



## **Investing in the business of relationships**

**Leigh Sinclair**

**“What a journey this life is! Dependent, entirely, on things unseen.” *James Baldwin, Nothing Personal***

I'd like to acknowledge that using economic terms as a metaphor for achieving social outcomes has a problematic history and will be jarring for many of you, and I get that. If I may give some background into my thinking; when it comes to financial investing, I am struck by the fact that there is so much effort put into trying to predict and understand the vagaries of the stock market, yet studies have demonstrated that chimpanzees are as effective at predicting the market as people are.

Recognising that there are so many unknown variables affecting the future performance of the market, there is an established school of thought that the best way to invest is to diversify risk across a range of businesses over a long time. Billionaire/ philanthropist Warren Buffet was one of the earliest investors to recognize this and was one of the first adopters of investing in indexed funds – funds that follow whole markets rather than individual stocks. He credits his exorbitant wealth to this strategy. He was once asked a question to the effect of, “if your investment strategy is so simple and successful, why don't more people copy you? Buffet replied, “Because nobody wants to get rich slowly”.

I think investing in collaborative, relational ways of working is like investing in an index fund. We are diversifying risk and increasing impact. Tackling the complexity of challenges facing our community is a marathon not a sprint. There is a lot we don't know, but we do know that strong relationships are a necessary precondition for achieving positive social change.

Research over the past fifty years into the effectiveness of talk therapy as a mental health intervention consistently demonstrates that one factor – more than any other – is



associated with successful therapeutic results: The quality of the relationship between the therapist and the patient.<sup>1</sup>

Social entrepreneur Hilary Cottam's work, which featured so prominently at the last WACOSS conference, presents a compelling case about the importance of authentic relationships when partnering with families to build their capacity to tackle the complex challenges they may be facing.

And the quality of relationships has repeatedly been shown to be a critical ingredient in successful collaboration between organizational stakeholders. Indeed, Cottam suggests that the more people, the more relationships, the stronger the solution.

While on the one hand we know this to be true, on the other we have been slow to recognize that creating conditions that allow relationships to flourish is a purposeful endeavour in and of itself.

One of the founders of the collective impact movement, John Kania, has cogently described the current environment that we find ourselves in – he suggests ... *that over the past two decades the prevailing view has been that only quantifiable and predetermined outcomes can create impact. But, if the pandemic years have taught us anything it is that complex, adaptive problems defy tidy logic models and reductive technical solutions. If we want to shift the dial on complex social challenges, it is time to invest our collective energy in more relational and emergent approaches to transforming systems*<sup>2</sup>.

### **A love letter to government**

It is in this context that my presentation today might be considered a love letter to Government – especially the State Government. It is a demonstration of what can happen when funders invest in mechanisms that nurture relationships to actualise the collective power of community.

The Fremantle Rockingham Family Support Network, the Perth Suicide Prevention Coordinator program and the Imagined Futures District Leadership Group all have different but intersecting remits, yet we all have the business of relationships at our heart.

One of these mechanisms is great on its own, but when all three of us come together to focus our efforts on the same geographic community – that impact is amplified even further.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.family-institute.org/behavioral-health-resources/importance-relationship-therapist#:~:text=However%2C%20it%20is%20the%20patient's,over%20the%20course%20of%20treatment.>

<sup>2</sup> [https://ssir.org/articles/entry/the\\_relational\\_work\\_of\\_systems\\_change](https://ssir.org/articles/entry/the_relational_work_of_systems_change)



Over the turbulent COVID years, we have leveraged our relationships to unlock the strengths that exist in community to deliver several collaborative projects including: improving support and care for people experiencing depression, enhancing connections for Aboriginal children in care to their family, culture and community, and testing ways of connecting people new to seeking support to the right help at the right time.

But first, let's look at what these mechanisms are:

#### *Fremantle Rockingham Family Support Network or FSN*

FSNs are a partnership of community sector services and the Department of Communities. They provide a common entry point to services and deliver earlier, targeted support to families with complex problems and those most vulnerable to involvement in the child protection system. The FRFSN is one of four FSNs across the metropolitan region and was established in 2018. It has 30 partner agencies and is funded by the Department of Communities.

They are experts at working with a target group – families and understanding the principles of system navigation.

#### *Suicide Prevention Coordinator program*

The Suicide Prevention Coordinator program is funded by the Mental Health Commission and works with the Commission to deliver on the current statewide suicide prevention strategy. Neami National has the contract for the Perth metropolitan area SPCs. Their role is to coordinate the development, implementation and evaluation of suicide prevention, intervention, and postvention activity.

They also have a role in building the capacity of service providers to enable them to better identify and address local suicide-related issues through evidence-based prevention activity.

The Program has been in place since 2017 and they work with more than 500 agencies across the metropolitan region.

They bring a coordinated approach to a complex social issue. They also have small buckets of funding available to direct toward activities that align with their mission.

#### *Imagined Futures District Leadership Group*

Imagined Futures is a place based collective impact partnership focused on the Local Government Areas of Cockburn, Fremantle, and Melville. There are currently 73





These three mechanisms serve to make it easier for people to work together. We each leverage off the great work that our partners are doing in their primary sphere of work. Collectively we can work together to overcome the barriers that often exist in delivering joined up approaches that don't fit neatly within prescribed funding pathways. We assist in joining the dots between the work of agencies, to add strength to what is working well and to attempt to fill gaps where needed. There is also a strong communication element to our work. We have each been around a while – strong relationships exist between our partners. It means that we are poised and ready to respond if a crisis strikes or if an opportunity presents.

So, all this is great. But we don't want relationships for relationships sake. How does it work in practice? What are the outcomes for community?

### **Where is the Door? project**

When the pandemic struck, it was clear that there was going to be a wave of people reaching out for support for the first time. The Imagined Futures partnership was keen to work together to see if we could find ways of reaching these people early and connecting them to the right support at the right time - we've called this body of work Where is the Door? Project.

While there are many much needed comprehensive directories available for community members to refer to, many people don't know that these exist, or indeed what help or service they may be looking for in the first place. Or they may not realise they are eligible or have the confidence to reach out.

The Imagined Futures Where is the Door? project seeks to proactively bridge this gap by simplifying information about where to begin, and then delivering tailored resources and connection to support directly to different community touchpoints such as school P&C committees, GP practices and sporting clubs via a range of communication methods.

One example of how we've done this is by developing a GP referral pathways resource for use with young people experiencing depression and anxiety. The aim is to expand GPs' referral options in addition to psychologists and psychiatrists (who have long waitlists). We interviewed several local GPs who told us that they would like an easy to reference one pager that clearly tells them what community mental health support options are available locally. So, that's what we did. We designed a simple resource that is broken



down by age group and severity of presentation. In each of these categories we gave an option for referral. For example, if a young person between the ages of 12 to 25 presents with a mild to moderate mental health condition, headspace is the best agency to refer to. If a young person presents with a severe mental health condition, Youth Reach South is the best option. The problem that we found was that when we came to the category for 0- to 12-year-old children with mild to moderate mental health presentations – which is ideally when you'd want to intervene – there was no obvious pathway in our region. This is where the FRFSN came in, we were able to put the problem to them – asking what they do when they are supporting families in this situation. They were able to connect us with one of their partners - a local Nurse Practitioner practice that specializes in working with children, and the use of trauma informed approaches; their appointments are much longer than a GP and who can also work with the rest of the families. We were then able to include the Nurse Practitioners on the GP resource. This kind of rich information is difficult to know about when you are trying to navigate the system from the outside. We were able to connect the expertise of FRFSN to local GPs to build their capacity. This resource has been delivered to all 399 GPs in our region as part of a broader GP pack that we have developed.

Similarly, as another example of our work in this space, our youth working group identified the trend of increasing numbers of young people receiving messages from friends via social media platforms disclosing thoughts of self-harm, and not knowing what to do. The group agreed that we would like to work together to try to fill the gap of lack of practical support for young people who find themselves in this situation. Our suicide prevention partners put up their hands to lead this body of work as it clearly aligns with their mission. Two years down the track the result is the recently launched Right By You website. A site that has been co-designed by young people with funding from Neami National and the Mental Health Commission.

To be clear, the hard work that has brought this fantastic resource to bear was undertaken by the Suicide Prevention Coordinators, Imagined Futures role was bringing together a group of stakeholders with expertise in working with young people and providing a space for new ideas to come to light. We had the spark of the idea, fanned the flames for a few months, and the Suicide Prevention Coordinators took it on and built it into a bonfire.

These are just two examples from a whole suite of activities that we are progressing as part of the Where is the Door project; while I am long on examples I'm short on time, but I hope that today has given a glimpse of what can happen when we invest in structures that foster relationships, provide the flexibility for new ideas to emerge, and in turn increase the



range of opportunities for these ideas to be brought swiftly to life to the benefit of the community. Together, we're on a path towards getting rich slowly.