

Why Use the *Thinking and Action Framework*...or, in other words: Why Not Just Wing It?

Introduction to the Framework – Thursday, July 25, 2002: Following an overview of the *Thinking and Action Framework* by Community Strategies Group Associate Director Janet Topolsky, Patricia Vasbinder was asked to “offer witness” to the usefulness of the framework for helping community foundations design effective grantmaking and program efforts to help build the economic vitality of rural families and communities.

Transcript of Remarks by Patricia Vasbinder

I believe the reason that I was selected to be a witness to the usefulness of the *Thinking and Action Framework* is the section that reads: “Please resist the urge to jump in with both feet before you think through what you are going to do.”

You are looking at a person who loves to wing it. And, in fact, I did wing it in my own rural development philanthropy project at the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation (NHCF) during which we worked closely with The Aspen Institute’s Community Strategies Group (CSG). I am, in effect, a perfect witness for how this Framework can help you avoid some of the missteps we made at NHCF.

You know there are some people who, when they get a menu or a new novel, the first thing they do is leap to the end to see the desserts or how the story end...I’m that kind of person too! So, when I got the draft of this framework—not in this beautiful form, but even as it was being printed—I immediately went to the end to see how many pages it was. And I saw it was 105. I called CSG and I said, “OK, I’m aware that this represents best practices of community foundations that are working to improve the economic security of low income people from foundations across the US. I’m aware that there is gold in these pages, but for others out there like me, won’t they just say, “Why use this framework when it’s just so much more fun to wing it?”

And Janet Topolsky said, “That’s exactly what we want you to talk about.”

So I’m going to take just a minute as a fellow “just-wing-it” person to preach to you, brothers and sisters. Is there anybody out there who thinks it’s *much more fun* to dream up something big, than it is to do the work it takes to actually have a positive impact? I’m speaking on the assumption that everyone in this room has done or is doing some manner of work with rural communities. But at this point, you are thinking that you need to be more intentional about your work with rural individuals or rural communities, you may need more or better resources, you would like to be more strategic about your programs and your grantmaking. You are here in this room because you want to do rural in a somewhat different way. In other words, you are already tired of just winging it—but are not sure what other options you have!

So, let me become deadly serious for a minute. There is an alternative to winging it and the framework will help you see them. And moreover, there are some really serious reasons why you should use the framework to *avoid* winging it:

1. One is that the framework will help **you – your foundation, that is, – climb the learning curve**. In particular, when Janet got me to read the whole framework, I found Steps 2 and 3 in which you are asked to “Take Notice” and “Know Yourself” particularly valuable. The resources listed to help you gather general information, demographic data and economic data on rural counties and rural areas is really quite extraordinary. It is critically important for your foundation to enter this field as a knowledgeable player because what is at stake, frankly, is the credibility as a foundation, not only in rural communities, but in everything you do. And, those of you who live in rural areas, you know how rural communities operate: everybody knows everything. So, a blunder, however small and unintentional, in one county will soon be

known throughout the region. The advantage of this framework is it will help your foundation avoid these beginner's mistakes.

2. The second reason for using this framework, especially Steps 2 and 3, is that these steps will **avoid reinventing the rural development wheel**. We all talk about this, but how many of us actually take the time and do the heavy lifting required to avoid duplication? There a lot of players in rural development trying to mitigate poverty. This challenge is a problem that has been with the United State for decades and decades. If it were easy, if there were a cookbook recipe or a one-size-fits-all solution, rural poverty would no longer be with us. This is very, very tough, complex work. It is very important for your foundation to be aware of what and who are the rural service providers already working with low-income families and communities in your region. You should know what their role is as well as how your role will complement, supplement or transform these efforts. Should you be bolstering them, starting something new or something in between? The point is, it will not be a good use of your resources to inadvertently reinvent the wheel. And, by the way, you are looking at somebody who did that. It is really bad behavior. Just because I didn't know I was doing it didn't make it any less damaging.
3. Using the framework **reduces on-the-ground experimentation**. This framework requires, God forbid, that you think at the outset through your program from its beginning to its end: *what* are you going to do, where are you going to do it, with whom will you do it, for how long, with what resources? Now, the advantage this process offers is that once you are on the ground in the community or working with groups of individuals, you will have thought through many contingencies. Although flexibility on the ground and program flexibility can be good things, *experimentation* is not. You are producing widgets, your partners are not gerbils. You are working with neighbors and friends. I do think in some cases, and I'm sure it's not present here in this room, but I have seen in my day, some hubris among foundations. Trouble and even great harm *can* sometimes result when folks who are smart, educated and are acting with other people's money try to make change. So, I think that we need to understand and carefully determine when what you are doing in *experimentation* and when it is *flexibility*. And using this framework will help keep you away from harmful experimentation.
4. Using the framework **reduces risk**. This is related to number three. When you begin doing something a little differently, with different populations, with more resources, you are *stretching* to do something you have not done before. When a business launches a new product or enters a new sales territory, a necessary step is the crafting of a *business plan*. This is a useful analogy for us foundation types because that is just what framework is – a type of "business plan." It will require you to think and plan and predict in ways that just winging it, sadly, will not. And why think, plan and predict? Because you want to mitigate the risk of falling on your face by accounting for as many unknowns as possible. Getting into the business planning mode is a *very specific discipline* and the framework will help become disciplined. I understand what's happened in the markets and among some business leaders will cause us to be suspicious of business planning, but when approached honestly and self-critically, the process does reduce risk.

For example, what is one of the major risks to new programs? Often, it is the fading of enthusiasm once the "honeymoon phase" of a new initiative is over—but long before sustained impact can be achieved. This framework will help you **plumb the commitment of your foundation** to its rural development work. And by your foundation I mean that we for four particular constituents: your board of directors, your executive director, your donors and your programming staff. One of the things

that I have observed is that program staff are often the people who are working in the community, on the ground, in the field. These folks make a professional and a personal commitment to the community, to individuals and to the region. And then one day, maybe one or two years into the work, the executive director or board are no longer interested in that work. We all know that foundations are notorious for falling in love with the cutting edge or for developing “pet projects” without the entire organization’s buy in. And so, an executive directors loses interest and the board was never quite sure what the project was all about anyway and the donors didn’t even know the foundation “did” projects, and so that program officer is out there, working with neighbors, working with communities, working to start a drum and bugle corps, or whatever, and realizes she is very much alone.

What is at stake? Not just the program staff credibility – but that would be enough, what is at stake is the very credibility of the foundation. Those of you from rural areas know once you lose trust and credibility, it takes generations to get it back. So think, plan and predict: it’s really better to know from day one exactly how strong your commitment to rural is. It’s ok for it to be a short-term commitment—if everyone understands that from the start. But what is really, really tragic is for some stakeholders to believe the foundation will be in it for the long haul, only to find out six months later, there’s something new and better on the agenda. Getting clear on these things can involve some very difficult conversations, but the framework will help and what’s more, however difficult they might be, the risk of not having them is simply too high.

5. And finally, using this framework will enable you to **improve your stewardship of philanthropic resources**—and this is probably, like the whole thing, right? I mean, this is not *our* money. Well, for those of you who are donors, it is *your* money. But, for most of us, it’s *their* money. And it is our job to be prudent stewards. The framework will help you be prudent stewards, especially in the section called “*Which Resources and How Much?*” Let’s keep in mind, trying to increase the economic security of low-income families is hard work and I don’t care how much money you bring to the table, it is unlikely to be enough. In the face of such a complex and difficult social issue, you must decide carefully how and when to invest your resources as well as what kind of resources and in what combination will bring you closer to your intended outcomes. If money alone could solve these problems, how easy would our work be? But, as we know, success tends to result from small incremental actions and events that influence the factors that contribute to rural poverty. For lasting influence, you must decide carefully and intelligently where and how to place your limited resources. As I said, the framework will help you do that.

You are trying to create a better future for rural communities. The framework as a whole will help you make some very important decisions. If you use the framework, I am absolutely confident that you will be much more prudent stewards of philanthropic resources because you will be strategic, you will be focused, you will be smart and, *most importantly*, you will be mindful of the high stakes attached to your work.

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