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Trusting Families to Help Themselves

By **DAVID BORNSTEIN**

Fixes looks at solutions to social problems and why they work.

Tags:

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On Friday, I [reported](#) on the Family Independence Initiative (F.I.I.), an organization that encourages low-income families to define their own goals and work towards them in mutual support groups, while carefully documenting their successes. (F.I.I. pays modest stipends for the research data provided by families.) So far, the few hundred families that F.I.I. has worked with have demonstrated impressive gains in areas like income and savings, debt reduction, skills training, and improvements in children’s grades and health care.

Many readers found F.I.I.’s approach promising. Dinah Lord, from Stanford, Calif. (8), wrote: “[It] sounds like F.I.I. has adopted a transformative perspective instead of a deficit perspective.” Ruanne, from Arkansas (42), added that the work represented a “great balance between two long-standing American traditions: hard work and community.” And Jon N. from Salinas, Kans. (34), added: “This method seems to form self-reinforcing community bonds that allow people to motivate and help one another. This is a brilliant paradigm for the future of welfare.”

Social service professionals will often focus on problems and overlook strengths in families and communities.

One of the things that distinguishes F.I.I.’s work from most programs designed to help struggling families is the way it creates a context that allows families to discover their individual and collective strengths and act upon them. To this end, F.I.I.’s staff members are not permitted to offer any advice or guidance to families.

Several readers commented on the respectfulness of this approach — as well as the discipline required to carry it out. MAL, from San Antonio (16), wrote: “As an educator, I can fall into the temptation of trying to provide a correct answer too quickly, and then

watch my advice not get followed. This program shows that it's possible to strike a balance between providing guidance and letting people find answers within themselves." And M. Rosaldo from Berkeley, Calif. (46), wrote that the idea of "preventing staff from offering advice is counterintuitive and brilliant," adding, "I'm curious about examples of social change organizations that employ similar approaches in other fields."

One of them is the Grameen Bank, the Nobel Prize winning microlender, which trains its staff not to suggest business ideas to borrowers. "The Grameen Bank has lots of money but it has no ideas," the bank's founder Muhammad Yunus has instructed his staff to tell borrowers who solicit advice.

Both Yunus and F.I.I.'s founder Maurice Lim Miller believe that the rise out of poverty comes when people take control and make choices. That process can be circumvented by professionals who would step in too quickly to prescribe solutions for others.

One reader, Balleria, from Minneapolis (44), asked about "the challenges that F.I.I. has faced." When I posed the question to Lim Miller, he replied: "This model can be corrupted very quickly because it's so hard for people who want to be actively helpful to actually back off and be secondary. This issue of trusting the families, believing that ultimately they are going to do something, is probably one of the hardest things for people to get used to."

He gave an example of how F.I.I. interacts with families. A woman called the office because she had had a car accident and wanted the F.I.I. staff to recommend a lawyer. "The first thing we do is push it back to her and her community," explained Lim Miller. "We asked, 'Are there other people you know who have had car accidents? Do you know any of them who got an attorney and were successful?'" The woman couldn't think of anyone. After a while, she said, "Oh, I babysit for an attorney! And he's always feeling guilty because he comes home later than he says he will." She decided that she could ask him for a referral. The only comment the F.I.I. staff made was to remind her to ask him if she could use his name. "That's how things work in middle class communities," they said. In the future, if anyone in this woman's circle needs an attorney, they'll go to her.

Social service professionals tend to overlook strengths. Lim Miller recalled when F.I.I. was preparing to work in Boston. He was in a meeting with people from local foundations and service agencies who were talking about a tough area of Boston. "The schools are bad, there's all this institutional racism, there's drug use, there's police brutality, there's poverty, and there have been millions of dollars thrown at the problems," he said. "And they're saying, 'Fifty percent of the kids in this community don't graduate from high school. What are we going to do about it?'" His reply was: "With all those problems, 50 percent *are* still graduating from high school? What are they doing differently from everyone else? We should be talking to them."

This approach — focusing on what’s going right and building upon it — has been called “[positive deviance](#)” and was systematized by Jerry and Monique Sternin, a couple who worked with Save the Children in Vietnam in the 1990s. The Sternins helped villagers teach one another strategies that reduced malnutrition by 85 percent within two years. Positive deviance harnesses ideas that are self-generated within communities. In Vietnam, villagers identified families with the healthiest children and examined what they were doing. (They had adopted uncommon practices, such as collecting nutritious foods that were not usually given to children and washing their children’s hands before meals.) Positive deviance has been successfully applied to address many problems around the world.

“We look for positive deviance from families we think are very typical,” explained Lim Miller. When a seemingly ordinary person deviates from the norm and succeeds, it creates a change in expectations that ripples out, he said.

Looking ahead Lim Miller’s goal is to expand F.I.I. and use it as a platform to change “the way the nation views and values low-income families.” “I think over the next three to five years, we’ll need about \$8 to \$10 million to reach thousands of families in multiple communities,” he says.

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To grow its work with integrity, F.I.I. is enlisting leaders from families —people like Maria Perez, from San Francisco, who is one of F.I.I.’s paid “Fellows.” Perez and her husband, on income of about \$40,000, patched together savings, scholarships and financial aid, to send six of their children to private Catholic schools. They battled the city of San Francisco and won the right to send a daughter with cerebral palsy to a public school in another municipality because it has superior special education classes.

The process turned Perez into a resourceful advocate. Now, F.I.I. is enlisting her talents. In Boston, she turned out to be their most effective spokesperson, convincing even the most skeptical men to join. Lim Miller envisions fellows like Perez playing a leading role in the expansion, encouraging families and training and monitoring staff members.

Many readers noted that families should have more access to investment capital. F.I.I. aims to highlight policies that could support family-led initiatives — such as microloans, scholarships, [Individual Development Accounts](#), and simplified business licenses. On a family basis, the program saves more money for the government than F.I.I. pays out in stipends — largely because families that do better receive lower tax credits. “The art is to bring in resources so that they are available to families, but in a way that is demand driven, not prescribed,” says Lim Miller.

They are also building a system so low-income families can rate social service programs the way customers rate restaurants on sites like Yelp. If foundations and government

agencies began using customer rankings as a criteria when allocating funding to social service programs — that is, if working poor families got to shape the services they needed to get ahead — it would represent a major, and radical, step forward.

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