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# Field catalysts: Behind the scenes of systems change

Consider the world's most complex and pressing challenges – like preventing disease, ending homelessness, and confronting climate change. Individual organizations use a range of approaches to tackle different parts of these issues, creating pockets of impact. But individual organizations, and even individual sectors, cannot create durable population-level impact alone.

These problems demand changes across the policies, practices, resource flows, and mental models that underpin our current systems. To solve them, we need organizers of long-term, coordinated, cross-sector action.

Research by The Bridgespan Group has found that *field catalysts* are an often overlooked lever for unlocking large-scale impact.<sup>1</sup> These organizations go by a number of different names, including systems orchestrators, ecosystem builders, network weavers, and backbones, and they have made significant contributions to systems change around the globe.

Field catalysts provide critical infrastructure for an ecosystem or field – a set of actors working on a common issue. Fields may focus on a specific problem, like reducing greenhouse gas emissions or improving representation of Native peoples, or a broader issue, like early childhood.<sup>2</sup> Field catalysts enhance a field's alignment, collaboration, and efficiency, resulting in collective impact that is greater than the sum of its parts.

Field catalysts play three primary roles:

**(1) Diagnosing and assessing the core problem and full landscape of actors devoted to it**, for example by engaging relevant actors to understand their respective roles, contributions, and insights and work toward a common vision and strategy; synthesizing and translating research or practical knowledge across contexts and geographies; and tracking collective progress.

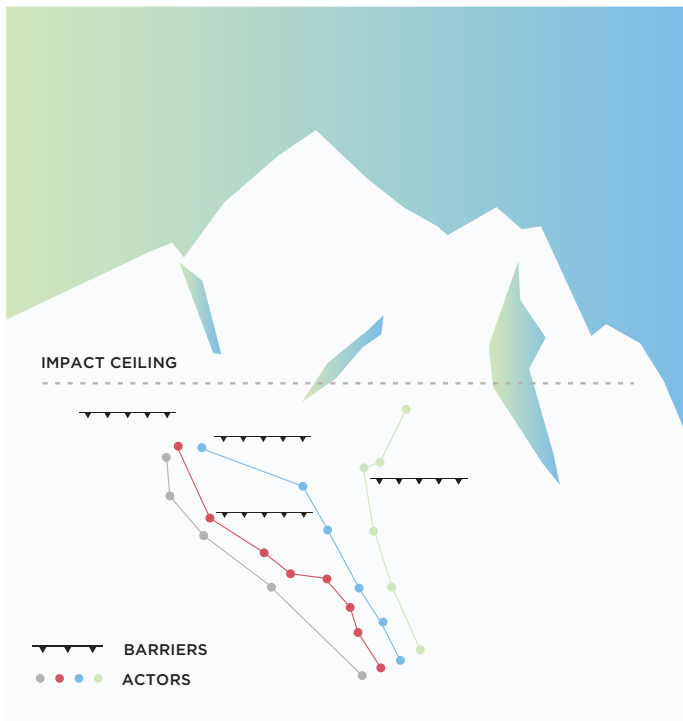
**(2) Advocating or shining a spotlight on an issue**, for example by producing communications materials to shift historical narratives, equipping actors to work together as a bloc for the purposes of policy influence, and building a broad base of public support for the field's vision.

**(3) Connecting and organizing actors around a shared goal**, for example by brokering and supporting relationships among previously-siloed actors, galvanizing action around the field-level strategy, and coordinating joint learning and information sharing.

**Some also fill critical gaps in collective effort toward a goal, for example by engaging in direct service, re-granting, or policy influence.**<sup>3</sup> They might identify and build resources and tools that the field needs, or pool and re-distribute funding in line with the field's priorities.

With their distinctive positioning as the “nerve center” of a field, field catalysts make other organizations more effective and build the capacity of the field as a whole.

## WITHOUT A FIELD CATALYST

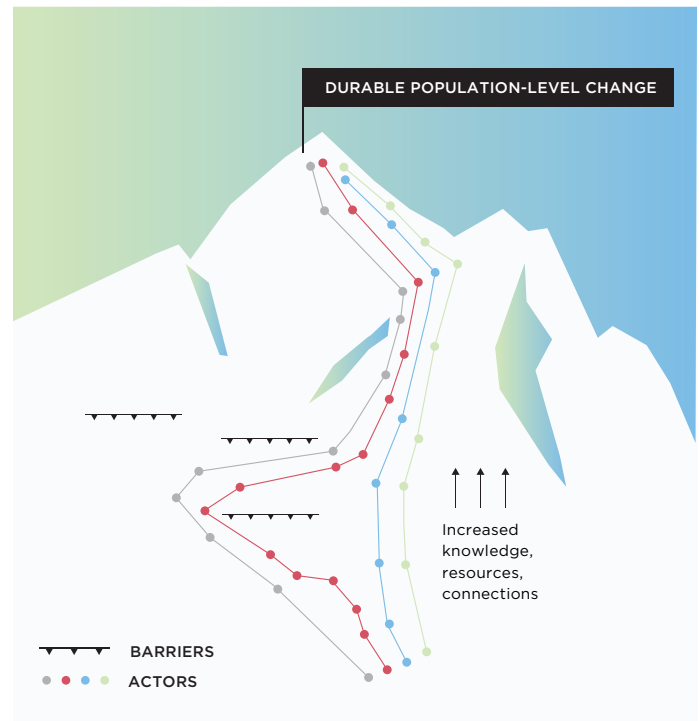


Without a field catalyst, actors work largely in their own lanes. Efforts to garner resources, track progress, and raise awareness are fragmented and duplicated. There is limited infrastructure to collaborate, share information, and harmonize the full set of actions needed to create change.

Relationships are at the center of field catalysts' work. They engage in deep dialogue with actors throughout the field, particularly those who are most marginalized by the current system. Their knowledge of these diverse perspectives is what enables them to develop and advance a vision for population-level change – and they use an organizer's mindset to engage, connect, and build capacity among the actors required to achieve that vision.

The work that field catalysts do calls for new ways of thinking about impact. Field catalysts have goals that are decades away, and progress toward large-scale change is never linear.

## WITH A FIELD CATALYST



When a field catalyst has been successful, actors play diverse and complementary roles to advance a shared agenda and overcome and remove barriers. The field's knowledge and resources increase and flow more efficiently. Coordination across sectors, geographies, and organizations unlocks and accelerates impact on a societal scale.

Further, field building requires “behind the scenes” efforts that are often less visible to funders than direct service and advocacy work. While they may not fit neatly into short-term evaluation models or narrowly-defined funding streams, field catalysts have been shown to raise the ceiling in terms of what is possible in solving complex and entrenched problems.<sup>4</sup>

For more on field catalysts, watch the [explainer video](#) and see The Bridgespan Group's research on [Field Building for Equitable Systems Change](#). For stories of field catalysts' work in action, read brief case studies of the [Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids](#), [Power to Decide](#), [RBM Partnership to End Malaria](#), and [Student Experience Research Network](#).

<sup>1</sup> Taz Hussein, Matt Plummer, and Bill Breen. [How Field Catalysts Galvanize Social Change](#), *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Lija McHugh Farnham, Emma Nothmann, Zoe Tamaki, and Cora Daniels. [Field Building for Population-Level Change](#), The Bridgespan Group, 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Lija McHugh Farnham, Emma Nothmann, Kevin Crouch, and Cora Daniels. [Field Catalyst Origin Stories: Lessons for Systems-Change Leaders](#), The Bridgespan Group, 2023.

<sup>4</sup> Lija McHugh Farnham, Emma Nothmann, Kevin Crouch, and Cora Daniels. [Equitable Systems Change: Funding Field Catalysts from Origins to Revolutionizing the World](#), The Bridgespan Group, 2023.