagram, the group acknowledged the importance of shifting mental models throughout the change process.

The group then identified four ways to reinforce the improvements described above, as shown in [figure 11.8](#). R8 notes the value of engaging vulnerable populations to develop further clarity about the community's health assets. R9 shows the importance of designing an education process that supports people, ideally in small groups, to identify additional opportunities to improve their health. R10 emphasizes that people who identify new opportunities are more likely to take ownership for implementing their own self-care initiatives. R11 explains the power of using demonstrable successes in improved health to generate additional funding.

The two cases above describe how people have developed systemic road maps for change based on root cause analyses. The next section provides examples of developing these road maps based on assumptions about critical success factors without such analyses.

Integrating Success Factors

The first case in this section uses a Success Amplification strategy to build on strong existing relationships in a region to improve people's food and fitness. The second case describes a Goal Achievement strategy to improve countywide education where the core corrective actions involved strengthening relationships among diverse stakeholders and engaging in evidence-based continuous improvement.

BUILDING ON STRONG RELATIONSHIPS TO IMPROVE REGIONAL FOOD AND FITNESS

When the W.K. Kellogg Foundation created their Food & Fitness program in 2006, there was growing public concern about childhood obesity. The program was designed to increase healthy eating and active living by all children, and the foundation had long supported developing a healthy, safe food supply and increasing consumption of good food. Because the issue was highly complex and prior efforts to address the issue in simpler ways had been unsuccessful, the lead program officers believed that a systems approach to Food & Fitness would increase the likelihood of:

- Engaging a diverse group of people and organizations.

- Fostering collaboration and finding innovative strategies to change the underlying systems.
- Creating and sustaining the healthy results everyone seeks for children and families.

The foundation brought together stakeholders from around the United States and also funded community systems change projects in nine geographic locations including northeast Iowa. Community leaders in this rural region developed the following vision for their initiative: “Northeast Iowa is a unique place where all residents and guests experience, celebrate, and promote healthy locally grown food with abundant opportunities for physical activity and play EVERY DAY. Healthier people make stronger families and vibrant communities.”⁷

In order to realize the vision, they articulated a Success Amplification theory of change based on the historically strong relationships among people in the region. They believed that cultivating these relationships would help them move toward more collective thinking about how to take advantage of their agricultural base and open space, as well as more collaborative action, better results, and even better relationships. The virtuous cycle linking relationships, thinking, action, and results is a core theory of success originally developed by Daniel Kim.⁸ Community leaders also recognized potential limits to growth by acknowledging that delays in learning and working across boundaries, as well as in converting innovative ideas into new policies, would try people’s patience. To overcome these limits, they invested in collaborative technologies, engaged policy makers early in the process, and set realistic expectations around what could be accomplished in a given time frame.

[Figure 11.9](#) summarizes their theory of change with particular emphasis on the engines of growth and reinforcing mental models.

Ann Mansfield, a co-convenor of the initiative and now project director, summarized the initial value of using systems thinking from a grantee’s perspective: “The tools helped us put a pause on the quick fix.” By acknowledging the strengths they were building on, the time delays they expected, and the steps they planned to take to reduce delays where they could and increase people’s patience where they could not, she and her colleagues established a robust and realistic way forward. Now, more than six years after creating the plan, Mansfield feels that “our core theory of success has, indeed, held up over time.” She and the team use it continuously to stay focused on systems change. It helps them bring on

new partners, orient new staff, check their progress, and create new strategies or lines of work.

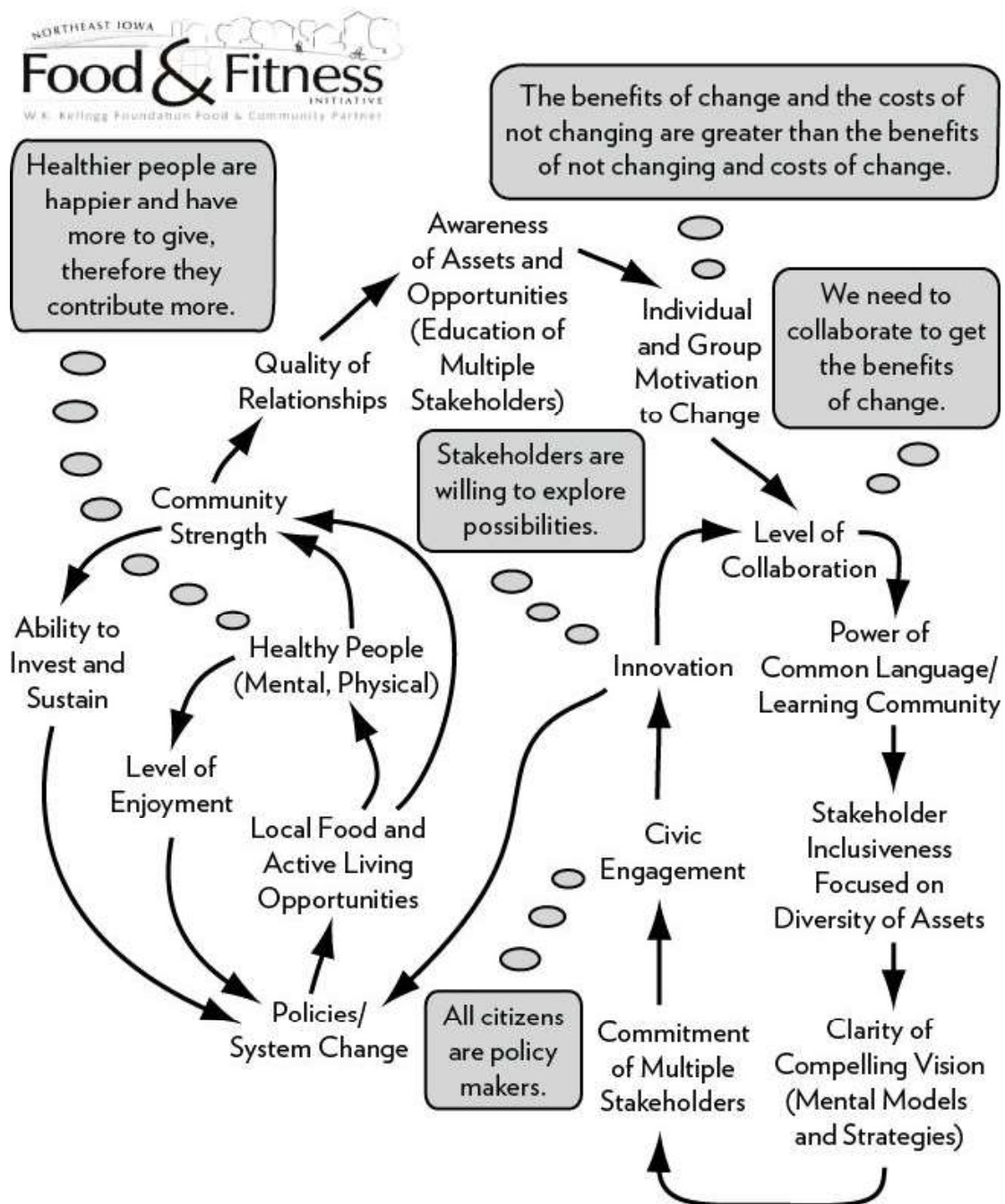


FIGURE 11.9 SUCCESS AMPLIFICATION FOR NORTHEAST IOWA FOOD & FITNESS INITIATIVE. This theory of change posits that building on the strong relationships that exist in the region increases collaboration, which in turn increases innovation, leading to policy change, healthier people, and even stronger communities. This dynamic is reinforced by holding certain assumptions. Northeast Iowa Food & Fitness Initiative

CREATING A COMMUNITY WHERE ALL CHILDREN ARE LOVED AND SUCCESSFUL

The InteGreat! coalition, committed to the health and success of all children in its highly diverse student population, also emphasized the importance of relationships in developing its strategy. Similar to the coalition formed by ECPHE, they chose to develop a Goal Achievement theory of change since their emphasis was on creating an inclusive community where all children are loved and successful in life. Moreover, because the population of the community was more diverse than in northeast Iowa, in terms of both income and ethnicity, they viewed improving relationships as a key part of the strategy. The coalition identified seven key success factors, of which four addressed relationship building directly:

- Quality of Community Relationships (among organizations impacting families).
- Level of Collaboration and Integration.
- Level of Youth Engagement.
- Level of Family Engagement.
- Level of Data-Driven and Evidence-Based Practices.
- Access to Opportunities.
- Equity.

They developed a systemic theory of change—mapped out in [figures 11.10 to 11.13](#)—to link these factors and include others identified during the design conversation. In the initial map, [figure 11.10](#), the core loop (B1) identifies the gap between actual and desired success as the driver of improving the quality of collaborative relationships, which in turn will improve the level of collaboration and integration among organizations impacting families, thereby creating mutual short-term successes, greater access to quality education opportunities, greater system equity, and a greater presence of educational success factors for all kids.

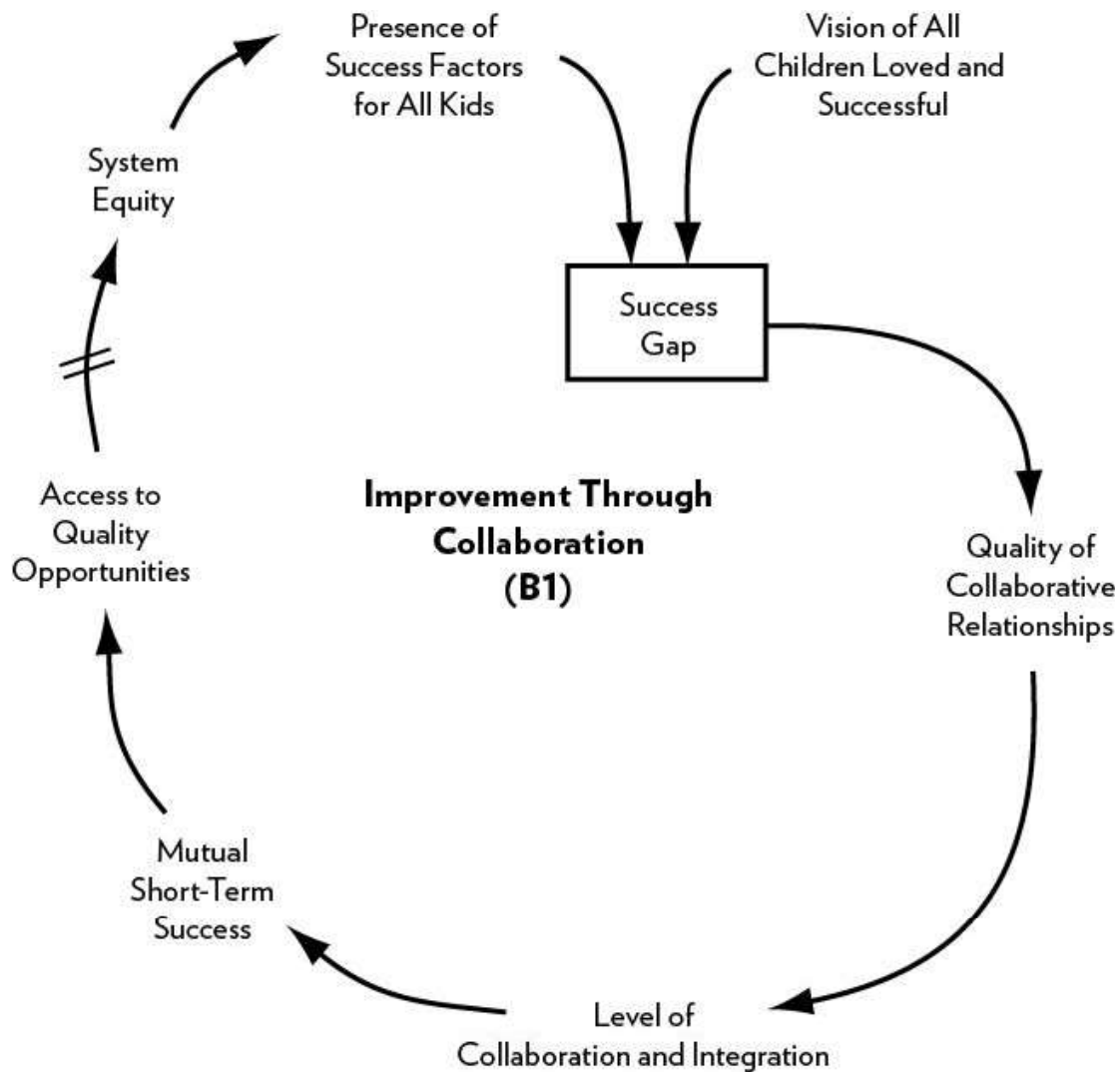


FIGURE 11.10 COLLABORATING FOR LOVED AND SUCCESSFUL CHILDREN. Improving collaboration among service providers is seen as the key to supporting all children to be valued and successful because it can lead to both mutual short-term successes and access to quality opportunities that increase system equity and the presence of success factors for all kids.

Building upon this map, [figure 11.11](#) adds loops B2 and B3, which emphasize the benefits of higher-quality collaborative relationships to more effectively engage youth and families.

[Figure 11.12](#) highlights the importance of strengthening data-driven and evidence-based practices. B4 focuses on developing shared knowledge. B5 and B6 show how agreeing on shared measures leads to more effective and efficient resource use as well as supporting mutual short-term success, both of which increase access to quality opportunities.

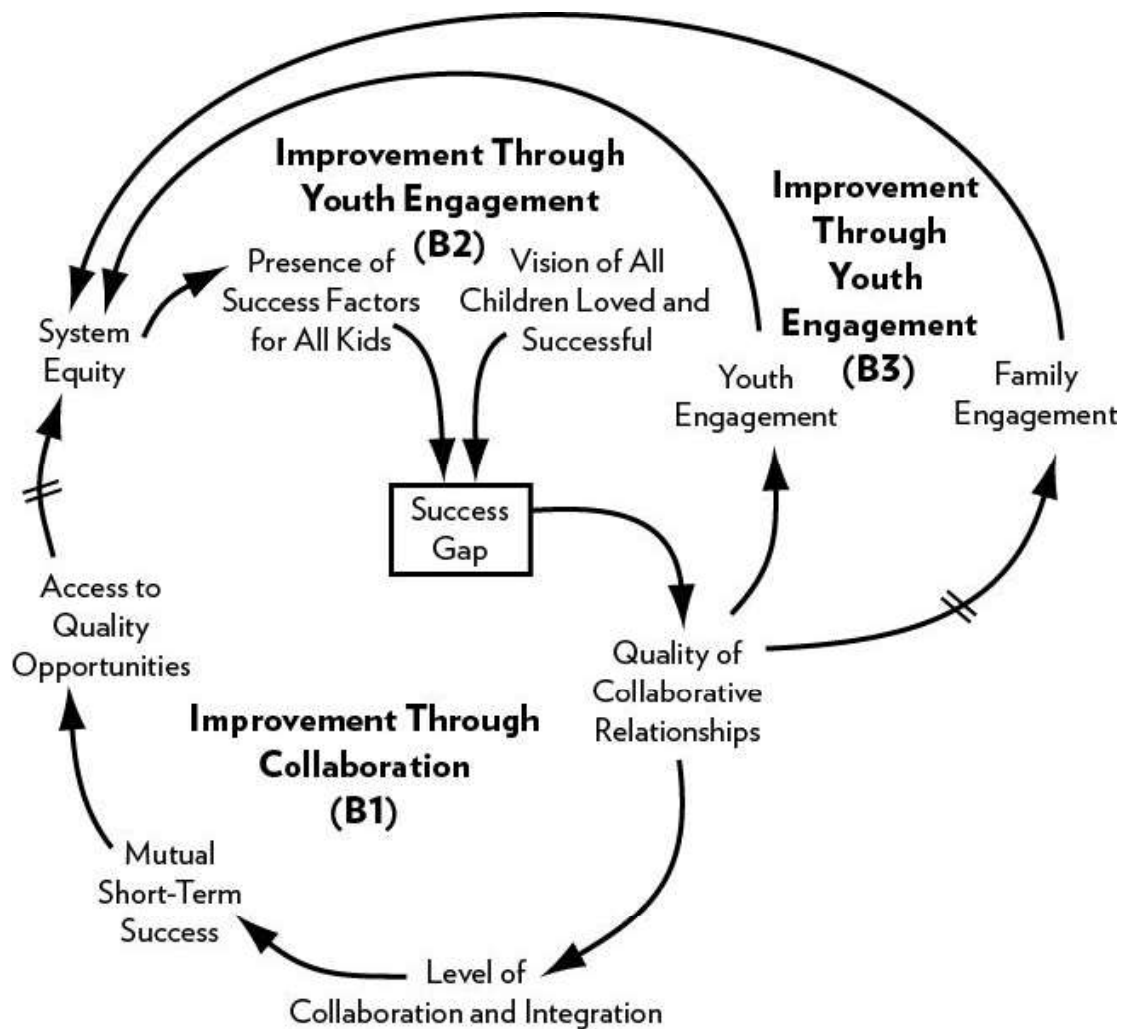


FIGURE 11.11 ENGAGING YOUTH AND FAMILIES FOR LOVED AND SUCCESSFUL CHILDREN. Improved collaboration among service providers also enables more effective outreach to youth and their families, thereby further increasing system equity.

The coalition also defined several reinforcing loops to ensure that initial improvements would be sustained and strengthened. R7 in [figure 11.13](#) emphasizes the need to develop aligned infrastructure beginning with a backbone organization. R8 notes that increasing system equity can further support access to quality opportunities. R9 identifies the benefits of engaging youth to involve their parents as well as supporting parents to engage their kids. R10 explains that shared measures help to further focus data analysis.

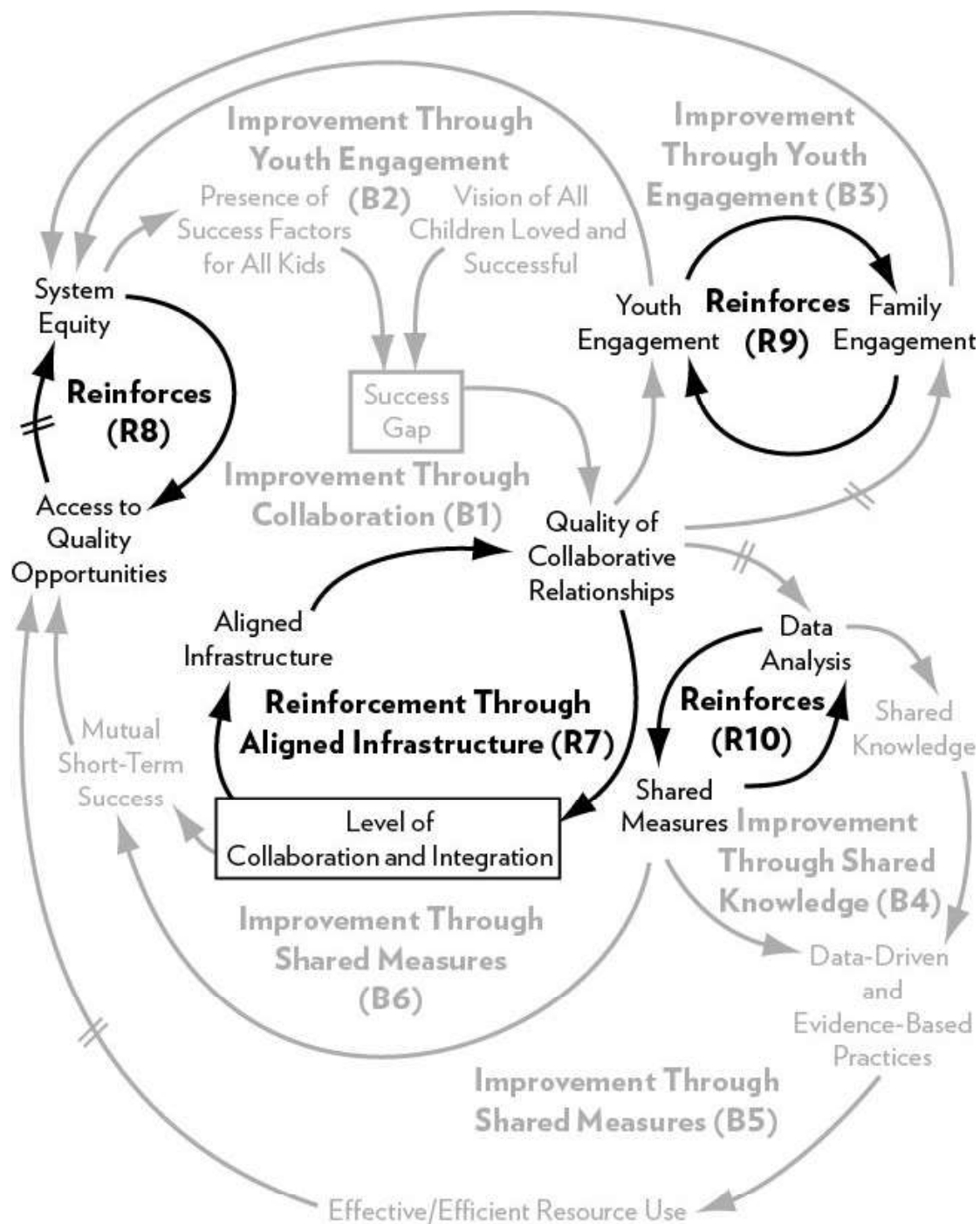


FIGURE 11.13 REINFORCING IMPROVEMENTS FOR LOVED AND SUCCESSFUL CHILDREN. Initial improvements can be reinforced in four different ways: capitalizing on increased collaboration and integration to develop an aligned infrastructure, further increasing access to quality opportunities through greater system equity, stimulating closer ties between youth and their families, and using shared measures to strengthen additional data analysis.

Often people distill more complex theories of change such as the one above into simpler insights over time. The InteGreat! coalition

subsequently recognized that its theory was based on three key ideas. Traci Wodlinger, the chief strategy officer for the Eagle County Schools, summarized them as:

1. A collaborative trust that aligns currently existing organizations and their assets will improve the equity of opportunities for our children.
2. Families and children must be engaged in the work, both directly and indirectly.
3. We must utilize continuous process improvements, where data will drive change and maximize efficiency of our efforts and resources.

Note that the change theory depicted in these diagrams includes all of the elements required for Collective Impact as defined in chapter 2. The systemic theory of change *is* the common agenda and explicitly incorporates shared measures and the need for a backbone organization. It also provides a road map for mutually reinforcing activities and continuous communication. Moreover, these critical success factors as well as others emerged directly from conversations among community leaders.

The consultant to the overall project, Kathleen Zurcher, reports several benefits resulting from the process of designing this systemic theory of change:

- The map represents the coalition's thinking about how they want to move forward, and they refer to it frequently as their road map.
- The smaller steering committee and larger group that participated in this process are translating the loops into narratives to explain the plan to their respective constituents.
- Developing the map increased people's understanding of inequities in the community and stimulated their first honest and open talk about the issue.
- They now have a common set of definitions going forward.
- The map helps the coalition focus on systemic change, assuring that strategies, tactics, and activities are aligned and contribute to intended outcomes.

Streamlining Choices

The following case describes the development of a systemic theory of change to organize an agency's large numbers of programs and tasks into a manageable strategy. By distilling a coherent strategy from what often seemed like disparate elements, the organization was able to focus its commitments and avoid win–lose debates about the relative importance of different people's work, which often make priority setting so difficult.

A large child welfare agency was concerned that it was spread too thin. The budget was too low to sustain all of its programs at a high level of effectiveness. Moreover, there was competition for funding between program management and the agency's other functions, in particular research & evaluation, and advocacy. When time came to review the agency's strategic plan, the senior management team decided to develop a systemic theory of change. By making better sense of the connections among the organization's various efforts, the team hoped to streamline programs and reduce tensions between functions. The team first categorized its programs—more than thirty—into four primary categories:

- **Prevention:** Helping families at risk develop and maintain the stability required to provide a safe, nurturing home for their children.
- **Stabilization:** Stabilizing children who have to be removed from their homes in transitional homes managed by the agency.
- **Development:** Supporting the nurturance and continued education of children in these homes.
- **Placement:** Reunifying children with their biological families or providing alternative permanent placements for them in the community.

The team then articulated the links across these categories. If prevention failed to help families overcome the many external pressures they faced, resulting in an unsafe and unsupportive home environment, children were removed from their home by law and placed by the agency in the transitional homes it managed. The goal at this point became to return the children to a safe, nurturing, and permanent home by creating a core path to recovery that provided stability followed by development and finally reunification or alternative placement—as shown in [figure 11.14](#), loop B1.

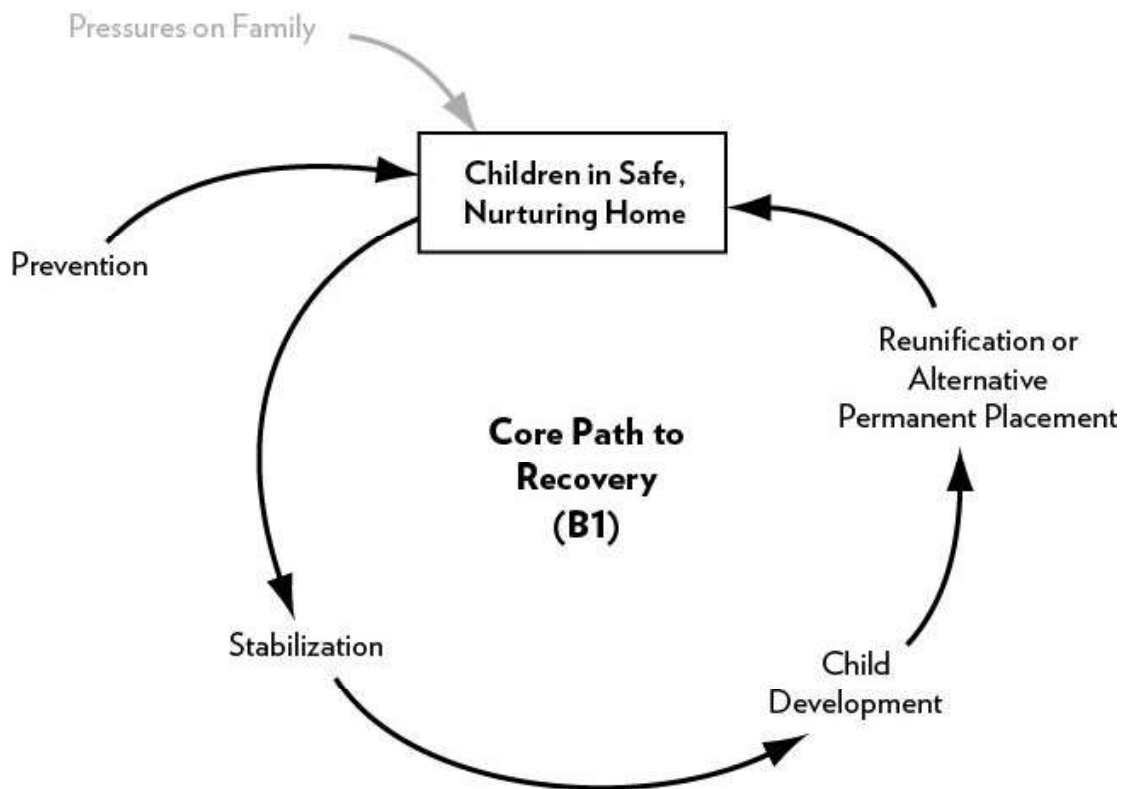


FIGURE 11.14 CREATING A SAFE AND NURTURING HOME FOR CHILDREN. When pressures on the family become too great, children must be temporarily removed from the home and sustained through first stabilizing them and then facilitating their ongoing development. Providing this foundation outside the home gives children a strong base for reunification or alternative permanent placement.

These four program categories required ongoing resources to sustain them. The management team clarified how other functions needed to be integrated to ensure the agency's financial viability. The agency maintained a strong research and evaluation unit. However, many program managers believed that the unit not only drew money away from their vital work on the ground, but also failed to provide fair evaluations of their work. The team was able to identify that, when the unit conducted assessments according to clear and agreed-upon criteria, it provided invaluable information to the agency that not only strengthened programs but also created additional benefits. One immediate benefit was to directly increase fund-raising effectiveness, shown by R2 in [figure 11.15](#), and a second was to demonstrate evidence-based practices that could be used to advocate for changes in child welfare policy. More effective advocacy would further increase fund-raising effectiveness (R3), and the increases in fund-raising effectiveness would provide ongoing resources for the agency's program work.

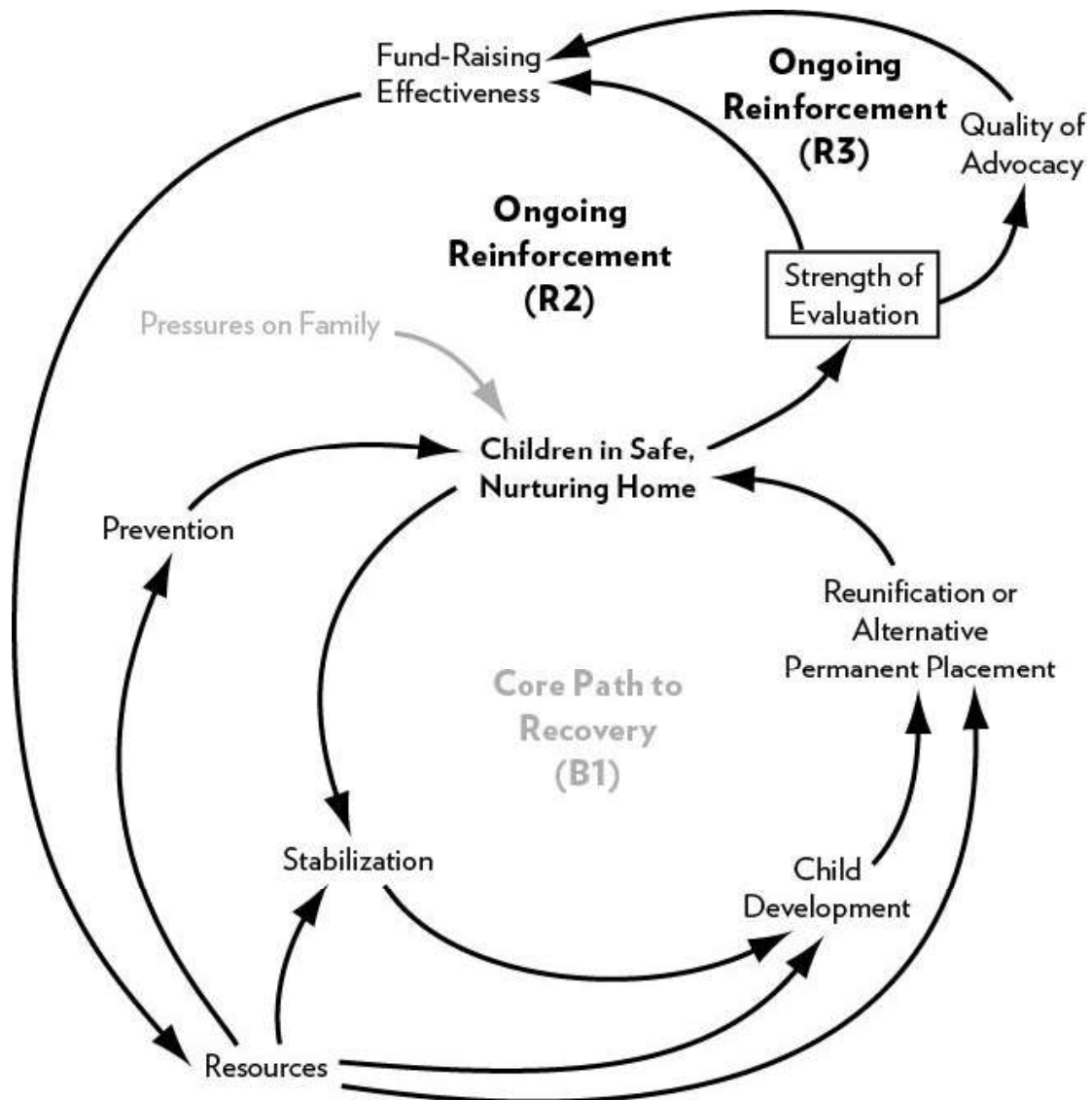


FIGURE 11.15 ENSURING SUSTAINABLE RESOURCES OVER TIME. Evaluation and advocacy are key to the effective fund-raising required to attract additional resources in support of the agency's core programs.

As a result of articulating its systemic theory of change, the agency was able to identify and eliminate programs that did not fit into its strategy. Interestingly, the managers of these programs had often taken up the most airtime in defense of their work, perhaps because they and their colleagues sensed that the programs were not a good fit for the organization. These programs were either transferred to other community organizations better suited to manage them or phased out when current funding ended.

The theory also enabled all of the functions to better appreciate and integrate their diverse contributions to ensuring children lived in safe,

nurturing homes. For example, the evaluation and advocacy units resolved tensions about their relative importance by recognizing that the organization needed to invest more in evaluation in the short run to increase the quality of its advocacy in the long run. Often, *sequencing* is an essential aspect of prioritizing because it enables people to think about the relative importance of different work over time.⁹ By contrast, prioritizing often results in win–lose debates that drain organizational energy and goodwill because people assume that, if their work is not considered a high priority now, it never will be. By taking time delay into account, systemic theories of change circumvent such debates and enable many parties to affirm their contributions over time. In the case of the evaluation and advocacy functions, the agency agreed that it needed to step up investment in evaluation in the short run to strengthen its platform for evidence-based practices, and shift more funding to advocacy over time as this platform became more established.

How to Refine Your Systemic Theory of Change

Systemic theories of change must be designed to evolve over time as more information becomes available, actions take effect, and conditions shift. Refining your theory means incorporating the theories of other stakeholders, tracking how key elements change over time, and modifying the theory by comparing what you expect to happen with what actually occurs.

In all of the cases discussed in this chapter that involved diverse community stakeholders, a larger group of constituents was invited to refine the theory developed by a smaller leadership group. It is important to ensure that refinements at this stage come not only from people within the organizations represented by the leadership group, but also from other key stakeholders who might not have been involved initially. These often include the ultimate beneficiaries of the work (such as students, patients, and homeless people) and the private sector, which is often misperceived by core participants to have less of a stake in social issues or be less accessible. Integrating these diverse views often presents the same challenges as when you develop a systems map to deepen your understanding of why a chronic problem persists: The systemic theory must be rich enough to incorporate multiple perspectives yet simple enough to provide actionable insights.

Tracking your theory involves identifying key indicators for each critical variable, estimating time delays, and drawing a pattern of behavior that projects how each key success factor or performance measure should change over time. Another element to track is mental models: identifying how people's assumptions need to evolve over time and estimating (often with long time delays) when to expect changes to become evident.

Because learning takes time and can lead to costly mistakes, it is important to establish milestones along the way to test more quickly if you are on or off course. In addition, by developing a computer simulation of your theory, you can shorten time delays in the real world to a matter of seconds and thereby accelerate experimentation and learning. For example, computer simulations exist for addressing climate change and sustainability and for testing alternative models of health care delivery.¹⁰ While computer simulations require more up-front investment, they can quantify outcomes and reduce the learning curve for testing different theories of change.

By comparing the intended and projected behavior over time with what actually occurs, you engage in continuous learning and can refine your assumptions and actions. You are able to rethink important cause-effect relationships, alter your strategy for revising mental models, and/or adjust expected time frames. Tracking and modifying your theory of change will also be examined more closely in the next chapter, on evaluation.

Closing the Loop

- Circular theories of change create pictures that quickly communicate a lot of readily understandable and navigable information.
- Applying systems thinking to strategic planning can help organizations and communities organize the leverage points identified by a root cause analysis, integrate the multiple critical success factors required to create something new, and streamline choices among too many programs and priorities.
- Based on the tools used in this book, there are two core theories of systemic change: one that seeks to amplify success and the other that strives to improve an existing situation.
- Amplifying success includes anticipating limits to success and planning ways to overcome these limits.