

## Dissolving Dualities: The Case for Commonsense Replication

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*Although replicating promising organizations and programs has been crucial to the development of the nonprofit sector, the replication process remains poorly understood. Its development has been caught on the horns of three unhelpful dualities: replication versus adaptation, competition versus cooperation, and systems or organizational capabilities versus leadership. Drawing on actual replication experiences, the article contends that these dualities represent false, oversimplified choices and that bridging the gaps they imply would enable replication to do more to strengthen the sector.*

*Keywords: replication; adaptation; competition; cooperation; systems; leadership*

A hundred years ago, G. Tarde, a French lawyer and sociologist, observed that imitation is the essence of society (Tarde, 1903). The reproduction of beliefs, habits, language, and the like, Tarde declared, is what makes a group of people a society.

To create shared ways of thinking, feeling, and acting is endemic to the human condition. It is also, for that very reason, part and parcel of how the nonprofit sector conducts its business, although, surprisingly, rarely acknowledged as such.

Replicating promising organizations and programs has been essential to the sector's development. From denominational churches to Boys and Girls Clubs, from Habitat for Humanity to children's museums, replication has served as a chief way in which the sector extends the reach and effect of what it

deems to have value. Even so, the subject of nonprofit replication remains, to this day, largely unexplored.

As someone involved on a daily basis in helping a wide variety of organizations with scaling up challenges over the past 8 years, I have been struck by the lack of what psychologist Ellen Langer (1990) called “mindfulness” when it comes to replication. To the extent there has been discourse on replication within the nonprofit sector, it has tended to generate more heat than light. Opinion leaders have been wont to line up either for or against it, as if replication represents an ideological position rather than, as Tarde implied, an elemental form of social action. A prominent nonprofit leader approached me at a conference a while back to aver that she did not believe in replication, but rather, in adaptation. At about the same time, I received a phone call from an enthusiastic nonprofit executive who, based on a single favorable story about her program in the local newspaper, believed she was ready for national scale. A penchant for oversimplification has characterized the topic, making progress in understanding near to impossible.

In particular, the consideration of replication has been stuck on the horns of three oversimplifying and unproductive dualities. Sometimes dualities serve a necessary analytical purpose. The difference between liberal and conservative, for example, helps us to understand democratic politics, even if it is not always easy to put people in one category or the other. However, often—perhaps more often than not—dualities are simply an excuse for not digging deeper.

At the most basic level, there is the duality distinguishing replication from adaptation, as emphasized by the nonprofit executive just mentioned. This duality pits replicating a program or organization with fidelity to its requirements against adapting it to the conditions of new settings. The implication is that either you honor the essential elements of the program or organization or you do not because settings differ too much to permit it. One position seems to suggest that the knowledge entailed in an effective program or organization should be dispositive, whereas the other seems to contend that it cannot be.

A second duality exists between competition and cooperation, between the intensified competition that replication entails and the ethic of cooperation intrinsic to the nonprofit sector. The sector has long been uncertain about the role competition should play in its development. At best, it regards competition as a necessary evil, something that occurs but is better left undiscussed. Entrepreneurial developers of promising programs and organizations want to compete but quickly meet with pressures to cooperate instead, as if the two forces are innately incompatible.

Third is the tension between systems and leadership. In this duality, achieving replication through the creation of sophisticated organizational capabilities contrasts with achieving it through charisma. The one school of thought is almost engineering-like in its orientation: build the right system or set of systems to replicate a program or organization effectively. The other views

managing the reality of replication largely as a political exercise best done by powerful individuals. One believes you can design your way to success, the other says that it is all a matter of personality.

Each of these three dualities represents a false choice. Only by transcending them will it be possible for replication to find its proper place among the strategies of the sector.

### REPLICATION VERSUS ADAPTATION

Replication and adaptation are inextricably linked. It is impossible to have one without the other. There has never been a pure replication, and there never will be. The programmatic or organizational know-how to be replicated will always be, to some extent, incomplete, and different human agents will be responsible for its application in each new setting. In addition, pure adaptation is a logical impossibility. It is tantamount to saying that everything about a given program or organization can be changed to suit the conditions in a new site; so, why bother. No, the choice is never between replication and adaptation, but over which aspects of a program or organization to replicate with fidelity and which can or should be adaptive.

The key to grasping this truth lies in the concept of fidelity, or more specifically, in treating fidelity with more subtlety than has typically been the case. If a program or what an organization does is valid and reliable enough to be replicated, fidelity to the function (i.e., purpose) and structure (i.e., essential components) of that model should be expected, at least when initially replicated. Adaptability should not be at these levels of fidelity, because they encompass what makes the program or organization effective. Tamper with them, and the chances of reproducing that effectiveness diminish or go out the window altogether. The aim of replication is to enable practitioners, whoever they might be, to have more effect, to become, in other words, more expert by running programs of demonstrable effectiveness. Such expertise is most likely to develop in a context defined by a clear and consistent purpose and structure, rather than one in which these features are deliberately left ambiguous or change with the latest breeze.

Where adaptability makes sense in replication is at the level of operations, the day-to-day work that staff or volunteers do. Consider Big Brothers and Big Sisters, the mentoring organization. It operates a community-based, one-to-one mentoring program that has the same basic components everywhere it exists. However, how a mentor and the child he or she mentors actually spend their time can vary from day to day and from pair to pair, within general guidelines provided by the national organization. Or take the Nurse-Family Partnership, a well-tested, highly regarded program in which nurses visit first-time mothers in their homes during pregnancy and the first 2 years of the child's life. The program is governed by a detailed design that

each site is expected to reproduce. Where adaptation comes in is in the discretion nurse home visitors exercise during any home visit, based on the presenting circumstances of the family.

Admittedly, the distinction between the structure to preserve and the operations to adapt is not always an easy one to make in practice. Some programs and organizations, as a matter of basic philosophy, go for more adaptation than replication, and often, thereby, create problems for themselves by intentionally blurring the difference between structure and operations. These endeavors typically call for replicating principles or concepts, a more abstract form of know-how that stops short of defining essential components and leaves most of the implementation design decisions to local operators. The Coalition of Essential Schools, a high school reform model, is a good example. A school adopting this model is guided by 10 principles or value statements in constructing the particular form that the program will take in that school. As a result, Coalition programs do not look alike from one school to the next, which leads to more variation in performance and makes it harder for participating schools to learn from each other's experiences.

The question that an example such as the Coalition of Essential Schools poses is: Who should decide what to adapt? Should it be local operators or the central agent for the program or organization? Replicating principles or concepts depends a lot on the capability of local operators. The more able local operators are liable to do well with the freedom they have to design a program suited to their circumstances (Slavin, 1995). However, less able operators are apt to flounder, as the Coalition of Essential Schools and other concept replicators have found. Furthermore, when local operators have a lot of latitude in deciding what to adapt, they often make choices based on political considerations rather than mindful attention to what it will take to preserve the effectiveness of the program or organization. In other words, a replicated program or organization gets changed to appease local interests, regardless of whether the change will enable the program or organization to attain the outcomes of which it is capable. Political accommodation trumps effectiveness.

It does not have to be this way. There are powerful, genuine advantages to replicating programs and organizations with structural specificity, to reproducing their essential components at some level of detail based on guidance and standards provided by their developers. They can be implemented more quickly (and thus more cheaply) and successfully because fewer local choices about how to implement have to be made. Moreover, they can be adapted with a sharper sense of how any change may affect the operation and performance of the program or organization (Racine, 2000). As studies of business replication have shown, adaptations are likely to be more effective after a model or template has been implemented with fidelity than before (Winter & Szulanski, 2001). Replicating effective programs and organizations with the right balance of fidelity and adaptation seems to be an important way to boost the overall effectiveness of the nonprofit sector.

## COMPETITION VERSUS COOPERATION

In every nonprofit organization in which I have worked no topic drew more attention from top management than what to do about the competition. In addition, no topic was more publicly undiscussible. The sector's commitment to an ethic of cooperation has discouraged thoughtful, overt attention to the reality of competition (unless, of course, the competitors happen to be for-profit).

Replication forces the issue of competition into the open. When a nonprofit organization or program decides to pursue replication, it makes a claim, whether expressed or not, to offer something of value that cannot otherwise be obtained. In other words, it makes a claim to superiority that cannot help but be regarded as a competitive threat by other organizations and programs in the same field. However, the truth does not end there. Ironically, by fostering competition, replication might actually enable more and better forms of cooperation. This is what happens in the business sector. There is no reason to think it cannot be made to happen in the nonprofit realm, too.

In the commercial, for-profit world, competition is valued and expected. It used to be thought that competition increases the efficiency of markets, whereas cooperation reduces it. This understanding has been slowly undergoing revision as sociologically oriented economists and economically oriented sociologists clarify the social nature of markets, in which interfirm alliances and more tacit forms of cooperation provide the stability needed for efficiency to be achieved and for companies to figure out how to prosper (Fligstein, 2001; Smelser & Swedberg, 1994). Competition occurs, as it always has, within legally and socially constructed rules of the game that usually keep things from getting out of control. In the absence of this social dimension, firms could not predict one another's behavior, and their ignorance would lead them to resort to ruthless or stupid tactics to advantage themselves.

The nonprofit sector has been affected, it might be said, by the opposite problem. Cooperation is valued and expected in the interest of civic harmony and, often, in expressed contradistinction to the rivalrous character of the for-profit arena. Yet in the quest for social sector effectiveness, which replication enunciates, it becomes clear that competition is not just a reality, but a necessity—a necessity we are better off acknowledging and managing in pursuit of excellence than trying to downplay.

Cooperation for its own sake crowds out creativity and can become stultifying, dashing ambition on the shoals of forced interdependence. However, when joined with competition, it provides the stable order that can keep the pursuit of excellence from getting out of hand, while at the same time showing the developers or agents of attractive programs and organizations how to extend their reach and produce more value for society.

Competition stems from the need organizations and programs have to differentiate themselves from one another. When competition is given freer

reign, it leads to more organizations and programs coming into being. This presents any one program or organization with more choices in terms of other programs and organizations with which to cooperate (Gulati & Gargiulo, 1997). Moreover, when there are more choices of this kind, the possibilities of discovering or creating more effective forms of cooperation increase.

The benefits of competition balanced with cooperation can be seen in the early childhood field. During the past 30 years, advances in knowledge about the role of early brain development and the continuing hope for preventing social problems before they start or worsen have spurred the proliferation of early interventions. In the home visiting for families with young children market, for example, there are no less than six national program systems (i.e., replicated program networks) vying for resources and legitimacy. These systems compete, and the competition is open and acknowledged. However, they also cooperate in numerous ways—formally and informally. The result is a maturing field in which each system appears to be evolving gradually toward the occupation of a distinct niche, a development only made possible, it seems, by the blending of competition and cooperation, or what the popular business literature refers to as “coopetition” (Bradenburger & Nalebuff, 1996).

Replicating promising programs and organizations is not a call for ruthless competition, but for competition within a rule-governed, relationally rich, nonprofit environment. Competition is not the enemy of cooperation. Just as with replication and adaptation, competition and cooperation are necessary complements of one another, not an unbridgeable duality. This is plain to anyone who has walked the path of replication. Arguably, there should be more attention to this reality within the conversation of the nonprofit sector. Indeed, it might be better for the sector if more thought were given to how to make competition work within it and maybe a little less to fretting over the threat posed by competition from for-profits.

#### SYSTEMS VERSUS LEADERSHIP

Not long ago, I gave a presentation on replication to the board of directors of a nonprofit organization. In the ensuing discussion, one of the directors expressed surprise that I had not emphasized more the importance of strong, dynamic leadership and top-notch personnel at all levels of a national replication effort. Another director quickly came to my rescue, noting that if replication always depended on being staffed by the best people, not much replication would happen.

Some think that replication is a substitute for leadership, but in reality it demands a certain type of leadership of which the nonprofit sector could use more. Leaders with charisma can be an advantage in producing social action, but they are usually not necessary and can have real downsides. Replication calls for a more ordinary, but still effective, kind of leadership that is in readier

supply. Although these leaders may not be all that interesting to read about, they are more likely to contribute to the overall capacity and effect of the non-profit sector.

There is no question that charismatic leadership can be a plus when trying to move a promising program or organization to greater scale. Moreover, trying to match this strength by developing champions at lower levels of the undertaking can be worth the effort. Most social sector initiatives must, to some extent, be pushed into an environment that, if not unwelcoming, rarely makes the task of replication straightforward and easy. Logically speaking, this "pushing" may be better done by leaders and staff with a compelling vision, determination, and intelligence than by those without these attributes.

However, at the same time, too much dependence on personality is a sure way to limit success. There is only so much charismatic leadership to go around. Dynamic founders of nonprofit organizations and programs often derive their early success from the intense interpersonal ties they are able to establish with their followers. As their enterprises grow, however, it becomes increasingly harder to maintain this same intensity of relationship. Ted Sizer, the founder of the Coalition of Essential Schools, discovered this as more and more schools joined the Coalition. It became humanly impossible for him to directly influence each school, so that more impersonal mechanisms for stimulating and managing the effort needed to be invented. Might it have been better for the Coalition, in the competition for school reform market share, had the need for management systems been deeply appreciated at the outset? Probably.

It also seems to be the case that entrepreneurial founders and the staffs they attract are often motivated mainly by the creative process of getting the organization or program started and on the path of growth. A fluid, free-form way of operating suits them. However, as the enterprise expands, while creativity is still needed, more room has to be made for managing growth systematically—for being clear about who is responsible for what, for being held accountable through measurable performance, and for creating an appropriate organizational identification for a growing number of stakeholders. Founding staffs sometimes have difficulty making this transition to a more orderly way of doing things.

I worked, for example, with one nonprofit organization that, after thoroughly considering the replication that its funders wanted it to undertake, opted out and instead decided to stick with its creative, informal mode of operation. The value its leaders and staff derived from a more organic way of functioning exceeded the value they believed they could attain through the increased formalization that replication would bring to them.

Replication is difficult work to do well. Although effective leaders are needed to provide vision and motivation, it is equally important that organizations be built up around them that, if need be, can succeed without them or with new leadership when that comes to pass.

## CONCLUSION

Replication has long been practiced in the social sector. In addition, as long as there are people with programs and organizations that hold the promise of improving lives on a larger scale, replication will continue to be practiced. The question is whether to face this reality and try to improve it or continue in a state of arrested development contending over false choices.

The nonprofit sector is where our society most expresses its diversity. It allows people of all kinds to pursue their different dreams and ideas for making life better in small ways and large. However, while serving as an outlet for difference, it must become at the same time more effective at consolidating its gains. It cannot thrive solely on the celebration of differences, especially not when communities have problems and challenges in common. If credible, effective ways have been found to solve those problems and meet those challenges, then replicating those ways should meet the test of common sense.

Replicating what works is a good strategy for the continuing development of the sector. Good, that is, if the kinds of dualities I discussed can be overcome, as I think they can and should be. Each side of each of these dualities needs not only to pay more attention to the other side but also to recognize the chinks in its own intellectual armor. Replication as a nonprofit strategy has not advanced much because of a willingness of too many people to accept simple and easy ways to think about it. Often, the only way to get to what is truly simple is to first contend with complexity. A healthy first step in that direction would be to ditch the shibboleths entailed in the dualities that have characterized the replication debate to date.

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