

Going Deeper:

Promoting Uptake of Practices

by Large Numbers of Organizations





Promoting Uptake of Practices by Large Numbers of Organizations

Evidence-based kindergarten readiness programs. Sustainable business practices through B-Corp certification. Constituent feedback as a core nonprofit practice and capacity.

There are innumerable things that funders and those in the social sector want people to believe, adopt, or practice in large numbers because of the belief that doing so will result in broad social good.

Sometimes, efforts to promote the uptake of practices by many organizations can be conflated with social movements, something we describe more fully in the brief “Not Always Movements: Multiple Approaches to Advance Large-Scale Social Change.” However, these efforts to promote uptake have a unique set of characteristics and distinct theory of change: if you are implementing them, it’s worth doing well.

In this companion piece to the fuller brief, we seek to help foundation staff, social change leaders, and others involved in designing, implementing, and evaluating these efforts to gain more clarity and understanding about what they are doing and the kind of changes they can

reasonably expect in the near and long term; how their work can more consistently reflect principles of equity and apply them to advance equitable outcomes; and how to track and learn more about change. Specifically, in this piece you’ll find the following:

- + A description of promoting large-scale uptake and key assumptions
- + Some theories and frameworks that might be helpful
- + Questions to help bake principles of equity into the work
- + Key outcomes to look for
- + Insights related to tracking progress and learning along the way
- + A list of resources to learn more

Our hope is that this resource can provide a bite-sized overview and introduction to key concepts that could support more effective development and implementation of this strategy that will lead to equitable impact.

In “[Not Always Movements: Multiple Approaches to Advance Large-Scale Social Change](#),” we provide overviews and compare and contrast three large-scale social change approaches that we think have similarities with social movements:



Field Building

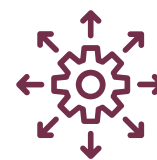


Network Development



Promoting Uptake of Practices by large numbers of organizations

We chose to focus on these approaches because we see them commonly conflated with movements. In the piece, we further detail these approaches—that is, their definitions, key theory of change, primary characteristics, outcomes, and other components, with the aim of helping foundation staff as well as social change leaders and others involved in designing, implementing, and evaluating social change strategies to better situate their work within these approaches where applicable. If you are unsure if you are building a field or if you want to learn more, [check out the full brief](#).



Promoting Uptake of Practices by Large Numbers of Organizations

What is it?

PROMOTING UPTAKE OF PRACTICES: Spreading and sustaining innovative practices in a larger context in order to achieve greater social impact.

When it comes to social change, people and organizations are often finding new ways to think about or do something—positing new solutions to problems or coming up with innovations that have the potential to drive change at a large scale. Promoting uptake of these practices refers to efforts to “spread and sustain [them] in a larger context, in order to achieve greater social impact with renewable revenue sources over time.”¹ The ways in which you might go about this work will of course depend on the larger context you’re working in—this might be geographical or refer to certain systems or areas of practice—and the nature of the innovation that you’re trying to spread. However, in general, this approach may include the following elements:

- + Defining or codifying the practice
- + Assessing a practice for its readiness for spread and uptake
- + Disseminating information, knowledge, and exemplars
- + Providing training or technical assistance
- + Building coalitions or other modes of affiliation with other organizations,

through which the practice can be taken up

- + Building a supportive enabling environment

A **key assumption** underlying promoting the uptake of practices as an approach to advancing social change: if new, innovative, or enhanced ways of thinking or working are widespread and institutionalized, it is possible to realize broad and durable social impact.

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Another shorthand for this type of work is “scale.” We intentionally avoided using that shorthand in this piece, largely because, like other terms, it is a word that can take on a life of its own and mean very different things to different people. Our hope with avoiding the shorthand is to help people talk specifically and directly about what they are trying to do, so they can be clearer and in better alignment with others.

We also are focusing on changes that happen within organizations, not efforts to change individual behaviors, which pull from a different set of theoretical frameworks and approaches.

Spreading new ways of doing business with B Labs

Founded in 2006, B Lab is a nonprofit entity that certifies companies seeking to generate value for stakeholders beyond just their shareholders. B Corporation certification is awarded based on the assessment of a company’s environmental and social performance and the level of accountability and transparency in its operations. A first set of organizations undertook certification in 2007, and the number of participants has grown rapidly since. Through a mixture of information and knowledge dissemination, fundraising, organizational licensing, training, and advocacy, B Lab has supported the spread of this practice, and it has been picked up by companies as a means of demonstrating their commitment to social impact and standing out from their competitors. As of 2020, there are more than 3,200 Certified B-Corporations in 150 industries, spanning 71 countries across the globe.

What are some key concepts and frameworks that might be useful?

If you want to achieve widespread uptake, it's important to be clear on what exactly it is you're aiming to promote—and what that means for how you go about doing it. In a piece that looks at the different ways you might think about scale, Julia Coffman outlines four approaches that

elucidate what is being scaled and the implications this has for how to scale it. While we have avoided the term “scale,” this framework is a useful way of differentiating what it is you actually want organizations to take up.

Table 1 — Approaches to Scale²

What Is Scaled	Definition	Mechanisms
Program: A system of projects or services that meets a need for individuals or communities	Copying a program that research has shown to be effective, with the expectation that it can or will produce the same results in different places. Scaled programs often allow for flexibility in implementation to best adapt to the local context.	Replication Adaptation
Idea or Innovation: A new way of thinking about or doing something; new solutions to problems	Spreading an idea among individuals or organizations within a certain area or system (geographic, organizational, professional); ideas can be adapted to fit different purposes or contexts.	Communication Marketing Dissemination
Technology or Skill: Products, tools, techniques, or practices ³	Increasing the number of people or places that use or apply a technology, practice, or approach.	Marketing Distribution Training Granting
Policy: Codified statements that define plans or a course of action	Ensuring that ideas expressed as policy are transformed into behavior throughout a place or jurisdiction (e.g., city, county, state, region, country).	Implementation

Source: Coffman, J. (2010). Broadening the Perspective on Scale.

Identifying the right strategy for promoting the uptake of an innovative practice is, as noted above, often dependent on the context it's being spread in—and the nature of the innovation itself. Given this, Greg Dees, Beth Battle Anderson, and Jane Wei-Skillern propose a set of “five

Rs”—considerations that, when addressed, can help actors engaged in this work to identify the most promising approaches for driving uptake.

Table 2| The Five “Rs” of Scaling Social Impact⁴

Consideration	Key Questions
Readiness	Is the innovation (or practice) ready to be spread? What core elements of the innovation are critical to achieving impact?
Receptivity	What strategy will best ensure that the innovation will be well-received in target communities? Are there reasons to anticipate resistance?
Resources	What are the resource requirements for the strategies under consideration?
Risks	How likely is it that an innovation will be implemented incorrectly or will fail to achieve its intended impact? What are the potential negative effects on the clients and communities being served?
Returns	What strategy will reach the most locations most effectively?

Source: Dees, J. G., Anderson, B. B., & Wei-Skillern, J. (2004). Scaling Social Impact.

Understanding how practices spread can also be helpful in determining the right approach for promoting uptake, understanding where to target efforts, and measuring progress. Diffusion of innovations is a theory that seeks to explain how, why, and at what rate new ideas and technology spread. Everett M. Rogers, who popularized the theory, proposes that four main elements

influence the spread of a new idea: the innovation itself, [communication channels](#), time, and a social system.⁵ This theory also lays out categories of adopters, detailed in the table below. Understanding the different categories of adopters can be useful for determining how to focus your efforts and how to understand successful rates of uptake.

Table 3 – Diffusion of Innovation Adopter Categories⁶

Type of adopter	Characteristics	Implications
Innovators	Want to be the first to try innovation; venturesome and interested in new ideas and willing to take risks.	Very little, if anything, needs to be done to appeal to this population.
Early adopters	Opinion leaders who enjoy leadership roles and embrace change opportunities. Already aware of the need to change and comfortable adopting new ideas.	Strategies to appeal to this population include how-to manuals and information sheets on implementation. They do not need information to convince them to change.
Early majority	Adopt new ideas before the average but typically need to see evidence that the innovation works before willing to adopt it.	Strategies to appeal to this population include success stories and evidence of the innovation’s effectiveness.
Late majority	Skeptical of change. Will only adopt an innovation after it has been tried by the majority.	Strategies to appeal to this population include information on how many other people have tried the innovation and have adopted it successfully.
Laggards	Bound by tradition and very conservative. Skeptical of change and the hardest group to bring on board.	Strategies to appeal to this population include statistics, fear appeals, and pressure from others.

Source: Adapted from University of Oklahoma. (n.d.) Diffusion of Innovation Theory

Within the rate of adoption, there is a point at which an innovation reaches critical mass. Widespread uptake of a practice often depends on successfully “crossing the chasm” between the early adopters and the early majority;⁷ understanding the characteristics of each group can be helpful in thinking about how they can best be targeted and how the innovation needs to adapt and

change in order to meet the needs of each group. Building on this, diffusion of innovation theory also identifies the five main factors that influence the adoption of an innovation, which can be useful in understanding the characteristics that a particular idea or practice needs to have if it’s going to be widely taken up.

Table 4 – Factors That Influence Uptake

Factor	Description
Relative advantage	The degree to which an innovation is seen as better than what it replaces
Compatibility	How consistent the innovation is with the values, experiences, and needs of the potential adopters
Complexity	How difficult the innovation is to understand and/or use
Triability	The extent to which the innovation can be tested or experimented with before a commitment to adopt is made
Observability	The extent to which the innovation provides tangible results

Source: University of Oklahoma. (n.d.) *Diffusion of Innovation Theory*

How can this approach advance equity?

Efforts to promote the uptake of practices can embed equity by addressing the ways in which current practices foster (or are unhelpfully neutral about) existing disparities and inequities. This approach can also consider and incorporate equitable principles throughout its implementation. To ensure this approach is grounded in equitable principles—including deep awareness of how practices are culturally appropriate; who are leaders, influencers, or spokespeople in efforts to spread practices; and how the promotion of ideas or practices is inclusive and respectful to all—the following questions are important to consider (though not exhaustive):

- + Who will new practices affect and in what ways? Have affected groups been involved in the conception and development of new practices?
- + Do practices themselves explicitly address issues of equity—for example, are practices intended to reduce disparities or ensure equitable outcomes?
- + Who is involved in and/or leading the spread and uptake of the practice?
- + Are communications that promote the spread/uptake culturally appropriate and respectful? Do communications involve avenues and modes that are accessible to a wide range of audiences?
 - Are knowledge/informational products accessible—for example, language, graphics?
 - Are trainings accessible—for example, language, timing, location of trainings?
 - Which organizations receive access to trainings and technical assistance? Which organizations may have difficulty accessing trainings or technical assistance?
- + Do certain organizations require additional supports to access, engage with, or take up new practices?
- + Are there unanticipated consequences of spreading these practices? How will these be addressed?

What are key outcomes to look for?

The most near-term changes resulting from efforts to promote the uptake of practices are likely to occur among targeted stakeholders: individual stakeholders expected to take up new practices or organizational leaders expected to encourage or support new practices.

What follows may be changes in systems as practices are refined, codified, and further spread, as well as the ultimate social impact sought through the uptake of practice. The table below identifies outcomes that may be relevant to these efforts at different stages of the work.

Table 5 – Examples of Outcomes Related to Promoting the Uptake and Spread of Practice

Shorter-Term	Longer-Term
<p>Changes among stakeholders expected to take up new practices (primarily organizations)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased awareness or knowledge about new/enhanced practice among key stakeholders and what it takes to implement the practice • Increased buy-in and support for uptake of new/enhanced practice among organizational leaders and decision makers • Increased stakeholder capacity and resources to engage in new/enhanced practices • Increased supports necessary to promote or maintain uptake or spread of practice—for example, processes to test and refine practice, technologies, training/technical assistance • Changes in internal resource allocation to support desired practices • Increased/broader demonstration of new/enhanced practices—for example, increased uptake of practices across multiple organizations 	<p>Systems-level changes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased codification of useful new practices • Changes in norms regarding expected practice across multiple organizations, networks, or systems • Increased and broadened transfer of knowledge that informs new/enhanced practice across networks or sectors • Increased infrastructure to support uptake and spread of practices—for example, policies, organizational structures, resources <p>Changes that reflect advancement of social impact</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Widespread uptake of practices is advancing large-scale population or environmental changes

Tracking Progress and Learning Along the Way

Measuring the state and progress of efforts to promote uptake of practices has some specific considerations that may differ from those related to other types of strategies. We wanted to share a few insights we have gained in the past that may help others more effectively and efficiently undertake this work and build upon the practices that exist currently.⁸

Define your denominator. Promoting the uptake and spread of practice implies that practices are taken up by large numbers of stakeholders. Measurement of such approaches often focuses on the quantitative assessment of how many people or organizations exhibit desired practices. However, that number on its own may not be sufficient to convey the extent to which practices

are meaningfully spread. Determining this depends on a clearly defined denominator—for example, the *total number* of people or organizations that you could expect to change practice. Getting clear about this number is likely to require some upfront work; for example, there may be research or assessment needed to determine what is the total number of people or organizations that could or should change. Once the denominator is clear, then measurement could be usefully implemented to track the pace of progress or determine where there appears to be gaps in the uptake/spread that might require a specific response or intervention. And tracking spread against the denominator will convey a much clearer signal about how well the spread has matched its potential. It is also

important to think about segmenting your denominator (and numerator) by different characteristics, so you can understand if uptake and benefits are representative of the whole or perpetuating inequities.

Consider a “theory of scale.” Many things go into developing ideas and practices that show promise for wider uptake and adoption, including a clear theory of change behind what activities or components need to be in place to achieve desired outcomes. It could be easy, then, to think that promoting greater uptake just means seeing more of these same outcomes. However, promoting uptake of something actually requires a different and distinct set of activities that should be considered and potentially evaluated. Rather than just seeing the degree to which outcomes are replicated by others who adopt the practice, it’s important to think about how that work will be supported. Activities related to technical assistance, quality assurance, continuous improvement, and communications need to be considered. The successful identification and implementation of these activities will

have a material effect on the degree to which uptake will occur as well as the degree to which uptake should have desired results. As with considering your denominator, understanding the degree to which you reach and support different populations can be important for supporting equitable results.

Be cautious with the term “scale.” For this work, we have very intentionally avoided the term “scale.” In our experience, that word can take on a life of its own and mean very different things to those who use it. We’d encourage you in doing this work to push yourself to avoid the word scale and be very clear, in plain language, about what is being sought. Do you mean increasing the number of individuals or organizations who are exercising a practice or idea? Do you mean setting up infrastructure that can allow work to happen across a broader set of organizations? Do you mean something else entirely? Being explicit about what you seek will lead to stronger strategy and measurement.

Where can I learn more and go deeper?

This short brief can only give the smallest taste of the wealth of information that exists that should inform strategy and measurement decisions. Below we provide links to some of the materials we referenced and

found most helpful so that you can dig deeper into the frameworks and ideas that will best support your own thinking and processes.

- Coffman, J. (2010). [Broadening the Perspective on Scale.](#)
- Dees, G. & Anderson, B. B. (2004). [Scaling Social Impact: Strategies for spreading social innovations.](#)
- Moore, G. A. (1991). [Crossing the Chasm: Marketing and Selling High-Tech Products to Mainstream Customers.](#)
- Rogers, E. M. (1962). [Diffusion of Innovations.](#)

Endnotes

- ¹ Tuan, M. T., & Greiff, D. (2010). *Framework for scaling, sustainability, and systems change applied to higher education*. For the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation Postsecondary Success Team, unpublished.
- ² Coffman, J. (2010). Broadening the perspective on scale. *Evaluation Exchange*, 15(1), 2–3. <https://archive.globalfrp.org/var/hfrp/storage/original/application/b09c074129f1943b4a172d23fb8542b5.pdf>
- ³ Note that we have used the term practice in a broader sense for this piece than the author does here; in our usage, it could potentially refer to any of these elements.
- ⁴ Dees, J. G., Anderson, B. B., & Wei-Skillern, J. (2004). Scaling social impact. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, 1(4), 24–32.
- ⁵ Rogers, E. M. (1962). *Diffusion of Innovations*. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster.
- ⁶ Adapted from University of Oklahoma. (n.d.) Diffusion of innovation theory. <https://www.ou.edu/deptcomm/dodjcc/groups/99A2/theories.htm>
- ⁷ Moore, G. A. (1991). *Crossing the Chasm*. New York, NY: Harper Business.
- ⁸ Check out the brief, [Not Always Movements: Multiple Approaches to Advance Large-Scale Social Change](#) for considerations about how to effectively track progress and learn along the way when you are implementing social change approaches in dynamic environments more broadly.