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Channeling Change: Making Collective Impact Work



By Fay Hanleybrown, John Kania, and Mark Kramer

What does a global effort to reduce malnutrition have in common with a program to reduce teenage substance abuse in a small rural Massachusetts county? Both have achieved significant progress toward their goals: the [Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition](#) (GAIN) has helped reduce nutritional deficiencies among 530 million poor people across the globe, while the [Communities That Care Coalition of Franklin County and the North Quabbin](#) (Communities That Care) has made equally impressive progress toward its much more local goals, reducing teenage binge drinking by 31 percent. Surprisingly, neither organization owes its impact to a new previously untested intervention, nor to scaling up a high-performing nonprofit organization. Despite their dramatic differences in focus and scope, both succeeded by using a collective impact approach.

In the [winter 2011 issue of *Stanford Social Innovation Review*](#) we introduced the concept of “collective impact” by describing several examples of highly structured collaborative efforts that had achieved substantial impact on a large scale social problem, such as [The Strive Partnership](#)¹ educational initiative in Cincinnati, the environmental cleanup of the [Elizabeth River](#) in Virginia, and the [Shape Up Somerville](#) campaign against childhood obesity in Somerville, Mass. All of these initiatives share the five key conditions that distinguish collective impact from other types of collaboration: a common agenda, shared measurement systems, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication, and the presence of a backbone organization. (See “The Five Conditions of Collective Impact,” below.)

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 create 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.

We hypothesized that these five conditions offered a more powerful and realistic paradigm for social progress than the prevailing model of isolated impact in which countless nonprofit, business, and government organizations each work to address social problems independently. The complex nature of most social problems belies the idea that any single program or organization, however well managed and funded, can singlehandedly create lasting large-scale change. (See "Isolated Impact vs. Collective Impact," below.)

Isolated Impact vs. Collective Impact	
Isolated Impact	Collective Impact
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Funders select individual grantees that offer the most promising solutions. ◆ Nonprofits work separately and compete to produce the greatest independent impact. ◆ Evaluation attempts to isolate a particular organization's impact. ◆ Large scale change is assumed to depend on scaling a single organization. ◆ Corporate and government sectors are often disconnected from the efforts of foundations and nonprofits. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Funders and implementers understand that social problems, and their solutions, arise from the interaction of many organizations within a larger system. ◆ Progress depends on working toward the same goal and measuring the same things. ◆ Large scale impact depends on increasing cross-sector alignment and learning among many organizations. ◆ Corporate and government sectors are essential partners. ◆ Organizations actively coordinate their action and share lessons learned.

Response to that article was overwhelming. Hundreds of organizations and individuals from every continent in the world, even including the White House, have reached out to describe their efforts to use collective impact and to ask for more guidance on how to implement these principles.

Even more surprising than the level of interest is the number of collective impact efforts we have seen that report substantial progress in addressing their chosen issues. In addition to GAIN and Communities That Care, [Opportunity Chicago](#) placed 6,000 public housing residents in new jobs, surpassing its goal by 20 percent; [Memphis Fast Forward](#) reduced violent crime and created more than 14,000 new jobs in Memphis, Tenn.; the [Calgary Homeless Foundation](#) housed more than 3,300 men, women, and children and contributed to stopping what had been the fastest growing rate of homelessness in Canada; and [Vibrant Communities](#) significantly reduced poverty levels in several Canadian cities.

The initiatives we cited in our initial article have also gained tremendous traction: Shape Up Somerville's approach has now been adapted in 14 communities through subsequent research projects and influenced a national cross-sector collaborative. The Strive Partnership recently released its fourth annual report card, showing that 81 percent of its 34 measures of student achievement are trending in the right direction versus 74 percent last year and 68 percent two years ago.² Its planned expansion to five cities when the article came out has since been vastly expanded as more than 80 communities (including as far away as the Ruhr Valley in Germany) have expressed interest in building on The Strive Partnership's success.

Part of this momentum is no doubt due to the economic recession and the shortage of government funding that has forced the social sector to find new ways to do more with less—pressures that show no signs of abating. The appeal of collective impact may also be due to a broad disillusionment in the ability of governments around the world to solve society's problems, causing people to look more closely at alternative models of change.

More and more people, however, have come to believe that collective impact is not just a fancy name for collaboration, but represents a fundamentally different, more disciplined, and higher performing approach to achieving large-scale social impact. Even the attempt to use these ideas seems to stimulate renewed energy and optimism. FSG has been asked to help launch more than one dozen collective impact initiatives, and other organizations focused on social sector capacity building such as the Bridgespan Group, Monitor Institute, and the Tamarack Institute in Canada, have also developed tools to implement collective impact initiatives in diverse settings.

As examples of collective impact have continued to surface, it has become apparent that this approach can be applied against a wide range of issues at local, national, and even global levels. In fact, we believe that there is no other way society will achieve large-scale progress against the urgent and complex problems of our time, unless a collective impact approach becomes the accepted way of doing business.

At the same time, our continued research has provided a clearer sense of what it takes for collective impact to succeed. The purpose of this article, therefore, is to

expand the understanding of collective impact and provide greater guidance for those who seek to initiate and lead collective impact initiatives around the world. In particular, we will focus on answering the questions we hear most often: How do we begin? How do we create alignment? And, How do we sustain the initiative?

Awakening the Power of Collective Impact

Of all the collective impact examples we have studied, few are as different in scale as GAIN and Communities That Care, yet both of these efforts embody the principles of collective impact, and both have demonstrated substantial and consistent progress toward their goals.

GAIN, created in 2002 at a special session of the United Nations General Assembly, is focused on the goal of reducing malnutrition by improving the health and nutrition of nearly 1 billion at risk people in the developing world. The development of GAIN was predicated on two assumptions: first, that there were proven interventions that could be employed at scale to improve nutrition of the poor in developing countries, and second, that the private sector had a much greater role to play in improving the nutrition even for the very poor. GAIN is now coordinated by a Swiss Foundation with offices in eight cities around the world and more planned to open soon. In less than a decade, GAIN has created and coordinated the activity of 36 large-scale collaborations that include governments, NGOs, multilateral organizations, universities, and more than 600 companies in more than 30 countries. GAIN's work has enabled more than 530 million people worldwide to obtain nutritionally enhanced food and significantly reduced the prevalence of micronutrient deficiencies in a number of countries. In China, South Africa, and Kenya, for example, micronutrient deficiencies dropped between 11 and 30 percent among those who consumed GAIN's fortified products. During that time, GAIN has also raised \$322 million in new financial commitments from its partners and leveraged many times more from its private sector and government partners.

At the other end of the spectrum, the Franklin County / North Quabbin Region of Western Massachusetts has a population of only 88,000 people dispersed across 30 different municipalities and 844 square miles. When two local social service agencies—the Community Coalition for Teens and the Community Action of the Franklin, Hampshire, and North Quabbin Regions—first called a meeting to discuss teenage drinking and drug use, they were astonished that 60 people showed up. From that first meeting, coincidentally also in 2002, grew Communities That Care, that now includes more than 200 representatives from human service agencies, district attorney's offices, schools, police departments, youth serving agencies, faith-based organizations, local elected officials, local businesses, media, parents, and youth. Overseen by a central coordinating council, the initiative operates through three working groups that meet monthly to address parent education, youth recognition, and community laws and norms. In addition, a school health task force links these work groups to the 10 public school districts in the region. Over an eight-year time frame, the work of Communities That Care has resulted not only in reducing binge drinking, but also in reducing teen cigarette smoking by 32 percent and teen marijuana use by 18 percent. The coalition has also raised more than \$5 million of new public money in support of their efforts.

Different as they may be, these two initiatives demonstrate the versatility of a collective impact approach and offer broad insights into how to begin, manage, and structure collective impact initiatives.

The Preconditions for Collective Impact

Three conditions must be in place before launching a collective impact initiative: *an influential champion*, *adequate financial resources*, and a sense of *urgency for change*. Together, these preconditions create the opportunity and motivation necessary to bring people who have never before worked together into a collective impact initiative and hold them in place until the initiative's own momentum takes over.

The most critical factor by far is an *influential champion* (or small group of champions) who commands the respect necessary to bring CEO-level cross-sector leaders together and keep their active engagement over time. 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.³ In the case of GAIN, four individuals with deep experience in the development field—Bill Foege, the former director of the US Centers for Disease Control who is largely credited with eradicating small pox, Kul Gautam, a senior official at UNICEF, Duff Gillespie, head of the Office of Population and Nutrition at US Agency for International Development (USAID), and Sally Stansfield, one of the original directors at The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation—came together to look at large scale opportunities to address malnutrition in populations at risk in the developing world. Together they galvanized the 2002 UN General Assembly special session that led to the creation of GAIN and to the subsequent engagement of hundreds of government, corporate, and nonprofit participants.

Second, there must be adequate *financial resources* to last for at least two to three years, generally in the form of at least one anchor funder who is engaged from the beginning and can support and mobilize other resources to pay for the needed infrastructure and planning processes. The Gates Foundation, the Canadian International Development Agency, and the USAID played this role in the case of GAIN. For Communities That Care, a federal grant provided the necessary multi-year support.

The final factor is the *urgency for change* around an issue. Has a crisis created a breaking point to convince people that an entirely new approach is needed? Is there the potential for substantial funding that might entice people to work together, as was the case in Franklin County? Is there a fundamentally new approach, such as using the production, distribution, and demand creation capacities of the private sector to reach millions of people efficiently and sustainably, as was the case for GAIN? 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.

Bringing Collective Impact to Life

Once the preconditions are in place, our research suggests that there are three distinct phases of getting a collective impact effort up and running.

Phase I, *Initiate Action*, requires an understanding of the landscape of key players and the existing work underway, baseline data on the social problem to develop the case for change, and an initial governance structure that includes strong and credible champions.

Phase II, *Organize for Impact*, requires that stakeholders work together to establish common goals and shared measures, create a supporting backbone infrastructure, and begin the process of aligning the many organizations involved against the shared goals and measures.

Phase III, *Sustain Action and Impact*, requires that stakeholders pursue prioritized areas for action in a coordinated way, systematically collect data, and put in place sustainable processes that enable active learning and course correcting as they track progress toward their common goals. (See "Phases of Collective Impact," below.)

It is important to recognize that the initiative must build on any existing collaborative efforts already underway to address the issue. Collective impact efforts are most effective when they build from what already exists; honoring current efforts and engaging established organizations, rather than creating an entirely new solution from scratch.

Being realistic about the time it will take to get through these initial organizing stages is equally important. It takes time to create an effective infrastructure that allows stakeholders to work together and that truly can ameliorate a broken system. The first two phases alone can take between six months and two years. The scope of the problem to be addressed, the degree of existing collaboration, and the breadth of community engagement all influence the time required. Conducting a readiness assessment based on the preconditions listed above can help to anticipate the likely time required.

Once the initiative is established, Phase III can last a decade or more. Collective impact is a marathon, not a sprint. There is no shortcut in the long-term process of social change. Fortunately, progress happens along the way. In fact, early wins that demonstrate the value of working together are essential to hold the collaborative together. In a collective impact education initiative FSG is supporting in Seattle, for example, 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. Merely agreeing on a common agenda and shared measurement system during Phase II often feels like an important early win to participants.

Setting the Common Agenda

Developing a well-defined but practical common agenda might seem like a straightforward task. Yet we find that regardless of the issue and geography, practitioners struggle to agree on an agenda with sufficient clarity to support a shared measurement system and shape mutually reinforcing activities. Setting a common agenda actually requires two steps: creating the boundaries of the system or issue to be addressed, and developing a strategic action framework to guide the activities of the initiative.

Creating Boundaries. Establishing the boundaries of the issue is a judgment call based on each situation. For example, in another collective impact initiative that focused on teen substance abuse, a cross sector set of stakeholders in Staten Island, N.Y. drew their boundaries to include key factors such as parental and youth social norms as well as prevention and treatment activities. They could as easily have included many other related "root causes" of substance abuse such as youth unemployment or domestic violence. While these issues undoubtedly contribute to substance abuse, the group felt less able to impact these areas, and therefore left these issues outside the boundaries of their efforts. On the other hand, working with retailers to limit the availability of alcohol to minors, although outside the social sector, was determined to be an issue inside the boundary of what the group felt they could take on.

Or consider the boundaries drawn by Opportunity Chicago, a collective impact effort that included foundations, government agencies, nonprofits, and employers working to connect low-skilled public housing residents to employment in connection with the city's sweeping plan to transform public housing. The initiative's leaders realized that new housing would not help if the residents could not meet the work requirement established to qualify for residency. As a result, they included workforce development within the housing initiative's boundaries and established Opportunity Chicago, the collective impact initiative that ultimately placed 6,000 residents in jobs.

Boundaries can and do change over time. After nearly a decade of addressing teen substance abuse prevention, Communities That Care is launching a second initiative to address youth nutrition and physical activity, applying the existing structure and stakeholders to a closely related but new topic area within their mission of improving youth health in their region.

Determining geographic boundaries requires the same type of judgment in balancing the local context and stakeholder aspirations. While Shape Up Somerville chose a city-wide focus to tackle childhood obesity, Livewell Colorado addressed the same issue for the entire state by bringing together a more widely dispersed group of representatives from businesses, government, nonprofits, healthcare, schools, and the transportation sector.

Although it is important to create clarity on what is and what is not part of the collective efforts, most boundaries are loosely defined and flexible. Subsequent analysis and activity may draw in other issues, players, and geographies that were initially excluded. Communities That Care, for example, began by serving only Franklin County, and expanded their geographic boundaries in their seventh year to include North Quabbin.

Developing the Strategic Action Framework. Once the initial system boundaries have been established, the task of creating a common agenda must shift to developing a strategic framework for action. This should not be an elaborate plan or a rigid theory of change. The Strive Partnership's "roadmap" for example, fits on a single page and was originally developed in just a few weeks. The strategic framework must balance the necessity of simplicity with the need to create a comprehensive understanding of the issue that encompasses the activities of all stakeholders, and the flexibility to allow for the organic learning process of collective impact to unfold. This framework for action can serve a critical role in building a shared agenda. As Chad Wick, one of the early champions of The Strive Partnership explains, "Our map got everyone to suspend their own view of the world and got us on a common page from which to work. It allowed others to suspend their preconceived views and be open minded about what was and what could be."

Successful frameworks include a number of key components: a description of the problem informed by solid research; a clear goal for the desired change; a portfolio of key strategies to drive large scale change; a set of principles that guide the group's behavior; and an approach to evaluation that lays out how the collective impact initiative will obtain and judge the feedback on its efforts.

Since 2002, the [Tamarack Institute](#) has been guiding Canada's approach to fighting poverty through the Vibrant Communities initiative in a dozen Canadian cities. The Tamarack Institute refers to their strategic action frameworks as "frameworks-for-change," and cogently describes their value as follows: "A strong framework for change, based on strong research and input from local players, shapes the strategic thinking of the group, helps them make tough choices about where to spend their time and energy, and guides their efforts at monitoring and evaluating their work. Ask anyone involved in the effort about where they are going and their road map for getting there, and they will tell you."⁴

We believe their description applies equally well to any strategic action framework that guides a common agenda. Our experience also suggests that it may not always make sense to start off by implementing every single strategy identified in the common agenda. It is also important to pursue a portfolio of strategies that offer a combination of easy but substantive short-term wins to sustain early momentum for the initiative, as well as more ambitious, long-term systemic strategies that may not show impact for several years.

Importantly, strategic action frameworks are not static. Tamarack goes on to note: "They are working hypotheses of how the group believes it can [achieve its goals], hypotheses that are constantly tested through a process of trial and error and updated to reflect new learnings, endless changes in the local context, and the arrival of new actors with new insights and priorities."

FSG research bears out this need for continuous adaptation. The Strive Partnership has evolved their roadmap three times in the last five years. GAIN has built in a robust feedback loop from its programming, and over the past eight years has incorporated best practices and lessons learned as a fundamental component of its fourth annual strategic action framework. And Communities That Care has revised its community action plan three times in the last eight years.

Implementing a collective impact approach with this type of fluid agenda requires new types of collaborative structures, such as shared measurement systems and backbone organizations.

Shared Measurement Systems

Practitioners consistently report that one of the most challenging aspects to achieving collective impact is shared measurement—the use of a common set of measures to monitor performance, track progress toward goals, and learn what is or is not working. The traditional paradigm of evaluation, which focuses on isolating the impact of a single organization or grant, is not easily transposed to measure the impact of multiple organizations working together in real time to solve a common problem. Competing priorities among stakeholders and fears about being judged as underperforming make it very hard to agree on common measures. Organizations have few resources with which to measure their own performance, let alone develop and maintain a shared measurement system among multiple organizations.

Yet shared measurement is essential, and collaborative efforts will remain superficial without it. Having a small but comprehensive set of indicators establishes a common language that supports the action framework, measures progress along the common agenda, enables greater alignment among the goals of different organizations, encourages more collaborative problem-solving, and becomes the platform for an ongoing learning community that gradually increases the effectiveness of all participants.⁵ Mutually reinforcing activities become very clear once the work of many different organizations can be mapped out against the same set of indicators and outcomes.

Consider the collective impact effort to reduce homelessness in Calgary, Canada, supported by the Calgary Homeless Foundation (CHF). When stakeholders first came together to define common measures of homelessness, they were shocked to discover that the many agencies, providers, and funders in Calgary were using thousands of separate measures relating to homelessness. They also found that providers had very different definitions of key terms, such as the "chronic" versus "transitional" homeless, and that their services were not always aligned to the needs of the individuals served. Merely developing a limited set of eight common measures with clear definitions led to improved services and increased coordination. Even privacy issues, a major legal obstacle to sharing data, were resolved in ways that permitted sharing while actually increasing confidentiality. As Alina Turner, vice president of strategy at CHF put it, "Putting shared measures in place is a way to start the deeper systems change in a way that people can get their heads around . . . starting from a common framework to get alignment across a whole system of care."

Developing an effective shared measurement system requires broad engagement by many organizations in the field together with clear expectations about confidentiality and transparency. The Calgary homelessness initiative worked with both a cross-sector advisory committee and a service provider committee to develop common measures from evidence-based research. The measures were then refined through iterative meetings with dozens of stakeholders before being finalized.

Shared measurement systems also require strong leadership, substantial funding, and ongoing staffing support from the backbone organization to provide training, facilitation, and to review the accuracy of data. In CHF's case, the foundation funded and staffed the development of the homelessness management information system (HMIS) and the process of developing shared measures.

Developments in web-based technology permit huge numbers of stakeholders to use shared measurement inexpensively in ways that would have been impossible even a few years ago. CHF has adopted a sophisticated HMIS system with different levels of secure data access for providers, government agencies, and funders. The Strive Partnership, in collaboration with Cincinnati Public Schools, Procter & Gamble, and Microsoft, has made major advances in shared measurement by introducing the "Learning Partner Dashboard," a web-based system that allows schools and nonprofit providers to access data including the performance of individual students and the specific services they receive. Memphis Fast Forward's Operation, Safe Community, built a tool for tracking and publicizing county-wide crime data and facilitated the memorandum of understanding that resulted in data sharing and participation by all five local municipal police departments and the Sheriff's office.

Having shared measures is just the first step. Participants must gather regularly to share results, learn from each other, and refine their individual and collective work based on their learning. Many initiatives use standardized continuous improvement processes, such as General Electric's Six Sigma process or the Model for Improvement. In the case of GAIN, the initiative has both a performance framework and

rigorous monitoring and evaluation criteria which feed into an organization-wide learning agenda. Their Partnership Council, comprised of world experts in the fields of nutrition, agriculture, economics, and business, advises the board of directors on the learning agenda, reviews the data to ensure its integrity, and recommends programmatic and management improvements.

Regardless of the continuous improvement approach chosen, the backbone organization plays a critical role in supporting the process of learning and improving throughout the life of the collaborative.

Keeping Collective Impact Alive

Two key structural elements enable collective impact initiatives to withstand the overwhelming challenges of bringing so many different organizations into alignment and holding them together for so long: the *backbone organization and cascading levels of linked collaboration*.

Backbone Organization. In our initial article we wrote that “creating and managing collective impact requires a separate organization and staff with a very specific set of skills to serve as the backbone for the entire initiative.” We also cautioned, “Coordinating large groups in a collective impact initiative takes time and resources, and too often, the expectation that collaboration can occur without a supporting infrastructure is one of the most frequent reasons why it fails.”

Our subsequent research has confirmed that backbone organizations serve six essential functions: providing overall strategic direction, facilitating dialogue between partners, managing data collection and analysis, handling communications, coordinating community outreach, and mobilizing funding.

Although the core backbone functions are consistent across all of the collective impact initiatives we have studied, they can be accomplished through a variety of different organizational structures. (See “Backbone Organizations,” below.) Funders, new or existing nonprofits, intermediaries like community foundations, United Ways, and government agencies, can all fill the backbone role. Backbone functions can also be shared across multiple organizations. The [Magnolia Place Community Initiative](#) in Los Angeles, for example, strives to optimize family functioning, health and well-being, school readiness, and economic stability for a population of 100,000. The Initiative has a small, dedicated staff that drives the work. Multiple partner organizations from the 70 organizations in the network fulfill different backbone functions, such as collecting and analyzing data, and maintaining a coherent strategic vision through communications.

Backbone Organizations				
Types of Backbones	Description	Examples	Pros	Cons
Funder-Based	One funder initiates CI strategy as planner, financier, and convener	Calgary Homeless Foundation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ability to secure start-up funding and recurring resources Ability to bring others to the table and leverage other funders 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of broad buy-in if CI effort seen as driven by one funder Lack of perceived neutrality
New Nonprofit	New entity is created, often by private funding, to serve as backbone	Community Center for Education Results	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Perceived neutrality as facilitator and convener Potential lack of baggage Clarity of focus 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of sustainable funding stream and potential questions about funding priorities Potential competition with local nonprofits
Existing Nonprofit	Established nonprofit takes the lead in coordinating CI strategy	Opportunity Chicago	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Credibility, clear ownership, and strong understanding of issue Existing infrastructure in place if properly resourced 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Potential “baggage” and lack of perceived neutrality Lack of attention if poorly funded
Government	Government entity, either at local or state level, drives CI effort	Shape Up Somerville	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Public sector “seal of approval” Existing infrastructure in place if properly resourced 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bureaucracy may slow progress Public funding may not be dependable
Shared Across Multiple Organizations	Numerous organizations take ownership of CI wins	Magnolia Place	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lower resource requirements if shared across multiple organizations Broad buy-in, expertise 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of clear accountability with multiple voices at the table Coordination challenges, leading to potential inefficiencies
Steering Committee Driven	Senior-level committee with ultimate decision-making power	Memphis Fast Forward	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Broad buy-in from senior leaders across public, private, and nonprofit sectors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of clear accountability with multiple voices

Each structure has pros and cons, and the best structure will be situation-specific, depending on the issue and geography, the ability to secure funding, the highly important perceived neutrality of the organization, and the ability to mobilize stakeholders. Backbone organizations also face two distinct challenges in their leadership and funding. No collective impact effort can survive unless the backbone organization is led by an executive possessing strong adaptive leadership skills; the ability to mobilize people without imposing a predetermined agenda or taking credit for success. Backbone organizations must maintain a delicate balance between the strong leadership needed to keep all parties together and the invisible “behind the scenes” role that lets the other stakeholders own the initiative’s success.

Backbone organizations must also be sufficiently well resourced. Despite the growing interest in collective impact, few funders are yet stepping up to support backbones associated with the issues they care about. Adopting a collective impact approach requires a fundamental shift in the mindset of many funders who are used to receiving credit for supporting specific short-term interventions. Collective impact offers no silver bullets. It works through many gradual improvements over time as stakeholders learn for themselves how to become more aligned and effective. Funders must be willing to support an open-ended process over many years, satisfied in knowing that they are contributing to large scale and sustainable social impact, without being able to take credit for any specific result that is directly attributable to their funding.

Worse, backbone organizations are sometimes seen as the kind of overhead that funders so assiduously avoid. Yet effective backbone organizations provide extraordinary leverage. A backbone’s funding is typically less than 1 percent of the total budgets of the organizations it coordinates, and it can dramatically increase the effectiveness of the other 99 percent of expenditures. Backbone organizations can also attract new funds. As mentioned above, both GAIN and Communities That Care have raised substantial new funding for their work.

Even the best backbone organization, however, cannot single-handedly manage the work of the hundreds of stakeholders engaged in a collective impact initiative. Instead, different levels of linked collaboration are required.

Cascading Levels of Linked Collaboration. We have observed markedly similar patterns in the way successful collective impact efforts are structured across many different issues and geographies. Each begins with the establishment of an oversight group, often called a steering committee or executive committee, which consists of cross-sector CEO level individuals from key organizations engaged with the issue. Under the best circumstances, the oversight group also includes representatives of the individuals touched by the issue. This steering committee works to create the common agenda that defines the boundaries of the effort and sets a strategic action framework. Thereafter, the committee meets regularly to oversee the progress of the entire initiative.

Once the strategic action framework is agreed upon, different working groups are formed around each of its primary leverage points or strategies. GAIN, for example, is overseen by a board of directors, with a 100-person secretariat that operates through four program initiatives: largescale fortification, multi-nutrient supplements, nutritious foods during pregnancy and early childhood, and enhancing the nutritional content of agriculture products. These programs are supported by 15 working groups on both technical and programmatic topics like salt iodization, infant and child nutrition, and advocacy, as well as functional working groups on evaluation and research, communications, and donor relations. Livewell Colorado operates with 22 cross-sector coalitions that reinforce the state's common agenda within individual communities. Communities That Care has three working groups focused on parent education, youth recognition, and community norms, and a school health task force. More complicated initiatives may have subgroups that take on specific objectives within the prioritized strategies.

Although each working group meets separately, they communicate and coordinate with each other in cascading levels of linked collaboration. Effective coordination by the backbone can create aligned and coordinated action among hundreds of organizations that simultaneously tackle many different dimensions of a complex issue. The real work of the collective impact initiative takes place in these targeted groups through a continuous process of "planning and doing," grounded in constant evidence-based feedback about what is or is not working.

The working groups typically develop their own plans for action organized around "moving the needle" on specific shared measures. Once plans are developed, the working groups are then responsible for coming together on a regular basis to share data and stories about progress being made, and for communicating their activities more broadly with other organizations and individuals affected by the issue so that the circle of alignment can grow. This confers an additional benefit of collective impact: as the common agenda's center of gravity becomes more apparent to all those working on the issue, even people and organizations who have not been directly engaged as a formal part of the initiative start doing things in ways more aligned to the effort. Brenda Ranum, a leader within [The Northeast Iowa Food & Fitness Initiative](#) that has brought five rural counties together to improve access to healthy, locally grown foods and to create opportunities for physical activity, refers to this benefit in alignment as getting "order for free." In our own consulting work supporting collective impact initiatives for issues as varied as juvenile justice reform, sustainable fishing, education reform, youth development, and agricultural development, we have also observed the benefits of this "order for free" phenomenon.

The backbone organization provides periodic and systematic assessments of progress attained by the various work groups, and then synthesizes the results and presents them back to the oversight committee that carries the sustaining flame of the common agenda.

The number of working groups and the cascading layers of collaboration may also change over time. As working group strategies are modified based on an examination of what is working, some groups may end and new ones begin to pursue newly identified strategies defined by the common agenda. What is critically important is that all strategies pursued clearly link back to the common agenda and shared measures, as well as link to each other.

Memphis Fast Forward illustrates how one community can address multiple complex issues through this multi-level cascading structure. The work of Memphis Fast Forward is overseen by a 20-person crosssector steering committee with the goal of making Memphis one of the most successful economic centers in the southern United States. They developed a common agenda focused on four key levers: public safety, education, jobs, and government efficiency. Each lever constitutes its own sub-initiative and is overseen by its own cross-sector steering committee and supported by a dedicated backbone organization. Each sub-initiative then cascades into linked working groups focused around the strategic levers unique to each of the four selected areas. Public Safety, for example, has developed its own strategic action framework that has 15 strategies, each with lead partners and cross-sector representation. The combined efforts of these linked work groups has led to a decrease in violent and property crimes of 26 percent and 32 percent respectively over the last five years.

One of the lead individuals associated with Memphis Fast Forward characterizes both the challenges and the value of this approach: "By using a decentralized but linked approach, each effort has its own governance and unique structure but all efforts come together to share learnings. It took us a while to realize the value in formally bringing the backbone organization leaders together for sharing and problem solving. Initially, the different initiatives were only loosely communicating, but then we realized that we had a great opportunity to all learn from each other and should do so more intentionally and proactively." Now leaders from the four initiatives meet monthly.

The Essential Intangibles of Collective Impact

Our guidance here on implementing collective impact has said little about the "softer" dimensions of any successful change effort, such as relationship and trust building among diverse stakeholders, leadership identification and development, and creating a culture of learning. These dimensions are essential to successfully achieving collective impact. We, as well as others, have written extensively about the profound impact that getting the soft stuff right has on social change efforts. And indeed, all of the successful collective impact practitioners we've observed can cite numerous instances when skillful implementation of these intangible dimensions was essential to their collective efforts.

One such intangible ingredient is, of all things, food. Ask Marjorie Mayfield Jackson, founder of the Elizabeth River Project, what the secret of her success was in building a common agenda among diverse and antagonistic stakeholders, including aggressive environmental activists and hard-nosed businessmen. She'll answer, "Clam bakes and beer." So too, The Tamarack Institute has a dedicated "Recipes Section" on its website that recognizes "how food has been that special leaven in bringing people together." In attempting collective impact, never underestimate the power and need to return to essential activities that can help clear away the burdens of past wounds and provide connections between people who thought they could never possibly work together.

As much as we have tried to describe clear steps to implement collective impact, it remains a messy and fragile process. Many attempts will no doubt fail, although

the many examples we have studied demonstrate that it can also succeed. Yet even the attempt itself brings one important intangible benefit that is in short supply nowadays: hope. Despite the difficulty of getting collective impact efforts off the ground, those involved report a new sense of optimism that dawns early on in the process. Developing the common agenda alone has produced remarkable changes in people's belief that the future can be different and better even before many changes have been made. For many who are searching for a reason to hope in these difficult times, this alone may be purpose enough to embrace collective impact.

¹ Originally named Strive when the earlier article appeared.

² <http://www.strivetogether.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/2011-Strive-Par...>

³ We described the qualities of such a leader as Adaptive Leadership, in Ronald Heifetz, John Kania, and Mark Kramer, "Leading Boldly," Stanford Social Innovation Review, winter 2004.

⁴ Cities Reducing Poverty: How Vibrant Communities Are Creating Comprehensive Solutions to the Most Complex Problems of Our Times, The Tamarack Institute, 2011: 137.

⁵ Mark Kramer, Marcie Parkhurst, and Lalitha Vaidyanathan, Breakthroughs in Shared Measurement and Social Impact, FSG, 2009.

Source: http://www.ssireview.org/blog/entry/channeling_change_making_collective_impact_work

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