Leverage Points for Broader Diffusion of the FSSD

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Introduction

The intrinsic characteristics of the Framework for Strategic Sustainable Development (FSSD) make it useful in moving society towards sustainability. However, most of the change agents who work with the FSSD report that it is not diffused widely enough to have a systemic impact on society. The purpose of this Master’s thesis was to enable those who wish to foster such diffusion to be more effective by giving them information they need to strategically plan their efforts.

An ‘important factors for diffusion’ lens was constructed from Diffusion of Innovations theory and social marketing concepts, and verified with case studies of the diffusion of Biomimicry 3.8, GRI and Cradle to Cradle. 152 current barriers and enablers to broader diffusion of the FSSD were identified from interviews with 27 practitioners and a survey of 58 additional practitioners. These were scored against the lens to determine the current diffusibility of the FSSD, then distilled and influence flows between them mapped, to identify seven leverage points for broader diffusion. Interrelations between these leverage points, as well as other emergent themes, were discussed, and further research suggested.

Research Questions

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<th>Primary Research Question (RQ)</th>
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<td>What are the potential leverage points for broader diffusion of the FSSD to sustainability practitioners in the United States, Canada and the European Union?</td>
<td>What might be important to FSSD diffusion?</td>
<td>What are the current enablers and barriers to broader FSSD diffusion perceived by practitioners?</td>
<td>Given practitioner perceptions of the FSSD and its enablers and barriers to broader diffusion, to what extent is it currently highly diffusible?</td>
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Results

The Lens: Factors Important to FSSD Diffusion

1. The Social Field

a. Humans Are More Social than Rational Reason is secondary to social influence. To be highly diffusible, innovations should serve as things around which a target social system can interact. “We do what we do because of other people and what they seem to be doing” (Earls 2009, 5). Research into human nature, influence, behavior, decision-making patterns and social networks has shown that the social field, particularly those we perceive to be like us, or of our ‘tribe’ (Cova and Cova 2002), wields far more influence on attitudes, norms, behavior and decisions than messages received from ‘outside’ parties (Rogers 2003; Earls 2009; Cialdini 2009; McKenzie-Mohr and Smith 2008; Christakis and Fowler 2009). While messages delivered from the outside may have influence, what the members of a social system do with the message amongst themselves is far more influential than the actual intervention. We also rely on approximations, intuition, feeling and social cues more and calculate less than is commonly believed, even in settings where calculation is expected (Kahnemann 1982; Cialdini 2009).

b. The Social Field Must Be Ready for the innovation in order for it to stick and spread. Readiness may be influenced by mass media (Leal and Borner 2005b) and by facilitating social interaction around the concept or innovation (Earls 2009). It was once believed if ‘influencers’ and ‘super-connecters’ could be persuaded to adopt, diffusion throughout a social system would follow, leading to a tipping point (Gladwell 2000; Rogers 2003). But while ‘influentials’ do play important roles in diffusion, recent research shows it is unlikely to occur simply because they adopted the innovation; instead, the other members of the social field must be ‘ready’ (susceptible to that particular product or idea), or it will not ‘catch on’ (Watts and Dodds 2007; Earls 2009).

2. The Change Agents (those who seek to promote the diffusion)

a. The Amount and Type of Efforts of the change agents significantly impact the success and rate of diffusion. This includes the acts of effective marketing
and branding, including **message design** and **positioning strategy** (Rogers 2003), as well as communication chains that aim to establish strategic partnerships in order to leverage the reach and legitimacy of large institutional players holding credibility in the social field of the target audience (Leal and Borner 2005a, 90).

**b. Client Orientation**

*Successful diffusion is related to the degree to which change agents focus on the target adopters, rather than on themselves and their own activities.*

“Client oriented change makers are more feedback-minded, have closer rapport with their clients, enjoy higher credibility in the eyes of their clients, and base their diffusion activities primarily on clients' needs” (Rogers 2003, 375). Empathy with clients is also positively related to success in securing the adoption (Rogers 2003).

**c. The Credibility** of both the change agents and the innovation is critical to success (Rogers 2003). Credibility is aided in part by communication chains involving strategic partnerships (Leal and Borner 2005a).

### 3. Multiple Communication Channels

A mix is most effective. Both mass media and interactive/interpersonal channels should be used (Leal and Borner 2005b). Mass media makes the innovation visible and “verbalizable” by placing it in public view and providing language for people to talk about it (Leal and Borner 2005a), while interactive/interpersonal channels leverage our social human nature and invite co-creation, collaborative adaptive use (Rogers calls it “reinvention”) and sharing around the innovation (Earls 2009; Leal and Borner 2005a; Rogers 2003).

### 4. Characteristics of the Innovation

**a. Five Attributes that Affect the Rate of Diffusion**

**Relative Advantage:** The degree to which an innovation is perceived as better than that which it supersedes. This may be measured in economic terms, but social prestige factors, convenience and satisfaction are also important. **Compatibility:** The degree to which an innovation is perceived as being consistent with the needs, existing values and past experiences of the potential adopters. **Complexity:** The degree to which an innovation is perceived as easy to understand and use. Some innovations are readily comprehended by most members of the social system; others are more complicated and are rejected, or adopted more slowly. **Triability:** The degree to which an innovation may be experimented with on a limited basis. New ideas that can be tried ‘on the installment plan’ will generally be adopted more quickly than innovations that are not divisible. **Observability:** The degree to which the results of an innovation are visible to others. The easier it is for individuals to see the results of an innovation they have used, or of one that others have used, the more likely they are to adopt it (Rogers 2003, 15-16).

**b. Name of the Innovation**

*The name is important. Technical names should be avoided.*

“The name given to an innovation often affects its perceived compatibility” and colors adopter perceptions (Rogers 2003, 251-2). “We recommend a receiver oriented, empirical approach to naming an innovation, so that the word symbol...has the desired meaning to the intended audience. Too often...the importance of what an innovation is called (is) ignored... Sometimes a...technical name is used for the innovation during its research and development stage...Unfortunately, such names are not very meaningful to potential adopters unless they are technicians” (Rogers 2003, 251-2).

**c. Openness to Reinvention**

Allowing “reinvention” helps diffusion and can serve as a way in which the target social system can interact around the innovation. “Reinvention is the degree to which an innovation is changed or modified by a user in the process of adoption or implementation...Diffusion of innovations is not necessarily a passive role of just implementing a standard template of the new idea. Innovation diffuses more rapidly when it can be reinvented and its diffusion is more likely to be sustained” (Rogers 2003, 17). The importance of allowing reinvention is supported by the desire of humans to interact socially around something, the high levels of influence the social tribe exerts on adoption, influence being multi-directional within the social field rather than mono-directional from the change agent, and most adoption being mimicry (see “Humans Are More Social Than Rational” above).
Current Reality: How Diffusible is the FSSD Now?

The bar graph shows how well the FSSD scores for diffusibility. That is, how likely is it to diffuse well, based on the current reality?

The graph shows the relative weight of the 152 enablers and barriers (to FSSD diffusion) mentioned by practitioners, coded to each of the 16 lens factors. The result shows that on the whole, there is a heavier weight of barriers than enablers, suggesting that there are currently more things blocking FSSD diffusion than helping it.

Formula used to assign relative strength of enablers (‘E’) and barriers (‘B’) per lens factor.

\[
\text{E Amount} + \text{B Amount} + \left( \frac{\text{E Total Mentions} + \text{B Total Mentions}}{2} \right) \times 100
\]

Graph inputs represent the average of two calculations made for each lens factor. Formula was E/(E+B).

Inputs were 1) no. of Es & Bs; and 2) total no. of mentions for E/Bs.

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Current Reality: The 30 Barriers, Straddlers and Potential Enablers Distilled from the 152

The list of 152 enablers, barriers (B), straddlers (S) and potential enablers (PE) mentioned by practitioners was distilled to yield these 30. The purpose of this distillation was to narrow the field in which we would hunt for leverage points to shift the system towards broader FSSD diffusion. (Straddlers are roughly half enabler/half barrier in the current reality).

To arrive at these 30, we took three steps. First, we ruled out everything on the list of 152 that was intrinsic to the FSSD, assuming intrinsic characteristics were not open to influence by a change agent seeking to diffuse the FSSD. Second, we ruled out current enablers, as these were by definition already aiding diffusion, so we didn’t believe ‘game-changing’ leverage points would be found there. Third, we distilled the remaining 95 down to 30 by eliminating overlap, merging common themes, and using our overview of the data set and knowledge of the FSSD, as well as emphasis given in the literature and by practitioners, to guide us.

1. (S) Skilled facilitation and deep learning are critical to diffusion of the FSSD.
2. (S) Unifying potential of the FSSD
3. (S) Credibility of the change agent and the innovation is critical
4. (PE) Personal transformational change needed for FSSD to stick
5. (PE) Organizational alignment needed for FSSD to stick; often means organizational change is necessary
6. (B) Lacks good strategic marketing and branding plan
7. (B) Poor visibility, confusion and varying opinions about what it is and what it is good for
8. (B) Poor name; name confusion.
9. (B) Lacks tools to support practitioners at all levels
10. (B) FSSD disappears from view after used a while.
11. (B) Language too tech-y. Leading with the science.
12. (B) Poor articulation of the benefits of use
13. (B) Lacks case studies
14. (B) Lacks positive, hopeful message
15. (B) Fostering paradigm shift is challenging, but critical to the stickiness of the FSSD
16. (B) Lack of a networked community of practice
17. (B) Unclear whose job it is to diffuse FSSD
18. (B) Social field perceives sustainability as boring
19. (B) Focus is on FSSD, not on adopter
20. (B) Lack of ongoing adopter support, confirmation and engagement
21. (B) Lacks strategic partnerships
22. (B) Lacks seminal book and mass media
23. (B) TNS culture: clinging to control; closed
24. (B) FSSD culture: there’s only 1 true answer
25. (B) FSSD culture: passion can be cultish
26. (B) TNS split focus? Clarify purpose and vision. Does TNS wish to be a change agent for the diffusion of the FSSD?
27. (B) Missing geographical capacity strategy; FSSD lacks presence in key markets
28. (B) Poor access to FSSD training; too costly for most of the world and not easily accessible
29. (B) Lack of openness to reinvention and experimentation
30. (B) Transformation not sold as the solution
Current Reality: Mapping Influence Flows between The 30

In order to identify which of the 30 might be leverage points to shift the system towards broader diffusion, we traced flows of desirable and undesirable influence between them. We hypothesized that ones with five or more influence outflows were potential leverage points. There are limitations to the flow chart, and many more flows may be added, but we believe the general patterns revealed are of value.
The Leverage Points

The seven highly interrelated potential leverage points identified by the flow charts fall into two categories: four that are mostly generic and would be helpful to the diffusion of any number of innovations, and three we believe to be specific to the FSSD. An eighth potential leverage point was also identified. Because the audience for the study was any change agent wishing to diffuse the FSSD, and because TNS is likely the only change agent that could operationalize this eighth leverage point, it was left off the formal list of seven.

Mostly Generic to Diffusion

Leverage Point 1: Assign a Diffusion Agent

Someone must adopt the role of diffusion agent clearly and with purpose. The current barrier defined as “Unclear whose job it is to diffuse the FSSD” influences all of the other 29 B/S/Ps on the flow charts in one way or another. Having a change agent or group of change agents working in concert step forth to host, facilitate and coordinate strategic diffusion efforts is a vital factor for broader FSSD diffusion.

Leverage Point 2: Marketing and Branding

The FSSD must get and use a strategic marketing and branding plan. In general, the FSSD has lacked branding, marketing and communications strategies. Of the many barriers flowing from this, one of the most frequently mentioned was confusion around the name of the innovation (FSSD/TNS Framework), and a strong feeling that “FSSD” is not a good name outside academia. In addition, a hopeful, positive message, clear articulation of the FSSD’s unique value in accessible, inviting language, and good case studies are some of the areas of intervention that promise to make a difference in the diffusion of the FSSD.

Leverage Point 3: Networked Community of Practice

Host and facilitate an active, networked FSSD community of practice. The goals would be 1) broader diffusion through social channels, 2) reinvention of the ways the FSSD is being presented, spoken about, facilitated and integrated with other frameworks, solutions and tools, and 3) ongoing social support and confirmation for adopters. The network could be facilitated to serve as a vehicle for these things, as well as for a host of other opportunities and services, such as the co-creation of a variety of FSSD-related tools, sharing of knowledge and experience, and mentoring programs.

Leverage Point 4: Open Source Tools

Develop open source tools of all types for practitioners at all levels. This could exert desirable influence on multiple other issues. The goal is both availability (hence the open sourcing) and variety, in these categories:

1) Process guidance/facilitation tools, to support the breadth and depth of skills good facilitators of the FSSD must have, and the endless variety of contexts in and with which they must work.
2) Tools practitioners can use to diffuse and market the FSSD themselves (e.g. appealing short videos, etc.). Every practitioner should be able to communicate the FSSD and its unique value effectively and consistently.

3) Tools for integrating the FSSD in practice with various other sustainability and/or management tools and frameworks (e.g. GRI, project management programs, business plans, etc.).

*Mostly Specific to the FSSD*

**Leverage Point 5: Fostering Paradigm Shift**

Make fostering paradigm shift a central strategy for facilitating and diffusing the FSSD. The FSSD does not ‘stick’ to adopters unless they also adopt the paradigms that form its foundation (underlying science, systems thinking, sustainability challenge, etc.). Attention to fostering both personal and organizational alignment with these paradigms is therefore critical to diffusion.

**Leverage Point 6: Ongoing Adopter Support**

Provide adopters with ongoing support, confirmation and engagement around the FSSD. FSSD learning journeys are long and complex and the paradigms on which it is based are not dominant in society. For all these reasons, adopters need continual contact and norm/paradigm/use support. This might be provided by a mix of sources, including a networked community of practice.

**Leverage Point 7: Skilled Facilitation**

Focus on highly skilled facilitation of multi-layer learning journeys. Adopters of the FSSD must understand its concepts, accept the paradigms that underlie it, learn to apply it in practice, and learn to communicate it to others—perhaps even learning to facilitate the learning journeys of others. Adoption is thus a complex journey that unfolds over time and requires guided, iterative practice. Both learner/adopter and facilitator/guide face multiple challenges in this process. The relationship between them thus becomes of primary importance. And, given the challenges the learner faces (including paradigm shift), placing the focus first on the learner at every stage in the facilitation process, rather than on the Framework itself, seems critical to success. The quality of the facilitation of these learning journeys is a prime determinant in whether the FSSD will stick, and thus diffuse more broadly, or not.

*Mostly Specific to TNS*

**Leverage Point 8: Change Agent Culture and Capacities**

Make change agent culture open, welcoming and inclusive. Many practitioners outside the TNS organization mentioned feeling shut out and turned off by an attitude of exclusiveness, possessing the one true answer to sustainability, and insistence that the FSSD is the ‘overarching framework’ that encompasses all else. Within the organization, there were mentions of lack of sharing, openness and transparency. The result of the former is ill will for the FSSD in the broader community; the result of the latter is duplication of efforts and missed opportunities for synergy. Both damage prospects for broader diffusion.
Potential Reality: Mapping the Imagined Results of Activation of the Leverage Points

As a final step, we imagined the change in influence flows that might result from positive activation of the seven leverage points, as well as the impact this change in flows might have on the other 23. We believe most of the previously undesirable influences would change to desirable ones, ‘tipping’ many current barriers and potential enablers into straddler status, on the way to enabler status. We hypothesized a tipping point would occur when a given item received more desirable than undesirable inflows.
Summary of Findings

current enablers = mostly intrinsic qualities of the FSSD

current barriers = mix of intrinsic and extrinsic

current reality = heavy on the barriers; FSSD blocked in a cycle of poor diffusion

good news = all these barriers are actionable, and most can be turned into enablers

The 7 leverage points can help (beware separating them—high levels of interrelation).

The system will shift only if a dedicated change agent, or multiple change agents working in concert, step forth to host, facilitate and coordinate strategic diffusion efforts.

If that happens, the FSSD could diffuse broadly enough to have an impact on the broader societal system, helping to move it towards a sustainable future.

Who will do this work?

For a full list of references informing the study, please see the thesis which can be downloaded from www.FSSDdiffusion.com.