

Editor's Note: Early this summer I attended the annual conference of the Delaware Alliance for Nonprofit Advancement. The keynote speaker was Hildy Gottlieb. Hildy is a TEDx speaker, as well as a contributor to The Huffington Post, and the Stanford Social Innovation Review. She is also the creator and host of the Making Change podcast, where she has interviewed leaders from around the world about the factors that create powerful, positive change. Hildy presented a message that resonated with many of us in the audience at the Chase Center: We can create the future we want. What would it take to reframe how we think about change, to focus on what is possible instead of what is wrong? In addition, what can we do better together than we can do on our own independently?

Hildy, Sheila Bravo (Executive Director of DANA) and I have continued a dialog, and the following article is one of the results of this ongoing dialog - and presents a potential road map to addressing violence in the First State. Many outside of the nonprofit sector are not familiar with the work of DANA, and I encourage you to visit their website, www.delawarenonprofit.org. It is the vision of DANA that resonates strongly with that of the Academy/DPHA:

“The quality of life for Delawareans will improve because nonprofits are delivering on their missions efficiently and effectively. The Delaware Alliance for Nonprofit Advancement will be the leader of the nonprofit sector, recognized for providing skills leadership, convening leadership, and voice leadership for the sector.”

Using Causality to Create Safe, Healthy Communities

Hildy Gottlieb

The lights dim, and the movie begins with the town confronting a powerful, evil force. Despite massive military efforts, the enemy is growing stronger. Finally the hero signals the turning point, declaring, “If we can’t outgun them, we’ll have to outsmart them.” By the time the credits roll, the town is safe.

Right now communities across the US often feel the desperation of that action movie scenario. The enemy isn’t a single villain, but the many faces of violence itself - random acts of gun violence in movie theaters, schools and workplaces, acts of terrorism, gang violence. Whole groups of community members live in fear of violence by police officers. Police officers live in fear of violence from the very people they work to protect. The artillery lobbed at this enemy has included the War on Terror, the War on Poverty, the War on Drugs. Local task forces and national task forces have tried idea after idea, rooted in different scenarios of who or what is to blame. Yet the problems persist.

With our very lives at stake, where is that movie hero with the answer to save the day?

Outsmarting vs. Outgunning

That sense of frustration and hopelessness has been a steady conversation for decades in the social change arena. In quiet whispers and in loud political proclamations, people who thought they had the answers wonder why, after all that effort, our problems still feel so overwhelming.

On the other side of that equation, though, the past hundred years has witnessed some of history's biggest leaps toward our human potential. The Civil Rights Movement, the Indian Independence Movement, and the South African Freedom Movement are evidence that the good guys can win in very big ways.

That simple fact has inspired my own research for the past 20 years: to identify what is at the root of those huge leaps of social progress, and to see what would happen if those success factors were applied to other large scale problems – poverty, climate change, violence.

My research has included the fields of sociology and history (the study of group behaviors), as well as the fields of behavioral psychology and neuroscience (the study of individual behaviors). My findings have been curiously similar to that movie plot: the solution to our problems lies not in our actions, but in the thinking that goes into those actions – outsmarting vs. outgunning the problem.

That thinking is rooted in the basic scientific principle of cause-and-effect. Simply put, social progress happens when causality is employed to create the future we want vs. react to our problems.

To see what that looks like in action, this article will first define causality. We'll explore what it looks like to use causality to create the future we want. Then we will compare that to how policy has been created in the past, using a variety of scientific disciplines to explain why those approaches have not produced significant results. We will then share steps you can take to apply causality to create the future you want, with an example rooted in the issue of community violence.

Causality

According to Merriam-Webster's online dictionary, causality is "the relationship between something that happens or exists and the thing that causes it." It is the simple fact that today's reality is both the result of yesterday and the cause of tomorrow.

We know that arguing with our kids at breakfast can set off a chain of causality that might include their being late to school and forgetting their lunches, as well as our being late to work and being grumpy when we arrive. Causality can turn a tiny snowball at the top of a hill into a growing mass that becomes an avalanche as it rolls downward.

That same principle of causality is both creating and perpetuating problems such as poverty and violence.

Our efforts to cure those problems do not begin with the social policies and programs we create, however, because those programs and policies have causes as well – the thoughts, assumptions and beliefs of the people building those programs (see Figure 1).

Figure 1.



If we want to create a future different from our present, that chain of causality will therefore begin not in our actions, but in our thinking.

Using Causality to Create the Future We Want

Aiming at a positive future means asking, “What do we really want? What would success look like? What is the highest potential outcome of our efforts?” and then determining the cause-and-effect conditions that will lead to that result. Those two steps – aiming and creating conditions – render that positive result as inevitable as the snowball gaining mass and momentum as it rolls downhill. We want a world filled with healthy, humane communities, where everyday life brings out the best in our uniquely human potential.

We want the world Dr. Martin Luther King imagined in his “I Have a Dream” speech.

But having a dream is not enough. Leaders of the civil rights movement reached for that dream by determining the conditions under which it was likely to happen. In his Letter from a Birmingham Jail,¹ Dr. King noted, “[Nonviolent resistance] seeks to so dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored.” Night after night on the evening news, politicians and average citizens watched peaceful adults and children being set upon by fire hoses and dogs, until finally they demanded change. That strategy exemplifies what it means to aim for what is possible and place cause-and-effect stepping stones towards that future.

The Norm in Social Policy

Social change agents want to think their work is aimed at creating a healthy, humane world. In truth, though, almost all current social policy is reactive, not creative. A “war” on anything is, by definition, reactive – poverty, drugs, terror. Anti-violence campaigns, anti-hunger campaigns, programs to reduce drop-out rates, law-and-order platforms, and mass incarceration efforts are all reactive programs, aiming to eliminate what we do not like about our current situation.

Reactivity shows itself in problem-solving programs (reacting to the problem), root cause programs (laying blame for and then reacting to those deeper issues), and proactive prevention programs (reacting by ensuring bad things don’t happen in the future).

In analyzing the difference between movements that create social progress vs. this plethora of reactive efforts, it becomes clear that programs and policies rooted in reactive thinking are almost guaranteed to result in a lot of work for very little reward.

It feels counterintuitive. How could the very act of problem-solving be perpetuating our problems? Again, the answer can be found in cause- and-effect, and specifically the kinds of chain reactions that happen when cause-and-effect gains momentum.

The situations we face today, from poverty to terrorism to gun violence, are the result of chain reactions that were sparked years ago. All these years later, our current efforts to solve those problems are like standing in front of that giant snowball as it careens downhill. At best, our tiny body may slow that snowball down a bit; at worst we will be pummeled into the snow, feeling like we did our best to stop it, but that we were up against unwinnable odds.

Sometimes reactivity is absolutely necessary. When the chain of cause-and-effect from the past is resulting in harm today, intervention can be a critical first step. Whether that harm is a family member stuck in a cycle of substance abuse or a community stuck in a cycle of poverty, sometimes we need to do our best to either stop that downhill-racing snowball from careening into the village or move people out of the way.

Unfortunately, social policy to date has, for the most part, exclusively focused on that reactive intervention. To create a future where such interventions are no longer needed, the only approaches that are scientifically more likely to create that reality are those, like the civil rights movement, that use causality to create an unstoppable chain reaction in the direction of our dreams.

What Science Teaches us About Reactivity

A variety of scientific disciplines confirm that creating causality is the only effective approach to moving beyond our problems, to create the kinds of communities we all want.

Physics and Chemistry

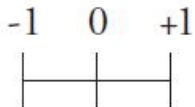
According to the Columbia electronic encyclopedia, “a chain reaction is a self-sustaining reaction that, once started, continues without further outside influence.”

Picture that snowball, or a forest fire, a line of dominoes, a nuclear reaction, the viral spread of a disease. Once a chain reaction starts, the longer it has been gaining momentum, the more energy it takes to stop it.

The violence facing many communities today is the result of a chain reaction that has been building momentum for decades. It should therefore be no surprise that programs designed to reverse or slow that chain reaction often feel so inadequate. Those programs are the equivalent of sitting in a lone backhoe at the bottom of a hill, trying to stop an avalanche.

Math

From physics and chemistry we turn to simple grade school math, which teaches that eliminating a negative cannot create a positive state; it can only get us to zero.



Applying that mathematical truth to social change programs, the best possible outcome from policies aimed at reducing or eliminating a problem is zero – stasis. This applies to intervention programs just as it applies to programs aimed at ending negative circumstances - ending racism, ending poverty, slowing or reversing global warming.

Sadly many policy makers even consider stasis to be too optimistic a goal. With the admonishment to “get real,” the prevailing culture warns that it is not realistic for programs to aim at completely eliminating poverty (or racism, or global warming, or terrorism, or drug abuse). For those programs, the goal becomes reduction, not elimination, defining 100% success as less bad.

The frustration change leaders face is therefore predictable. They are hoping to create something positive by reducing something negative, a mathematical impossibility.

Brain Science

It is hard to imagine that the simple question, “What should we do to solve this problem?” could cause its own chain reaction of negative forces. But that is what happens when people spend hours talking about what’s wrong, ascribing blame (root causes) for the problem, struggling in frustration to find new solutions because old ones have not produced results. The unconscious level of stress in these negative conversations triggers the brain’s fight-or-flight center, the amygdala, to release chemicals such as adrenaline.²

Those chemicals then create their own chain reaction, a condition psychologist Daniel Goleman refers to as Amygdala Hijack.³ The more time people spend in reactive circumstances, the more prolonged their stress, the more argumentative and suspicious they become, staking a claim in being right and challenging others who propose different ideas. Those behaviors are a predictable part of the chain reaction kicked into play by that simple question. We may suggest that people “leave their baggage at the door,” but those reactive questions are, in fact, inviting that baggage into the room.

Just like any chemical chain reaction, once fear has entered the room, it takes considerable energy to stop that reaction, to bring a discussion back to what is possible. People often leave such meetings feeling frustrated or hopeless.

On the other hand, when conversations begin with +1 questions such as, “What do we want life to feel like in our community?” agreement happens quickly, because virtually everyone wants a healthy environment, a safe community where people are kind and caring. That spirit of agreement has the potential to ignite a different chain reaction, bypassing the brain’s fear center, releasing chemicals associated with feelings of well-being, and activating the parts of the brain where reason and creativity reside.⁴

Science in General

There is one more scientific truth that drives scientists and mathematicians to discover new formulas and thought processes: unless something is physically impossible, it is possible.

Science is constantly discovering that what they thought was impossible yesterday is actually possible – that all it took was asking different questions, looking at things differently.

The implications for social programs is clear: humanity can be everything our human potential suggests, simply because that is not physically impossible. As it is with scientists discovering new realities, what it takes to turn that possibility into reality is asking different questions.

Creating Causality Towards the Future We All Want

If reactive approaches are physically incapable of creating the world we all want, and may actually lead our brains in the opposite direction of creativity and cooperation, what would it take for actions to start a chain reaction towards the future we want for our communities?

The answers to that question have become a critical component of a set of practices called Catalytic Thinking.⁵ Catalytic Thinking pulls together approaches that have brought out the best in people and situations throughout time and across disciplines. Those practices are rooted in questions, because the act of asking and answering questions can catalyze its own chain of cause

and effect.⁶ Change the questions we ask, and we can change the world. Table 1 shows the difference between questions that can catalyze potential vs. reactive questions.

Table 1. Catalyzing and Reactive Questions.

Questions that react to what we do not like about the present	Questions that create the future we do want
What is the problem, and what will we do to solve it?	What is the future we want to create, and what would it take for that future to be reality?
What obstacles could stop us?	What would people need to have / know / believe, for our goals to be realized?
How can we ensure people follow the rules? What will we do when they don't?	What systems would bring out the best in people?

Catalytic Thinking practices are rooted in two interrelated observations about the cause-and-effect of positive change:

- 1) Our power to create powerful results lies in our power to create favorable cause-and-effect conditions towards our dreams.
- 2) The most favorable conditions begin and end with bringing out the best in people vs. focusing on stuff (money, food, education).

Focusing on People vs. Stuff

It would seem obvious that the most effective social policies are rooted in the strengths and potential of people.⁷ Unfortunately, most social policy overlooks that proven truth. This article has already noted vast areas of social policy that focus on suspecting and preventing the worst in humanity vs. building on people's strengths, with the prison system in the US being perhaps the worst offender.

In addition, because those policies tend to be intervention-based, they tend to focus on things - food to address hunger, homes to address homelessness, prisons to address crime. And as we've seen, intervention alone falls short of even getting us to zero.

Therefore, to create favorable conditions for a new chain reaction, the most powerful conditions will aim at bringing out the best in people, creating systems for sustaining that "best."

Creating a Path to the Future

To activate our power to create a path towards our dreams, first we need to be able to identify those dreams. Having been told for so long that even the zero-sum of "ending violence" is a pipe dream, most people do not have practice in identifying and reaching for what they really want. Towards that end, catalytic Thinking's strategy framework employs questions that help to first identify what we really want for our communities, and to then create the cause-and-effect path that will create that future.

Question 1 - If we were to end violence in our communities, what would that make possible for the people who live and work there? For whom in particular?

If violence begets violence, what are the good conditions we want in our communities instead? That picture of what good would look like is where we will aim our chain reaction of causality.

Causality is actually embedded in the question itself. The phrase “make possible” suggests that ending violence is actually a precondition for something greater. Through the lens of causality, our “problems” are actually just unmet conditions for something amazing. So this first question aims beyond the problem, to the +1 vision on the other side of its resolution. When that problem no longer exists, what will be possible? You can also see the focus on people in the question: “People who live and work there” and “for whom?”

- What could life look like for children? For the elderly?
- For school teachers? For school kids? For that relationship?
- What would ending violence make possible for the police? For people of color? For the relationship between police and people of color?
- And so on.

The answers to these questions will be rich with words like “compassion” and “safety” and “health” and “vibrant.” The more you ask the question, “And what would that make possible?” the richer those images will become.

Question 2 – What cause-and-effect conditions would render that healthy, humane future inevitable?

Our uniquely human potential to envision a future different from our present means that we also have the power to identify the pre-requisite conditions that will create that future. Those conditions are the dominoes that will create our chain reaction.

Many planning processes begin by creating a vision, and then leap to today’s reality, asking, “What will we do in the next few years, to aim at that vision?” Tethered to today’s reality, the only future such a question can create will be an extension of today. Today-forward planning is like standing on the sidewalk, staring at the roof of a 30 story building, wondering how far up we could jump.

Causality-driven conversations create the ladder to get to the roof. Those conversations begin with your future vision, then step backwards from that vision one step at a time, until they eventually land at today. In causality-driven strategy discussions, “today” is the last thing you’ll discuss.

For policy-makers, the good news about this reverse engineering process (sometimes called back-casting) is that we all learn this approach at a very young age and use it all the time without realizing it.

If you need to be at the airport for a 9am flight, how would you determine what time to wake up? You would start with that 9am flight and work backwards:

- For a 9am flight, you’ll need to be at the airport by 7am.
- To be at the airport by 7am, you’ll need to leave the house by 6:30.

- You may still have some packing to do, plus taking a shower and feeding the dog – that’s another hour.
- You’ll set your alarm for 5:30.

Each of us uses this approach for everything in our lives, from getting to work on time to planning an elaborate dinner party. We can do the same for creating a safe, healthy community.

Just like the question of where to aim was about possibility for people, catalytic Thinking’s questions about cause-and-effect conditions will be about the people as well. For every aspect of the beautiful picture of your vision, what would people need to have? What would they need to know and understand? What would people need to value and believe? What would they need to be assured of?

Taking the next step backwards, you will look at the answers to those questions, and then ask that same set of question again, this time about that first group of answers. “What would it take for THAT to be in place? What would people need to know? What would they need to feel?” and then backwards again, “And what would it take for THAT to be in place?” When you are done, you will have laid a path of stepping stones between today’s reality and your desired future. You will have done so by describing the intricate web of conditions that will naturally fall into place if you kick- start that first domino – a step by step, cause-and-effect map to the future you want. And that web will all be rooted in bringing out the best in the people who are both the cause and the result of your plans.

Using Causality to Outsmart Community Violence

From the theoretical to the practical, let’s apply catalytic Thinking’s strategy framework to the issue of community violence, specifically to the relationship between police and people of color. What could an end to violence make possible for that relationship, and for the parties individually?

Question 1: If we were to end violence in our communities, what would that make possible for people of color? For the police? For the relationships between those parties?

Answers to that question might include...

- Safety for all parties. Trusting that they will be safe when they encounter each other.
- The community overall would be safer.
- Resources currently devoted to safety could be focused on education, recreation, health and overall quality of life, increasing security in all meanings of the word.
- For the relationship between the parties, a feeling that we’re all on the same side. Relationships of trust, support, and friendship.
- Those specific relationships of trust and support will ripple out to everyone in the community – a community culture of trust, support, and friendship.
- Those relationships of trust will lead to true equality in everything, among people of all races, ethnicities, sexual orientations, income levels.
- And so on.

As these conversations evolve, the ripples of possibility often lead to places that feel surprising, touching on every aspect of what it is like to live in a healthy, humane community. For example, someone might suggest, “If we build relationships of trust and support, our community would be filled with art.” Why art? “Because graffiti could be seen as an opportunity to channel artistic talent into positive outlets.” And so on, all fueled by the question, “And what would that make possible? For whom?”

These questions have the opposite effect of asking root cause questions. Instead of spiraling deeper into negativity, the energy in the room increases every time you ask, “And what would that make possible?”

From here, you will begin to consider what conditions need to be in place for your community to become the vibrant, humane place you have envisioned. For purposes of this example, let’s focus on the last bullet item above – a community where people trust each other in a spirit of true equality.

Question 2: What would it take for community members to trust each other in a spirit of true equality? What would people in the community need to feel? What would they need to know? What would they need to value?

In general, the answers might include...

- To trust each other, people from all walks of life would need to know each other.
- They would need to feel how each other experiences life.
- People would need to find the things they have in common vs. the things that separate them.
- People would need to value each other as fellow humans vs. labels and positions.
- And so on.

You might also ask about specific groups. In this scenario, those questions might include, “What would people of color need to have and be assured of? What would public safety officers and people working in the criminal justice system need to believe and know? What would policy makers need to value, understand, be assured of?”

The answers might include...

- People of color would need to feel heard. They would need to know that their experience is taken seriously, that their lives and their experience genuinely matter. And so on.
- Public safety officers would need to feel safe on the job. They would need to feel supported. They would need to feel they can be compassionate at work vs. having to hide their humanity behind their fear. And so on.
- Individuals working in the criminal justice system would need to know how to create conditions for the success of a person who has been arrested. They would need to have encouragement to explore restorative alternatives to incarceration. And so on.
- Community leaders and policy makers would need to emphasize the development and maintenance of trust relationships in their communities as much as they

emphasize the development and maintenance of roads, financial infrastructure, and sewer systems.

They would need to understand that their investment in public safety (fire, police) would go a lot farther if they invested in building trust (+1) vs. investing solely in reacting / intervening when there is no trust (-1). And so on.

With these and many other conditions in place, you will be creating the chain reaction towards the trusting community you envisioned. Without these conditions, there is no snow for the snowball, no dominoes to tumble.

From here, you'll take another step backwards, to create the pre- conditions for the conditions you just listed. What would it take for people to know each other and share stories and experiences openly, valuing each other and finding commonalities? What would the people need to have, to know, to feel, to be assured of?

For people to know each other...

- They would need to have gathering places. They would need to be assured that they were stepping into a safe space for such conversations. There would need to be fun! And food! And laughter!
- There would need to be ongoing, honest conversations between groups who experience power disparities - communities of color and the police, communities of different income levels, citizens and policy makers.
- For those trust conversations to occur regularly, there might need to be structures such as facilitation, guidance, ongoing nurturing of relationships so they sustain and so that people don't revert to prior assumptions and behaviors.
- For structures to be maintained, there would need to be investment of sufficient resources – especially human capital – to ensure that these efforts are sustained over not just one or two years, but decades.
- And so on.

For policy makers to invest in human interaction as the backbone of everything else in the community...

- They would need to understand the types of infrastructure that could support those trust relationships, with detailed, budgetable blueprints, just as they receive detailed blueprints for expansion of the sewer system.
- They would need to have mechanisms for working with the community to co-develop the infrastructure, to ensure they are building trust relationships with citizens in the very development of the mechanisms.
- And so on.

Even in this brief example, you can see the path we have created from our lofty vision to today's actions. It is at this point that groups begin to recognize actions they might take – perhaps expanding an existing program, or perhaps listing assets that can be shared to create safe spaces for conversation. Perhaps the words “people” and “policy makers” and “police” are being

replaced in your mind by names of real individuals and real organizations. Perhaps you might see a first step as simply having coffee with those individuals.

By changing the questions we ask in our day-to-day lives, catalytic Thinking practices instantly reframe our focus from what's wrong to what's possible, and from a reactive focus on "things" to a supportive and creative focus on our human potential.

We Are Creating The Future Every Day, Whether We Do So Consciously Or Not.

Coming back to our movie scenario, this is where the hero steps in and lays out his plan. And the townspeople proclaim, "This might just work!" Social policies and programs can create healthy, humane communities, because we are creating the future every day, whether we do so consciously or not. Using causality to bring out the best in ourselves and the situations we face, we can absolutely create the future we want.

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