

Scaling Up the Big Picture

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1.

Resources and the Big Picture

The title of our research project - Scaling Up the Big Picture - needs an explanation. The term *big picture* refers to a non-profit organization called the Big Picture Company (BP), and to its signature design for small high schools. The design is the product of BP's experience since 1995 in building, developing, and operating six state-funded small high schools in Providence, Rhode Island. The Big Picture school design emphasizes education tailored to the unique interests of learners, and the use of the community as a resource for their learning. The term *big picture* also refers to big ideas that underlie these emphases – ideas with a lineage back to John Dewey: about how teaching and learning really work, about continuity in the educational experience of the young, and about the insufficiency and even the danger of schooling as ordinarily conceived.

Meanwhile, the term *scaling up* refers to BP's efforts to install its school design in places far from Providence – for example, Detroit, Chicago, Sacramento, and Denver. By the 2007-2008 school year, with funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, BP plans to have 60 Big Picture schools operating in at least nine states. At the same time, the term *scaling up* concerns BP's ambition to be influential beyond its own schools (whatever the final number of these turns out to be). BP views itself as more than a school design vendor in an emerging market for school designs. In this regard, it is like other school reform organizations for whom the word *scale* means more than market share. We think, for example, of the National Center for Education and the Economy (NCEE) that aims not just to promote adoption of the America's Choice school design, but to re-conceive all of American education in the image of the high-end post-industrial corporation. Or we think of the Success for All Foundation (SFA) that aims not just to promote an early literacy program, but to install efficient and equity-focused curricular machinery throughout American urban education.

How do BP's ideas about schooling compare with the ideas of these other ambitious organizations? If NCEE is post-industrial, and SFA just plain industrial, then BP seems pre-industrial. When she first figured out what BP was up to, writes Deborah Meier, she gasped. It was “taking on the unmentionable” in school reform. “Suppose we just turned the whole thing upside down,” she explains, “and went back to the oldest and most traditional idea around: Let kids learn mostly in the settings in which real people do interesting work. Let novices learn from masters. Then let's create a part-time community of kids where they can use these experiences of the real thing to grow” (Meier, November 2003, p. 9).¹

In relation to a “pre-industrial” attitude, the metaphor *scaling up* seems unsuitable. Can one *scale up* a design that “turns the whole thing upside down,” in Meier's words? Can one *scale up* big ideas? BP itself continually wrestles with a related question: Which takes precedence in educational influence - designs or the ideas that infuse them?

On the one hand, BP favors the fidelity side of what we termed in our previous essays the dilemma of whether to favor fidelity or adaptation. It wants to make sure that new Big Picture schools really follow the design, rather than merely allow themselves to be inspired by it. BP criticizes other school reform efforts that in BP co-founder Elliot Washor's words, "lose control of their own ideas." On the other hand, BP also tends to worry about achieving fidelity by contractual remote control without opportunity for BP's own touch or the school's "push back." This worry is frequently expressed by other BP co-founder Dennis Littky – where it surfaces as a concern about numbers: "Should we really have 60 schools? Wouldn't 20 be enough?"

Among their intellectual mentors, both Littky and Washor consistently claim Meier and Ted Sizer, as well as John Dewey - all of them founders of small schools that have served as intellectual outposts as well as schools. These mentors' schools have represented a different idea of school, and this seems to have been more their purpose than to enact a particular design. Littky and Washor also claim Myles Horton as an intellectual mentor, whose Highlander Folk School attempted to appropriate the word *school* to an emancipatory cultural and political purpose; and Ivan Illych, who advocated the *de*-schooling of society – though he founded a kind of school to help accomplish this end.

This is an essay about the impact of resources on ambition – financial resources, human resources, and intellectual resources. Of these three, the last may be the most consequential since they play a crucial role in defining the ambition in the first place, and also in defining the role that the other two kinds of resources must play in furthering the ambition. When Littky and Washor told yet another of their intellectual mentors, Seymour Sarason, that they had been funded by the Gates Foundation to scale up the Big Picture school design, he told them, "Give back the money. Give it right back." Long the school reform gadfly, Sarason worries that the Big Picture idea – which he admires in its Providence setting – will be hurt by a growth and funding strategy based on closely specifying the design and then trying to replicate it in many other places.

Background

The first Big Picture School, called the "Met" (for the Metropolitan Regional Career and Technical Center) opened in 1996 in a corridor of the State Education Department building, and offered 110 students a personally tailored and workplace-focused curriculum. The major features of its curriculum are *advisory* - in which a single advisor oversees the student's pursuit of an individualized Learning Plan, and a group of 14 peers work to establish a supportive learning community; and the *LTI* (short for Learning Through Internship) – in which a student works closely two days a week with an outside mentor in a workplace setting. Today, there are six Met sites in Providence – four of them sharing a campus in the heart of one of the city's poorest neighborhoods. Together, the six sites form a virtual school district that falls within the purview of Rhode Island's statewide vocational education system. Under the watchful eye of Dennis Littky, the six also serve as BP lab and showcase. Meanwhile, his partner Elliot Washor – living in San Diego, but traveling nearly continuously - oversees what

BP calls the “prospecting” part of its scaling up. This involves figuring out where Big Picture schools might flourish as the result of favorable local conditions, and then assisting in their implantation.

This essay is the third of four planned essays on scaling up the Big Picture. By means of these essays and the research that underlies them, we hope to illuminate issues related to scaling up new innovative schools generally. Essay 1, entitled “The Difference Difference Makes” (February 2003) explored the characteristics and qualities of the Big Picture School design, noting its contrast with conventional American high school design. The essay also raised some strategic questions. How much standardization does scale demand? How much adaptation to local context? How much is scale dependent on fidelity, and how much on local invention? These questions are relevant beyond the Big Picture Company, and even beyond the dozens of enterprises now scaling up other small high school designs. We think BP provides a good context in which to study the questions, but other contexts would do as well. These include contexts beyond education, as we pointed out in both of our previous essays, and as we suggest also in the concluding section of this essay.

In Essay 2, entitled “Challenges and Strategies” (June 2003), we named seven core challenges of scaling up, and explored in detail the first five of them. We also named and explored strategies and tools that BP has developed for dealing with these challenges. Here is an updated list of challenges, derived from our most recent analysis of data:

Challenges of Scaling Up New School Designs

1. Balancing fidelity and adaptation
2. Teaching and learning the design
3. Instilling shared ownership of the design
4. Communicating effectively across contexts
5. Using experience in new settings to improve the design
6. Obtaining and managing the resources sufficient to scale
7. Negotiating the politics of local adoption

Our naming and enumerating is a kind of theorizing, one that adds to BP’s own theorizing about its ideas, strategies, and tools. The difference is that we have an eye to the ways in which BP’s practice may inform the practice of others. In the essay that follows, we extend our theorizing to the sixth challenge – obtaining and managing resources sufficient to scale: money, people, and ideas. We uncover what we take to be the hidden aspects of obtaining and managing these resources. We also provide a kind of catalogue of the strategies BP is using to find, generate, and allocate resources in these

three areas. Finally, in a special concluding section, we draw a comparison between BP's efforts to cope with resource challenges and those of another organization operating within another economic sector.

In Essay 4, planned for June 2004, we will explore the seventh challenge: negotiating the politics of local adoption. What happens on the ground politically as BP and its design come to Denver, Chicago, Detroit, Indianapolis, San Diego, and other places? What strategies does BP use to manage the political challenges? What effect do these strategies have?

For the culminating product of our study, we plan a book that will draw on the four essays with their data sources, and also on two dissertation studies with their own independent data sources. Both dissertation studies are now underway. Emily Klein's is focused on the professional learning needs of a diverse group of Big Picture school advisors, while Megan Riordan's is focused on the learning experiences of a group of Big Picture school students in their Learning Through Internships.

2.

Uncovering the Resource Challenge

Isn't the resource challenge obvious? Scaling up a new school design takes lots of money, smart people, and good ideas – and these are all in chronically short supply.

Yes. Plus the challenge has less obvious dimensions too. They're less obvious because the enterprise is so novel. It was not until the early 1990's – with the development of the Edison and New American Schools Projects, and the advent of school chartering and contracting – that anything like the phenomenon we are now studying became imaginable. The U.S. has always had school reform, and questions of how reform spreads and of what *spread* really means have always been of interest. However, the central question that concerns us here – how a third-party proprietary designer of comprehensive schooling might best go about installing and supporting the design in many public school policy contexts – has few direct antecedents in educational inquiry. Thus it is not surprising that certain dimensions of the problem of funding it, staffing it, and thinking about it become apparent only as one really begins to do it.

Hidden Dimensions of the Resource Challenge

- The three aspects of the challenge interrelate: financial, human, and intellectual.
- The demands of the challenge vary with the phases of scaling up.
- Meeting these demands puts strains on organizational culture, leadership, and theory of action.
- School designers have to manage resources within an environment lacking ready indicators of effectiveness, and with few proven allocation mechanisms.

In what follows, we explore in turn each of these hidden dimensions of the resource challenge. We end each exploration by deriving some lessons from the Big Picture experience.

Aspects Interrelate

There are three aspects of the resource challenge, as we define it. First, there is the one that involves finding and generating enough financial resources. The third-party designer typically meets this part of the challenge by obtaining grants from foundations or corporations or private donors, by obtaining venture capital in the form of grants or loans from social investors, by marketing services and products, or by partnering in a way

that provides in-kind benefits. The first and second parties – that is, the school itself, and the district or chartering agency – meet this part of the challenge by tapping into whatever revenue streams already exist: for example, district per-pupil funding, charter funding, Title I or other federal funding, or special state funding (vocational, drop-out prevention, etc.); and also by augmenting these with private fundraising. At both levels, this aspect of the challenge requires planning an overall development strategy that matches revenue to need, and involves budgeting well, spending smartly, and accounting for what is spent.

Second, there is the aspect of the resource challenge that involves finding and developing appropriate human resources. It includes recruiting, hiring, training, and deploying people. Deployment involves not only matching skills and talents to problems and tasks, but building infrastructures for coaching, support, and supervision.

Third, there is the aspect of the resource challenge that involves finding and generating the right intellectual resources: tuning into outside ideas, capturing inside insights, using both to generate fresh perspectives, and then putting the ideas to use at the right places and in time to do the most good.

One of the things that makes the resource challenge particularly difficult is that these three aspects interrelate. For example, getting enough money may depend a lot on having the right people in place with hands-on design skills and fundraising expertise. But getting these people may depend on having enough money to pay them. Meanwhile, getting good ideas in place that are adequate to the work, and articulating these ideas in ways that remote users can understand, depend on having people with yet other skill sets, and also on having the money to support the expensive work they do.

Managing the risks and trade-offs here are a constant part of the management environment at BP. For a long time, the organization stayed small and local, and depended on a staff of smart, young generalists. But now it is in an aggressive phase: rapidly increasing the number of schools it works with in order to expand its financial base; recruiting high-quality specialized staff and engaging in rapid staff turnover; and working hard on the cultivation and dissemination of ideas.² In these ways, it has acquired some slack in all three resource categories - enough to cover inevitable pockets of deficit. So it relies on dollars from unfilled positions or other budget savings to cover core costs even as it searches for a donor willing to cover them, or until it develops a marketing plan that can do so. And it gets by for awhile with a bookkeeper until it finds the right CFO, and with intuition about what makes a Big Picture school Big Picture until it gains enough experience to spell this out. This is a kind of “rash” maneuvering that all growing companies – whether non-profit or for-profit – have to learn to do well.

Schools starting up have to learn to do it well also. But at this level, interrelation effects can be even more dangerous, threatening a kind of “poor get poorer” slide that can require rescue or lead to failure. For example, one of the new Big Picture schools starting up in a big city has had a very hard time getting the financial machinery of its district even to recognize that it exists. “Aren’t you a charter school?” someone downtown

asked. The school is not. The consequence of this neglect is that several months into its first school year, the school had no computers in its computer lab, no copier, and a fax machine that only dialed locally. There was a laptop at the school which someone brought from home and that students used for word processing, but there was no internet connection, and thus no chance that the students – or their advisors (at least at work) could access the ideas and materials available to them at Big Picture Online.

As often happens in large school districts, when funds become available here – suddenly and mysteriously as the result of budget shifts somewhere higher up – they have to be spent quickly. Last summer, the principal was asked to spend \$150,000 in three days, with purchases restricted to school supplies and instructional materials. Naturally, he made mistakes. “Do you need any paper clips?” he asked us on a visit, implying he had plenty to go around. But he refused to spend all of his “start-up” money, as the district called it, leaving nearly \$40,000 so that the teachers he had not yet hired could make some of the decisions about instructional materials. In retrospect, he realizes that he should have acted more “rashly.” That is because he learned in September that the funds he thought he still controlled had been frozen. When we spoke with him more than a month later, he was still “following up.” Following up in a huge bureaucracy where nobody knows your name (or even the name of your school) can be a daunting task.

Meanwhile, this new principal of a new school based on an unusual design – one that nobody else in his district has ever experienced - is also new to the job of being principal. So he must learn general school management skills on the job (as new principals always do), even as he continues to learn about the Big Picture school design, and the intricacies of an intricate district. Looking for teachers to hire as the new school’s first advisors, he told us that he especially searched for people who could believe in the potential of the kids and in the ideas of the school, who could connect well with kids one-on-one, who seemed to have good problem-solving skills, and who were bilingual. Although he seems to have hired well according to these criteria, he also ended up with two first-year teachers. They are now learning on the job how the Big Picture school design works, and struggling to create an advisory culture with a group of students new to each other. But as first-year teachers, they are also learning basic group management techniques. Of course, if there were already experienced Big Picture advisors in the school – or even nearby - or if the principal himself had been a Big Picture advisor, or had had enough money to hire a third teacher who was experienced, then the resource gap would not be so disadvantageous.

Interrelated resource shortages put great demands not only on principals and others at start-up sites like this one, but also on BP’s back-up support systems. In this case, BP has supplied emergency coaching (from a Met advisor flown in to help the school’s inexperienced advisors); ongoing support for the principal from BP staff in person and by phone; and even some BP political intervention with the district.

Meanwhile, the principal told us that he holds fast to two ideas he gained in his BP training. The first is that even a toehold on one resource can help over time to bring in the others. So the principal hired good support staff – who may help the school be

noticed and appreciated in the community, which may in turn bring in a steady stream of students and LTI mentors. And this could well result in political support, money, and ideas. The security guard, for example, is an active, respected adult who interacts with the students – and to whom the students clearly look for guidance. The office manager/secretary likes kids, and talks with them – not just about their lives but about their LTIs. And the maintenance man tells the kids stories they love, and interacts well with the advisors. All are from the neighborhood, and all are bilingual.

And the second idea - which the principal said Dennis Littky and Elliot Washor told him again and again – is that everything depends on making connections. In the hopes of helping to fill his resource gaps, the principal sought out a neighborhood priest who works with gang-related youth, and who has in turn connected him to other important neighborhood resource providers, including a college professor who is now planning an after-school video production program at the school, and who is likely to be a source of student teachers. The professor also happens to be well connected to academics and activists in the city, who may be useful in helping the school with ideas and fundraising. In an interview with us, Elliot Washor called this “going from connection to connection to connection,” and he claimed that it is the best way to solve the resource challenge in all its dimensions.

To manage interrelated resource needs

- Act “rashly” to build resources.
- Use slack to cover inevitable pockets of deficit.
- Expect local resource emergencies, and plan to deploy central resources to fill the gaps.
- Connect, connect. Every connection is a potential resource gain.

Demands Vary by Phase

A second hidden dimension of the resource challenge involves the fact that different phases of scale demand not only different quantities of resource but different qualities too. For example, a third-party school designer probably *should* share financial resources with pioneer clients – resources that may come from foundation or corporate sources. In the earliest phase of scaling up, these pioneers are really co-designers rather than clients in the ordinary sense. Later, however, such sharing of resources with clients may prove counterproductive.³ It may shield everyone involved from understanding the true costs of adopting the design, may weaken the third-party organization’s efforts to develop a real-cost accounting system, and may actually devalue the design in the clients’ eyes.

BP seems currently at a point in its financial development where it must shift from sharing its expertise to charging for it. The shift is difficult. As Dennis Littky put it, “We’re talking about charging a school for our materials when we know that the school doesn’t even have enough money to pay for a secretary.” Another new Big Picture school – a charter school whose revenue stream does not cover its capital expenses – faces a yearly deficit of \$100,000.

Some third-party school designers – for example, the Success for All Foundation – charge client schools the full cost of support materials and services from the beginning – wary about the shock effect of charging later for something that started off free. But these designers count on the fact that their client schools have a reliable funding stream to use for this purpose – typically Federal Title I or other federal funding. A Big Picture start-up school cannot depend on such sources. Thus BP counts on the fact that other costs will decline as a Big Picture school moves beyond the start-up phase, that the resulting slack will be enough to pay for some reasonable BP fee for service, and that the school will want to continue the relationship on this basis. At this point, however, BP has not yet figured out the specifics of this calculus.

The demand for human resources also varies qualitatively across phases of scaling up. Thus at first – during the hands-on phase of working with pioneer sites – the third-party designer may need generalists who can do everything from coach new principals effectively to prepare materials and raise funds. Later, such functions as coaching and material preparation and fundraising are likely to need specialists at various levels. For example, as they scale up, some third-party school designers move from a system of headquarters-based coaches to one using a combination of local school coaches, regional trainers of coaches, and headquarters-based designers of coaching strategy. BP is not at this point yet, but it is currently redesigning its coaching system for a second time – having moved from two headquarters-based coaches, to a system of partly local/partly itinerant coaches, to a new system that will rely especially on peer coaches – Met advisors who will travel to other school sites in the company of Met students. Now the only specialist traveling to the new schools deals with quantitative reasoning and math, but the plan is to send other specialists as the schools need them, such as college counselors, and special education personnel. Similarly, in response to this phase demand, BP is vastly overhauling its financial operations, its telecommunications operations, and its training operations – with all of these involving staff changes.

Meanwhile, at the school level too, the different phases of development may require different kinds and degrees of human resource. For example, the early phases of the first Big Picture start-ups have put enormous and enormously varied demands on principals. These principals have felt pressure to find political and financial angels. Most have had to find and renovate space. All have had to hire whole staffs, and educate staff members (along with students, parents, mentors, and others) in the Big Picture ideas – even while still educating themselves. They have also had to negotiate all the politics that attend doing anything different in education – from convincing a superintendent that some reporting requirement is incompatible with the Big Picture design, to figuring out what to do about state testing requirements, or (to reassure parents ahead of time) what to

do about state university admissions requirements. Then, once their schools open, the principals must continue to do all of the above, plus create an accountable learning community, a respectful school culture, and an efficient set of operations that use the Big Picture materials and structures well. Meanwhile, all these tasks are more onerous because the Big Picture school is like few others inasmuch as it draws substantially on the learning resources of the larger community, and uses numerous structural and cultural elements unique to the design.

BP is counting on a decline in such demands as routines become established within new schools, as clusters of Big Picture schools develop within a city or region, and as BP gets clearer about the essential elements of the design and firmer in its contracting with regard to the contractor's obligations to enact them. Such a decline in role demands will be crucial to the success of Big Picture schools over the long haul, since experience to date suggests that the demands on the principal in a Big Picture school's start-up phase may exceed most people's capacity to meet them.

Finally, even intellectual resources needed for scaling up vary by phase. In the earliest phases, the most valuable intellectual resources may be those that help illuminate design issues and site-level implementation issues. Later, the most valuable may be those that help illuminate system issues related to communication, training, or resource allocation. Little more than a year ago, BP especially needed ideas related to the development of materials and training procedures that "capture" the design in action. Today, it especially needs ideas related to the costing out and the marketing of these materials and training procedures, as well as ideas about coaching and training at a national level.

At the school level also, different intellectual resources are likely to be needed at different levels of school development. This is evident in a comparison of what the newest Big Picture schools need versus what the longer established Met campuses need. The latter still hire new staff, of course, and these newcomers need access to basic ideas and materials; but the continuing staff and leadership need intellectual resources that push practice deeper. One rationale for BP co-director Dennis Littky's enhanced presence at the Met is that he will orchestrate the effort there to generate and allocate intellectual resources sufficient to pushing practice deeper. The working assumption is that this effort is crucial to establishing the Met as a genuine lab school for the network of Big Picture schools, and so crucial to the overall scaling up effort.

To manage varying demands

- Design for cost sharing, and help schools budget for it.
- Keep all systems nimble, and expect to change them frequently as you grow.
- Be realistic about the job demands of site-level leadership, and tailor training and support mechanisms accordingly.
- Design for the continual infusion of new ideas.

Strains on Organizational Culture, Leadership, and Theory of Action

To accommodate shifts in resource demands during scale up, a school designer must periodically add some organizational functions and adjust others. This may involve deep changes in culture and leadership, and may lead to explicit or implicit shifts in the organization's theory of action. The strains are inevitable. The consequence of the strains depends on how they are managed.

A close observer of New American Schools (a group of affiliated third-party school designers), says that as its affiliates scaled up in the 1990's, they found themselves having to change their organizational culture from that of a think tank to that of a professional services firm (Millot, forthcoming). This meant adopting the operations and attitudes of a fee-for-service company, hiring specialists to oversee the quality of particular services and their delivery systems, and focusing more on the stability of the school design than on its evolution.

Signs of a similar transformation are evident today at BP – as are signs of resulting dislocation and resistance. As we suggested above, BP has recently experienced substantial staffing changes. Indeed, since the start of our study it has almost completely turned over in its staff. In the process, it has opted for more specialization within a more hierarchical reporting system (with staff reporting to directors in such areas as school development, communications, research, and financial operations). The rationale for the change is that the originally flat BP staffing arrangement, with its reliance on relatively young and inexperienced staff, fluid job descriptions, and invent-as-you-go operations seems ill-suited to the design support needs of sixty schools scattered across the United States. The task is too big, and the financial resources too slim to tolerate such a degree of organizational slack. Yet nearly everyone acknowledges that this slack had been a wellspring of BP creativity.

Of course, BP did not turn over its staff in one sweep. Thus staff members used to an apparently fading organizational culture interacted somewhat uneasily all year with those expected to create a new one. Some of the former report the loss of an organization that once felt more democratic in terms of the generation and allocation of

resources, one where they had greater voice. And some of the newcomers report resistance to the new reporting structures and protocols. This resistance may be the last pain of a new order settling in, or it may be a sign of a transition that has hardly begun, and whose ultimate organizational impact is still unclear.

Meanwhile, BP leadership seems in transition to a yet indiscernible state. Dees, Emerson, and Economy (2001) warn that the leader dependency crucial to the start-up phase of a socially innovative organization may settle later on into what they call “founder’s syndrome” (p. 186). This is when the leader’s take on the founding vision deliberately or inadvertently comes to preclude necessary innovation. A variety of founder’s syndrome may be playing out now at BP. It has to do first of all with Dennis Littky’s and Elliot Washor’s intuitive ways of leading and working – their penchant for surprise, quick re-direction, and playfulness. It also has to do with the fact that they are *co-founders* – with somewhat different takes on the founding vision, and a strong tendency to pull at least temporarily in opposite directions pending the outcome of intense conversations with each other.

The premise of BP’s most recent organizational moves is that BP has now reached a level of scale where it requires some organizational space free of its founders’ operating style. This new space is characterized by rational planning, budgeting models, role definition, and standard operating procedures. As if to signal their acquiescence on this point, Washor and Littky have been relatively absent from BP headquarters since September. Washor is much on the road now overseeing the prospecting for new Big Picture sites, and acting in his words as the network’s “glue.” And he has moved his home to San Diego. Meanwhile, Littky has moved his office to the Met, where he is working to make it more explicitly and successfully a lab school for the entire network of Big Picture schools.

Although Littky and Washor remain the paramount leaders of BP intellectually, strategically, and politically, they have ceded much operational authority to a managing director who explicitly promotes a more rational organizational structure. Still, there are signs that Littky at least is uneasy with the new arrangement. For one thing, he worries that specialization may squeeze out some of the organization’s spirit and creativity. At the fall 2003 staff retreat, he complained that “as we get bigger, people get pushed into being solely in charge of something.” He prefers, he said, “this thing I keep reading about – synchronicity. It’s about dance, but it applies to us too.” When at one point in the retreat, he called for “re-inventing ourselves,” it seemed that he might be referring to an organizational dislocation yet to come, rather than one nearly over.

Meanwhile, there is the matter of the impact of distance on the Littky-Washor relationship. The organization is used to the dynamic that we describe above of their pulling temporarily in different directions, then resolving the tension in one-on-one conversation. But lately, BP staff have told us, their differences appear sharper. Washor said Littky told him that he misses their Sunday conversations. Littky told us that he feels the burden of being the co-leader closest to headquarters. The organizational design that has been emerging this year at BP – with its separate arenas of interest for each of its

co-leaders, plus a third arena for rational operations overseen by the managing director – depends ultimately on strong relationships and excellent communication across the archipelago. Otherwise some other organizational design will have to emerge, and possibly some other leadership structure.

Then there is the role of the Met, the original Big Picture School in Providence. It is important to note here that BP's expertise is steeped in its intimate relationship with the Met. Although BP as an organization pre-dates the Met, and has always had other projects besides the Met, its association with the Met over the last decade has been so close – particularly given the migration of personnel from one to the other, and sometimes back again – that it has often been hard to discern the organizational boundaries between the two. An important consequence of this association has been a grounding of BP design – both school design and scaling-up design – in an intimate perspective on actual schooling with its incessant uncertainty and volatility. Dennis Littky, for example, frequently criticizes other school designers – as well as BP's own staff – for tending to overlook the uncertainty and volatility of schools – to think of them as simpler than they can possibly be. Some other Gates-funded new school designers are like BP with regard to this deep attachment to one actual setting – for example, the High Tech High Foundation, and the Cristo Rey Network. However, all such designers are in a distinct minority among third-party school designers generally – for whom, in effect, a set of blueprints preceded a set of actual schools.

The difference has consequences for a third-party designer's *theory of action*. We use the term as Donald A. Schon used it – to designate the idea implicit in the sum of an organization's pronouncements, instincts, tools, and practices – at all levels, and whether coherent or not. A theory of action, simply put, answers the questions: What does the organization mean to do, and why does it think that doing it will make a difference in the part of the world it cares about? Schon argued that most organizations operate with inexplicit and incoherent theories of action, and that the chief function of organizational development ought to be to help them become more explicit and more coherent (Schon and McDonald, 1998).

The implicit theory of action governing most third-party school design takes schools to be simpler than they can possibly be - *as if* what were being designed could actually be put into place as designed. This is essentially what Millot (forthcoming) describes as the theory of action behind the scaling up of the New American Schools designs. It depends fundamentally on getting the blueprint right, and then standardizing implementation. But it denies a generation of research and practice in school reform which suggests that schools adapt designs rather than adopt them (Berman and McLaughlin, 1978; Berends, Bodilly, and Kirby, 2001).

Dennis Littky understands that this theory of action rests on a fictional premise – one that becomes more pronounced across the phases of scaling up, as the designers lose touch with their prototype schools, and as they become necessarily more remote from where their designs land. It may be a useful fiction to some extent – preserving hope and energy for the sake of invention. But when one faces up to it *as* fiction – as Littky tends

to do - than one can begin to question the very value of scale. This is why Littky raises doubts continually about BP's commitment to create 60 or more schools.

Yet he knows well that this commitment was crucial to gaining the financial resources that BP needs to be influential. What then can be done? The answer is to construct an alternative theory of action, one truer to actual new school development. Hence the importance in his mind of the Met as lab school. The strategy that he and Washor are developing, and that may evolve into a distinctly different theory of action than the one BP tends now implicitly to follow, is the one we termed in Essay 2 *networking communities of practice*. "What I hear," Littky told us, "is that people out there want to talk to advisors, and we have 70 people next door [at the Met campuses] who, if trained right, could go out on a limited basis and provide the right support." But pulling this off – through some combination of brief staff and student exchanges (Met to new schools first, then older schools to newer schools), and both web-based communications and video conferencing – require major shifts of BP resources.

To understand the theoretical stakes involved here, it helps to focus on BP's recent work to develop a set of design benchmarks that it calls "School Distinguishers." These include "Learning in the Real World," "One-Student-at-a-Time Personalization," and "Authentic Assessment." Each distinguisher has a set of essential elements, as well as recommended elements. The question the organization faces now concerns how these *distinguishers* will be used. Will they be the terms by which a third-party designer of schools offers, extends, and occasionally withdraws the right to use its name and materials? According to Bradach (2003), it is crucial that designers of complex innovations like the Big Picture school spell out the terms of their designs in this way, and then insist that its clients adopt them. Some of the conversation concerning the distinguishers suggest that this is indeed their purpose - to standardize the Big Picture design. Yet other parts of the conversation suggest that the distinguishers are meant instead to be the basis of conversation and negotiation among critical friends over a network of linked communities of practice. It is possible to imagine these uses as complementary, but it is probable that they are in practice contradictory.

To cope with strains on culture, leadership, and theory of action

- Expect turbulence, and figure out how to talk openly about its sources and its inevitability.
- Understand that different levels of scale require different management and communication systems, and different leadership. Make appropriate adjustments.
- Seize opportunities to make the organization's theory of action explicit and coherent.

Inadequate Indicators and Models

A fourth hidden dimension of the resource challenge in third-party school design concerns the inadequacy of school-level indicators to guide the smart allocation of resources, and the scarcity of available allocation mechanisms. The result of this one-two punch is that third-party school designers have to spend an inordinate amount of time and effort inventing what entrepreneurs in other sectors can take for granted.

First, on the indicator side, new school designers want to get the right resources to the right places at the right time to support the development of their schools. How can they do this? When their overall operations are small and their staffs still generalist and highly integrated, they can visit their pilot schools and make collective judgments about what the schools need. As their operations scale up, however, and they begin to hire specialists, they lose the opportunity for frequent eyes-on monitoring, and also the capacity to pool judgment calls. This is when indicator systems become very important. By paying close attention to sensitive indicators of their new schools' effectiveness – ones highly correlated with essential design features – and by standardizing their resource allocations to what the indicators tell them, third-party school designers can operate smartly at scale.

The problem is that readily available indicators of school effectiveness – for new schools as well as established ones – are very crude. For students' intellectual engagement, there are average daily attendance reports; for their intellectual achievement gains, there are standardized test results generally reported cross-sectionally rather than longitudinally; for their moral development or citizenship or sense of safety, there is the number of yearly police incidents, or some similar measure; for school progress in narrowing achievement gaps, there are the NCLB target reports which for small schools with necessarily small numbers in population sub-groups are statistical fluctuations rather than indicators; for the quality of the lives students live outside schools, there are the free and reduced lunch statistics.

Chris Whittle, the founder and CEO of Edison Schools, says that Federal Express and UPS know much more about the packages they ship than American schools know about their students (Chubb, forthcoming). If they need richer indicators – and they do – school designers have to invent or adapt other measures: student work samples, parent and student satisfaction surveys, school visitation protocols, longitudinal value-added analyses, home and community surveys, follow-up studies of graduates, and so on. Moreover, these measures have to be built into the school design itself. That is, the school must be designed for research capacity – must be designed to be mindful of its own effectiveness. And the results of its research must be monitored. An example of the kind of indicator system that BP will eventually have to invent is the one that YouthBuild developed. This large-scale and innovative youth program conducts biennial audits of each of its local programs, using internal assessments of more than a hundred performance indicators, plus site visits to audit the assessments (Bradach, 2003).

Developing such built-in measures and external auditing systems will demand and consume resources that are in short supply – both human and financial resources. BP’s effort to develop Big Picture Online as an important mechanism for tracking students and school progress remains underfunded. Its effort to hire a Research Director, whose job description would involve developing novel measures for assessing student and school growth, is stalled for want of good candidates. And its effort to build a longitudinal study of Met and other Big Picture School graduates is still searching for start-up funding. On the other hand, *not* developing such measures eats up resources too. Without better indicators, schools have no easy means of self-regulating, and thus the third-party designer has to engage in the most costly form of management, namely direct supervision (Chubb, forthcoming).

On the resource allocation side also, third-party school designers must expend much time and effort inventing, testing, and piloting mechanisms. In the area of financial resources, for example, many designers – and BP is among them - cannot take for granted that there are local funding streams adequate to support the implementation of their designs. They must therefore help local start-ups gain expertise in such areas as fundraising. Moreover, school contracting is too new a phenomenon to have yet generated reliable guidelines for practice - whether in districts or states, or in organizations scaling up designs; whether among CEOs, CFOs, policymakers, principals, lawyers, or accountants.

In the area of human resources too, third-party school designers cannot count on proven recruitment, training, and deployment models. In the crucial area of school coaching, for example, there are no proven and ready models of effective school coaching – never mind a pool of experienced school coaches to draw from, or well developed training protocols that can be adapted. There are not even any well articulated theories of school coaching. Although many reform groups are now engaged in what they call school coaching, what they actually do varies widely (in many cases within as well as across groups). This gap means that an organization like BP, even as it struggles to scale up its coaching, must simultaneously struggle to figure out what coaching is and what skill sets it requires. Similarly, BP is learning that it cannot simply delegate the recruitment and training of appropriate local staff to local principals. The attitude and skill sets needed are in rare supply, and people who possess them will probably have to be recruited nationally. Moreover, the jobs themselves – for example, that of advisor or LTI coordinator are so different from their counterparts in conventional high schools, and the experience of new Big Picture principals so thin with respect to Big Picture practice, that some regional training scheme or centrally devised staff training protocols seem called for.

Similarly, in the area of intellectual resources, good models of networking are still scarce despite evidence of the power of networking in spreading ideas. Again, this is not because networking is rare, but because the practice of it remains under-theorized. Thus practitioners are forced continually to re-invent good practice, rather than merely adopt it.⁴ Moreover, as Bradach (2003) points out, different degrees of network “tightness” are needed depending upon the degree to which an organization scaling up can standardize

its design. The more standardization it can achieve, he argues, the looser its networking can be – and loose networking is advantageous in the non-profit world where entrepreneurs – for example, individuals likely to want to be principals of Big Picture schools - tend to prize autonomy. But there are no formulas to depend on in this regard. Although BP is now engaged in an effort to describe the essential core practices and technologies of Big Picture schooling, there are probably limits to how much standardization it can achieve. In the end the “big picture” here is more than a set of ideas or a core set of practices and technologies. As Dennis Littky makes clear in a forthcoming book, it is fundamentally a culture. And as Bradach points out, cultures are among the hardest innovations to scale up because they require not only strong and clear theories of action, but also tighter than average networks. “This does not necessarily mean,” he explains, “that control has to emanate from the network’s center, but it is apt to involve substantial interaction between the local office and the center and among the [local] programs” (p. 24). Designing for this interaction will require much invention.

To cope with inadequate indicators and allocation mechanisms

- Build rich indicator systems into the school design.
- Invest in internal research capacity.
- Network for accountability as well as communication.
- Be prepared to be inventive.

3.

Managing the Resource Challenge

To manage the real resource challenge of scaling up new school designs – hidden aspects included - school designers have to develop strategies for finding and generating resources, and also systems for planning and allocation. What follows is a kind of catalogue of the strategies and systems that BP has developed or is in the process of developing in order to do these things. We have arranged the catalogue by resource dimension.

Financial Resources

Finding and Generating

- Foundation and corporate fundraising. BP Central relies predominantly on the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which funds a large share of its staff costs – 100% of those directly tied to school start-ups, and a proportion of those indirectly tied to start-ups. The heavy reliance on Gates, however, may be deterring other foundation backing. It may also be pushing growth too fast, since Gates funding is tied to numbers of new schools under development. The only corporate gift to BP Central to date has been one from the CVS Corporation, whose founder is Chair of the Met Board. At the local level, there has been significant foundation funding in Denver and Detroit; also in Vermont, though the planning effort there collapsed.
- Private donorship. There is one example of this at the level of BP Central, but the Board is pushing for more. The only example at the local level to date is Detroit, but the scale of the anticipated gift there was far less than originally projected.
- Fees for contracted services and products. The BP Memorandum of Understanding with parties interested in adopting the Big Picture school design establishes a fee-for-service basis in principle, but there has been a lag in putting a fee-for-service structure into place. The new Chief Financial Officer (CFO), recently hired by BP, will approach this task bottom-up – that is, by first building school-level budget models that incorporate fee-for-service.
- Open marketing. There has been talk about this at BP – regarding, for example, selling curriculum materials to any small high schools, or to home schooling families. Given the demands of meeting its obligations under second-round Gates funding to open many more schools, however, BP has decided to defer planning for open marketing until at least 2005.
- Raising “venture capital.” In the non-profit world, this can take the form of accepting help from an “incubating” parent – generally with management strings attached – for example, a seat on the Board, management consulting, and so on. There has been some exploration of this with a New England group, but no concrete developments yet.

- Consulting. BP's work with youth development groups starting their own high schools— though funded by Gates rather than on a fee-for-service basis – is an example of an income-generating consulting practice.
- State funding streams. The Denver and Detroit Big Picture schools are state-funded charter schools. The schools in Providence are also funded directly by the state as regional vocational schools. There is talk in California of accessing state funding for “continuation schools” as a revenue stream for Big Picture schools there. Most state revenue streams are for per-pupil expenditure only, and do not cover capital costs. Hence the dependence in Detroit and Denver on philanthropy. Capital costs in Providence were covered by a one-time voter-approved bond issue.
- School district funding streams. This is the main source of funding for Big Picture schools not funded directly by their states. Districts fund capital costs also – for example, rental charges and space renovations. Average per pupil expenditure levels vary dramatically across and sometimes within states. For example, among current Big Picture start-up sites, Camden, NJ per-pupil expenditure is \$13,787, Bloomfield, CT \$10,500, San Diego \$8,483, and New Orleans \$6,262 (NCES, 1999-2000 data).

Planning and Allocating

- Cost accounting. BP's scaling efforts have been hampered to date for want of a reliable accounting of the actual costs of Big Picture school development. Such accounting will be one of the first tasks of the newly appointed CFO.
- Growth management. BP was selected as one of a small number of Gates grantees to be offered extensive and customized consulting services from the Bridgespan Group. A non-profit spin-off of Bain and Company, the Bridgespan Group focuses on the particular challenges that non-profits face, and seeks to equip them with strategies and tools they need to address them.
- Financial management. BP Central has significantly transformed its overall management systems over the course of the last year. More change is likely to follow given the appointment of a CFO with significant management experience. Among her tasks will be to assist start-up schools with their budgeting efforts.
- Financial planning. BP Central called on consultants to undertake several planning efforts during the last year, including the development of a business plan, and a SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats). These proved helpful in highlighting the need for still more planning and analysis, including the appointment of a CFO with experience appropriate to full-scale operations.
- Financial development. BP Central hired a Director of Development in the summer of 2002 – as part of the revamping of its core staff operations. He and a consultant specifically hired for this purpose have provided some support for development efforts by local schools, but principals mostly rely on their own expertise and contacts (or suffer the lack thereof). Some complain of feeling abandoned in this regard. A possible structural problem here is that many start-up schools may have regular funding streams inadequate to the full

implementation of the Big Picture design. However, a final determination of this will depend on a full cost accounting.

Human Resources

Finding and Generating

- Recruiting. For most of its scaling-up period, BP has relied largely on two classic methods of recruiting staff. The first is to promote talented people within the organization – especially among Met advisors. This has helped to ensure that staff members assisting in local design development have experience with the design. It has also helped the organization hold onto expertise otherwise prone to move (that of Met advisors who have tended not to “re-up” when their first cohort of advisees graduates). The second method is to depend on network connections – for example, within the Coalition of Essential Schools. But BP’s current pace of scale up has outstripped the capacity of both methods. Hence it has been relying on the thin set of contacts that it manages to acquire during what it calls the “prospecting” stage of school development – when it first entertains inquiries in Indianapolis or Bloomfield, Connecticut, and so on. BP Co-Director Dennis Littky told us that he believes the organization must soon develop a national recruitment strategy and staff it appropriately. This is a common strategy used by third-party school designers working at a larger scale.
- Training. BP follows a combination of networking and turn-key approaches to training staff for new Big Picture schools. It contracts with school districts or charter holders to train principals who have been jointly selected by them and by BP – beginning in the year before the school is scheduled to open. Then it connects these principals to each other and to Met “buddies” in Providence residencies which are scheduled for short periods of time during the TYBO (The Year Before Opening). Then in turn-key fashion, the principals recruit and train their own staffs. By means of a summer training experience and on-line networking, BP next tries to link these staff members to each other. For various reasons, however, which include turnover in the training staff, a lag in developing on-line networking capacity, and the sheer demands of the jobs the trainees train for, the BP training approaches have not been as successful as the organization had hoped to make them. Current efforts to raise the profile of the Met as a lab school, and to link it to other schools via telecommunications are intended to address this problem.

Planning and Allocating

- Articulating a theory of action. BP has been slow to develop training and coaching protocols. This is likely because it is still working to articulate the essential features of the Big Picture School design – what it calls distinguishers. This effort is nearly complete now, and is likely to have a major impact on scaling up. BP will similarly need to articulate more precisely its theory of school development. This may be one outcome of its work with the Bridgespan Group, whose co-founder and managing partner, Jeffrey Bradach (2003), argues that a strong and articulated theory of action is fundamental to scaling up.
- Coaching and consulting. As we stated above, BP has undergone numerous shifts in its coaching strategies. The emerging profile situates several field-based staff as “relationship managers” (all these terms are still in flux), or brokers between sets of schools and the human resources of the larger network; the continued “connecting” work of Elliot Washor who travels among the schools; a group of specialists based at BP who may provide assistance in person or online; and teams of trained advisors and students from Big Picture Schools (especially the Met) who have a limited number of consulting days on which they may travel to other schools in the network.
- Leveraging other organizations. BP has attempted with mixed results to partner with local reform organizations – for example, the Small Schools Network in Chicago, the Bay Area Coalition of Equitable Schools in Oakland, and the Colorado Children’s Campaign in Denver – to provide consulting assistance or political support to Big Picture start-up schools in their areas. The effort acknowledges the fact that a significant degree of the overall challenge of starting and sustaining Big Picture schools involves managing local political circumstances. Without a regional infrastructure of some kind, it is unlikely that BP can provide sufficient assistance in meeting this part of the challenge. But trusting local reform organizations to play this role can pose significant threats to BP’s emphasis on the fidelity side of the continuum between fidelity and adaptation. This has happened in at least one case that we know of.
- Networking communities of practice. This remains a principal strategy in BP’s overall effort to meet the challenge of teaching and learning its school design, and specifically in managing the challenge of human resource shortfalls. This is the reason that it is investing substantially in the development of Big Picture Online, and in a new telecommunications operation. The latter represents an important and potentially transformative development (See below).

Intellectual Resources

Finding and Generating

- Reading. There is always a text circulating within BP and across the Big Picture network. Sometimes it is a book – for example, Ron Berger’s (2003), Malcolm Gladwell’s (2001), or Elliot Levine’s (2002). But more frequently it is shorter: an essay on Robert Redford and the Sundance vision (Zades, 2003), or a *New Yorker* piece about *Saturday Night Live* (Gladwell, 2002), or an article about the Blue Man Group (Walker, 2003) or Zingerman’s Deli (Brokaw, 2003).
- Citing. Those cited include John Dewey, Art Powell, Frederick Law Olmsted, and many others. The weekly TGIFs are full of citations – especially in what the Co-Directors write, but in others’ entries also (see below). The citations are evocations of authority and of intellectual lineage, but they are also prods to think deeply or in another key, to read, and to reflect.
- Identifying and cultivating intellectual mentors. Among the prized ones to date are Ted Sizer, Debbie Meier, Ron Wolk, Frank Wilson (1998), Seymour Sarason, Tom Peters, and Stanley Goldstein.

Planning and Allocating

- Writing. The best and most recent example of how BP uses writing to “allocate” intellectual resources is Dennis Littky’s new book, about to be published by ASCD. Tentatively entitled *The Big Picture*, the book is a lively and engaging account of Littky’s intellectual roots and influences, and of the principles that have guided his work. Other examples include Met advisor Eliot Levine’s (2002) book, and Elliot Washor’s (2002) doctoral dissertation.
- Conversing in Salons and Brewhouses. BP has appropriated these 17th and 18th century terms to describe major vehicles for sharing and critiquing ideas – especially in Providence. The former are focused and frank discussions of key issues. The latter are informal encounters among members of a professional community of practice (Wenger, 1998).
- Publishing TGIFs. These are reflections on a week’s work written by Big Picture School principals and teachers, and by BP staff. In Essay 2, we described these as efforts to achieve transparency of operations, and suggested that their record in this regard is mixed. Perhaps their more important functions, however, are to build community, celebrate success, and spread ideas.
- Publishing Snapshots and the Wizer Advisor. These are new online network journals focused on spreading ideas of best Big Picture practice.
- Communicating interactively online. Although the original expectations for BP Online as a means of achieving school and network transparency seem now to have been inflated, its usefulness as a resource in articulating and sharing Big Picture ideas has been considerable.
- Video making and video conferencing. This is the BP new frontier. It echoes the experience that both of BP’s Co-Directors had in the mid-1990s with a precursor

effort called *Here, Thayer, and Everywhere*. The latter was a hybrid cable- and satellite-based television program which attempted to network the many communities of practice within the Coalition of Essential Schools, and the other reform networks associated with the ATLAS Project (a high-school design effort associated with New American Schools). The pun in the program's title refers to New Hampshire's Thayer High School, where Dennis Littky was principal, but the whole title reflects the serious purpose of using local practices as the basis for a national conversation. Each month, live from New Hampshire, Littky hosted the program, which featured Thayer teachers and students talking about their work, interviews of expert guests, and video shot on location in other schools. It also included many antics: funny hats, practical jokes, and so on. In Essay 2, we described HT&E as something of a cross between Bill Moyers and Sesame Street. The new effort – scheduled to begin next month – will employ teleconferencing rather than telecasting, and thus be far more interactive. However, plans still draw some inspiration from television – in this case, reality TV. Videographer Christine Sommers, formerly a public television producer and now on the BP staff, has been filming the daily life of a Met advisory, and episodes from this documentary titled *The Advisory* will be texts for the teleconferences.

4.

An Imperfect Analogy

In this final section of our essay, we reprise some of the earlier themes by way of an extended analogy between the Big Picture Company and Ben & Jerry's Ice Cream.⁵ In doing so, we mean to highlight the ways in which the resource challenges that non-profit entities face are both like and unlike the ones that for-profits face.

Although we foreground the Ben & Jerry narrative, we also interrupt it several times to call attention to the *other* narrative, the Big Picture narrative, and to the ways in which the two both coincide and diverge.

Is It About Who or What?

In his 1994 book, Ben & Jerry's Ice Cream CEO Fred "Chico" Lager traces the history of the company's humble beginnings through its growth into what was by 1994 a "\$100 million publicly held company nationally recognized as one of the most innovative, progressive, and socially responsible businesses in the world"(xi). (Later, it got even bigger.) Part of Lager's book focuses on the lives and personalities of Ben and Jerry themselves, arguing in effect that their characters and histories largely shaped how their business developed.

He may be right on this point, or his argument may be business hagiography, as Joel Spolsky (2000) suggests. Spolsky claims that whatever the men's backgrounds, their business developed fairly predictably along one of only two routes possible. Its route was the "organic" one - "Start small with limited goals, and slowly build a business over a long period of time." He contrasts this with the "Get big fast" or Amazon.com route. In *either* case, Spolsky argues, scaling up is both difficult along the way, and transformative in the end – regardless of the personalities or ideals of the company founders. In other words, when you get bigger at any pace, you change – big-time.

Ben Cohen and Jerry Greenfield were both born in Brooklyn in 1951, but met on Long Island in the 7th grade. This places them generationally among the baby boomers, the first suburbanites, those subject to the Viet Nam War draft, and the pioneers of the "counterculture." They became pals at Calhoun High School, in Merrick, NY, where Jerry suggests they may have been drawn together partly because they were fat. As a senior there, Ben took a job as an "ice cream man" on a truck with bells, a regular feature of Long Island neighborhoods then and now. After graduation, he went to Colgate, while Jerry went to Oberlin (where he got his first professional ice cream job dishing it in the cafeteria). Oberlin's progressive, free-thinking environment suited Jerry well; but Ben hated the more traditional Colgate, and dropped out after a year and a half.

Jerry stayed at Oberlin for four years, studied, and played sports. He applied to numerous medical schools, but was rejected by all. Ben, meanwhile, hitchhiked, took pottery, film, and design courses at Skidmore's University Without Walls, and held

various jobs including cashier at McDonald's and night mopper at Friendly's. He must have had a high number in the draft lottery.

By 1974, Ben was teaching pottery and other crafts, and working as the school's cook at the Highland Community School in the Adirondacks, a non-traditional high school. He built his own house there. Meanwhile, Jerry was in New York City working as a lab technician. After a year, he applied to medical school again, and was rejected again. A little later, he shared an apartment with his old friend Ben, on 10th St. in the East Village, then one of the world's great Hippie neighborhoods.

The *Other* Narrative

- Start-up imagination and energy often come from personal chemistry in the non-profit arena too (and, by the way, Dennis Littky and Elliot Washor also met on Long Island).
- The BP story, though certainly about *who*, is also about *what*. That is, the story is about a different idea of high schooling, and about the somewhat predictable and somewhat unpredictable fate of the idea in the real world.
- With respect to *who* as well as *what*, scale is bringing changes to the BP story, as it did to B & J's.

The Start-up

By 1976, Ben and Jerry decided they wanted to start a business together. Initially, they wanted to make and sell bagels, but they discovered that the equipment they'd need was too expensive. They never actually priced the equipment needed to make ice cream, but assumed that it must be cheaper than bagel-making equipment. However, they did do some research: they visited homemade ice cream shops and took a \$5 correspondence course on ice cream making through Penn State University. They got A's in the course, since the test was open-book.

In 1978, with a \$12,000 investment, they opened the first Ben & Jerry's scoop shop on a busy downtown corner in Burlington, Vermont. The building had formerly housed a gas station. There they experimented with making ice cream (using only the highest quality ingredients), seeking a rich, dense, smooth, and chewy product. Because Ben had sinus problems, their batches became heavily flavored with chunks or add-ins so that he could distinguish the flavors. They also offered soup and crepes – both sweet and savory - but these didn't sell well. Their ice cream, however, was well received, bringing in \$650 a day and causing long lines at the counter. To keep the customers happy while they waited, the partners created a fun atmosphere. They had a player piano, and also a piano player. They made signs advertising "Today's Orgasmic Flavors."

Meanwhile, they tried hard to get their hired ‘scoopers’ not to talk too much. Talking among scoopers slowed down the line. Habits of slow scooping or over-scooping were the principal reasons for staff turnover at Ben & Jerry’s in these earliest days: they got you fired. Though neither man liked to be boss, it was Ben who liked it least. Still it was he who did the firing. “When they knew that someone had to go, they’d say to each other, ‘The monster is hungry, the monster must eat,’ and Ben would begin to practice his role of rumbling and acting tough.” He would then give the failed scooper a “compassionate speech” about how his or her future career – as doctor, lawyer, executive – would not be affected by incompetence in rolling a scoop of ice cream into a sugar cone (Lager, 1994, pp. 27-28).

Another role that neither man liked was that of accountant. They never managed to create a system: at first Jerry paid bills, then Ben. Then they stopped paying bills and cash-flow improved! However, the bank’s balance almost never matched their own. Meanwhile, though they sold lots of ice cream, they had little to show for it (Lager, 1994).

Consequently, whenever they advertised, they did it cheaply. They adopted their hand-lettered, chunky logo because it was less expensive for a graphic designer friend to draw it than to have it typeset. The designer, Lyn Severance, “put herself into the mindset of a five-year-old in an ice-cream-mode.” She also urged the boys to repaint the store with bright, primary colors, and to add roof-art – ice cream cones and coffee cups, cut from plywood and painted (Lager, 1994, p. 30). They depended for the bulk of their draw, however, not on advertising but on events. They threw end-of-summer celebrations with dancers, jugglers, frog jumping, and ice cream eating contests. They had a winter promotion: POPCDBZWE, which stands for Penny Off Per Celsius Degree Below Zero Winter Extravaganza. They also showed free movies outdoors in the summertime, projecting on the wall of the building beside their store. On their first anniversary, they held a Free Cone Day.

Jerry’s slogan became, “If it’s not fun, why do it?” Ben’s became “Business has a responsibility to give back to the community from which it draws support” (Lager, 1994, p. 36). Both ideas had roots in the hippie movement. Meanwhile, sales doubled – still without much of a business strategy in place.

The *Other* Narrative

- The start-up of a successful organization like BP or B& J’s can seem from one perspective crazy and accidental, and the actions of its entrepreneurs irrational. In fact, this perception overlooks the crucial role in success of out-of-the-box thinking, of serendipity, and of fast adaptation. Moreover, the surface details of a start-up can belie the power of a driving mission, one that has been years in the making, one that involves serious ideas.

Scaling Up

In 1979, Ben and Jerry got into the wholesale ice cream business. They did it for two reasons. First, they figured they'd never make money just scooping because there was no way to control scoop portions. Second, Ben felt envious of the salespeople who came into the shop to sell ingredients and supplies. He longed to be on the road, too. So he began lining up accounts with restaurants in Vermont and upstate New York.

To keep both their Burlington scoop shop and their emerging wholesale business in good supply, Ben and Jerry purchased an old textile mill and turned it into an ice cream manufacturing plant. By the summer of 1980, Jerry was overseeing the plant, a manager was running the scoop shop, and Ben was on the road selling and delivering, though no longer just to restaurants. That is because he had seized on a transformative idea. He thought Ben & Jerry's should package ice cream in pints and sell it to mom and pop grocery stores. Initially, Jerry resisted this idea, thinking it would be too much work (remember his slogan). Eventually he relented, however, and their designer friend Lyn was called in to create the pint packaging. She argued for a picture of the two men on the package. Ben wasn't thrilled at having his face displayed so widely, but he agreed eventually. This would forever brand the product in a highly personalized way. Later, Ben and Jerry both became tireless personalizers.

The *Other* Narrative

- Personal branding is an important factor in the BP story too. One result is that the personal choices of its founders matter more than they otherwise might – whether, for example, they stay home or go on the road.

Partnering

Within a few months, Ben & Jerry's had 200 on-the-road accounts (mostly mom and pop stores), and decided to approach local supermarkets too. Within a year, it had expanded its pint-packing operation beyond the old textile mill, and was also looking for a distributor. The 300% increase in sales was a bit much for Ben's VW station wagon to handle. So the company signed a contract with Real Ice Cream, giving it exclusive distribution rights in Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont. All Ben & Jerry's accounts had to buy from Real. But the deal unraveled quickly, teaching Ben and Jerry what they

then took to be a valuable lesson: Don't trust others to commit to your product as you do (Lager, 1994).

The problem remained, however, that Ben and Jerry couldn't service their growth with only their own truck. Briefly, they considered selling the business to a former executive with M&M Mars. Ben felt reluctant, but he also struggled with being a businessman. He felt it conflicted with his hippie ideas and ideals. During a conversation with a friend, he said, "It's just a business, like all others, exploits its workers and the community." But his friend countered, "You don't have to run your business that way. If there's something you don't like about the business, change it." The conversation marked the beginning of Ben's efforts to run what he termed a socially conscious business (Lager, 1994, p. 57).

Meanwhile, franchising the business required trusting in others' commitment. The first franchised Ben & Jerry's opened in Shelburne, Vermont, in 1981, and the first out-of-state franchise opened in Portland, Maine, in 1983. Opening a Boston market in the same year required depending on independent distributors as well as franchise owners.

Then in 1984, the company took its biggest step into dependence by issuing a public stock offering. It went public for the same reason that companies always do – because it needed new sources of revenue in order to support growth. In particular, it needed the capital to build a new manufacturing plant. But it went public in an oddly local way: the initial public offering was for Vermont residents only.

The *Other* Narrative

- Non-profits like BP cannot, of course, become public companies, but there are other ways in which a certain kind of dependence – for the purpose of gaining resources - may become for them also the price of going to scale. For example, they may partner with a school district, link with a local reform effort, and come to rely on one or more key funders.

Gaining Attention

The next year the company went beyond New England in its marketing, but only as far as New York City, the founders' old hometown. There it decided to take on the premium ice-cream giant Haagen Dazs. It wasn't the first joust between Ben & Jerry's and this subsidiary of Pillsbury. The year before, Haagen Dazs had tried to limit Ben & Jerry distribution in Boston by telling its own distributors that they couldn't distribute both brands. Haagen Dazs then had the higher market share, and the distributors knew that they would take a big hit if it pulled its brand. Ben and Jerry fought back in their

unique fashion. Jerry picketed in front of the Pillsbury Headquarters in Minneapolis. He held a hand-lettered sign reading “What’s the Dough-boy Afraid of?” He handed out leaflets with a description of the Haagen-Dazs effort in Boston, and a kit that had sample letters of protest to the FTC and to the Chair of Pillsbury’s board. The Pillsbury letter said, “Why don’t you pick on someone your own size?” He also handed out a coupon redeemable for a T-shirt with the slogan “Ben & Jerry’s legal defense fund major contributor.”

As anticipated, the press ran with the picketing story and interviewed Jerry. Meanwhile, Ben & Jerry pints began carrying stickers advising customers to call an 800 number to support the cause. Lager’s (1994) assessment of the results of this joust is that Pillsbury had unwittingly handed Ben & Jerry’s “a public-relations bonanza that created brand awareness” for its ice cream in excess of anything the company could have created with paid advertising (p. 120). Moreover, Ben & Jerry’s took Pillsbury to court and won.

Moving into New York against Haagen Dazs, Ben & Jerry’s felt cocky. The company believed that its ice cream and image were unique. Lager (1994), recalling the company’s mood then, says, “If Haagen-Dazs and the clones were worldly and sophisticated, then we were funky and unpretentious. If they were slick and elegant, Ben & Jerry’s was down-home and genuine. ‘We’re the only super-premium whose name you can pronounce,’ Ben would say...” (p. 81). Moreover, Ben & Jerry’s flavors were different, and had chunks added in.

Without having given serious thought to the profitability outcome, Ben & Jerry’s had created a unique identity.

The *Other* Narrative

- As B & J’s famously did with respect to the ice cream business, BP uses an antic image to capture its iconoclastic ideas about high schooling.
- The tight market that B & J’s first faced – and that it helped open up – may be equivalent to the expectations that local Big Picture school developers must overturn – about what a high school is and how it ought to function.
- The distinguishability of the Big Picture design – like the distinguishability of B & J’s ice cream – is the leverage that the headquarters operation offers its local marketers. Without it, they cannot make the sell.

Moving On

Soon Ben & Jerry’s the corporation became somewhat less equivalent to Ben and Jerry the actual people – the first of several shifts in this direction. Jerry decided to move to Arizona with his girlfriend, selling all but 10% of his interest in the company to

Ben. Given the personalized branding, however, the two friends negotiated an agreement whereby Jerry would return to Burlington four times a year to participate in promotions, consult, and help with advertising.

In fact, by 1985, Jerry had come back to Burlington full-time to become the company's "Director of Mobile Promotions," and Vice-Chair of the Board. The Chair was Ben. One of Jerry's mobile promotions happened in the summer of 1986, when Ben and Jerry traveled across the country together in a "cowmobile," serving up free samples of their ice cream. But the cowmobile caught fire and burned to the ground outside Cleveland. Ben was quoted in news stories across the country as claiming that the burning cowmobile "looked like a giant baked Alaska." It was among their many stunts that raised market share – from the dough-boy attack, to the world's largest sundae weighing in at St. Alban's, Vermont, at 27,102 pounds then slowly melting, to sending a "scoop vehicle" to Wall Street after the crash of 1987 to serve free servings of Economic Crunch ice cream, to joining in a "linguistic activism" campaign to demand that dictionaries list *s'mores* as a word. And then there were the flavor introductions, combining fun and social activism: besides S'mores, there was Cherry Garcia, Wavy Gravy, Brazilian Rainforest Crunch, the Full VerMonty, and Blueberry (introduced to create a market for blueberries grown by a particular tribe of Native Americans in Maine).

After New York, Ben & Jerry's moved back up the coast to take in Connecticut and Rhode Island. Ben negotiated with distributors in these areas, and created TV advertisements called "Cheap," which were ten-second spots that featured Ben and Jerry on a "talking ice cream lid," saying "Hi, I'm Ben!" and "Hi! I'm Jerry! We may not have enough money for a thirty-second TV spot, but we sure make some of the best ice cream you've ever tasted!" (Lager, 1994, p. 87). They also employed their special events van there. A team of people would emerge from the van and walk into office buildings with bags over their shoulders filled with ice cream. They would hand out pints, spoons, and coupons that listed the store locations at which the product was available. Predictably, the success of sales in these markets led to the need to increase production – hence the new factory in Vermont and the public stock offering.

The *Other* Narrative

- As with B & J's, the images that BP uses to capture and promote its ideas have naturally affected its organizational culture. This has implications for scaling up.
- Unlike B & J's, BP went geographically wide in its first out-of-state forays – to the west coast, rather than adjoining states. The result was that BP's available resources were stretched further, and its first host cultures less familiar than they otherwise might have been.

Scaling Up a Culture

In 1984, Ben & Jerry's had sales of more than \$4 million, a 120% increase over the previous year. In 1985, the company's sales exceeded \$9 million, an increase of 143% over the previous year. And in 1986, sales climbed to just under \$20 million, more than a 100% jump. When a company grows faster than 100% a year, Joel Spolsky (2000) argues, "it is simply impossible for mentors to transmit corporate values to new hires." Where these values are crucial to product quality, then the organization either has to slow growth or figure out a way to beat the odds through cultural power. According to Lager, the only thing the company ever did deliberately to reduce its rate of growth was to limit expansion initially to New England and New York. "By going 'deep' before we went 'wide,'" he writes, "we were actually ensuring our success in the biggest and most important markets in the country" (p. 154).

However, the company built a strong corporate culture – one that from the perspective of ordinary business practice was countercultural. It depended on the idea of "linked prosperity." This meant, Lager (1994) explains, that "as the company grew and prospered, the benefits would accrue not just to shareholders, but also to employees and the community. Each constituency's interests were intertwined with the others" (p. 126). Thus Ben & Jerry's established a five-to-one salary ratio, whereby no one could be paid more than five times what the lowest paid staff member was paid. As Ben put it, this did not mean that it could not offer high salaries to top people, but that it then had to raise all bottom salaries correspondingly. To link outside prosperity to inside prosperity, the company also established the Ben & Jerry's Foundation, and instituted the practice of donating 7.5% of its pre-tax income through the foundation to non-profit organizations that foster social change. And the corporation itself became politically active. In 1990, it protested New Hampshire's Seabrook nuclear power plant with a Boston billboard that read "Seabrook: Keep our customers alive and licking." That same year, it printed a "Support Farm Aid" panel on 8 million pint containers. Later, it introduced its new line of smooth, no chunks ice cream flavors with an advertising campaign that featured, among others, Spike Lee, Daniel Berrigan, Pete Seeger, and Bobby Seale.

The new manufacturing plant in Waterbury, Vermont, had been built to accommodate growth, but a result of its vastness was that employees were suddenly spread out. Because size added complexity, the employees also worked in a more departmentalized way. "The up side," writes Lager (1994), "was that more work was getting done. The down side was that as people became more task-oriented, they began to lose their connection to the whole of the organization" (p. 143). To compensate, the company began shutting down production one day a month to bring everybody together. The meetings enabled management to communicate about the company (flavors, sales, etc.), and offer information on future plans. The meetings served also as forums to discuss issues and ideas raised by staff, and to give line-level employees a voice in strategy and operations development. Through celebrations and other special events, the meeting also passed on the antic culture of the company – the one that had started in the Burlington scoop shop in order to entertain people waiting on line, but had then become a combination operating philosophy and marketing strategy - about being down-home,

spunky, inventive, resourceful, fun. Here it also became a means of building esprit, and of holding onto valuable employees.

Spolsky (2000) says that the Amazon.coms of the world – needing to get big fast enough to dominate an open market that will otherwise be gobbled up by someone else – always have to substitute cash for time. They buy corporate loyalty rather than cultivate it. They write off their mistakes with big checks, rather than try to prevent them by growing the right cultural and training environment. By contrast, the Ben & Jerrys of the world – the slow-growth organics operating in competitive markets – can't afford any of this. In an important sense, their culture *is* their product. They risk losing everything if they grow faster than they can promulgate this culture.

Still, culture alone is not enough to solve all the human resource challenges of a company growing fast, albeit at an organic rate. As it grew, Lager explains, Ben & Jerry's increasingly needed to fill management positions by recruiting outsiders rather than just grooming insiders. The complexity of its scaled-up operations was one reason. Another was to gain the benefit of external perspectives.

The *Other* Narrative

- Like B & J's, BP has felt the tug between efficiency and culture as it has grown in scale – and a consequent threat to its identity.
- BP continues to struggle with the question of whether “outsiders” – especially those who have never worked in a Big Picture school – can lead or coach those who do.

The Big Shift

Meanwhile, in the early 1990's the company's growth policy had become a source of tension between Lager who was still CEO, and Ben, who was still closely involved in management issues. Lager calls it an “unresolved debate.” He says that Ben believed that if the company got too big, “it risked becoming just another bureaucratic corporation, no different from any other.” For his part, Lager thought that this fear created a “mythic horizon, beyond which we never looked” – one that precluded sensible long-range planning (pp. 152-153).

Eventually, the debate ended with both men stepping down, and also with the adoption of a mission statement that seemed to resolve some of the differences at stake. Beyond dedicating Ben & Jerry's to the making of “finest quality ice cream” in “innovative flavors” using Vermont dairy products, the mission statement acknowledges the “new corporate concept of linked prosperity” – linking the economic and the social. The economic side involves increasing benefits to stockholders and to employees, while the social side involves running the business in ways that improve quality of life locally, nationally, and internationally.

Ben's departure made for a huge organizational transition in two respects. First, it meant that the company had to become less intuitive in its product development and marketing strategy. Ben had served as the "official taster" on ice cream development, and also the creative force behind the company's marketing. "He had great instincts about what would and wouldn't work," Lager (1994) writes, and Ben & Jerry's relied on these instincts nearly exclusively, never doing market research or test marketing of products. "If Ben thought it was a good idea. . . [Ben & Jerry's] would do it" (pp. 149-50). Meanwhile, what Lager calls Ben's "fanatical commitment to producing a high-quality product" (p. 148) had long been the company's principal vehicle of quality control. He "was a taskmaster and a perfectionist who held everyone to incredibly high standards. He rarely passed out praise and was always focused on what was wrong" (p. 150). One day in 1987, when Ben was walking through the plant, he came upon freezer doors that weren't closing properly. He became livid. How could an organization committed to quality ignore a problem that so directly affected its product? The term "freezer door" thereafter became the phrase to describe systems or procedures not up to standard. However, under Ben's control, the standard remained intuitive and aphoristic. It was tied to his vision of a company whose generosity, spirit, and positive attitude causes everybody to pull together for the common good.

Although the company launched the much noticed "Yo, I'm your CEO" contest in 1994 to replace Lager – attracting 22,000 entrants who explained in 100 words or less why they should be the new CEO – the replacement CEO was actually located by a search firm.

This CEO lasted two years, and accomplished manufacturing efficiencies, according to the company's website. He was followed by one who expanded marketing strategies. Over the next several years, the organization developed formal decision making processes, long-range planning and budgeting systems, an orientation program for new employees, and an assessment system to evaluate franchise operations – none of which it had had before. It also expanded into many international markets, and abandoned its 5-1 salary limit - in order, it said, to attract the caliber of professional managers it needed. By 1999, Ben & Jerry's had net sales of nearly \$240 million.

That was also the year that the company announced that it had received "indications of interest" from potential buyers, and that it was considering the offers.

The Other Narrative

- BP has also introduced new systems to manage itself at scale, and is currently undergoing an organizational transition designed over time to substitute standard operating procedures for intuition (at least to some degree). But the precise degree remains a matter of contention.
- The BP story seems now on the verge of some plot turn also – though hardly like the one that B & J's underwent at this point.

The End or a New Beginning

As the *New York Times* put it in its lead on the story: “A poignant cry is rising from many a Vermonter’s heart these days, a plaint for local purity in the face of cold cash and the forces of globalization: ‘Say it ain’t so, Ben and Jerry’” (Goldberg, 1999, p. 18). Governor Howard Dean protested the possible sale, calling Ben & Jerry’s Vermont’s signature corporation. He was particularly concerned about the economic impact on the state’s dairy farms, and the possible loss of the state’s premier tourist site, the Ben & Jerry’s manufacturing plant. Among other protestors was a street theater group demonstrating outside the Burlington shop, suggesting new flavors “like Chubby Bureaucrat, Funky Money, and Two-faced Swirl.” A web site, www.savebenjerry.com, warned that “gigantic multinational companies are trying to take advantage of Ben & Jerry’s undervalued stock price” (Goldberg, 1999, p. 18).

Ben and Jerry themselves were mostly silent in the face of the protests, except that Ben issued a statement saying that he hoped to resolve the tension between his fiduciary obligation as a member of the Ben & Jerry’s Board to return adequate value to shareholders, and the company’s commitment to progressive values. But the website was right. What was going on behind the scenes was prospecting by multinationals for undervalued stock. From another perspective, this was another episode of an old dilemma in the company’s history – a predictable dilemma of scaling up: how much to depend on others when it comes to resources needed for the job, versus how much to go it alone.

Already this same dilemma had led the company to the once unthinkable business decision of letting Haagen Dazs be one of its major distributors. Now the dilemma was threatening a takeover by a major multinational. But the fiduciary obligation that Ben spoke of was real and legally binding. As Vermont’s Congressman Bernie Sanders put it with indignation, “The directors of a company could actually be sued because they are responsive to their employees, to local farmers in our state, and to the local economy.” The Vermont legislature had passed a law known informally as the Ben & Jerry’s law which declared that a company could consider other factors besides profit in considering a buy-out offer. However, the law was untrustworthy for being untested in the courts (Goldberg, 1999, p. 18).

Ben tried to organize a plan that would have divided the company fairly equally among himself, a venture capital firm that describes itself as socially responsible, and an Anglo-Dutch firm called Unilever, whose subsidiaries include Good Humor and Breyer’s ice cream companies. In the end, this deal was eclipsed by one that Unilever proffered on its own. This beat the other offer by as much as \$10 a share – and at a price considerably above the trading price (Hays, 2000). Ben & Jerry’s accepted it.

Ben, who made about \$39 million on the deal, was apparently impressed by the fact that one of the Unilever co-chairmen arrived at negotiations with a knapsack on his

back, and that he talked about Unilever's sustainable agriculture programs. The Unilever offer included an agreement to maintain a separate Ben & Jerry's board, one-time \$5 million payments to both the Ben & Jerry's Foundation and Ben & Jerry's employees, a commitment at least in the short term not to reduce jobs or change the way the ice cream is made, continuation at least for the short-term of the 7.5% pre-tax charitable contribution, and the prospect of Ben & Jerry's concept of "linked prosperity" influencing the practices of the global Unilever with its \$44 billion annual sales.

"While I would have preferred for Ben & Jerry's to remain independent," Ben said at the announcement, "I'm excited about this next chapter." Then he quoted lines from a Grateful Dead song: "Once in a while you get shown the light in the strangest of places" (Hays, 2000). His allusion was to the possibility that Unilever might buy into "linked prosperity." Meanwhile, both the influence *and* survival of Ben & Jerry's inside Unilever depend on the long-term strength and marketability of the branding that Ben and Jerry gave it. Looking back, it seems clear that this was the only real control the founders ever had.

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Notes

¹ The “past” in this sense may be prologue – so claims Wayne Gerson (2003) in a recent *Education Week* article. There he describes a “personalized public school” that may “be the wave of the future.” Mountain Oaks School, in Calaveras County, California, provides networked services, as well as community meeting space, and a lending library to families involved in home schooling. Although all the current Big Picture schools operate as state-directed (RI), district-based, or charter schools, they are functionally similar to the school that Gerson describes.

² The principal source of funding for the Big Picture Company today is a grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which provides a certain sum for each of the new schools BP has committed to open.

³ Both Marc Tucker and John Chubb (discussing the experience of America’s Choice and Edison Schools respectively) - make this point in a forthcoming Rand volume about scaling up school reform, edited by Bodilly and Glennan.

⁴ Two of us make this point in a recent article about the use of networking in school reform. See McDonald and Klein (2003).

⁵ The principal sources for this section of the essay are Lager (1994), the Ben and Jerry’s Ice Cream website (www.benjerry.com), Ben & Jerry’s own book (Cohen and Greenfield, 1997), and a small number of secondary sources. Because of the obvious limitations of these sources, the reader should not take what we say here as a definitive analysis of Ben & Jerry’s. What we intend is a distant mirror for the Big Picture Company, constructed of Ben & Jerry material.