**15 Lessons and Tips for Systems Mapping**

**Be prepared**: Systems mapping is resource intensive. Set aside more time, budget and energy than you initially think you need.

1. **Clarify WHY you are making a map**: Is the goal to inform strategy? To learn? To shape an evaluation agenda? Design the process with your primary objectives in mind, and revisit those objectives regularly.

**Keep the focus on the value-add of systems thinking** and how the map will be used. This can help provide direction and a sense of purpose.

**Emphasize systems thinking (process) over systems mapping (product)**: Systems mapping is a learning process, and can push strategy and build relationships. These benefits can be even more valuable than the final map!

1. **Consider your audience**: A systems map that is useful for internal strategy and learning may not be useful as a public communications tool, and vice versa.
2. **Ground the process in realism and practicality.** The time-intensive nature of systems mapping may require reprioritization of other organizational goals. The energy-intensive nature of the process may mean that staff cannot work on systems mapping for long periods of time without breaks. However the process manifests for you and your team, be responsive, realistic, and practical.
3. **Hire a systems thinking expert** to support your team through the practice.
4. **At the same time, value your staff’s expertise:** respect and emphasize the organization’s internal knowledge even as you engage outside consultants. This will help ensure fit between the map and organizational priorities, and can help sustain buy-in throughout the process.
5. **Engage with diverse perspectives** – not just people you already agree with and whose opinion you already know. They only represent one part of the system!
6. **Find the right level of zoom and scope:** The right level of zoom is essential for managing the process and making the map useful to staff. When thinking about scope, try to highlight *dynamic* complexity (a map that *emphasizes interconnections* between different parts of the system) over *detail* complexity (a map that represents many different factors).

**Get the right people to the table:** the staff who create the map should be the same staff who will use the map to make decisions on strategy, learning questions, and other organizational priorities.

**Put effort into making learning comfortable:** Systems mapping will challenge assumptions and reveal knowledge gaps, which can be scary! Emphasize these as benefits, not challenges, and allocate time and energy to manage different reactions to learning in this way.

**Teach staff how to manage ambiguity and iteration:** These are inherent in the process, and can feel contrary to our natural inclinations toward certainty.

**Get leadership on board:** Obtain buy-in from your Board and other organizational leaders to secure resources and to ensure effective decision-making throughout the process.

**Establish clear roles and processes**: the process may involve consultants, program staff at different levels of seniority, evaluation staff and others. Be clear about the process steps, as well as about the various roles and responsibilities staff and consultants will play throughout the process.