Backbone Starter Guide

A Summary of Major Resources about the Backbone from FSG and the Collective Impact Forum

The Collective Impact Forum, an initiative of FSG and the Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions, is a resource for people and organizations using the collective impact approach to address large-scale social and environmental problems. We aim to increase the effectiveness and adoption of collective impact by providing practitioners with access to the tools, training opportunities, and peer networks they need to be successful in their work. The Collective Impact Forum includes communities of practice, in-person convenings, and an online community and resource center launched in early 2014.

Learn more at collectiveimpactforum.org

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Our teams work across all sectors by partnering with leading foundations, businesses, nonprofits, and governments in every region of the globe. We seek to reimagine social change by identifying ways to maximize the impact of existing resources, amplifying the work of others to help advance knowledge and practice, and inspiring change agents around the world to achieve greater impact.

As part of our nonprofit mission, FSG also directly supports learning communities, such as the Collective Impact Forum, the Shared Value Initiative, and the Impact Hiring Initiative to provide the tools and relationships that change agents need to be successful.

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Introduction

For collective impact initiatives, the backbone support is a critical component of the infrastructure that enables these collaborative, multi-sector efforts to advance systems-level change. It is also one of the most unique elements of collective impact, distinguishing the approach from several other forms of collaboration.

Since 2011, FSG and the Collective Impact Forum have studied and supported collective impact efforts and have developed perspectives and recommendations regarding the purpose, function, structure, leadership, and selection process required for backbone supports to be effective. In addition, through experiences across many collective impact initiatives at varying stages of maturity, we have documented a set of advice for funders interested in supporting backbone capacity.

The *Backbone Starter Guide* summarizes the collective impact approach and highlights the major ideas and learnings that have been previously published by FSG and the Collective Impact Forum.

Overview of Collective Impact

Collective impact has emerged as a powerful and innovative approach to solving social problems and is a paradigm shift for how to create social change. Complex social problems are affected by large and interdependent systems that no single organization can change alone.

With the collective impact approach, cross-sector leaders come together and strategically organize all of the relevant groups in a community to accomplish a population-wide outcome. Collective impact is defined as "the commitment of a group of cross-sector actors to a common agenda for solving a complex social problem."[1]

Collective impact initiatives are characterized by five core elements which have been distilled from studying the experiences of successful cross-sector collaboratives. All five elements are consistently present—in forms adapted and customized for the local context—to effectively facilitate cross-sector collaboration and the resulting population-level impacts. These five elements are:

1. **Common agenda:** All participants share a vision for change that includes a common understanding of the problem and a joint approach to solving the problem through agreed-upon actions.

2. **Shared measurement:** All participants agree on how to measure and report on progress, with a short list of common indicators identified to drive learning and improvement.

3. **Mutually reinforcing activities:** A diverse set of stakeholders, typically across sectors, coordinate a set of differentiated, mutually reinforcing set of activities.

4. **Continuous communication:** All players engage in frequent, structured communication to build trust, assure mutual objectives, and create common motivation.

5. **Backbone support:** An independent, dedicated staff provides support and key functions for the sustained operation of the collective impact initiative. *(For more detail on the core functions of the backbone entity, see The Backbone Support below.)*

No element is more important than the others; rather, a collective impact effort needs all five to effectively drive long-term, population-level changes in a given topic or area of focus.

With all five elements in place, collective impact efforts can greatly accelerate the pace of change and drive deep and lasting social impact. For example, Project U-Turn in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, brought together hundreds of groups in a collective impact initiative that has steadily increased graduation rates. In New York state, a group of cross-sector leaders has catalyzed a

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1   John Kania and Mark Kramer, "Collective Impact," *Stanford Social Innovation Review,* Winter 2011.

juvenile justice collective impact effort that has resulted in a 45 percent drop in the number of incarcerated youth over the past 3 years, with no decrease in public safety. Finally, the Strive Partnership in Cincinnati, Ohio, has achieved such strong results improving academic and career success for young people that a network of sites is replicating the Strive approach in dozens of communities throughout the country.[2]

The combination of the five elements and these practices contributes to meaningful population-level change

Principles of Practice for Collective Impact

Over time, as collective impact initiatives have developed and matured, their experiences have informed a set of principles of practice that help to define *how* collective impact initiatives are implemented to result in successful systems change. Although many of these principles are not unique to collective impact, the combination of the five elements and these practices contributes to meaningful population-level change.[3]

The principles of practice include the following:

- Design and implement the initiative with a priority placed on **equity**
- Include **community members** in the collaborative
- Recruit and co-create with **cross-sector** partners
- Use data to continuously **learn, adapt, and improve**

- Cultivate leaders with unique **system leadership** skills
- Focus on program and **system strategies**
- Build a culture that fosters **relationships, trust, and respect** across participants
- Customize for **local context**[4]

More detail on each principle of practice can be found on the Collective Impact Forum blog.

Structure for a Collective Impact Initiative

Collective impact is structured to foster shared leadership and create multiple avenues for engagement across stakeholders in a given system.

- At the highest level, the Steering Committee is composed of cross-sector leaders, decision-makers, and community members who provide strategic direction, champion the effort, and align their own organization's work to the common agenda.
- The backbone provides dedicated staff to support the collective impact initiative. *(The Backbone Support provides more detail on the backbone and its role.)*
- Working groups of cross-sector partners are formed around specific elements of the common agenda.
  - Working group members typically represent affected populations, entities that implement related services and solutions, government agencies, and other relevant partners who together design, align, and implement a related set of strategies.
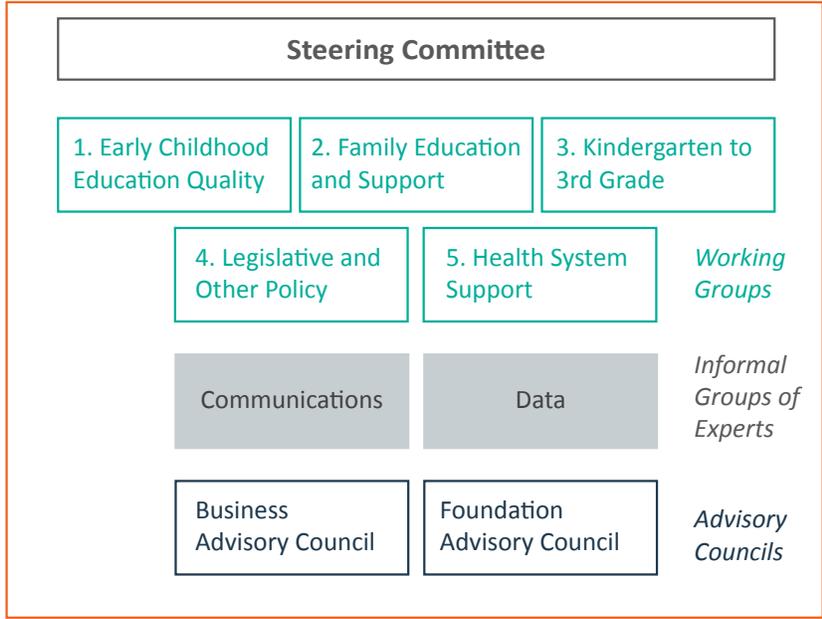
The collective impact structure has

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2   FSG interview with Project U-Turn website; New York State Office of Children and Families; Strive-Together website.

3   Sheri Brady and Jennifer Splansky Juster, "Collective Impact Principles of Practice: Putting Collective Impact into Action," Collective Impact Forum blog.

4   Ibid.

Backbone

Figure 1

Example Structure of Collective Impact Effort—Early Matters in Houston, Texas

Steering Committee

1. Early Childhood Education Quality	2. Family Education and Support	3. Kindergarten to 3rd Grade

4. Legislative and Other Policy	5. Health System Support

Working Groups

Communications	Data

Informal Groups of Experts

Business Advisory Council	Foundation Advisory Council

Advisory Councils

FSG interviews and analysis with Early Matters.

formal members but seeks to work with other stakeholders and community representatives beyond its members. For example, the number of formal members is limited to keep the logistics manageable, but certain strategies may require working groups to seek additional partners from community organizations, other stakeholders, or affected populations. These partners can play a critical role in implementing strategies and providing input to the initiative. For example, a local private-sector employer, who is a member of a working group on workforce development, might form a coalition of other employers who are willing to adopt a certain practice or goal in alignment with the working group's strategies and the common agenda. This engagement with additional stakeholders is helpful for cultivating engagement and shared ownership of outcomes across the community.

As collective impact initiatives evolve, so will the structure of the initiative. Specifically, the focus and composition of working groups often evolve as work progresses, context changes, successes are achieved, and challenges are encountered.

The Backbone Support

For each collective impact effort, a backbone support infrastructure is needed to foster the cross-sector communication, alignment, and collaboration required to achieve population-level systems change in the area of focus. Backbones are specific to the site and the population that the effort hopes to impact.

This section provides more detail on the purpose and function of the backbone; the structure, staffing, and budget of the backbone; the process to select a backbone at each site; leadership; and the backbone's focus on equity.

The Backbone's Purpose and Functions

"The expectation that collaboration can occur without a supporting infrastructure is one of the most frequent reasons why it fails. The backbone organization requires a dedicated staff separate from the participating organizations who can plan, manage, and support the initiative through ongoing facilitation, technology and communications support, data collection and reporting, and handling the myriad logistical and administrative details needed for the initiative to function smoothly."[5]

As described in Kania and Kramer's 2011 article "Collective Impact," the backbone is the support infrastructure for a collective impact initiative. To succeed in playing this support role, backbones need to have dedicated capacity; that is, staff will not be effective if they try to add the role of the backbone on top of existing responsibilities. In some cases, select staff may be part-time or

certain roles may be shared across multiple people, but the backbone requires capacity that is solely dedicated to the collective impact effort.

Through study of effective collective impact efforts, FSG has identified six essential functions for backbone support:[6]

1. **Guiding vision and strategy:** The backbone team works together with the Steering Committee to provide data, prioritize opportunities for action, and adapt to changing context and systems in the overall vision and strategy of the effort. It is critical that the backbone prioritizes equity in its efforts to guide the vision and strategy, thereby ensuring that Steering Committee and working group members keep equity at the center of their strategies and actions.

2. **Supporting aligned activities:** The backbone facilitates dialogue between partners, provides direct support for Steering Committee and working group meetings as needed, and generally helps to coordinate the actions across the effort.

3. **Establishing shared measurement practices:** The backbone manages

5   Kania and Kramer, 2011.

6   Fay Hanleybrown, John Kania, and Mark Kramer, "Channeling Change: Making Collective Impact Work," *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, Winter 2012.

data collection among partners and supports the use of data for learning and evaluation of the effort.

4. **Cultivating community engagement and ownership:** The backbone cultivates broad relationships throughout the community in coordination with the Steering Committee and working group members, seeking to build an inclusive effort that authentically engages and fosters ownership within the community over the long term.

5. **Advancing policy:** As the collective impact effort matures, the backbone often plays a role supporting a policy agenda that impacts large systems and institutions in support of the effort's overall goal.

6. **Mobilizing resources:** The backbone plays a key role in developing resources for the initiative's sustainability, including fundraising for the backbone itself and recruiting volunteers or other non-monetary support for the initiative. Backbone staff can also coordinate or support the fundraising efforts of members of the collective impact initiative.

Backbone entities most often support all of these functions to some degree, although a backbone's priorities tend to **shift over time**. For instance, often as backbones are launched, they focus on guiding vision and strategy, supporting aligned activities, and establishing shared measurement systems. As they mature and develop, backbones may expand their focus to include functions such as mobilizing resources and advancing policy.[7] For instance, the Roadmap Project in South King County, Washington, is focused on doubling the number of students on track to graduate from postsecondary education and closing the achievement gap for students in grades K-12. As its work matured, the Project assembled a Community Network and Advocacy Council to focus on policy efforts. Because of this strategic focus, the Project successfully changed institutional policies at local community colleges, state policy for kindergarten standards, and city funding for education (for example, the Project helped ensure approval of Seattle's 2011 Families and Education Levy that resulted in the commitment of $230 million over 7 years to improve educational outcomes from cradle to career).[8]

"We [influence] by having the right people at the table *and* having the best data."
—Susan Dawson, Director, E3 Alliance

Successful backbones also employ **key approaches** to enable their work: building relationships among initiative members, creating focus and urgency around the initiative's central issue or goal, framing issues to present both opportunities and challenges, and using evaluation as a tool for learning and marking progress. Backbones must ensure coordination and accountability among members to foster and preserve the trust needed to achieve large-scale, collective change. Susan Dawson, director of the E3 Alliance in Austin, Texas, underscored the importance of relationships and data in her work: "We [influence] by having the right people at the table *and* having the best data."[9]

Despite their important role in collective impact, backbones must often remain "behind the scenes" to **promote collective ownership** among the initiative's members and partners. By supporting the work of members,

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7   Shiloh Turner, Kathy Merchant, John Kania, and Ellen Martin, "Understanding the Value of Backbone Organizations in Collective Impact," *Stanford Social Innovation Review* (article adapted from the original four-part blog post), 2012.

8   FSG interviews with Seattle Roadmap Project.

9   FSG interview with Susan Dawson, director of E3 Alliance.

highlighting their successes, and authentically attributing or sharing credit with partners, backbones foster shared leadership. Cheryl Moder of the San Diego County Childhood Obesity Initiative explained, "The more successful you are, more people want to be a part of the effort, and the more you need to bend over backwards to give credit to your partners. It's very easy to make mistakes regarding partner recognition."[10]

When considering the role and functions of the backbone, it can be helpful to examine what the backbone does *not* do. The backbone:

- **does not set the group's agenda.** Rather, it collates the input from different members to collectively build and maintain focus around the common agenda as defined by the Steering Committee with input from the community.

- **does not drive or independently determine the solutions.** Rather, it supports the Steering Committee and working group members as they align the activities within their respective organizations with the common agenda.

- requires funding to operate but **does not receive all of the funding** for the initiative. Funding must necessarily also be directed toward implementation of services, innovation, advocacy, or other types of activities that the partners advance in service of the collective effort's goal.

- is **not self-appointed**. The Steering Committee, often in consultation with other key community stakeholders, selects the backbone.

Structure of a Backbone Entity

There is no one way to structure the backbone. The structure and staffing for the backbone depend on the context, the needs, and the resources available. The Steering Committee and key partners for the collective impact effort should together determine the best structure, site, and staff for the backbone. Fay Hanleybrown and colleagues confirm this flexible approach to backbone design: "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."[11]

When structuring the backbone, the Steering Committee and its key partners must consider several interrelated questions:

- Does it make sense to select an existing organization to house the backbone or create a new organization?

- If selecting an existing organization, should the selection process be open or closed?

- How much capacity does the backbone need? How many full-time employees?

- Who will the staff report to?

- Is the organizational home also where the staff are located? Or does it make sense to split the fiscal agent from the physical location?

- Who will fund the backbone infrastructure (e.g., salaries, benefits, operating expenses) in the short term? In the long term?

Type of Organization

Many different types of organizations can play the backbone role or house the backbone staff. Funders (i.e., private foundations, community foundations, United Ways), nonprofit organizations,

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10   David Phillips, "Lessons Learned from Our Conversations with Experienced Backbone Leaders," Collective Impact Forum blog, August 2016.

11   Hanleybrown, Kania, and Kramer, 2012.

Figure 2

Pros and Cons of
Different Types
of Organizations
as the Backbone

TYPES OF BACKBONES	DESCRIPTION	EXAMPLES	PROS	CONS
Funder-Based	One funder initiates CI strategy as planner, financier, and convener	United Way of Salt Lake; Salt Lake City, UT	• Ability to secure start-up funding and recurring resources • Ability to bring others to the table and leverage other funders	• May lack broad buy-in if CI effort seen as driven by one funder • Potential perceived lack of neutrality
New Nonprofit	New entity is created, often by private funding, to serve as backbone	Community Center for Education Results (CCER); Seattle, WA	• Perceived neutrality as facilitator and convener • Potential lack of baggage • Clarity of focus	• 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	Educate Texas; Rio Grande Valley, TX	• Credibility, clear ownership, and strong understanding of issue • Existing infrastructure in place if properly resourced	• Potential "baggage" and lack of perceived neutrality • Lack of attention to the CI initiative if poorly funded
Government	Government entity, either at local or state level, drives CI effort	Shape Up Somerville; Somerville, MA	• Public sector "seal of approval" • Existing infrastructure in place if properly resourced	• Bureaucracy may slow progress • Public funding may not be dependable
Shared Across Multiple Organizations	Numerous organizations take ownership of CI wins	Magnolia Place; Los Angeles, CA	• Lower resource requirements if shared across multiple organizations • Broad buy-in, expertise	• Lack of clear accountability with multiple voices at the table • Coordination challenges, leading to potential inefficiencies
Backbone of Backbones	Senior-level committee with ultimate decision-making power	Memphis Fast Forward; Memphis, TN	• Broad buy-in from senior leaders across public, private, and nonprofit sectors	• Lack of clear accountability with multiple voices

Hanleybrown, Kania, and Kramer, 2012.

government agencies, universities, or a combination of these can be effective choices. Figure 2 outlines the pros and cons of different types of organizations serving in the backbone role.

Staffing and Budget

Structuring of staff positions for the backbone is a flexible process and depends on the local context and resources. For many backbones, especially in the early stage of development, the staff is lean. Capacity can be added over time in accordance with the progression of the initiative and its resources. For example, StriveTogether, a national network of collective impact initiatives that support cradle-to-career education and workforce efforts, has simplified the initial staffing requirements for a backbone to three roles: executive director, facilitator, and data

Figure 3

Sample Functions, Activities, and Roles for Backbone Staff

Role	Function	Activities
Executive Director	**Guide Vision and Strategy**	• Build a common understanding of the problem • Serve as a thought leader / standard bearer for the initiative • Ensure common agenda is updated as needed as strategy unfolds
Executive Director	**Advance Policy**	• Advocate for an aligned policy agenda • Stay on top of policy developments that impact the effort
Executive Director	**Mobilize Resources**	• Mobilize and align public and private resources to support initiative's goals (and the backbone itself)
Facilitator	**Build Community Engagement**	• Create a sense of urgency and articulate a call to action • Support community member engagement activities • Produce and manage communications (e.g., news releases, reports)
Facilitator	**Support Aligned Activities**	• Coordinate and facilitate partners' continuous communication and collaboration (e.g., run taskforce meetings) • Recruit and convene partners and key external stakeholders • Seek out opportunities for alignment with other efforts • Ensure taskforces are being data driven
Data Manager	**Establish Shared Measurement Practices**	• Collect, analyze, interpret, and report data • Catalyze or develop shared measurement systems • Provide technical assistance for building partners' data capacity

Turner, Merchant, Kania, and Martin, 2012.

manager.[12] Based on this three-person structure, Figure 3 shows the six functions of the backbone, as well as sample roles and activities for each backbone staff member.

As backbones grow and develop, additional staff may be needed. Additions should be dictated by the particular needs of each collective impact initiative and might include a second facilitator, a person with community engagement expertise, a fundraiser, or a person with external communications skills.

Initial annual budgets for backbone operations typically range from $400,000 to $600,000 for the first few years. The most significant expense is staff salaries, followed by additional costs for data management systems, communications, community engagement, and office/administrative needs. If partners can offer in-kind contributions (e.g., office space or shared IT systems), this annual budget may be reduced. As the backbone matures and the initiative expands, additional costs such as third-party evaluation support and additional staff may be added. Although budgets vary depending on available resources and staffing needs, more established and sufficiently resourced backbones tend to operate on annual budgets in the $500,000-$750,000 range.[13]

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12   Kania and Kramer, 2011.

13   FSG interviews and analysis.

Backbone Leadership

The leadership displayed by the backbone staff (and particularly the director at the helm) is critical to the success of any collective impact initiative. As Hanleybrown and colleagues indicated in their 2012 article, "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."[14]

Backbones function best when they use a systems-oriented and adaptive approach to leadership. According to Senge, Hamilton, and Kania (2015), three core capabilities distinguish system leaders:

- They see the greater system, even those aspects or elements that are less visible from the leader's particular vantage point, and they help other people understand the **greater system** and the complexity of which they are a part;

- They foster a reflective and generative **type of dialogue** that leads to greater clarity, understanding of difference, and innovation; and

- They shift collective focus from reactive problem-solving to **co-creation of the future.**[15]

Kania and Kramer (2011) have described this leadership orientation in different terms: "In the best of circumstances, these backbone organizations embody the principles of adaptive leadership: the ability to focus people's attention and create a sense of urgency, the skill to apply pressure to stakeholders without overwhelming them, the competence to frame issues in a way that presents opportunities as well as difficulties, and the strength to mediate conflict among stakeholders."[16] Ross Meyer, the former backbone leader of Partners for a Competitive Workforce, remarked, "I think backbone leaders require a diverse skill set. The most important skills are listening, facilitating, developing relationships and trust with individuals and partners, being able to communicate a compelling vision… and the ability to execute toward that vision."[17]

"Backbone leaders require a diverse skill set."

—Ross Meyer, Former Backbone Leader, Partners for a Competitive Workforce

Leadership must be collaborative and relationship-oriented in a collective impact effort, which often requires leaders who are both politic and humble. Successful backbone leaders have also been described as visionary, charismatic and influential communicators, results-oriented, and focused but adaptable.[18] Liz Weaver, vice president of the Tamarack Institute, has worked closely with many backbone leaders and was herself a backbone leader of the Hamilton Roundtable in Ontario, Canada. She reflected that leaders need to focus not only on relationship-building but also on inclusive conversations. "You have to go slow to go fast," she says. "Too often we only talk to the people that we know…Until you bring those people in that you don't know, you're going to have the same conversation that you've had all the time."[19]

14   Hanleybrown, Kania, and Kramer, 2012.

15   Senge, Hamilton, and Kania, "The Dawn of System Leadership," *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, Winter 2015.

16   Kania and Kramer, 2011.

17   FSG interview with Ross Meyer, Partners for a Competitive Workforce.

18   FSG interviews and analysis.

19   FSG interview with Liz Weaver, Tamarack Institute.

> ## "Until you bring those people in that you don't know, you're going to have the same conversation that you've had all the time."
>
> *—Liz Weaver, Vice President, Tamarack Institute*

As the work develops, successful backbone leaders continue to place importance on navigating the interpersonal dynamics of partnership and collaboration. For example, Chekemma Fulmore-Townsend of Project U-Turn includes key stakeholders before reports are released: "We vet the data with leaders in the system [before releasing important reports]. Of all the things we do to advance partnerships and align to the common goal, vetting reports with system leaders prior to publication is the most powerful approach we have."[20]

E3 Alliance Director Susan Dawson added that to fulfill the three roles of a systems leader, "[The backbone needs] to speak multiple languages, because you have to understand that often the languages of the different sectors are semantically very different. We need to relate and connect with all of them."[21] To generate deep dialogue and co-create future solutions, the backbone leader must be able to speak fluently with all partners across the system, which may require communication that can reach across and build bridges among different sectors or partners. Importantly, different organizations within a given category—funders for example—may focus on different perspectives, interests, or language. Gabriel Guillaume at LiveWell Colorado captured this sentiment when he commented, "Knowing how to speak to different types of funders is really important. Some funders want to hear the 'collective' side of collective impact, such as how partnerships are forming. But others want to hear the 'impact' side, such as what are you accomplishing and your return on investment."[22]

Selection of Backbone Support

The process for selecting the backbone support requires careful consideration and design for the local context. Backbone supports are neither self-selected nor predetermined, which could diminish the trust, transparency, and credibility of the backbone as a fair and honest broker among the effort's partners. Rather, the Steering Committee develops a process through which committee members and key stakeholders provide input and select the structure, staffing, and partner to provide local backbone support to the collective impact initiative.

Depending on the local context, initiatives may choose an open, semi-open, or closed selection process. The benefits of the open selection process include its transparency, ability to build the initiative's credibility among stakeholders, and openness to a wide breadth of organizations with different skill sets (including those beyond the most prominent or well-resourced organizations, which may not always be the best choice to promote inclusion and equity in the initiative). The cons of an open process include its typically longer time frame and potentially contentious Steering Committee discussions regarding selection.

Communities that place a premium on inclusion often choose to design an open and transparent selection process to further foster trust. An open process can be particularly helpful for building trust in communities where a certain population or group may feel historically marginalized. However, a more closed selection process can make

20   Phillips, 2016.

21   FSG interview with Susan Dawson, E3 Alliance.

22   Phillips, 2016.

sense in certain cases. For instance, in communities with more limited resources, there may only be one organization that has the size and capacity to house the backbone staff. In such a context, that one organization is the obvious choice and an open selection process is therefore unnecessary.

Equity as a Focus for the Backbone

Given the nature of the backbone's support for the collective impact effort, one of the backbone's critical roles is to reinforce the effort's focus on equity[23] and inclusion. The backbone staff must begin its commitment to equity and inclusion by examining its own internal practices, structures, and staff—paying great attention to equity and intersectionality. The backbone's authenticity and credibility in the community related to issues of equity depend on this "equity mirror" to examine its internal operations.[24]

Backbone staff should reflect the community's diversity. Factors such as economic class, gender, race, ethnicity, language, and lived experience may be important to consider when selecting staff to serve as the backbone for the collective impact effort. As Junious Williams and Sarah Marxer (2014) wrote, "To ensure that a deep commitment to racial, economic, and other forms of equity is built into an initiative, backbone organizations need to have credibility with the communities most affected by inequities, staffing that reflects the diversity of those communities; the skills and resources to engage communities and develop leadership and power within them, and the humility to follow that leadership as it emerges."[25]

This ability to represent the community is critical for many of the backbone's core functions—including guiding the vision and strategy and in building community engagement and ownership. The backbone must ensure that the Steering Committee and working groups design their strategies with a focus on the most vulnerable or most in need. To support the Steering Committee and working groups in designing and targeting strategies with attention to equity and intersectionality, the backbone can help present quantitative and qualitative data that reveal disparities and achievement gaps. The backbone can also bring in diverse voices and lived experiences as input to the collective impact effort, helping members to understand the various and overlapping identities that impact equity and the need for targeted services, solutions, and innovations.

> "Backbone organizations need to have credibility with the communities most affected by inequities."
>
> —Junious Williams and Sarah Marxer

The backbone will also be the key actor gathering community input, developing broad engagement and ownership, and guiding the Steering Committee and working groups in their community engagement. As such, the backbone staff must have the cultural competency to work with leaders across the structures and roles of the effort, from leading business representatives to government actors to individuals with lived experience in a certain issue or system.

Given its important role ensuring an equity focus in the collective impact initiative, the backbone should

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23   According to PolicyLink's "Equity Manifesto," equity is defined as "Just and fair inclusion into a society in which all can participate, prosper, and reach their full potential."

24   Paul Schmitz, "The Culture of Collective Impact," Collective Impact Forum blog, October 2014.

25   Junious Williams and Sarah Marxer, "Bringing an Equity Lens to Collective Impact," Collective Impact Forum blog, September 2014.

consider several important equity-focused questions:

- How do we effectively **integrate community voice into institution-heavy collective impact** efforts?

- How do we **authentically and meaningfully involve communities who have historically been excluded** from decision-making processes?

- How do we **engage stakeholders in sensitive conversations about race, class, and culture** without driving away those who need to sit at the problem-solving table?

Each collective impact effort will undoubtedly face its own specific questions, challenges, and opportunities as it addresses equity. Across collective impact efforts, approaching equity and community engagement with an asset-based mindset will best position the backbone to work productively with diverse members of the community.

Role of the Funder in Supporting the Backbone's Sustainability

In addition to the performance of the backbone itself, the ecosystem of partners, funders, and community stakeholders can support the success of the backbone. Funders in particular can play a strong role in supporting the sustainability of the backbone's critical infrastructure for a collective impact initiative.

The Greater Cincinnati Foundation developed a strategic role supporting multiple collective impact initiatives, including the Strive effort described above. The Foundation's experience supporting Strive and many other collective impact efforts in the Cincinnati area revealed several roles for funders as they seek to support the financial sustainability of the backbone:[26]

- First, and most straightforward, funders can support the backbone with unrestricted funding. In the experience of many collective impact efforts, raising funds to support the backbone can be more difficult than raising funds for the programs and services among partners, but the backbone infrastructure to support collective efforts is no less critical to achieving significant, systems-level change.

- Funders can also offer other supports for the backbone—including advice and technical assistance around evaluation and learning or the creation and support of a community of practice across backbones.

Funders can play a very important role beyond funding as champion and advocate, helping collective impact efforts to engage local funders and other partners from the beginning. Often, one or more major funders may support the initial launch of the collective impact effort and then help to recruit other supporters—preferably local institutions such as community foundations, local funders, or anchor institutions such as universities or hospitals. In different scenarios, funders may approach this critical champion role in different ways. For instance, the Aspen Institute's Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund (OYIF) serves as a mechanism to provide financial support to more than 20 local collective impact efforts to improve employment for young people who are not in school and not employed. In this case, OYIF developed a pooled funding mechanism that re-grants to the distinct local collective impact

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26   Turner, Merchant, Kania, and Martin, 2012.

Figure 4

The Role of Funders

EARLY STAGE	MIDDLE STAGE	MATURE STAGE
• Fund data collection/research to make the case for collaboration	• Fund backbone infrastructure	• Align funding with the common goals/measures of the effort
• Encourage grantees and stakeholders to collaborate	• Fund shared measurement systems	• Continue to fund backbone infrastructure and shared measurement systems
• Encourage other funders to join the effort/align with other funders	• Fund trainings to increase stakeholder expertise in key collective impact skill sets	• Fund discrete initiatives identified through the effort
• Use convening power to draw key stakeholders to the table	• Fund research on evidence-based practices	• Provide content expertise
• Broker relationships to create open lines of communication between stakeholders	• Encourage grantees and other stakeholders to align evaluation to shared measures	• Continue to encourage grantees and other stakeholders to align evaluation to shared measures
• Participate on a Steering Committee	• Convene community stakeholders	• Align/coordinate strategy with other funders
	• Participate on working groups or Steering Committee	• Participate on working groups or Steering Committee

Adapted from FSG's study of collective impact collaborations.

efforts but requires local matching funds in order to receive the grant. In this way, OYIF incentivizes each collective impact effort to pursue funding from local donors and helps to leverage that local funding as incentive for those donors.[27]

Thinking beyond financial sustainability, funders can support the long-term success of the backbone by embracing a flexible and evolving function, supporting key capacities (e.g., data systems, communications) at the moment in the backbone's maturity when they are needed. Figure 4 above summarizes how the role of funders can evolve as a collective impact initiative matures.

27   FSG interviews and analysis.

Conclusion

Backbone support is critical infrastructure for successful collective impact efforts. Without a dedicated backbone performing core functions to support the cross-sector collaboration of diverse partners, collective impact will not succeed. Thus, careful consideration is necessary when designing and structuring the backbone, selecting backbone staff, and allocating the backbone's capacity across six core functions during each phase of a collective impact effort. Sustained funding for the backbone is also important to provide continuity, stability, and support needed for the effort's members and partners to achieve a shared goal.

Further Reading and Resources

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For more information about the Collective Impact Forum

Jennifer Splansky Juster
Director, Collective Impact Forum
jennifer.juster@collectiveimpactforum.org

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The Collective Impact Forum exists to meet the demands of those who are practicing collective impact in the field. While the rewards of collective impact can be great, the work is often demanding. Those who practice it must keep themselves and their teams motivated and moving forward.

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