Knowledge Broker Support Program

Volume 2 – Knowledge Broker Tools – Theory of Change module

CSIRO Australia's National Science Agency

Citation

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Important disclaimer

Cover photo: Knowledge broker in action. Photo by Tom Greenwood, 2017. Photo below by Seona Meharg.
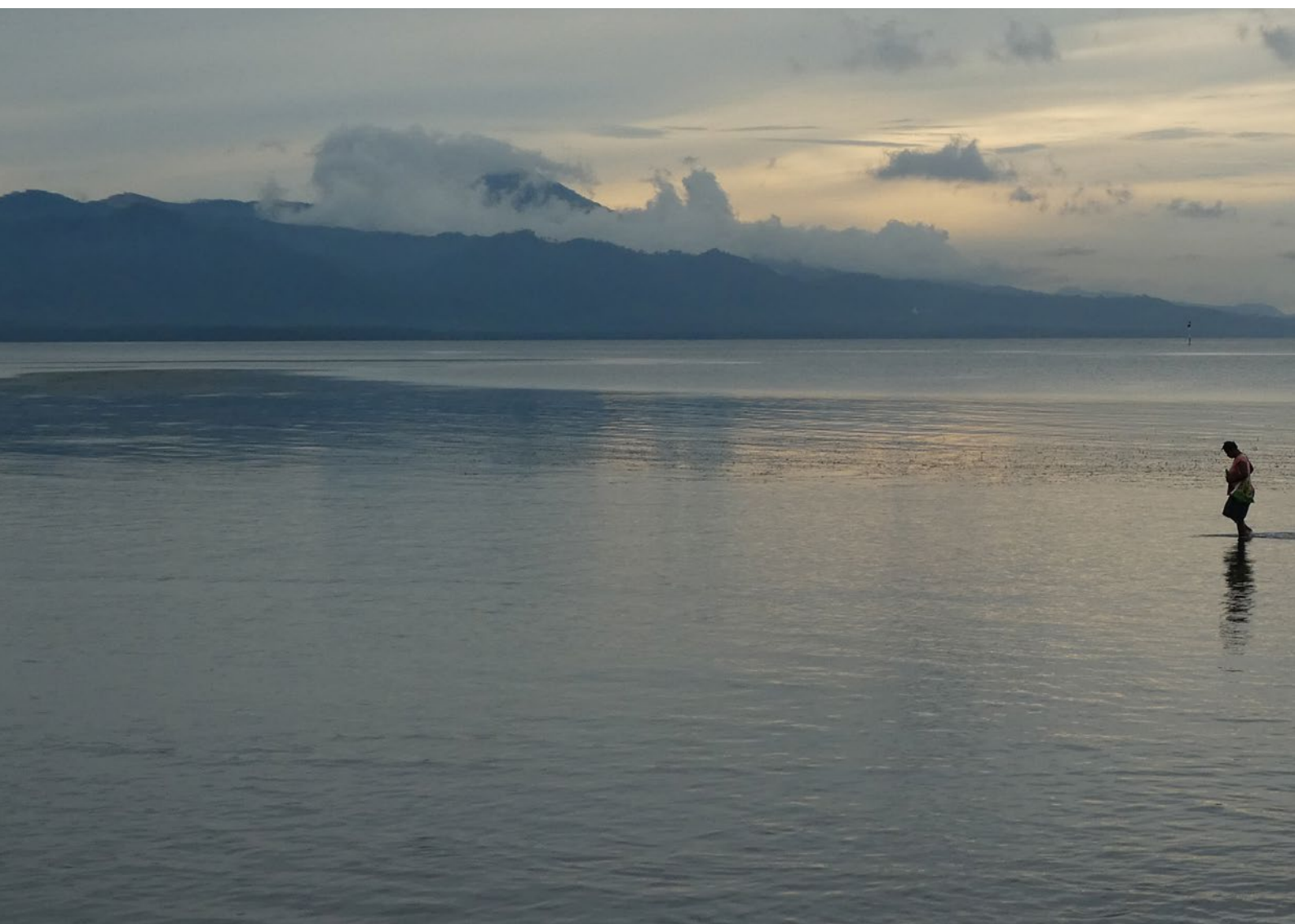
Theory of Change

Theory of Change

A Theory of Change is a mental model of how change is anticipated to happen, and it helps you plan for the future and anticipate barriers or challenges.

A Theory of Change:

- Is both a process and a product (an illustration and/ or a narrative) that articulates how and why a desired change is expected to happen in a given context.
- Maps out what has been described as the "missing middle" between what a program or change initiative does (activities or interventions) and how these lead to desired impact and goals being achieved.
- Is not a social or scientific theory of change (although it would be good to include them!)

Why create a Theory of Change

The process of developing a Theory of Change with your partners and key stakeholders can help you to:

- Create a shared vision and understanding of the impact you want to achieve.
- Articulate and share your assumptions about how the project or activity will be undertaken and how you anticipate change will occur.
- Understand your context and who will need to be engaged with to help activities and the project succeed.
- Map out the steps needed to plan your project and associated activities.
- It supports planning and decision making
- Develop a MEL framework by understanding what data you need to collect to test your assumptions and assess progress. The Theory of Change, together with your learning framework will enable you to adjust your project as you understand what works, what doesn't, and why. It can also help you measure and communicate your impact to your stakeholders and funders.
- Learn and improve or change your processes and assumptions for the next project or for scaling your existing activities.

Visualising a Theory of Change

Theory of Change can be drawn in many ways. There are different ways to visualise a Theory of Change or a living road map which will be shaped by the people who pull the diagram and change narrative together and the audience it is for.

The most important aspect is to articulate the assumptions in each step and be aware that there is decreasing confidence in your ToC over time. The image (fig 28) shows this as a one-way pathway for simplicity, but you would really expect to see feedback loops which is critical to your ToC, as learning and testing your assumptions are key.
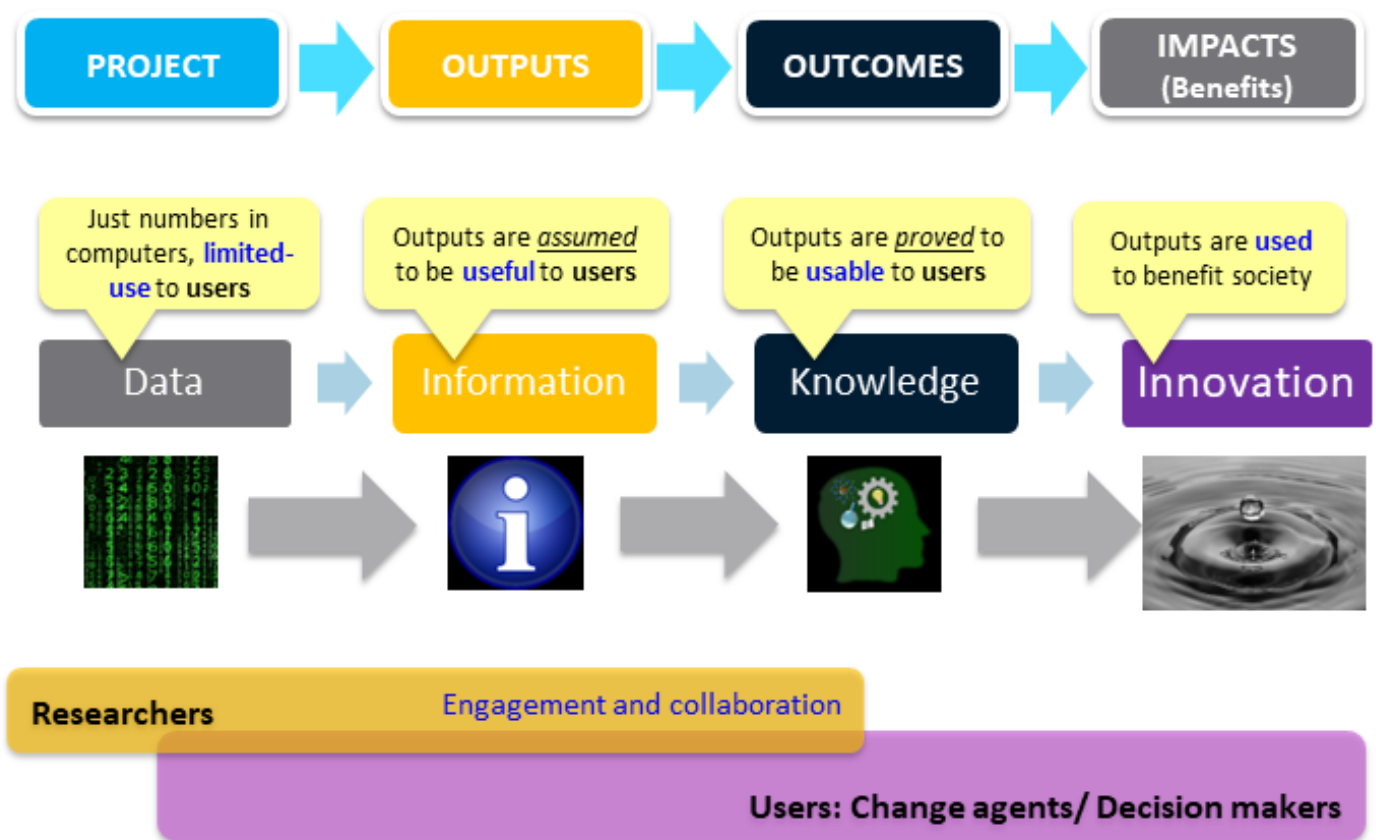

Figure 28 The visualisation of the elements that make up a Theory of Change (Image credit: Minh Nguyen (CSIRO))

How to create a Theory of Change

There is no 'right' or best practice way of developing a Theory of Change. It is a flexible and iterative process and pathway that helps you navigate through to your goal.

Key tips for developing include:

- The approach you take will depend on the context, project and participants.
- A Theory of Change can't cover everything. Rather go with the 80/20 rule (roughly 80% of the effects come from 20% of the causes, so focus on the 80%).
- Be mindful of the context and your assumptions, and windows of opportunity.
- Sometimes Theory of Change can be misused by thinking it is an inflexible map for control and management, which can lead to an accountability and planning focus, rather than a tool for reflexive learning.

Ultimately, the story of the impact pathways developed through the process becomes more useful for the team and stakeholders and for creating the learning framework.

Step 1: Understand the context

A ToC often starts with a vision, but before you get to the vision, you must have at least a basic understanding of the context you are working in. Whether that is in a foreign country or a community you are not familiar with or about the field or domain you are working in. For many places, as you would be aware in your own community, this also includes the historical context (what has happened before you).

You need to understand and be able to clearly communicate:

- Why are you doing what you are doing, and what are the "whys" of the people you are working with?
- Where are you hoping to work? What is happening here now (other than your project)? What has happened in the past?
- When would you like to do this work? When is your window of opportunity for change?
- Why are you doing what you are doing, and what are the "whys" of the people you are working with?
- Who needs to be involved, consulted etc?
- What are you trying to achieve (goal)? What do others hope to achieve?
- How do you hope to do the work?

Step 2: Develop a shared vision

With the people identified in the "who" in Step 1, develop a shared vision for the impacts of the work and what the project will achieve (goal) that helps you achieve the vision.

Developing a vision is a critical step as it starts the process of shared ownership of the project process and outputs, and can break down barriers between groups by focusing on what both want.

Draw their vision. Write it. Tell a story.

When it is done it is important to record all the attributes of the vision that are desired.

Figure 29 Example of a vision developed in East New Britain, Papua New Guinea

Step 3: Sequencing steps towards the vision

Start adding the 'stepping stones' needed to get from where you are to the vision.

This is often best done working backwards from your vision and goal, outlining:

- Long-term impacts
- Medium-term outcomes and impacts
- Short-term outcomes
- Activities and associated outputs

Step 4: Make assumptions and agendas explicit

While you are adding the steps, it is important to make your assumptions and agendas explicit.

This helps you build a more robust program of work and get a better understanding of your partners.

Types of assumptions can include:

- planning and timing of activities
- who should be / needs to be involved
- mental models or theory about why one step will lead to another, which leads to an impact

Articulating these assumptions will help you better understand yourself, your partners and your stakeholders and inform you what to test in your monitoring, evaluation and learning framework.

Not articulating your assumptions or misplaced assumptions of what was possible/needed can lead to costly replanning, no change or maladaptive outcomes.

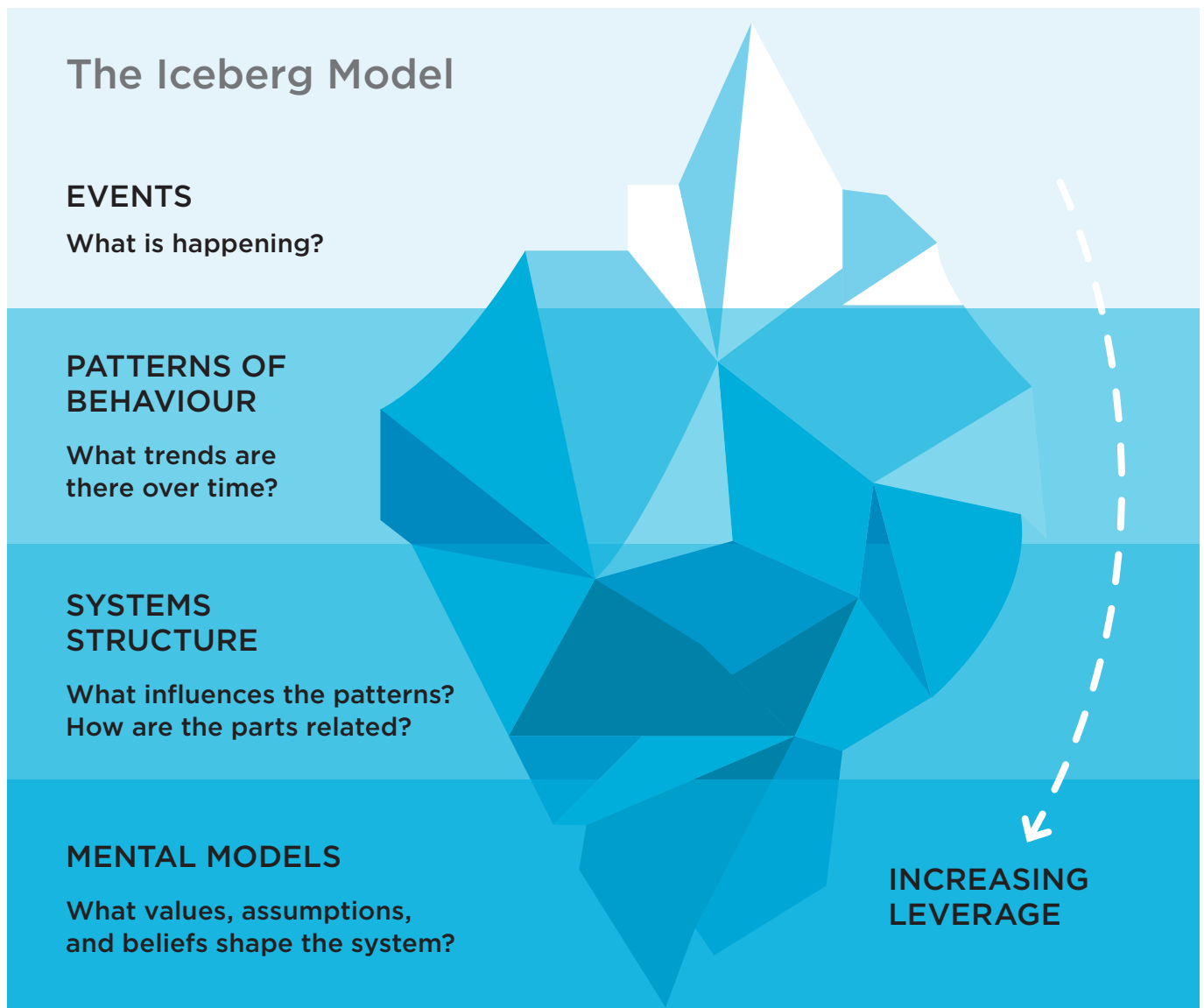**CSIRO and TNC teams creating a Theory of Change**

The Iceberg Model

EVENTS

What is happening?

PATTERNS OF BEHAVIOUR

What trends are there over time?

SYSTEMS STRUCTURE

What influences the patterns? How are the parts related?

MENTAL MODELS

What values, assumptions, and beliefs shape the system?

INCREASING LEVERAGE

Figure 30 Good practice in Theory of Change requires considering all levels of the iceberg

Not only the tip of the iceberg...

In addition to making your assumptions and agendas explicit, it is worth identifying the underlying systemic structures (below the water line) you need to account for building steps to your goal.

These include thinking about:

- what may be already in place that might prevent your project from working or create mal-adaptations
- potential more impactful leverage points that would be more effective to create change, such as: events; patterns of behaviour; system structures; mental models etc.

Just like an iceberg, 90% of which is invisible beneath the water, these structures are often hidden below the surface.

However, if you can identify them and connect them to the events that you are seeing, you may be able to develop lasting solutions that target the whole system rather than short term, reactive solutions.

What skills and competencies are needed?

A knowledge broker will require many key competencies to create a Theory of Change.

Of particular importance are the **interpersonal competencies** required to facilitate a group of people to co-create a theory of change as well as facilitation skills and openness to other perspectives.

- **Learning and openness competencies** will help you see novel pathways forward and address barrier identified.
- **Future thinking** and **normative thinking** will help you to facilitate the cultivation of the vision which is an essential early step.
- **Systems thinking** and **critical thinking** will help you map the impact pathways, ensuring there are no unintended consequences of your activities and that you are including the necessary set of stakeholders addressing the appropriate intervention points.
- **Integration and strategic thinking** will help you pull the pathway together and develop a clear and logical set of steps to implement your theory of change.
- **Being able to hold with ambiguity** allows you to progress without getting caught up in not knowing.
- A little **entrepreneurial or creative competency** will help thinking outside of the box to create the change you seek.
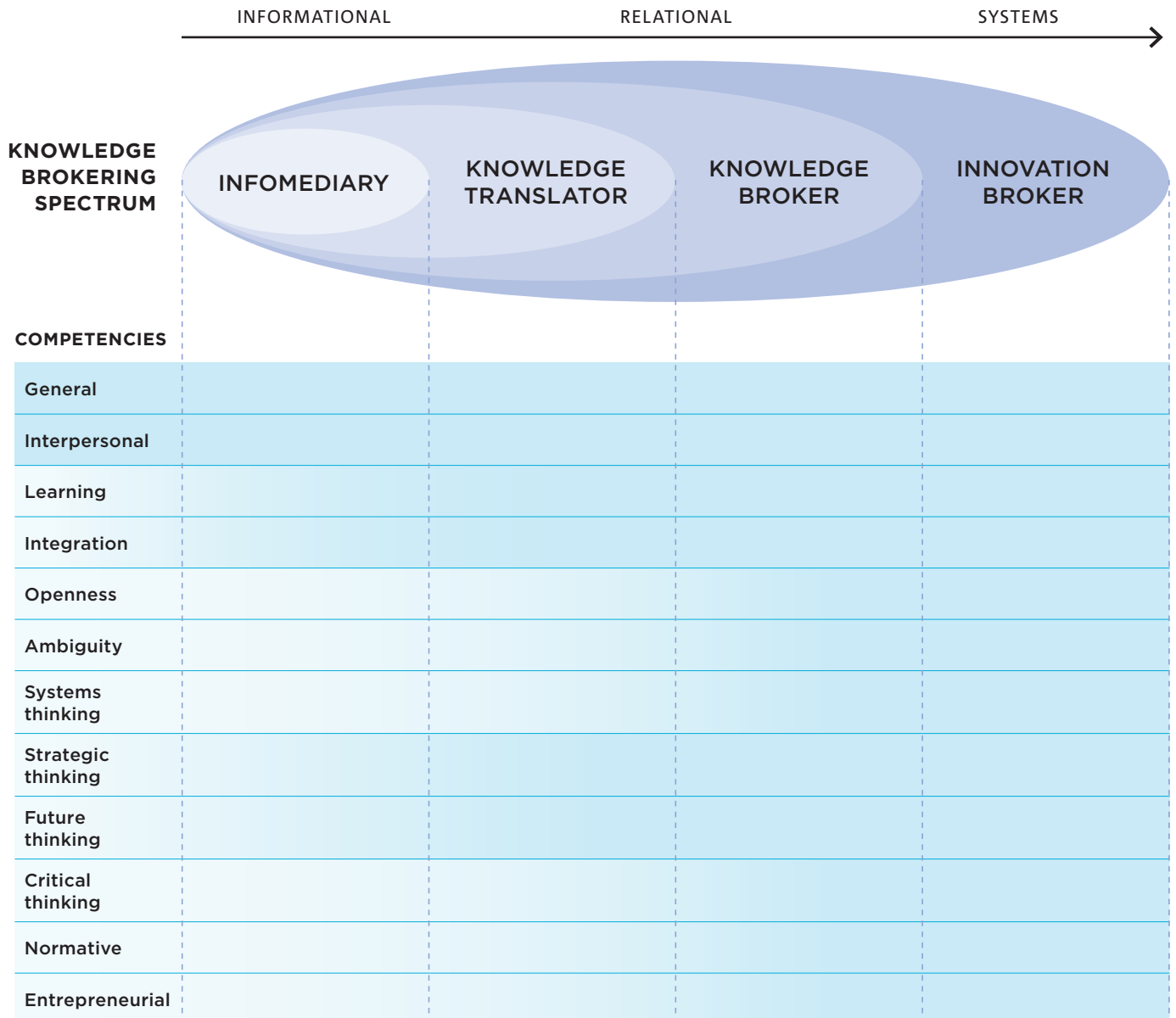

Figure 31 competencies by knowledge broker type

References and additional resources

References

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Acknowledgements

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