

Essential Mindset Shifts for Collective Impact

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Essential Mindset Shifts for Collective Impact

To be effective, collective impact must consider who is engaged, how they work together, and how progress happens.

BY JOHN KANIA, FAY HANLEYBROWN, & JENNIFER SPLANSKY JUSTER

Since the initial publication of “Collective Impact” in *Stanford Social Innovation Review* (Winter 2011), collective impact has gained tremendous momentum as a disciplined, cross-sector approach to solving social and environmental problems on a large scale. The idea of collective impact is not new—many collaborations pre-date the original article and embody the five conditions of collective impact¹—but the original article created a framework and language that have resonated deeply with practitioners who were frustrated with existing approaches to change. Since 2011, hundreds of new collaborations have begun implementing the principles of collective impact in a variety of domains around the globe, from the United States and Canada to Australia, Israel, and South Korea. Collective impact ideas have also started to influence public policy. In the United States, for example, the concept has been written into grants from the Centers for Disease Control and the Social Innovation Fund, a White House initiative, and a program of the Corporation for National and Community Service.

Our team at FSG has studied successful collective impact efforts around the world,

supported dozens of new collective impact efforts, and trained thousands of practitioners. We are inspired by their successes, from improving juvenile justice outcomes in New York State to reducing childhood asthma in Dallas to boosting educational attainment in Seattle.

People often ask whether we would refine the five conditions of collective impact that we articulated in the initial article: a common agenda, shared measurement, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication, and backbone support. (See “The Five Conditions of Collective Impact” below.) Although our work has reinforced the importance of these five conditions and they continue to serve as the core for differentiating collective impact from other forms of collaboration (see “Maintaining the Integrity of a Collective Impact Approach” on page 4), we also realize that they are not always sufficient to achieve large-scale change. In addition, several *mindset shifts* are necessary for collective impact partners, and these are fundamentally at odds with traditional approaches to social change. These mindset shifts concern *who* is engaged, *how* they work together, and *how* progress happens. Although not necessarily counterin-

tuitive, they can be highly countercultural and therefore can create serious stumbling blocks for collective impact efforts.

MINDSET SHIFT ONE: WHO IS INVOLVED

Get all the right eyes on the problem | As we said in our 2011 *SSIR* article: “Collective impact is the commitment of a group of important actors from different sectors to a common agenda for solving a specific social problem.” By their very nature, these complex problems cannot be solved by any single organization or sector alone. Yet many collaborations that seek to solve complex social and environmental problems still omit critical partners in government and the non-profit, corporate, and philanthropic sectors, as well as people with lived experience of the issue. Including the often radically different perspectives of these diverse players can generate more meaningful dialogue.

Cross-sector perspectives can improve collective understanding of the problem and create a sense of mutual accountability. In New York, a group of cross-sector leaders came together in 2010 to reform the juvenile justice system, which was widely viewed as inefficient, ineffective, and unsafe, with high youth recidivism rates. The group included leaders from law enforcement, the governor’s office, large state and local agencies, community advocates, judges, and private philanthropic and nonprofit organizations. Many of those partners had never worked together before, and some had dramatically different views. Over several months this group grappled with their differing viewpoints and ultimately created a shared vision for reform: to promote youth success and improve public safety. This effort now has backbone staff embedded in the state’s Division of Criminal Justice Services to coordinate action among hundreds of participant organizations. After three years, the effort has built upon earlier successes and contributed to remarkable results: The number of youths in state custody has declined by a stunning 45 percent, and

The Five Conditions of Collective Impact

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.
Shared Measurement	All participating organizations agree on the ways success will be measured and reported, with a short list of common indicators identified and used for learning and improvement.
Mutually Reinforcing Activities	A diverse set of stakeholders, typically across sectors, coordinate a set of differentiated activities through a mutually reinforcing plan of action.
Continuous Communication	All players engage in frequent and structured open communication to build trust, assure mutual objectives, and create common motivation.
Backbone Support	An independent, funded staff dedicated to the initiative provides ongoing support by guiding the initiative’s vision and strategy, supporting aligned activities, establishing shared measurement practices, building public will, advancing policy, and mobilizing resources.



juvenile arrests are down 24 percent, with no increase in crime or risk to public safety.²

In addition to engaging the formal sectors, we have learned the importance of working with people who have lived experience. Too often, the people who will ultimately benefit from program or policy changes are excluded from the process of understanding the problem and then identifying and implementing solutions. Authentic engagement with people who are experiencing the problem at first hand is critical to ensuring that strategies are effective. For example, young people play a critical role in Project U-Turn, a collective impact effort in Philadelphia that focuses on improving outcomes for disconnected youths by reconnecting them to school and work. Its Youth Voice working group focuses on ensuring that young people are integrated into all aspects of Project U-Turn, including participation at committee

meetings. Youths also participate in specific projects, such as developing a public awareness campaign about school attendance. And the approach has paid off: Project U-Turn has seen an increase of 12 percentage points in high school graduation rates in Philadelphia since the program's inception in 2005.³

MINDSET SHIFT TWO: HOW PEOPLE WORK TOGETHER

The relational is as important as the rational
| In his “Slow Ideas” article in the July 29, 2013, issue of *The New Yorker*, systems theorist Atul Gawande asked why some powerful and well-documented innovations that help cure social ills spread quickly, whereas others do not. One of the answers to that question was found in the global problem of death in childbirth. Every year, 300,000 mothers and more than six million children die around the time of birth, largely in the poorest countries.

As Gawande points out, many—perhaps the majority—of these deaths are preventable. Simple lifesaving solutions to the causes of these deaths have been known for decades, but they just haven’t spread.

Why is this? Gawande quotes the late scholar Everett Rogers: “Diffusion is essentially a social process through which people talking to people spread an innovation.” Gawande illustrates this observation by describing a birth trainer in northern India who, after more than five visits, convinced a birth attendant in a rural hospital to include evidence-based childbirth practices. The attendant adopted the new practices because the trainer built a trusting relationship with her, not because of how convincing the evidence-based practices were. To quote Stephen M. R. Covey, and a common view in the community development world, change happens at “the speed of trust.”⁴

We have seen that data and evidence are critical inputs for collective impact efforts, but we must not underestimate the power of relationships. Lack of personal relationships, as well as the presence of strong egos and difficult historical interactions, can impede collective impact efforts. Collective impact practitioners must invest time in building strong interpersonal relationships and trust, which enable collective visioning and learning. Reflecting on the recent success of the juvenile justice reform effort in New York, one leader commented: “There is now a shared sense of why we’re doing things and where we want to drive the system to be. The process of having sat at the same table and gotten to know one another has really changed our work and the level of trust we have in each other.” Collective impact can succeed only when the process attends to *both* the use of evidence and the strengthening of relationships.

Structure is as important as strategy

When beginning a collective impact initiative, stakeholders are often tempted to focus on creating a “strategy”—a specific, tangible set of activities that they believe will ensure progress toward their goal. Although it is important to have a sense of how partners will address a problem, the fact is that in many cases the

solutions are not known at the outset. We believe that a critical mindset shift is needed: Collective impact practitioners must recognize that the power of collective impact comes from enabling “collective seeing, learning, and doing,” rather than following a linear plan. The structures that collective impact efforts create enable people to come together regularly to look at data and learn from one another, to understand what is working and what is not. Such interaction leads partners to adjust their actions, “doubling down” on effective strategies and allowing new solutions to emerge.

Collective impact efforts coordinate the actions of dozens—sometimes hundreds—of organizations, and this coordination requires an intentional structure. As we wrote in the Jan. 26, 2012, *SSIR* article “Channeling Change: Making Collective Impact Work,” cascading levels of collaboration create multiple ways for people to participate, communicate lessons, and coordinate their effort. By structuring how stakeholders share information and engage with each other, initiatives enable collective insights that identify new strategies as the process develops.

Sharing credit is as important as taking credit | One of the biggest barriers to collective impact that we have seen is the desire by indi-

vidual organizations to seek and take credit for their work. This tendency is understandable, particularly in an environment where non-profit organizations are frequently asked to demonstrate evidence of their unique impact to receive scarce grant funding, boards hold foundation staff accountable for results, and companies look to strengthen their brands. Nevertheless, seeking to take direct credit is extremely difficult in large-scale collaborations, and it can inhibit participants from making decisions that are aligned with the broader system and common agenda and hamper their efforts to create mutually reinforcing activities. We do not imply that organizations should not rigorously evaluate their own work and how it contributes to shared outcomes, but rather that organizations should think about their decisions in the context of others. Doing so also requires a behavior change among public and private funders, who must recognize an organization’s contribution toward the common agenda rather than seeking evidence of attribution of a grantee’s work.

For collective impact efforts, sharing credit with others can be far more powerful than taking credit. Consider the Partnership for Youth in the Franklin County and North Quabbin region of Massachusetts, a coalition that over

Maintaining the Integrity of a Collective Impact Approach

The pace at which the concept and language of collective impact have spread over the last three years is inspiring. We are encouraged to see that many organizations in the social and private sectors have embraced the concept as a new way to achieve large-scale systems change. Practitioners, funders, and policymakers have begun to recognize that solving complex social problems at a large scale can happen more effectively when actors work together, rather than through isolated programs and interventions—a tremendously important shift for the field.

Unfortunately, we have also observed that along with enthusiasm about this momentum, “collective impact” has become a buzzword that is often used to describe collaborations of all types. Many efforts using the term do not resemble the uniquely data-driven, cross-sector approach that employs the five conditions of collective impact. Nor are they intentional about building the structure and relationships that enable the emergent, continuous learning over time that is critical to collective impact. Many funders report frustration at receiving grant applications that claim to use collective impact but do not resemble the approach at all. Conversely, grantees have shared

their frustration that some funders are creating programs mandating participation in collective impact that force grantee cohorts to collaborate with each other in ways that are inconsistent with the cross-sector, emergent collective impact approach. Neither of these occurrences is useful to advancing efforts to achieve positive and consistent progress on a large scale.

Maintaining the integrity of the collective impact approach is important. For the field to continue to embrace collective impact as a path to large-scale change, efforts appropriately identifying themselves as collective impact must see results. In addition, to avoid movement away from collective impact as the preferred way the social sector does business, we must help efforts inaccurately calling themselves collective impact to better understand the important changes they need to make to increase their odds of success. The stakes are high. If, through misinterpretation and disappointment in collective impact, the current tide toward working collectively were to turn—and working in isolation were once again to become expected and accepted organizational behavior—society’s potential to achieve urgently needed progress will be severely diminished.

the past 10 years has made significant progress in reducing substance abuse and other risky behavior by young people.⁵ The backbone team consistently puts the work of the coalition in the forefront, publicly giving awards to a select number of coalition members. Award plaques are given annually, and the same plaque is passed around each year with the recipient's names added so that partnership members can see how their work builds over time. The backbone staff also has held press conferences highlighting the work of the school districts and other partners to draw attention to their contributions. The ethos of the coalition is summarized by this statement from one of the coalition leaders: "We always think about who we can blame the good results on."

MINDSET SHIFT THREE: HOW PROGRESS HAPPENS

Pay attention to adaptive work, not just technical solutions | Collective impact initiatives are designed to help solve complex social and environmental problems. As we described in the July 21, 2013, *SSIR* article "Embracing Emergence: How Collective Impact Addresses Complexity," complex problems are unpredictable and constantly changing, and no single person or organization has control. Such problems require *adaptive* problem solving.⁶ Because the answer is often not known at the outset, participants must engage in continuous learning and adaptation. Collective impact allows for adaptive problem solving by pushing multiple organizations to look for resources and innovations to solve a common problem, enabling rapid learning through continuous feedback loops, and coordinating responses among participants.

In contrast, much of the social sector has historically focused on identifying technical solutions, which are predetermined and replicable. Indeed, technical solutions are often an important part of the overall solution, but adaptive work is required to enact them. In the juvenile justice reform work in New York, for example, many stakeholders knew that keeping incarcerated youths in or close to their home communities, where they receive services and support, would likely improve outcomes. Yet although this technical solution was clear, the question of how to enact the policy was not—it required an adaptive solution. By building trust and establishing shared aspirations among previously contentious stakeholders, the collective impact effort helped pave the way for implementation

of Close to Home legislation. The success of the initiative in bringing about much needed policy change—the new policy was signed into law by the governor in 2012—demonstrates the emphasis collective impact efforts must place on adaptive work that creates the processes, relationships, and structures within which real progress can unfold at an accelerated pace.

Look for silver buckshot instead of the silver bullet | Achieving population-level change, the ultimate goal for collective impact initiatives, requires all stakeholders to abandon the search for a single silver bullet solution. Instead, they must shift their mindset and recognize that success comes from the combination of many interventions.

This mindset shift—from seeking a silver bullet solution to creating silver buckshot solutions⁷—is important for initiative partners as well as public and private funders. For practitioners, this shift means thinking about their work as part of a larger context and considering how their contribution fits into the larger puzzle of activities. Funders and policymakers similarly must shift from investing in individual, single-point interventions toward investing in processes and relationships that enable multiple organizations to work together.

In the case of juvenile justice reform in New York, multiple efforts in concert dramatically and quickly reduced the number of incarcerated youths. Partners created linked data systems, which allowed agencies to coordinate more effectively. They also established a public database of evidence-based programs for young people in the court system, which enabled providers and families to understand and use the many programs available with greater transparency and access than previously possible. Furthermore, they assembled evidence about alternative sentencing outcomes, which allowed judges to avoid incarcerating young people for misdemeanor offenses only. Finally, they enhanced coordination among government agencies and nonprofit providers. They enacted many additional changes at the organizational, local, and state levels. None of these changes would have been sufficient for large-scale change on its own, but taken together they represented a shift in the system that benefits thousands of young people and communities across the state.⁸

The shift toward silver buckshot solutions does not minimize the importance of high quality individual programs, interventions,

and policies. Rather, it emphasizes that each of these programs and policies is necessary, but not sufficient, for success. Rather than isolating individual programs and trying to scale them up, collective impact works best when it focuses on the ways that strong individual interventions or policies fit together and reinforce each other to solve a complex problem. This mindset is highly countercultural for many public and private funders, and for practitioners who design and implement their work in isolation from others.

CONCLUSION

The widespread momentum around collective impact is exciting. It demonstrates a vital shift for organizations, away from considering their work in isolation and toward seeing their work in the context of a broader system, paving the way for large-scale change. The five conditions, however, are not by themselves sufficient. Achieving collective impact requires the fundamental mindset shifts we have described here—around *who* is involved, *how* they work together, and *how* progress happens. These shifts have significant implications for how practitioners design and implement their work, how funders incentivize and engage with grantees, and how policymakers bring solutions to a large scale. Without these vital mindset shifts, collective impact initiatives are unlikely to make the progress they set out to accomplish. ●

NOTES

- 1 Examples of collective impact that pre-date the Winter 2011 "Collective Impact" article include, but are not limited to, the Strive Partnership, the Elizabeth River Project, Shape Up Somerville, Living Cities' *Integration Initiative*, Communities that Care, Ready by 21, Vibrant Communities, and GAIN.
- 2 New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services: Uniform Crime Reporting and Incident-Based Reporting System, Probation Workload System, and DCJS-Office of Court Administration Family Court JD/DF Case Processing Database. NYS Office of Children and Family Services detention and placement databases. New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services Office of Justice Research and Performance: Juvenile Justice Annual Update for 2012, May 21, 2013.
- 3 Four-year Cohort Graduation Rate, School District of Philadelphia.
- 4 Stephen M. R. Covey, *The Speed of Trust*, 2006.
- 5 The coalition has reduced binge drinking rates among young people by 50 percent, and alcohol, cigarette, and marijuana use by 33, 33, and 39 percent respectively; 2003-2012 Annual Teen Health Survey for Franklin County and the North Quabbin Prevention Needs Assessment.
- 6 Ronald A. Heifetz coined the term "adaptive problems" in his seminal body of work on "adaptive leadership."
- 7 The notion of "silver buckshot" has been frequently used in the field of climate change by people such as Al Gore, Bill McKibben, and Jim Rogers.
- 8 New York State *Juvenile Justice, Progress Toward System Excellence*; New York Juvenile Justice Advisory Group, Tow Foundation, FSG; January 2014.