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## Q & A WITH JOHN KANIA AND FAY HANLEYBROWN

Liz Weaver

### SUMMARY

LIZ WEAVER FROM THE TAMARACK INSTITUTE WAS ABLE TO CATCH UP WITH John Kania and Fay Hanleybrown from FSG at the Champions for Change – Leading a Backbone Organization for Collective Impact conference held 1-3 April 2014 in Vancouver, British Columbia. John and Fay share their recent experience and latest thinking about Collective Impact in this interview for *The Philanthropist*.

JOHN KANIA oversees FSG's consulting practice and has 25 years of experience advising senior management on issues of strategy, leadership, assessment, and organizational development. Email: john.kania@fsg.org .

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**Q: Given the tremendous take-up and momentum of Collective Impact in the past few years, this must have been a tremendous learning opportunity for you and your colleagues. Has anything surprised you, and what would you say has changed the most since John and Mark wrote the original article in 2011?**

FAY HANLEYBROWN leads FSG's Seattle office and Collective Impact approach area and has nearly 20 years of experience advising foundations, corporations, and nonprofit clients across a range of areas, including strategy development, organizational alignment, and evaluation. Email: fay.hanleybrown@fsg.org .

*John:* My initial surprise was the incredible nerve it seemed to strike with many people. There was a lot of resonance, not only in the US and Canada, but around the world, and we were amazed with the number of people that responded. This idea was consistent with what they were learning about how to achieve progress at scale, and it hit a deep visceral chord for many.

*Fay:* The timing was really right for the article. There was frustration with trying the same approaches and not getting results. Having a common language and frame around Collective Impact has been helpful for people. We were also surprised at how quickly this was picked up by nonprofit and public entities. The White House Social Innovation Fund has written Collective Impact into their most recent round of funding. The Centers for Disease Control have started doing pilots focused around Collective Impact. There have been hundreds of new Collective Impact efforts catalyzed around the world as people try to do this work more effectively... It's been very exciting!

*John:* One merit of the framework for those doing this kind of work for decades is that it gave them a common language and a consistent way of talking about comprehensive community change. Typically when bringing up that term, unless you're deeply embedded in doing the work, eyes glaze over. But when we talk with others such as government or business – they don't spend so much time doing this work but can contribute – they immediately perk up. The five conditions of Collective Impact gave language to what many people already intuitively knew, but in a way where we can now have consistent conversations about this work, and people understand what it takes to do this work in a rigorous way.

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And there continues to be a great hunger among practitioners for information about how to do this better. For example, this conference is sold out with more than 250 people in attendance. We see the same at every conference we've had on Collective Impact since the publication of our first article. We have just launched an online Collective Impact Forum in partnership with Tamarack, the Aspen Institute, and others. In the first week, more than 1,000 users signed up. There is so much hunger for knowledge and engagement around Collective Impact. People doing this work understand the importance of working collectively, and they know it's critical to do it well. Developing a common way to describe this helps us to better understand challenges and overcome barriers.

*Fay:* I'd like to stress that this is not a rigid model – Collective Impact looks different in different contexts. We have found tremendous value for practitioners from learning across different efforts, so that's why we've launched the Collective Impact Forum. There is great opportunity for learning from one another, but also a danger if people see Collective Impact as a model that looks the same in each place.

**Q: You have had the opportunity to work with many people and organizations in Canada and, indeed, around the world. Have you identified any systemic or cultural differences between the United States and Canada that might lead you to interpret the framework any differently here?**

*John:* I've thought about this a bit, though we haven't directly consulted on Collective Impact efforts in Canada. But my sense in talking to folks like Liz and other practitioners here in Canada is that I wouldn't interpret the framework itself – the five conditions – differently between the United States and Canada. There are some countries – for example, many countries that are not democracies – that are just not ready to do Collective Impact, but there is not so much difference between the US and Canada.

I do think I've observed key differences that are a matter of degree, rather than fundamental oppositions, between the United States and Canada. I can think of four specifically:

**Readiness and enthusiasm to work collectively seems to be higher in Canada.** Americans are more drawn to success of the individual, which is part of our historical and national narrative. We recognize and hold up on a pedestal the awesome individual or organization. Canadians tend to want to believe that the whole can deliver better than the sum of parts and are more willing to act accordingly. National healthcare is an example. Canada seems to me to be a culture more comfortable with collective action.

**Role of government.** The debate about the role of government is everywhere but is perhaps less fierce in Canada than in the United States. For example, it is more natural in Canada to see a municipal or provincial government play a role as a backbone coordinating resource. It's not impossible this would happen in the US – we have seen some instances in the United States where government is playing the backbone role – but it is more the exception than the rule.

**Impact of philanthropy.** In the United States, philanthropy typically has larger dollars and a larger voice in collaborative efforts than in Canada, but this is a double-edged

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sword. On the positive side, in the US where there is more philanthropy, theoretically there should be more flexible funds to support Collective Impact initiatives and to fund backbone support and shared measurement. But on the flip side, because the US has a fairly crowded funder landscape (particularly in major populated areas), funders love to own their specific initiatives and to pick and choose who they work with. This drives a culture of isolated vs. collective impact. This is something we need to overcome in the US that seems less challenging in Canada.

**Appreciation of systems efforts.** I think there is greater appreciation among thought leaders and practitioners in Canada for the complex nuances of systems change. Not that this doesn't exist in the US, but proportionally there is a higher percentage of thought leaders in Canada who are engaged in better understanding the nature of systems change. As a result, there seems to be a broader and deeper dialogue in Canada about understanding Collective Impact through the lens of systems and complexity. This is one place where I think Canada is ahead of the US. Not that people in the United States don't get it, but it's a smaller voice in the dialogue about how to make progress against social problems. I often look to Canada for what I can learn from leading practitioners and thinkers here about systems change.

**Q: Is it more typical that there's a single funder in Collective Impact initiatives in the US?**

*Fay:* No, there are usually multiple funders involved. But even in a Collective Impact effort, this is not always coordinated. We are now starting to see in the US funder groups that are actively talking, sharing investments, and more actively coordinating. But funder culture in the US is not so much about collaboration or pooled investment at this point.

**Q: Looking ahead, what would you say are the greatest challenges facing Collective Impact?**

*Fay:* One of the recent trends we've observed is that as more Collective Impact efforts take off, we are seeing instances of competing efforts in the same geography and on the same issue area. There is competition about who plays the backbone role. This is ironic, because it represents isolated impact in the context of Collective Impact. It is not helpful to communities if the various stakeholders are investing in competing Collective Impact efforts.

Another set of challenges are around measurement and data. This is one of the biggest barriers that we hear many collaboratives talking about: the ability to identify shared measures that all partners agree on; and the capacity to look at data, learn from data, and make course corrections as you go.

A third major challenge is around funding and sustainability. Collective Impact efforts often take a long time to execute. Large-scale change takes years, if not decades, to accomplish. It's important to keep a Collective Impact infrastructure in place over a long period, which requires a mindset shift among funders to allocate funding to infrastructure (backbone support, convening players, and building data systems) and to have the patience to allow the process to work and solutions to emerge. Often the expectation

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is to see results in one year, or in one grant cycle, but you need to make a considerable long-term investment to get to large-scale change.

**John:** I can put together two of these challenges: the long-term nature of the work and the ability to measure progress. These are challenges for all of us who work in the social sector, especially when addressing complex issues. We have a set of funding entities – usually government and philanthropic funders – who (as they should) want to be rigorous, use dollars wisely, and see outcomes from what they invest in. But when we are talking about Collective Impact efforts, where it takes years to see progress, outcomes are not the result of one organization but a collective effort. Many of the outcomes you see in the early years relate less to population-level outcomes and more to how people work together differently in order to come up with more innovative ways of scaling evidence based practices.

But these two stakeholders in the change process – government and philanthropy – are structured to want precise outcomes-oriented data that is often very difficult to deliver in a Collective Impact effort. That’s no one’s fault. Everyone wants to see outcomes in as clear a fashion as possible. But, as Albert Einstein said, *everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler*. It can be very difficult to find that middle ground for reporting results between making things simple and clear, but not oversimplifying things so much that you disguise the complexity of what’s happening on the ground. It’s something we all need to work on.

**Q: Building interpretation and learning into evaluation and shared measurement is critical. When you see the “needle” actually move at an aggregate level, that’s good. But you then need to determine to what degree the population you are targeting is embedded in that movement. If you are looking at poverty, focusing on children, and if it’s actually seniors where poverty drops, it creates an interesting dilemma: the poverty needle has moved, but you are not necessarily impacting the targeted population.**

**John:** You raise an interesting point. Here is what we’ve found to be important in terms of evaluating Collective Impact. The challenge is that evaluation itself is not well understood by most people. Collective Impact evaluation should typically encompass two related but separate kinds of evaluation: The first is performance measurement – do we see indicators moving – that’s about the “what.” This is important, but Collective Impact work is so iterative we need to also focus on learning that also helps us with the “why.” So, second, we need to do evaluation that is diagnostic in nature, and diagnostic evaluation requires more frequent iteration-based on tracking qualitative data as well as quantitative data. When we talk about “shared measurement” as one of the five conditions of Collective Impact, people say they get it, and then they go and collect a bunch of quantitative indicators of progress and feel like they’re done. But that’s not shared measurement – that’s just collecting shared measures. You must also look at “why” the indicators say what they do and engage in dialogue about what the data tells you. This can get lost on people.

**Fay:** Another key challenge for Collective Impact going forward is the need to build a clearer case for funders to support the backbone resources that help align and co-

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ordinate Collective Impact stakeholders. Effective funders of Collective Impact don't see backbone infrastructure as cost – they see it as *leverage*. The reason is simple: if you have a backbone structure and measures that align the work of hundreds of organizations, spending millions or billions of dollars, then the cost of that infrastructure is tiny compared to all the funding being influenced and aligned. And that's tremendous leverage if done well.

**Q: That is an interesting reframing of the backbone, an important one for making the case. You need to look at the whole system of investments and, in comparison to the total cost of the system, this investment in a backbone to coordinate collective actions is tiny.**

*John:* It's a drop in bucket. It's hard for people to have that lens into it. Funders are forever looking for leverage. If backbone resources and shared measurement are effectively deployed, this gives you dramatically more leverage than you can imagine achieving through a grant to a single organization or single intervention.

**Q. One of the compliments that we hear often is about the clarity and detail of the Collective Impact framework – I call it “deceptively simple.” On the other hand, we imagine that this poses a bit of a burden as experience is gained. We also think that you have been very clear on the importance and interdependence of the five conditions. Are you feeling any need to revise or evolve the framework at this point?**

*Fay:* Since publishing the initial article, our team at FSG has continued to research successful Collective Impact efforts around the globe, supported the launch of dozens of new Collective Impact efforts, and trained thousands of practitioners about how to put this work into practice – and the five conditions still hold. We've been pleasantly surprised to see how consistently important they are across the work we're studying and doing. So while we wouldn't change the Collective Impact framework itself, we have deepened our understanding of what it takes to be successful in this work. Take, for example, the importance of cross-sector collaboration. While it is not spelled out explicitly in the framework, we have seen how powerful it is to bring different sectors together around a problem. Each partner holds important keys – no one group alone can solve the problems we're trying to tackle with Collective Impact. Having them all at the table creates a different level of dialogue and action than would occur if you only have the usual suspects or people engaging in their usual groups.

Another key lesson we have learned is the importance of structure in this work. It's really important to have the backbone function to coordinate all of the work, but as part of that backbone infrastructure you also need to have shared cross-sector governance as well as multiple working groups focusing on different parts of the problem. These working groups are constantly communicating with each other, looking at the data, and sharing lessons. This structure for working together is critical for identifying new strategies, scaling what's working, and innovating.

Hand in hand with structure are relationships. We touched lightly on this in the second article “Channeling Change,” but we've really come to see the importance of interpersonal relationships to the success of this work. A wise backbone leader recently said to me,

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“Progress happens at the speed of trust.” Breaking down silos, thinking creatively, and true collaboration just can’t happen without strong interpersonal relationships.

*John:* This is where continuous communication comes in. People interpret this as, “We need to talk on an on-going basis to the outside world about what we’re doing.” No. It’s people *involved* in the Collective Impact effort who must continuously communicate with each other. What we’ve found is that the five conditions as a framework have held up remarkably well. There’s nuance underneath the conditions. Your phrase “deceptively simple” is accurate. Many people, who haven’t been involved in the deep and heavy work of community change look at the framework, say “Oh, I get it,” and assume it will be easy. Then they begin the work and learn how challenging it is. What I’ve come to appreciate is that Collective Impact is about really “working the issue” over time. And the nature of this work is that new solutions, not known at the front end of the process, will emerge over time if appropriate attention is paid to structuring the process well. The framework of Collective Impact (e.g., the five conditions) is important, but there’s a lot of additional knowledge required to do this work well.

*Fay:* Another key lesson is the importance of including the voice of persons with lived experience. We’ve seen a huge range of community engagement across Collective Impact efforts in terms of how broadly or deeply different populations are included. But regardless of the degree of engagement, you must have the voice of persons with lived experience helping to define the problem and key measures, and engaging in the development of solutions.

*John:* Related to this is the notion of ensuring that a representative set of all the people and organizations who are relevant to a particular issue participate in the work. We talked about this in our “Embracing Emergence” SSIR article. And it’s why relationships are so important. One thing we’re constantly amazed at is that, once you bring all the different eyes of people who need to be together across the sectors to deal with an issue, it is remarkable that many of those people have rarely if ever been at the same table together. Solutions emerge that they each individually couldn’t get to themselves, but when they get together as a collective, innovative answers nobody thought of before become obvious. We have countless examples of this, although it is counterintuitive for many.

**Q: Several of our writers for this special issue felt strongly that there are very few “true” or “fully implemented” examples of Collective Impact initiatives in Canada, but on the other hand they felt that people could still gain insight and knowledge from the framework and supporting materials. In other cases, we see considerable application of the term “Collective Impact” without necessarily believing that these initiatives or networks have all of the characteristics that you describe, a phenomenon that we describe as “re-branding.” We know it is a tough question to answer publicly because it implies an ownership we don’t think you have ever claimed, but are you concerned at all about protecting the integrity and even the “brand” of Collective Impact?**

*Fay:* We have been delighted to see the excitement about Collective Impact and are inspired by the momentum we’re seeing in terms of partnerships taking off because of this thinking. At the same time, there is a danger with respect to the term “Collective Impact”

being used too loosely. FSG has no interest in copyrighting the term, and we've given it freely to the field. But there is some utility in being definitive about the five conditions, and distinguishing Collective Impact as something more structured and rigorous than typical collaboration. When Collective Impact is used loosely, it can be problematic if the effort subsequently fails because it doesn't have the structure and conditions for success. This could ultimately label all of Collective Impact as a failure and undermine the hard work of many. Not every effort will be successful, but we see real opportunity here to get to large-scale change in a manner that has been elusive for society to date.

**John:** I've seen misuse of the term when people use it to describe their way of achieving collective ends. For example, we know of one funder that brought together its grantees – and its grantees only – and said, “We're going to hold all of you accountable to achieve a collective set of outcomes that we will define for you. And you need to report to us the progress you're making on these outcomes consistent with our grant cycle.” There are so many things wrong with this at so many levels – not just about how Collective Impact happens, but how one effectively supports social change. Yet they're branding it as Collective Impact. It's damaging – if I were to hear about this effort, and it was conveyed to me as Collective Impact, I would think Collective Impact was one of the worst ideas ever! We also see nonprofits going to funders who are sincere in their efforts to support Collective Impact and make grant requests in the name of Collective Impact, but they are not really following the principles. This can be very frustrating to funders.

**Fay:** Collective Impact is not the answer for every community or every set of partners. There needs to be readiness for Collective Impact, and the three preconditions that we have found to be really important are: 1) Making sure there are strong champions for this work – leadership is so critical; 2) A sense of real urgency for change; and 3) Having resources to support the planning to do this work. We see communities jumping in when the readiness conditions just aren't there, and that is a problem as well. So there is a danger in dilution, calling something Collective Impact when it is not so rigorous, and also the danger of jumping in when the partners are not ready.

**Q: When the McConnell Foundation funded Vibrant Communities, Tamarack invited a number of communities to step forward, but not all did. Readiness is so important. Even today, 12 years later, a community we thought would be out in front of other communities – which has a strong history and strong principles – is still not part of the network, because they didn't see it as right for their community. There's something to think about in developing a staged approach to Collective Impact.**

**John:** Achieving Collective Impact is super hard and challenging for any set of organizations. We're really still at the beginning stages as a society in understanding how to do this work well. We, as well as others, recognize that. I don't think there's a lot of leverage for society in FSG attempting to be the police or certifiers of what is or isn't Collective Impact. What we hope to do, with Tamarack and others through the Collective Impact Forum, is to help those who aspire to Collective Impact access knowledge and tools, and connect with others who are doing this work, so that we can *all* get better together. While we worry about commoditization of the term Collective Impact, we feel the best approach to address the concern is to keep holding up efforts and communities who are doing this well, and help explain why it's working, so that others can aspire to get better.

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**Fay:** We see the new Collective Impact Forum as an opportunity for the whole field to learn about how to do this work well and to get into the nuances of what makes Collective Impact efforts successful.

**Q:** We also publish book reviews in *The Philanthropist*, and wondered if you were aware of any books on Collective Impact that are in the works or recently published.

**John:** We're not aware of any book that has yet been written specifically on Collective Impact. We've been approached to write a book, but we're so early in the learning about Collective Impact that we're not ready to write this. However, there are a number of books that have influenced our thinking about Collective Impact. Many of these have been out for a while. *Getting to Maybe: How the World is Changed*, by Frances Westley, Brenda Zimmerman, and Michael Quinn Patton – two of the three authors are Canadian. This book has had a profound influence on my understanding of social change. *The Power of Positive Deviance*, by Richard Pascale, Jerry Sternin, and Monique Sternin. Steven Johnson's *Emergence: The Connected Lives of Ants, Brains, Cities, and Software*. Atul Gawande's *The Checklist Manifesto*. These all have a common theme: they are books helping all of us to better understand complexity, adaptation, and systems change. We have a ton to learn about how complex systems effectively adapt and improve over time, and how we as practitioners can positively affect systems. Those who manage resources, who can help to improve society, really need to understand complexity and systems change. Our hope is that, along with Tamarack and others, we can continue to learn about how social change happens and contribute to teaching others about the nature of this important work.