

Catalysing Change at Scale

Features and enablers of
effective field catalysts
and field-building
intermediaries

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Catalyst

Clear Horizon

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The Early Years Catalyst honours and respects First Nations aspiration and voice and chooses to act as co-creators and co-leaders in this journey as we hold to the spirit of the 2020 National Early Years Summit with a principle of 'First Nations First'.

This discussion paper is part of discovery work commissioned by the Early Years Catalyst – an ambitious, long-term systemic change initiative that emerged from the 2020 National Early Years Summit. The Early Years Catalyst is a national collaboration working to improve early childhood development outcomes for children experiencing disadvantage and vulnerability.

The paper is being shared for the benefit of the early years field and is a primer for people interested in learning about field catalysts. It was produced by Clear Horizon, led by Dr Ellise Barkley with the technical input of Dr Jess Dart. Ellise is a white Australian evaluation practitioner living and working on Darkinjung Country.

The paper is based on a literature scan, the input of practitioner perspectives, and draws on Clear Horizon's substantial experience as an evaluation partner of over 15 field-building intermediaries and many systems transformation initiatives. It is not an academic paper nor a comprehensive literature review.

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“...these types
of ambitious and
coordinated efforts
to catalyse change
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decades.”

About this paper

Field catalysts are a type of field-building intermediary that are playing an important role in systems transformation in Australia and internationally. Changemakers, funders, policymakers, and social innovators are keen to better understand what it takes to set up an effective field catalyst, to assess if and how the approach might be relevant for driving impact at scale.

The identification of field catalysts as a distinct type of intermediary is a relatively recent phenomenon and it has helped deepen our understanding about how these ambitiously action-oriented, nimble, and often politically driven entities set up and amplify a field's impact. However, trying to pin them down as a distinct model can be problematic and sometimes limiting, as they can vary so much in practice.

This paper summarises the key features, structures, and enablers for effective field catalysts, drawing on local and international learnings so far. It discusses key developments in the literature and profiles how catalysts are being set up, implemented, and creating impact. It also considers some of the challenges for practice and investment and posits ideas for further exploration. While the paper focuses on the field catalyst niche, the insights included are relevant to field-building and systems change more broadly.

The insights shared are drawn from the literature, input from several expert perspectives, and Clear Horizon's practice-based experience as a learning partner for field-building intermediaries. It is being shared as a primer for people interested in learning more about field catalysts and is not intended as a scholarly or comprehensive literature review.

Introduction to field catalysts

Field catalysts are a type of field-building intermediary. Intermediaries are organisations that coordinate and intermediate between different stakeholders around a common goal. The focus of field-building intermediaries is on building a field to be more impactful, some are also seeking to transform the systems that the field is a part of. They set out to support and unify the dispersed actions of actors across a field and fill capability gaps that individual change efforts cannot fill on their own.

One type of field-building intermediary showing promise for contributing to transformative social impact is the field catalyst. While the identification of the field catalyst as a distinct type of intermediary is relatively recent, these types of ambitious and coordinated efforts to catalyse change at scale have been happening for decades.

Field catalysts contribute to population-level change through field building and deploying different capabilities to nudge powerful systems players (Hussein, Plummer, and Breen, 2018). Field catalysts seek to augment efforts across a field to achieve impact. They are set up to influence the actions of others, rather than acting directly.

Key developments in the literature

We are still in the early stages of understanding how and when field catalysts work. There is not much written about field-building intermediaries and even less about field catalysts. Over the last five years, a small tranche of influential papers has started to codify the field catalyst model. This niche sits within the larger body of work on systems change and related frameworks such as field-building, systems convening, collective impact, systemic collaboration, ecosystem building, etc.

We are also still learning about when field catalysts are not appropriate and what isn't working. For example, field catalysts cannot do the job of traditional service or program delivery or may not be an appropriate response in the absence of some key enabling conditions (outlined later in the paper), such as sufficient and flexible funding.

FIELD CATALYSTS AS A DISTINCT TYPE OF FIELD BUILDING INTERMEDIARY

The field catalyst model was identified in 2018 in The Bridgespan Group's paper, 'How Field Catalysts Galvanise Social Change' by Hussein, Plummer and Breen and further developed in the Bridgespan Group's later paper, *Field Building for Population-Level Change: How Funders and Practitioners Can Increase the Odds of Success* (2020).

The four main types of field-building intermediaries identified were:

- **Capability Specialists:** those providing the field with one type of supporting expertise
- **Place-based Backbones:** those connecting and supporting stakeholders within a region
- **Evidence-based Action Labs:** those undertaking a range of functions to help scale-up interventions
- **Field Catalysts:** those that deploy different capabilities to nudge powerful systems players and unite efforts across a field for transformative change

The Bridgespan typology has had good uptake with other thought leaders contributing to building out the model. Papers such as Cheuy, Cabaj, and Weaver's *How Field Catalysts Accelerate Collective Impact* (2022), *How Philanthropy Can Support System-Change Leaders* (Farnham, Nothmann, Tamaki, Harding and Daniels 2020/21), and Cabaj's paper *Evaluating the Results of Intermediary Organisations: A Paper for Intermediaries in Australia* (2021) have all contributed to advancing an understanding of the features, funding models, and impact of field catalysts, and how to evaluate them. Social Ventures Australia's report, *Insights on Australian field-building intermediaries and their funding journeys towards sustainable impact* (2022) and case studies offer valuable insights and profiles the Australian examples: CoAct, Health Justice Australia, Indigenous Eye Health, The Front Project, and the Sydney Policy Lab.

The insights in this paper draw heavily from these key literature sources along with practitioner input.

LIMITATIONS OF THE TYPOLOGY

While Bridgespan's big four typology is foundational work that brings great value, there are limitations. First, as is pointed out in the literature, the four main types of intermediaries are neither mutually exclusive nor exhaustive. The simple categorisation can be problematic in practice as it remains slippery work to pinpoint the specific attributes of field catalysts. Many adopt a looser way of working, spanning several types. For aspiring catalysts, it may also not be helpful to aim for pure fidelity to the codified model, as catalytic functions will be most effective when they do whatever is needed to respond to the context-specific conditions and strategic opportunities to push a field forward.









Second, we acknowledge it is early days in evolving an understanding of this work and that many of the examples in the literature are dubbed retrospective and/or based on an outsider's label of the work. We're mindful that some initiatives may not align with the conceptual framing of field catalysts or prefer their own language. It is also important to note that most of the lessons about what is working and what is not are still implicit in practice and have not yet made their way into the literature.

Last, of the small amount written and shared on field catalysts, it predominantly represents western and white norms, perspectives, and framing (as is the case in this paper). This is not for lack of powerful First Nations-led examples of catalysing efforts in Australia. Take, for example, the Coalition of Peaks work in the Closing the Gap (National Agreement) context that is driving

system-wide change around First Nations-defined outcomes, the Uluru Statement from the Heart and movement for a constitutional Voice to Parliament, or the co-led Deep Collaboration work by field-building intermediary Collaboration for Impact. More likely is that First Nations' knowledge and perspectives about catalysing field transformation sits in other spaces and the critical work of creating a shared conversation between First Nations and other Australians needs prioritising, whilst recognising a differentiated strategy and approach may sometimes be needed.

Profile of a field catalyst

This section outlines the key features, roles, structures, and operating principles of field catalysts

| Key Features of a Field Catalyst | |
|---|--|
|  Focus on achieving population level impact |  Purpose driven, adaptive, and opportunistic |
|  Influence the actions of others rather than acting directly |  Hold diverse skills and integrate bottom-up and top-down approaches |
|  The more progressive catalysts tend to have a focus on equity |  Work at whatever scale is required |
|  Concentrate on getting things done not on building consensus |  Are built to win, not to last |

Field catalysts weave together a diversity of skillsets to facilitate integrated bottom-up and top-down approaches. They see themselves as field-facing, working across a whole field at whatever scale is required. This can involve supporting or joining up local movements and/or using strategic system levers like policy or advocacy. They are concentrated on getting things done rather than building consensus. The results most causally proximate to a catalyst's activities will be linked to their effectiveness in nudging the conditions and system, rather than outcomes for populations (even though they aim to contribute to this via their catalysing role).

While we are still very much learning about field catalysts, our hunch is that the nature and form of the field catalyst model itself have the potential to turbocharge the challenges and impact of systems change, even compared to other types of intermediaries. Based on what we know so far, compared to other field-building intermediaries, field catalysts tend to have looser boundaries, are less specialised, be less likely to implement tangible activities, and usually play in highly political spaces. As such, they are more opportunistic and emergent, with longer 'on-ramps' to achieving tangible results. Field catalysts have wider geographic boundaries than place-based intermediaries, which are intended to centre the needs of a defined local community. They have a wider set of roles than capacity-building intermediaries, which have a more clearly defined focus on skill-building. Finally, their work is more facilitatory and indirect than that of action labs, which often prototype solutions with key cohorts or micro-places.

Following are three examples: Australia's Early Years Catalyst (EYC) and The Front Project (TFP), and the Tamarack Institute in Canada. TFP and Tamarack, while having strong catalyst features operate more broadly than only a field catalyst, whereas EYC has been set up more closely fitting with the pure field catalyst model.

“Field catalysts weave together a diversity of skillsets to facilitate integrated bottom-up and top-down approaches. They are concentrated on getting things done...”

Examples

Early Years Catalyst, Australia

Early Years Catalyst (EYC) is an ambitious, long-term systemic change initiative that emerged from the 2020 National Early Years Summit. EYC is a national collaboration working to improve early childhood development outcomes for children experiencing disadvantage and vulnerability. It seeks to connect, support, and amplify the work of organisations across the country so that together we can disrupt and transform the early years system to ensure that all young children and their families in Australia thrive. EYC is in its early phases of design and set up and was established in 2021.

The Front Project, Australia

Established in 2017, The Front Project (TFP) is a field-building intermediary with a mission to improve the equity, quality, and access in Australia's Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) system. It has features of a field catalyst seeking to build sector coherence, as well as features of an evidence-lab and capacity builder. It plays various roles, to best respond to opportunities for creating impact in the ECEC system. TFP roles include engaging actors and influencers who work in and on the system, convening and joining up cross-sector stakeholders, directly conducting research and policy work at both state and federal levels, and building capacity via delivery of programs for early childhood education professionals.

The Tamarack Institute, Canada

The Tamarack Institute was established 2001 and is working as an intermediary with placed-based community change initiatives across Canada, the United States and globally. It links together local efforts and strengthens their capacity to do the local work to amplify their impact. Their catalytic work has a strong orientation to capacity and movement building. Tamarack has two key parts to their work.

First, Tamarack works at local community level efforts and leaders via their Vibrant Communities work in four domains: ending poverty, deepening community, building youth futures, and climate transition. Tamarack's approach involves having team members deeply connected with the communities that provide them with regular contact, support codesign, and collaboratively sense-make and learn and to lift up individual work in the community. It started in 12 communities and this has grown to a network of 90 regional roundtables implementing poverty reduction strategies across more than 400 communities. Tamarack also engages in policy reform efforts at the systems level – thus integrating bottom-up and top-down approaches. Second, Tamarack has a self-funded Learning Centre that supports capacity building (via coaching, consulting, training, publications etc), and facilitates sensemaking and shared learning across campaigns, local efforts, and the field to strengthen practice and amplify impact.

The roles played by field catalysts in systems transformation

To drive impact, the roles field catalysts play are multiple and iterate over time. The roles of field catalysts being identified in the key literature include:

- **diagnosing and assessing** the problem including the ecosystem (the landscape of system actors and context) and continually reviewing this, seeing the patterns, identifying promising strategies and translating them into a roadmap and practical actions around the common goals.
- **convening and activating** individual actors and organisations by engaging, joining up, and strengthening collaboration and using strategic levers and existing efforts to increase the effectiveness and coherence of the field and change effort.
- **advocating and amplifying** by shining a spotlight on the problem and facilitating system actors to address it; amplifying voices; building awareness and visibility of the work, keeping an issue on the radar of influential decision-makers, and securing and mobilising funding to and in the field.
- **strengthening capacity and building capability** to support the field to meet its evolving needs by filling critical capability gaps and building leadership across all levels of the system.

These roles are unpacked in the Tamarack example opposite, to show what this can look like in practice.

The multiple roles Tamarack plays

Tamarack plays multiple catalyst roles across their work. Take for example their work on advancing Living Wage (a wage set higher than a minimum wage that takes into consideration what is needed for people to meet a basic standard of living). Tamarack wanted to tackle the issue that a sizeable proportion of people working low wage jobs are kept stuck under the poverty line and don't have affordability in their communities. As a start, Tamarack convened a community of practice on living wage and started assessing the current state of play and looking to colleagues in United Kingdom and United States for bright spot examples. The community of practice co-developed a shared approach and set some common principles for calculating living wage to enable the movement to grow. Tamarack drew on the expertise of researchers and people with lived experience and the group designed and built the Living Wage Canada calculator and website. Tamarack and the group engaged employers at the front end of advancing living wages and have over 900 living wage employers involved. They brought people together and looked at what could be done together to be more proactive around addressing the issue and nudging the system. After momentum grew, they started linking up with and influencing other efforts. In their catalyst role they were not doing the work but holding it for the group to drive the change. What started as an idea to try and move people out of poverty has grown into a catalytic movement.

The Set-up: Funding, structure, and operating principles

There is no one right model for set up, resourcing, and structuring of a field catalyst. A key lesson is they often undergo rapid iteration in the early phase of inception, so flexibility is important. Setting up involves navigating how authority and credibility are granted or established, how decisions are made about priorities and resourcing, and what governance and funding arrangements work best to support the work. How this is done has a significant bearing on how power is shared and the extent to which there is transparency about their accountabilities.

Staged Evolution Over a Long Term

The field catalysts demonstrating impact at scale had persistent effort over a long-term and evolved over time. Over their lifespan, catalysts will undergo various stages of evolution. SVA's 2022 report defines the evolution phases for field-building intermediaries as: catalysing (exploration and set up), growing (activating implementation), sustaining (well established and continued evolution), and renewal or wind-down (refining focus or ceasing operations).

Across phases, catalysts must navigate the need to manage expectations about the long-term nature of the work while maintaining a sense of urgency for achieving the mission level results.

Funding and Resourcing

Field catalysts tend to rely on a mix of funding from philanthropy, government, and corporate investment, and self-generated income. Most catalysts will not have the capacity to ever be self-sustaining, so funding is essential. Philanthropic funding, in particular, is vital, especially during the early phase of set up. The Bridgespan's 2017 report found across the 15 examples studied, 80% required changes to government funding, policies or action; 75% required coordination of actors across the sectors; and 66% required one or more philanthropic "big bets" of more than \$10m. Protective factors for catalysts include having a diversity of funders, and in the early phases, some set up auspicing arrangements with a supporting organisation (such as a not for profit working in the field or philanthropic foundation). These auspicing arrangements might then change and evolve once the field catalyst hits the growth stage.

The Tamarack example opposite outlines their mixed funding model, including long-term philanthropic investment, and shows how funders are partnering as active collaborators (not just donors).

Tamarack's funding model and framing

Tamarack Institute has a mixed funding model. Over twenty years, this includes long-term support from two foundations and various multi-year funding grants. It aspires to a revenue mix of equal parts philanthropy, self-generated income, and income from government. The self-generated income stream is via the fee-for-service consulting and training and membership fees. As it has matured, Tamarack has reduced its income from philanthropy and moved towards more self-generated and government income. This shift was made possible once their network grew and the 'proof of concept' was established, making it a more attractive and less risky investment for government.

The other interesting thing about Tamarack's approach is that it has framed its work to funders as a collaboration – meaning, funders are part of the work and are active partners. This is significantly different to a typical investor or donor mindset. It has involved funders being embedded in the learning journey with Tamarack as the intermediary and participating in the learning opportunities, networking, and engagement with the insights and feedback loops happening.

Structure and Operating Principles

Depending on the strategic and political orientation of the catalyst, they may set up centralised or decentralised structures. By structure we mean the governance and operational arrangements that supports a group to work together within their individual functions to deliver the catalyst's aims. Compared to typical organisation structures, the governance tends to be more horizontal than vertical to get collective decisions and buy-in. Some are also often intentional about creating alternative structures that support power-sharing and counter the system hierarchies they are working to address.

For some catalysts, such as EYC, the structure aspires to support shared leadership, shared actions, and shared responsibility. This may include having key functions distributed across multiple groups, e.g.:

- **dedicated catalysing organisation (also known as a facilitating partner or backbone team)**
- **a leadership table made up of strategic system actors and stakeholders**
- **a network of system actors or members involved in the broader collaboration**
- **the funders sponsoring parts of the effort and/or the facilitating partner**
- **action groups to advance the work.**

In this type of set up, the dedicated catalysing organisation is often deliberately neutral and does not set the strategic agenda. Rather, they convene stakeholders to set the agenda and are working on creating an 'intentional ecosystem' for system actors and ventures to do their work. Field catalysts with this structure will need to balance how much, and what type of work is allocated to the dedicated catalysing team and how to keep everyone focused on the collective element of the work, which ultimately is what will make the field building sustained over the longer term.

In other cases, such as TFP, the intermediary operates within more traditional organisational structures including a board. For this set up it can mean catalysts need to be innovative with how it enables a plurality of accountabilities and shared decision-making across stakeholders. There are also network approaches, like the Human Learning Systems collaboration (UK) that is guided by several partner organisations and individuals, or decentralised structures such as for Black Lives Matter. While Black Lives Matter is more of a movement than field catalyst it offers an interesting decentralised example.

Black Lives Matter's approach to shared leadership

Black Lives Matter (BLM) is a grassroots political and social movement that seeks to mobilise action to address acts of violence against Black communities, racism and racial inequity, build local power, and create space for Black lives and improved life outcomes. It grew out of the US following high-profile killings by police and is now global. While there are specific organisations labelled BLM, including the Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation, Inc. which the original movement is formally filed under, the overall movement is a decentralised and non-hierarchical network of people and organisations.

To not replicate the structures of the dominant norm, BLM set up structures so as many organisations as possible can have meaningful input on decisions and priority setting. This includes a table structure, where numerous tables coordinate different spaces and allow diverse members (including victims, survivors, and people with lived experience) to join and participate. The tables have power and are where the work happens. There is also a leadership team, chosen by the tables, to oversee across the tables and work as a whole and look at how to leverage and share resources to increase impact. Time and effort is invested in democratic processes for decision making and budget allocation.

There are also some common operating principles, however each initiative has their own ways of working.

Common Operating Principles of Field Catalyst



Shared leadership, actions and responsibility (though not always)



Broad definition of accountability that is equitable and inclusive



Consultative rather than consensus-driven approach



Ambitiously action-orientated



Mindful of power and context



Data and evidence-driven, with a strong learning stance

Enablers for Effectiveness

The enablers and barriers for a field catalyst will be context specific and influenced by the nature of the issue being addressed, the related field/s, systems status, starting foundations, and readiness for change. Below are three enablers for effective field catalysts showing up strong in the literature.

Putting equity at the centre: broadening accountability and addressing power

One of biggest potential pitfalls for field catalysts is not putting equity at the centre. A key learning is that equity is a critical factor in addressing social justice and that people with lived experience of the issue need to be involved in the solution. Field catalysts need to have a broad definition of accountability and include the perspectives of those who will be most affected by the work – whether that be organisations, communities, or both. It may also mean having explicit principles about having First Nations decision making as part of the work and having continuously reflecting on and making conscious decisions about the power being built, shared, and used in service of its purpose.

Sufficient, long-term, and flexible funding and resourcing

Sufficient funding and resourcing is a critical success factor. However, from the field we hear that there is not a lot of funding for the field catalyst role (generally speaking) and for the funding that is secured, it is tends to be project/program funding for discrete parts of the catalyst role and not for the 'glue' part of the role (that is essential for its impact).

This can mean catalysts can end up playing the fundraising game to be able to quietly do what is needed for impact. While some catalysts have explored generating earned income it is unlikely to be self-sustaining or cover all services. We also heard there can sometimes be a tension between the catalyst role and their own fee-based services (e.g. external consulting) which at times can inhibit the brokering, convening, and advocacy roles it needs to take up as catalyst.

Some key lessons about funding field catalysts include:

- Philanthropy and government have a vital role to play as funders and as collaborators.
- Field catalysts need resourcing over a long-term, as the uncertainty and distraction of pursuing shorter term and piecemeal funding can undermine the work.
- Funding needs to consider the nature of the intermediaries, the systems change approach, and the stage of development.
- As well as being sufficient, funding needs built in flexibility suited to the emergence of work and be responsive to needs that arise along the way, such as capacity building. Procurement and funding arrangements pegged to programmatic style deliverables and milestones can trip up the work (particularly in the initial stages) and can work to be a barrier to effectiveness.
- Where multiple funders are involved (which is ideal), it is beneficial to all work together to streamline reporting and increase consistency and collaboration.
- Partnership arrangements need to be supported by two-way conversations between funders and catalysts to address the inherent power dynamics between players and organisations.

Capacity and capability

There are two key parts to capacity and capability building that have a bearing on effectiveness. First, one of the very real challenges for setting up and delivering catalyst work is a shortage of workforce capability, as is the case in Australia. The critical skills and mindsets to interact and do the work of a catalyst (including the backbone/facilitating partner/ convening teams) are very niche. It is highly relational work and requires systems leadership capabilities. It needs systems thinking; knowledge and credibility in building the field; ability to move fluidly between different roles; ability to weave connections, bring diverse actors to the table, and build a commitment to action, work with multiple accountabilities and hold and sustain the work; and recognising and seizing opportunities to advance systems change and translate aspirations into practical actions in highly complex and changing environments.

Second, is the capacity building of the field. This requires a strengths-based approach and having the right kind of supports and expertise to build capacity and grow capability across the field. Across both parts of the capacity building piece, it is to be expected that some form of skills uplift across contributors and system actors will be needed, especially around sharing power (for equity), learning (for adaptation) and having self-awareness and processes to examine biases, assumptions, and privilege.

Conditions for collaboration and systems change

Last, the following are some of the conditions considered important for implementing the work, that relate to the process and enablers for collaboration and systems change. Most field catalysts are explicitly working towards strengthening some, or all, of the following conditions that support the work:

- **A shared purpose** for equitable and sustained population level change and a clear story and roadmap to change to help bring others along in the broader movement of change (can be structured common agenda or focused goals yet emergent).
- **Deep understanding** of the problem and the eco-system informed by diverse perspectives.
- **Relationships and trust for partnering and collaboration** and earning legitimacy and having credibility with the actors required to achieve change.
- **Transparent and effective structures and leadership**, including clear roles and arrangements for governance, backbone support, and network/ membership generation.
- **Ways of working** that promote equity, power sharing, and being agile and responsive.
- **An evidence and data-driven approach** with an emphasis on learning for adaptation and the ability to articulate results and demonstrate impact.
- Having **access to and leverage with formal/ institutional/ systems power**.
- **Staged scaling** when it is better to start small or narrow, with ambitions to scale.

Evidence of impact

The literature has evidence of catalysts contributing to systems change and impact at scale – on issues such as marriage equality, reducing youth smoking and pregnancy rates, and reducing homelessness. Below are two examples. The first is Tamarack’s impact at scale towards poverty reduction and the second is an example of significant systems influence achieved by TFP in the Australian context.

“Tamarack’s five-year impact report estimates that the work has contributed to poverty being reduced for more than one million Canadians, between 2015 to 2020.”

The Tamarack Institute: Contributing to poverty reduction

Through Vibrant Communities and Communities Ending Poverty, Tamarack has joined up and supported a cross-community movement for poverty reduction strategies across 400 communities over 20 years. Collectively, across all the communities involved, Tamarack’s five-year impact report estimates that the work has contributed to poverty being reduced for more than one million Canadians, between 2015 to 2020. Tamarack contributed to this result, as has government investment, and other factors. Tamarack and the ending poverty work played a pivotal role in driving significant systems changes over decades, enhancing the collective impact of local initiatives, growing the movement, and keeping the issue visible to chief decision makers. While Tamarack is one of many contributors to the local efforts and achievements, they are seeing positive trends for the difference they make locally.

Tamarack reflections (via case studies, webinars, and in conversation) include a few key lessons:

- The success of the movement was enabled by the long-term and persistent support from Tamarack.
- It is a demonstration that connecting place-based work can create impact at scale.
- The degree to which field catalysts can communicate beyond their sphere of influence is the degree they can have impact at scale.
- Community change can be scaled more quickly when there is a method or approach that can be used with fidelity over time (in this case a collective impact approach).

While population-level change is usually the long-term ambition of catalysing a field for impact, the types of outcomes within a catalyst's sphere of influence are often changes around effective convening and partnership building; generating, sharing, and using evidence; building public awareness or shifting narratives about an issue; and influencing systemic changes in capability, mindsets, relations, practices, policies, resource flows etc. See opposite for the TFP example showing their contribution to a significant systemic change.

The Front Project: Systems influence and impact

In May 2021, the Australian government pledged \$1.7 billion to optimise the childcare subsidy – in particular, to lift the childcare subsidy and to remove the income cap for households. This significant policy change followed a year of targeted and coordinated advocacy by organisations including TFP and national bodies like Chief Executive Women and the Business Council of Australia.

TFP was uniquely positioned to contribute to this work, being able to speak the language of business groups, ECEC sector leaders and government, as well as to bring in the voices of families and children. TFP roles included:

- recognising a window of opportunity
- mobilising both business industry and national ECEC bodies
- influencing the dominant narrative
- responding to government concerns
- elevating the voices of families and children

While this was a collective effort, TFP's 2020-21 Impact Summary Report and accompanying case study provides evidence that without TFP mobilising power, research backing and work, it is highly likely the policy changes would not have happened.

Implications for practice and investment

In closing is a reflection on some key implications and ideas for further exploration moving forward.

Getting the mix of investment for field-building right

The issue of funding is dynamic and multifaceted. On the one hand the field needs resources to be catalysed, and then there is the catalysing part of the field. From a funder perspective, weighing investment choices, there can be a tendency to prioritise individual actors/initiatives rather than the catalytic functions. While funders are starting to recognise the mutual benefit of backing both, it still appears a leap for funders to invest in catalysts. One barrier identified is that funders often require evidence of impact before they will fund which is difficult for catalysts. Another challenge is funders are still developing an understanding of the value of these roles for the social field - as equally as happens in some industry, commercial, or economic fields. While funding individual efforts can be impactful and are generally less risky, effective field catalysts have the potential to achieve greater impact at scale. Working out what proportion of investment goes to supporting individual actors and what is needed to resource the catalytic function for a field is a current challenge to dominant funding mindsets and models in Australia and internationally.

Putting equity at the centre is a key opportunity and challenge

While many catalysts will work to be centred in equity, they face the conundrum of how to do this in practice. An ongoing challenge for catalysts is balancing the brokerage of local (bottom up) and the wider system (top down) strategies, as

achieving a more equitable system will be enabled by (and not controlled or centralised by) a field catalyst. Field catalysts need to deal with the established hierarchies and power in the field, and work to both leverage and counteract this in the work. Questions such as 'what is the field?', 'who gets to define this?', 'where are the boundaries?', and 'what is the framing of the issue?' all have implications for how equity is embedded from the start. In the Tamarack example with its local movement-building focus, having a balance between engaging people with lived experience and grassroots voices as well as the system allies and actors was key. If the balance between bottom up and top down is not achieved (including accountabilities and relationships) there is the risk that either group becomes isolated or disengaged from the process. Catalysts must navigate the time it takes to embed equity while keeping the ability to be agile, responsive, and opportunistic.

Managing expectations and evaluating results

Catalysing fields is dynamic, complex, and long-term work. Results are emergent, can have long on-ramps, and can be unpredictable. A key challenge field catalysts face is managing stakeholder expectations for what can be achieved and in what timeframes. The complexity of the work, and the necessary invisibility and humility of the work that's needed to have the field accelerate, also poses technical challenges for impact measurement, evaluation, and determining contribution. Even compared to other types of intermediaries and system change interventions, the challenges for evaluation seem accentuated for field catalysts. Field catalysts and funders will need to rethink how 'results' are framed and evaluated. Demonstrating learning and adaption will be important as well as not



tripping the work up with too many or unsuitable key performance indicators early in the design and start up. (See the companion paper Evaluating early-stage field catalysts, Barkley 2022, for more on the implications for measurement, evaluation, and learning.)

Areas for further exploration

It is exciting to see the rapidly emerging international body of evidence about the qualities and conditions that are making field catalysts effective. In Australia, some opportunities for further exploration include:

- Centring First Nations perspectives and leadership into the work and learnings.
- Examining the difference made to field-building when funders partner as collaborators.
- Learning about when field catalysts are not appropriate, what is not working, and the fatigue and failure rates and the temptation to revert to business as usual.
- Continuing to advance and learn about how data sharing and sovereignty (including Indigenous Data Sovereignty) is working (or not) in the field catalyst context.
- Capturing and sharing learnings about, and impact of, the emergent trend in Australia to intentionally join up (horizontally) and elevate community-led movements nationally to amplify impact.
- Exploring how coherence can be built between multiple catalysts in connected field/sector/systems.

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