THINK. TALK. TAKE ACTION.

Talking About Collective Impact: A United Front Conversation

Mark Kramer and Jeff Edmondson's Collective Impact Q&A

Identifying Resources

Are there resources to help organizations do a collective impact process to address an issue?

Jeff Edmondson: Communities can find local assets to leverage from a variety of sources. As an example, the backbone organization has three key roles that need to be played and these could come from existing resources:

- Chief "Cat Herder": Someone who wakes up thinking about this every day. There may be an existing non-profit well positioned to lead such work or a community leader in the Chamber or District recognized for building consensus. Having partners who would be willing to loan or donate such talent is ideal.
- Data Analyst: Universities are ripe to play this role, but corporations often have experts in this area as well who could provide critical support.
- Facilitators: If a funder is interested in a particular outcome, such as kindergarten readiness, they could consider funding an expert facilitator to guide practitioners through the process with the expectation a collaborative action plan will emerge.

When securing funding to support a collective impact effort, what are some of the mechanisms that might be used to distribute those funds among the nonprofits/agencies involved?

Jeff Edmondson: We have actually developed a Donor Engagement Continuum because funders come to this from different places. The key here is NOT having all the funds controlled from a single place. Rather it is having funders agree on what the outcomes are they all want to move and to agree they will focus dollars on what has evidence it moves those outcomes. And then the funders need to communicate regularly about their investments in order to reduce overlap and duplication.

What are some of the factors to consider when determining whether or not to drive the formation of a collective effort through the development and implementation of a funder's collaborative vs having the funders collaborative be an outgrowth of a community plan aimed at collective impact?

Jeff Edmondson: Sites where the effort is built around a funding pool are actually having a tougher time than those that come together around the vision and purpose. If funding is the motivator for taking on this work, it will be hard to sustain. The reason partners come to the table is more in line with the traditional RFP process – jumping through the right hoops to get critical resources to sustain programs. So the latter option of having the funder collaborative merge around the specific outcomes you want to move is really the best way to go.

Data Collection

To what extent is the Harlem Children's Zone an example of collective impact?

Mark Kramer: The Harlem Children's Zone is a terrific organization, and it certainly embodies the idea that a comprehensive approach – much like Strive's cradle to career approach – is needed to ensure that children succeed in school and in life. HCZ provides many different services that would typically be provided by different organizations, and it is therefore able to better align its different activities in mutually reinforcing ways just like a collective impact initiative.

But HCZ is still just one organization – however remarkable it may be. It does not engage other nonprofits, corporations and school districts as full participants in designing the solution. It operates in a relatively small geographical area, much smaller than many of the collective impact initiatives we have studied – which include global examples like GAIN in our newest article -- and it depends on the remarkable leadership of Geoffrey Canada rather than a dispersed model of leadership in which all the organizations involved share accountability. So, we see it as capturing some of the benefits of collective impact but it isn't really a full example of it.

Jeff Edmondson: The Harlem Children's Zone is the mother of this idea. It got people to believe we could think more systemically and strategically. The challenge is that it is primarily centrally controlled – one entity delivering most of the services and support. The challenge in Collective Impact is the influencing of others when you have little to no control. So most communities will have to go with aligning partners instead of delivering comprehensive services, and if you want to go to scale beyond a few thousand to a few million, this will be required anyway.

How does a local collective impact team funnel local results to the Federal level in order to add to the large scale bottom line and demonstrate progress toward a particular issue (i.e. decreasing hunger)?

Mark Kramer: Spreading local learning effectively is a difficult challenge but there has been a surge of interest from the Obama Administration in doing exactly that. The White House Council on Community Solutions chaired by Michelle Obama is focused on helping communities build collective impact approaches to solving youth unemployment, and is very interested in helping communities learn from each other. The White House Office of Social Innovation has also taken as a priority the idea of helping communities identify and learn from each other's successful solutions. And the Social Innovation Fund is making grants of up to $15 million to scale up programs that have a proven model of effectiveness.

A key piece of success is shared data, data that ultimately is tied to a person. How do you balance questions of data privacy and security with the need to track results?

Mark Kramer: It's an interesting question, and the Calgary Homelessness Foundation in Canada confronted that exact issue in developing shared measurement systems to track homeless people. Initially there was great concern about sharing data because of privacy issues – but that turned out to be a red herring. In fact, many agencies did not have very good privacy policies in place and their technology had weak security. In designing a single shared measurement system for all organizations to use, the Foundation was actually able to establish much more secure and consistent privacy, with different levels of protected access. For a really interesting FSG webinar on shared measurement in collective impact with Tim Richter, the Foundation's President go to: Collective Impact: Implementing Shared Measurement

Incidentally, they discovered that the many different agencies involved were separately tracking literally thousands of different measurements – a number that was reduced to about ten key metrics in the shared measurement system.

Jeff Edmondson: This is always a critical question and one that we will have to deal with over time. I actually was fortunate to have an opportunity to do a TEDx speech and I focused on this topic. Here is my question: if corporations can gather infinite amounts of data on people to help sell us stuff (think your shoppers card), why can't we find a way to get data on individual kids to help them succeed in life. We have to figure this out. It is the only way to become truly efficient and effective. We have to understand what individual kids need so we can target limited resources to what will help them most.

Reaching Diverse Groups

How have these local and U.S. regional collective impact groups addressed the involvement of refugee, immigrant, and ESL communities through nonprofits serving those groups?

Jeff Edmondson: Portland is setting the bar for making equity issues and disadvantaged populations the focus of collective impact efforts. But the bottom line key is the disaggregation and use of data. We have to be willing to take a hard look at the numbers for different subgroups and really figure out what is working for different populations of children. Then we can target our resources to their needs.

Collective Impact ROI

Nonprofits are being held accountable for developing and meeting specific, measurable outcomes, including (and especially) measuring return on investment for their individual programs. There is also a growing movement amongst public and even private funders towards a "pay for performance" model. What implications will this have on developing a collective set of metrics against which success of the collective effort will be measured? How might communities, particularly funders, reconcile conflicting interests?

Jeff Edmondson: It will have huge implications. We are shifting from a silo mentality to a synergistic strategy. So in the end, the traditional service structures will have to evolve. They key will be whether we can embrace that the pie is large enough for everyone to have a slice……IF you are willing to use data to really improve how you serve children over time. Meaning, if we identify a few practices that really get results for kids in Minneapolis, will those service providers that do related work be willing to adopt some of these practices AND work together to have greater impact. If so, I believe there is enough work to do that everyone serving kids now can have a role to play in the evolution of this work to become more system vs. program oriented.

Mark Kramer: I'm very enthusiastic about the pay for performance model – there are some serious challenges to financing services in advance of getting paid – especially when payment is contingent on results – but it certainly aligns the incentives in the right way if the financing can be managed. One of the interesting side-effects of pay for performance is that the ultimate result often depends on multiple organizations' efforts, and so it naturally leads to a shared measurement system among multiple organizations that work toward a common definition of success. This again helps align everyone's incentives behind the ultimate social outcome, rather than their individual organizational agendas.

It is quite true that different funders have different definitions of success – just as different grantees do – and so it is not easy to get agreement on a shared measurement system and single vision of success. But this is just a matter of patient and persistent facilitation. Ultimately, we have seen, time and again, that different funders and grantees can come to agreement on a set of shared measures that are perceived as fair by all participants. Often, it is a pretty basic set of measures: For example, we might argue at length about what a good education looks like, but we can usually agree that basic reading competence by third grade, and math competence in eighth grade, high school graduation, and similar milestones are key indicators of success. Often there is solid academic research to back up what key success factors are on a range of social problems and that can serve as a starting point. Each organization may still have other specific goals it strives to achieve above the common measures, but getting agreement on the basic measures is a huge step forward.

Backbone Organizations

Does the backbone organization that administers Strive also make decisions about funding partner organizations that support the work of Strive?

Jeff Edmondson: If this relates specifically to Cincinnati, the answer is no. The partners serving children develop the collaborative action plans that are based on data and these are presented to a cross-sector group of stakeholders to review. At that point, funders come together either operating individually or collectively to consider the plan. It is best if there is some agreement among the funders on the type of plan they want to see in advance, but funders come at this in their own way.

All that said, if the funders do not actually support the action plans over time, it will be big trouble. Money quite simply must be going to move toward the collaborative work that gets real results in order for real change to occur in the system. So the cat herder really does need to build strong relationships with funders to help inform their decision making.

The conflicts due to the many organizations coming together could be mitigated by a backbone organization, yes?

Jeff Edmondson: Absolutely. We call this “the Art of Cross Sector Leadership”. Traditionally there have not been people waking up thinking about this work every day. By having people in this role as part of the backbone, you are able to navigate the many pitfalls that come up when people are having to learn how to work together in a sustainable way.

Transition Strategies/Models

What is the role and importance of good facilitation to collective impact efforts?

Mark Kramer: Facilitation is one of the six key essential functions of backbone organizations that FSG has identified, along with: (1) providing strategic coherence, (2) data management, (3) communication, (4) community outreach, (5) mobilizing funding. Facilitation in collective impact requires: (a) supporting ongoing interaction between players, (b) managing meetings and logistics, and (c) acting as neutral arbiter between players, as necessary. For example, a leader of Shape Up Somerville—one of the collective impact examples highlighted in the first CI article— has talked about how having a backbone facilitator as part of the planning and process of achieving consensus was key for getting all partners to agree on a common agenda. "The facilitator is able to listen to the needs and opinions of all, take all into account and build some common ground." Without a "facilitating voice" groups can get lost in their own views and never reach any consensus.

Another one of the examples from the first article, that of the Elizabeth River Project—a cross-collaborative effort, aiming to restore the river's environmental quality through government, business and community partnerships—cites good facilitation as a key part of consensus building: Marjorie Jackson states: "Our facilitator was key. She had the art of making people feel heard and drawing out a sense of what should happen next."

Jeff Edmondson: In many ways this is the secret sauce. Without people who can get partners – service providers and/or funders – to work together to actually develop an action plan – as opposed to start a new program or just share information – the work of collective impact cannot happen. Now the key piece of the puzzle is making sure the data is available to inform such collaboration, but the facilitators who can take that data and put it to work are critical.

What are some effective strategies or approaches for causing the sort of "mind shift" amongst partners; from isolated impact to collective impact?

Mark Kramer: Creating "urgency for change" or, in other words, a need for a collective impact approach to solving the complex problem at hand is one effective strategy. In some cases, a crisis might have broken out that convinces people of the need of an entirely need approach. There might be the potential for substantial funding that might entice people to work together. Conducting research and publicizing a report that captures media attention and highlights the severity of the problem is another way to create the necessary sense of urgency to persuade people to come together.

Another strategy includes bringing examples of successful examples that have used collective impact to address similar issues. A strategy we use at FSG is a collective impact role play exercise where participants are split into groups of 7, each given a specific role in "education" within a community. For example, one participant might represent a community college president, another participant might represent a student parent, another participant might represent a superintendent, etc. All participants "have their own agenda" and goals but must work together to find common understanding on how to fix the education system in their community. Through these exercise participants are able to see how inter-related each of their problems are, and how a cross sector collaborative approach to addressing failing education across the community is needed.

Jeff Edmondson: VISUALS! We all have these mental models of what education looks like – namely the little red schoolhouse we all experienced. You need visuals that help people to rethink these mental models. DATA! Putting the data at the forefront every step of the way is imperative. If you start every meeting with some data to help people see that we really can move the dial and/or learn from it to do work better, people will believe we can serve children and families differently.

What is the difference between "adaptive" organizational functioning and "mechanistic" organizational functioning, and how the adaptive model fosters the effectiveness of a collective impact model?

Mark Kramer: Some social problems are technical in that the problem is well defined, the answer is known in advance, and one or a few organizations have the ability to implement the solution. Examples include funding college scholarships, building a hospital, or installing inventory controls in a food bank. These types of problems require "mechanistic" organizational functioning. Adaptive problems are complex, the answer is not known, and even if it were, no single entity has the resources or authority to bring about the necessary change. In these cases, reaching an effective solution requires learning by the stakeholders involved in the problem, who must then change their own behavior in order to create a solution. It requires a systemic approach (collective impact approach) to social impact that focuses on the relationships between organizations and the progress toward shared objectives. This requires a backbone organization, or backbone leader that has the skills and resources to assemble and coordinate the specific elements necessary for collective action to succeed. Typically, successful backbone leaders who practice "adaptive leadership" demonstrate the following three key success factors:

Skills over Content. More than knowing the nuanced insides and outs of an issue area, a successful backbone leader must possess existing relationships with, or an ability to build relationships with, a cross-sectoral range of system players who themselves are issue area experts. More than having a specific solution in mind for how to address Social Issue X, a successful backbone leader must have the ability to thrive in a fluid, unstructured, and often entrepreneurial environment. For example, for one effort we're currently advising, the individual identified to lead the backbone structure has no background in the issue area at hand, but is respected by a broad number of stakeholders, brings past experience with high-level strategic thinking, and the ability to inspire confidence and passion in both internal and external audiences—a killer skillset for leading a collective impact initiative.

Orchestra Conductor. Maren Stewart, Executive Director of LiveWell Colorado, talks about the need to be the "orchestra conductor," and not a "top-down boss telling people what to do." As Maren has said to our FSG team before, "It's not about the conductor coming in and throwing all the musicians out and starting from scratch. It's about exploring the great talents that can be built upon, and identifying some gaps where we need other musicians to fill in." This resonates in an effort we're currently advising, where the backbone's Project Director is charged with maintaining strategic coherence of the effort, but not with developing and implementing strategies herself.

Sufficient Authority. In another effort we're advising, it's been hugely important for the backbone lead staff to have enough authority to drive collective impact forward. Where does this authority come from? It can be formalized and institutional in nature (e.g., they are part of a very important organization or agency), or more informal and rooted around the relationships that have been developed, or both. Regardless, the effective backbone leader must feel comfortable pushing the thinking of senior-level folks at a range of partnering agencies and organizations, facilitating difficult conversations, and communicating with a range of stakeholders more broadly.

Jeff Edmondson: We actually just released a "[Progress Assessment tool]" for tracking how well you are building civic infrastructure. Almost all the words are mechanistic or technical steps. The adaptive work is in how you get to different milestones along the way. The work will look different in every city because the local context is different in every city. So making progress to meet very concrete points along the way will all depend on how well you navigate the adaptive work of bringing people together around outcomes to drive improvement over time.

What process/approaches/techniques did you use to gain commitment/participation by the various decision makers from cross-sectors?

Mark Kramer: This is where having what we refer to as an "influential champion"— someone who commands the respect necessary to bring CEO-level cross-sector leaders together and keep their active engagement over time, is incredible important. We have consistently seen the importance of dynamic leadership in catalyzing and sustaining collective impact efforts. It requires a very special type of leader, however, one who is passionately focused on solving a problem but willing to let the participants figure out the answers for themselves, rather than promoting his or her particular point of view.
One strategy to grow the number of people at the "table" over time is to start working with the people who have been willing to come to the table already and with the funding that is available. Showing early wins from the first phases of collective are also essential for maintaining the "mind shift" among partners. For example, in a collective impact education initiative FSG is supporting in Seattle, collaboration in the first year of the initiative led to a dramatic increase in students signing up for College Bound scholarships; not the ultimate goal, but an encouraging sign.

Tim Richter from the Calgary Homeless Foundation says, "We weren't going to wait until our plan was done. We had a little bit of money and what we did was try and show that it could be done. When we released the plan we had no provincial support or funding. We had a plan and no way to pay for it. We got results and we were able to convince senior levels of government and then other communities to buy into this."

For Magnolia Place Community Initiative, an effort in Magnolia Place (L.A.) hoping to bring sustainable change for families by strengthening individual to neighborhood protective factors, it was also all about starting with those who were willing, and then bringing others along:
"While participation from local stakeholders is important, more importantly was beginning with a diverse group committed to task at hand and willing to cooperate rather than compete."

Celebrating successes is another way to maintain folks at the table:
Blair Taylor from Memphis Fast Forward—a citywide collective impact initiative in Memphis, TN states: "You keep everyone at the table by having high profile leadership, willing and keeping them there, but also making sure that you are celebrating successes so that's its viewed as successful effort. Really making the time to celebrate the process of activity and doing it loudly, and giving people credit and celebrating."

Jeff Edmondson: This gets to the real tactics of how to make the work happen. Based on learning from sites who have been brave enough to take on this challenging work we have learned a number of processes and approaches. These include a) setting criteria for why decisions are being made so people do not question whether they are being motivated by politics or individual interests, b) selecting a consistent methodology for how data so you can build the capacity of partners over time to do the work on their own and support each other along the way, and c) being very clear about expectations for results and roles within a group so people stay focused and do not get frustrated over time.