

How Field Catalysts Contribute to Progress in Their Fields

Field catalysts are among the highest-leverage investments that philanthropy can make when it comes to systems change. Yet, as we outline in [“What Philanthropists Can Learn from Field Catalysts About Measuring Progress on Systems Change,”](#) progress can be tricky to measure. That leaves funders often wondering how they can know they are making progress through the investments they are making or considering in field catalysts.

We encourage funders to 1) ask the leaders how they measure progress and support their approach, 2) seek *output* measures to understand progress in the early stages of an effort—because meaningful outcomes may be a long way off, and 3) support field catalyst leaders as their strategies and measures of progress change in response to shifts in the field.

To help kickstart conversations, we’ve pulled together a set of specific questions a funder might ask a field catalyst leader, aligned with **five observable field characteristics (and sometimes a sixth)** that we know together enable fields to make progress toward equitable systems change. Funders can pick and choose from these questions to start conversations with field catalysts.

1. Field-Level Agenda

Questions funders can ask field catalysts:

- How are you and others defining the problem you are trying to solve, and your vision for solving it?
- What are you observing as the priority needs in the field right now?
- What areas are emerging as priorities for field actors to collaborate on?
- How do you contribute to the field by developing a shared understanding of the problem, vision, and/or agenda?

2. Knowledge Base

Questions funders can ask field catalysts:

- What academic and practice-based research do field actors rely on?
- What are the open learning questions that field leaders are grappling with?
- Are most actors in the field basing their approaches on the same information and understanding of the core problem and its root causes? Where is there alignment and where are there disconnects?
- How do you contribute to actors deepening their knowledge and understanding of the problem and what it will take to solve it?

3. Actors

Questions funders can ask field catalysts:

- Which actors are critical to engage in charting the path forward for this field, and are they involved today?
- Are you seeing the actors that work closest to the stakeholders most affected by the problem have a meaningful say and power in the field?
- How do you contribute to ensuring the appropriate diverse set of actors are cultivated and engaged in this work?

4. Infrastructure

Questions funders can ask field catalysts:

- What structures and spaces exist to build and maintain relationships, and learn from others?
- How do you contribute to actors connecting, learning, and collaborating with one another?

5. Resources

Questions funders can ask field catalysts:

- Who are the main funders in the field, and how are they coordinating their efforts?
- Is funding reaching all the actors it needs to in this field, in the ways it needs to?
- How do you contribute to shaping resource flows in this field?

6. Public Sector Systems

In certain geographies or contexts, consideration of public sector systems actors and infrastructure is so essential to the work of equitable systems change that we recommend considering “public sector systems” as its own characteristic.

Questions funders can ask field catalysts:

- What is the value proposition of your work to public sector systems actors?
- How will public sector systems evolve as a result of your work?

As you approach the conversation, consider:

- Listen for how a field catalyst showcases the four field catalyst assets:
 - Deep understanding of the problem
 - Vision for durable and equitable population-level change
 - An organizer’s mindset
 - Trusting relationships with the actors required to achieve change
- Field catalyst leaders may raise successes, and they may name areas that have been challenging and/ or are the frontiers of the work—both are important to understand. View challenges as opportunities to clarify the barriers and support the next wave of approaches.
- The ability of a field catalyst to describe a field and identify areas of opportunity is often a better reflection of the field catalyst’s effectiveness than actual field progress.
- Field progress often reflects the contributions of field catalysts but isn’t attributable to their work alone.
- Field catalyst leaders may note some of their own contributions and those of others—there may even be more than one field catalyst in a field.
- For further details on assessing the progress of a field, please see Bridgespan’s [“Field Diagnostic Tool.”](#)

THE BRIDGESPAN GROUP

BOSTON 2 Copley Place, 7th Floor, Suite 3700B, Boston, MA 02116 USA. Tel: +1 617 572 2833

JOHANNESBURG Bridgespan Africa, The MARC, Tower 1, 3rd Floor, Corner Maude and Rivonia Road, Sandown Johannesburg, South Africa. Tel: +27 11 012 9280

MUMBAI Bridgespan India Private Limited (registered address), 11th Floor, Platina, G Block, Plot C 59, Bandra Kurla Complex, Mumbai, 400051, India. Tel: +91 022 6628 9624

NEW YORK 333 Seventh Avenue, 11th Floor, New York, NY 10001 USA. Tel: +1 646 562 8900

SAN FRANCISCO 88 Kearny St., Ste. 200, San Francisco, CA 94108 USA. Tel: +1 415 627 4500

SINGAPORE The Bridgespan Group, Sponsored by Bain Singapore, 38 Beach Road, 15th Floor, South Beach Tower, Singapore 189767



www.bridgespan.org

contact@bridgespan.org
contactindia@bridgespan.org

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons BY-NC-ND License.
To view a copy of this license, visit <http://www.bridgespan.org/about-us/terms-and-conditions>