Champions for Change: Leading a Backbone Organization for Collective Impact

A Conversation with Workshop Faculty

FSG Discovering better ways to solve social problems

Discovering better ways to solve social problems

FSG is a nonprofit consulting firm specializing in strategy, evaluation, and research.

Our international teams work across all sectors by partnering with corporations, foundations, school systems, nonprofits, and governments in every region of the globe. Our goal is to help companies and organizations—individually and collectively—achieve greater social change.

Working with many of the world's leading corporations, nonprofit organizations, and charitable foundations, FSG has completed more than 400 consulting engagements around the world, produced dozens of research reports, published influential articles in *Harvard Business Review* and *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, and has been featured in *The New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Economist*, *Financial Times*, *BusinessWeek*, *Fast Company*, *Forbes*, and on *NPR*, amongst others.

Learn more about FSG at www.fsg.org.

Acknowledgements

Workshop Faculty

Backbone workshop faculty shared their time and expertise generously to make the conference a time for participant learning and reflection.

Fay Hanleybrown, Managing Director, FSG

Paul Born, President, Tamarack – An Institute for Community Engagement

Jeff Edmonson, Managing Director, Strive

John Kania, Managing Director, FSG

Liz Weaver, Vice President, Tamarack – An Institute for Community Engagement

Foreword

In early 2013, more than 60 leaders of mature collective impact initiatives gathered in Cincinnati for a three day workshop to discuss their work leading backbone organizations, and to learn from each other about how to improve their practice. The workshop was organized by the Aspen Forum for Community Solutions, FSG, the Strive Network, and the Tamarack Institute.

At the close of the three day workshop, leaders from FSG, Strive, and Tamarack participated in a discussion on critical questions raised by workshop participants. The conversation touched on a range of topics including articulating the value of the backbone organization to funders and community partners, measuring the success of the backbone organization, and building shared leadership for collective impact work. This report reflects that panel discussion.

Introduction

Collective impact is being used as a new approach to achieving large scale social change by organizations across the globe. Leaders are recognizing that individual organizations cannot solve the world's most challenging issues in isolation, and that collectively committing to a common agenda for solving a specific social problem can lead to larger, more lasting change. Practitioners are coming together to put the five conditions of collective impact in place to enable the pursuit of a collective impact approach.

The Five Conditions of Collective Impact

Common Agenda	All participants have a **shared vision for change** including a common understanding of the problem and a joint approach to solving it through agreed upon actions
Shared Measurement	**Collecting data and measuring results consistently** across all participants ensures efforts remain aligned and participants hold each other accountable
Mutually Reinforcing Activities	Participant activities must be **differentiated while still being coordinated** through a mutually reinforcing plan of action
Continuous Communication	**Consistent and open communication** is needed across the many players to build trust, assure mutual objectives, and appreciate common motivation
Backbone Support	Creating and managing collective impact requires a separate organization(s) with staff and a specific set of skills to **serve as the backbone for the entire initiative and coordinate participating organizations and agencies**

The condition of collective impact that most fundamentally differentiates the approach from traditional collaboration is the presence of a "backbone organization" – staff dedicated to coordinating and advancing the work of participating organizations. *The Aspen Forum for Community Solutions, FSG, the Strive Network, and the Tamarack Institute* recognized that backbone organizations play a unique role in social change, and that to date little targeted professional development or peer learning for the field has been focused on this critical role.

To that end, the four partners convened over 60 leaders from backbone organizations and their governance committees for a workshop to collectively learn more about this role, and identify further areas of exploration that would benefit collective impact practitioners. Participants represented a broad diversity of collective impact initiatives: from urban to rural, California to Maine, education to environment to health. What these leaders did have in common, however, was that they all came from mature collective impact initiatives that had been operating for more than a year and were all grappling with many of the same questions. Please see this link for a *video about the backbone workshop.*

At the close of the three day workshop, leaders from FSG, Strive, and Tamarack participated in a discussion on critical questions raised by workshop participants. The conversation touched on a range of topics including articulating the value of the backbone organization to funders and community partners, measuring the success of the backbone organization, and building shared leadership for collective impact work.

Participants agreed that communicating the value proposition of the backbone begins with focusing on the social issue the initiative is trying to impact, and then articulating the specific roles that the backbone organization can play in supporting progress on the issue. They highlighted the importance of engaging funders from the beginning of an initiative, and continuing that engagement throughout the lifecycle of the work. The conversation also explored the importance of creating the structures and processes to put the five elements of collective impact in place, but that the work itself can and should adapt as learning surfaces and the life-cycle unfolds over the course of the initiative.

A Conversation with Faculty

Fay Hanleybrown: How do you communicate the value proposition of the backbone to funders and community partners? What is your elevator pitch?

Jeff Edmonson: Strive did a miserable job of this for years. We made the mistake of always talking about adults because as backbones we're focused on getting the adults to work together nicely. We worked with three different communication firms and, for the first two tries, all mission statements and one-pagers focused on adults. By the third time, we thought, "why don't we focus on the kids, the beneficiaries?" We talked about outcomes.

We found that all of the one pagers focused on adults got no traction; the successful ones put impact and outcomes for kids at the top. The value add of the backbone is that we are going to move these outcomes at all costs. The "we" is a big "we," and we're going to use data to make progress. This means we're not going to start new programs, we're going to look at data to move outcomes. Detroit has an emerging cradle to career partnership called Drive Detroit. They boiled down their core approach to a very simple statement: There's a new way for people and organizations to come together using data to create a better Detroit for our children.

Fay Hanleybrown: How can a backbone organization measure its own success?

John Kania: It is important to measure long term outcomes of the initiative, but these take a long time to shift. FSG worked with the Greater Cincinnati Foundation to think about how to measure the success of backbone organization. [So, FSG worked with six backbone organizations, working on six different social issues in Cincinnati, to see how to measure their success.](#) We went in with the hypothesis that the six backbones were all doing the same activities, and this turned out to largely be true. These activities were: guiding vision and strategy; supporting aligned activities; establishing shared measurement practices; building public will; advancing policy; and mobilizing funding.

We then drew a theory of change that described how the backbone activities would help change the approach to these issues from isolated impact and to collective impact. We assumed that the six key backbone activities would contribute to outcomes at 3 levels:

1. Outcomes of partners (to be more sustainable/effective);
2. Outcomes of the initiative (policy change, organizations working more effectively together), and
3. Outcomes at the community level (are we moving the needle against the indicators?)

Basing the theory of change on the six activities, we said, "We need indicators for whether we are playing these roles in the short-term, medium-term, and long-term." So we created 27 indicators across those six activities. Then, we surveyed stakeholders for each backbone and asked, "How are backbones doing against these indicators?" We also interviewed these stakeholders. The most significant question we asked was: "If it weren't for the backbone, what wouldn't be the way it is now?" The answers were super compelling and this gave the backbone organizations quantitative data against indicators and great qualitative data from interviews.

Jeff Edmonson: Strive has also been thinking about this. If you think about achieving collective impact, these are some of the mileposts along the way. Progress is organic to each community, but there are three core things around which we will all want to see movement in order to better understand the power of this work:

1. Clear improvement on a few priority outcomes due to the backbone's work, within 2 years
2. How money flows differently as a result of the work
3. Partners' beliefs about added value of the partnership and backbone organization in galvanizing resources to improve outcomes

Fay Hanleybrown: How do you build shared leadership that gets funders and partners to buy in and change their behavior?

Liz Weaver: We have funders embedded at the table so they have walked alongside us. Funders are willing to do this in our work in Canada, and it has been helpful.

It is also critical to have the voices of the citizen and the business community at the table. They both bring a sense of urgency around the issue that you don't always get from the nonprofit and government sectors. By not having those voices at the table, you create a lack of authenticity in what you are trying to accomplish. Having them present creates a deeper understanding and the generation of new potential solutions that might not have been immediately apparent.

Paul Born: Another important piece is to understand who and what makes up the system that we are trying to change? Once you have identified the critical system players, you need to constantly bring together different sectors and try not to allow a meeting to occur when the entire system isn't present. You need people with lived experience, citizens, at the table.

In the meetings, people will have to make difficult decisions. How do you train people to do that collaboratively when they're used to a command and control environment? This will be a change in culture, but if this work is controlled by the center, it will not be collaborative. It needs to be owned by partners who go away and work and then bring that back to the center.

John Kania: The military has made this shift to decision making without command. Marines now do mostly covert action without command. What the military is doing is consistent with how you manage in complexity. You need to know the mission, direction, outcomes, and minimum set of rules that you should apply in any situation. If you think of birds flocking, three basic rules lead to incredible alignment and coordination. Collective impact efforts need autonomy to self-organize, but general principles that everyone knows and will follow.

Fay Hanleybrown: What is at the heart of collective impact: Is it a model, a guide, or an aspiration? How rigorously do you need to be in fidelity to the model? It can't be too loose, as there is a needed rigor in the elements of collective impact, but if it's too rigid, it may lose the opportunity for emergence.

Jeff Edmonson: We have been thinking about this nonstop. We are concerned that collective impact is getting watered down. We had one community call us with seven collective impact projects underway around education – but we know that there are not enough resources to support seven backbones.

I want to note that we actually differentiate between the role of a backbone and a convener. You need a single backbone in a given community around an issue area. So if you are taking on education for example, you need a single backbone to focus on keeping partners aligned around the vision and outcomes, building the data infrastructure and capacity to use data on the ground, and advocating for what works across the continuum. And then you need conveners who are much more visible than the backbone, that pull together practitioners around a specific outcome area. These conveners work with the backbone to get the data they need and focus on making sure a truly collaborative action plan is developed with all the partners engaged around what the data says really works for children and youth.

Back to the question, we'd say that collective impact is not a model, but a new way of doing business, a new way of attacking complex social issues. There is a framework to help us accomplish that, but we need to set minimum quality benchmarks; otherwise, everyone will say they're doing collective impact and it won't mean anything. Our goal for the next year is to work with communities to define and refine those benchmarks. We are actually releasing in early-May a Theory of Action that captures these quality benchmarks. This was developed over the last six months with over 30 sites doing this work and a host of national advisors. It balances the need for rigor and respect for local context.

There's a quote from the recent Lincoln movie where the President notes his time as a surveyor when he learned the value of a compass. He noted, "I learned the value of a compass in showing true north, but I also realized that if we don't develop the right path to get there, we would either drown in a swamp or get lost in the desert." We need to be a bit more rigorous than we're being today. Collective impact initiatives need to be clearer about defining roles and responsibilities. Part of defining the secret sauce is to say what collective impact is not.

Fay Hanleybrown: How do you implement change when an effort has been underway for some time without looking like you don't know what you're doing?

Jeff Edmonson: We embrace the concept of failing forward. The more transparent we are about what we haven't done well, the more partners facing similar issues can admit that they haven't been doing things quite well enough. Don't run away from your history, run towards it. Model the behavior that your partners will have to do going forward and keep them involved in the process.

Fay Hanleybrown: Liz, you have presented on an eco-cycle describing the Four Phases of Collaborative Change during this workshop. You have explained that the four phases in this cycle - exploration, development, maturity, and creative destruction - are important to recognize, and respond to rather than ignore when they occur. How do you talk about this eco-cycle with stakeholders, and develop their comfort with these ideas, especially creative destruction?

Liz Weaver: We think about our work in three-to-five year campaigns. In that time, significant things change and transform the work, putting it in a wobbly state. How do we navigate through this wobbliness? In our poverty work, we had many critical steering committee members leave at the same time – how do we intentionally think about the opportunity that's created. If we're not thinking about this as an opportunity, then we lose the chance and go into crisis mode. The eco-cycle frame helps us think about what we've learned so far, and helps us bring ourselves into a new place, acknowledging that it is healthy to do so.

Fay Hanleybrown: Right, one of the challenges to this work is that it is constantly emerging and changing. How do we communicate this to partners engaged in the work, especially to funders who don't always think that way?

John Kania: Funders should hold us accountable to outcomes, but not how we get there. Historically, it's been about funding programs and maintaining fidelity to programs. In a complex system, there is often a need to adapt and change program(s) while maintaining a focus on goals and outcomes. If you're rigid in fidelity to program, you're not going to be successful because we're never going to change things by working at a program level. Funders have supported programs for years and it hasn't worked. We need to look at what's going to make a difference, and we need to work at system level. We need to highlight that investments in the backbone are incredibly leveraged investments – coordinating system of $7B with $500K to $1M is really powerful.

Paul Born: As Liz mentioned, I try not to go into a collective impact process without the funder at the table. Funders have to bring more than money, they have to bring people. In emergence, "anything" can happen, but we can't communicate "anything" properly in a report. In many places, we take this so seriously that we will not accept money unless a funder comes to the table. Once they're at the table, giving funders jobs and things to do helps keep them engaged.

Fay Hanleybrown: What reflections are you taking away from this workshop and today's conversation?

John Kania: What's critical to this work is that we all need to collectively get smarter with each other over time. We can't get smarter in our silos. I leave with the question of how do we work across sectors so we connect across sectors more efficiently and effectively?

Liz Weaver: The best ideas already exist. Learning from each other can help us scale our work so much more quickly than we could on our own.

Jeff Edmonson: The bottom line tenets for us are: focus on the data, start every meeting with vision and outcomes, keep our eyes on the prize, and keep true north front and center.

For questions or comments on this report, please contact:

Fay Hanleybrown
Managing Director, FSG
fay.hanleybrown@fsg.org

Jennifer Splansky
Senior Consultant, FSG
jennifer.splansky@fsg.org

FSG

FSG is a nonprofit consulting firm specializing in strategy, evaluation, and research, founded in 2000 as Foundation Strategy Group. Today, FSG works across sectors in every region of the world—partnering with foundations, corporations, nonprofits, and governments—to develop more effective solutions to the world's most challenging issues.