Understanding the Value of Backbone Organizations in Collective Impact: Part 1

An in-depth review of what it takes to be a backbone organization, and how to evaluate and support its work.

By Shiloh Turner, Kathy Merchant, John Kania & Ellen Martin | Jul. 17, 2012

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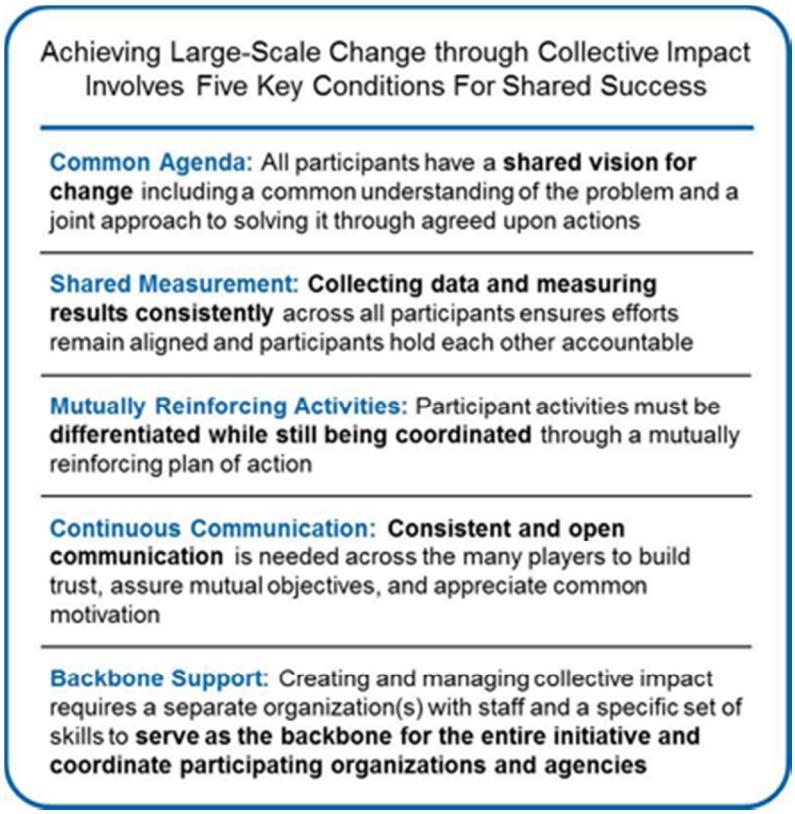
The Greater Cincinnati Foundation (GCF) and the nonprofit consulting firm FSG have partnered to understand and evaluate the role of backbone organizations in collective impact efforts. The first in a four-part series, this blog post describes the foundation's motivations for funding backbone organizations, and for GCF and FSG's work.

Making a Commitment to Strengthen Backbone Organizations

Communities and organizations around the world are adopting a different mindset to achieve large-scale systemic change through collective impact, a concept that was first introduced in the winter 2011 issue of *Stanford Social Innovation Review* and more recently discussed on the *Stanford Social Innovation Review* blog. As cross-sector groups engage more deeply in this practice, funders and practitioners alike find ourselves probing for answers to the question: How do you do this work well?



In Cincinnati, the collective impact model is a living, breathing—and evolving—practice. The community has embraced this approach to accelerating change across systems. And the community's leaders are committing to making this ambitious work succeed.

GCF is leading the way for collective impact in the region. As a funder, GCF believes that providing "backbone support" (see chart) which propels collective impact efforts is critically important. The foundation has taken a bold, if not "sexy," step by investing in the support infrastructure of collective impact—the backbone organization itself—to accelerate change. If the Foundation is to succeed, everyone must understand what backbone organizations are and how they can be most effective.

In January 2012, GCF and FSG began exploring four big questions with a cohort of the region's backbone organizations:

1. How and to what extent are backbone organizations **effective catalysts** for achieving community-level progress?
2. How and to what extent do backbone organizations **contribute** to improved social outcomes?
3. How is **success** best measured for backbone organizations?
4. What **common challenges and best practices** can be shared across backbone organizations?

In this series of posts, we share our experience to help funders see backbone support as a strategy to advance collective impact initiatives. We hope to build a common language and understanding for the role and value of backbone organizations so that all partners in a collective impact effort can articulate the need for and the importance of this vital element, and ensure the overall success of an initiative.

Cincinnati's "New Normal"

In Cincinnati, collaboration is the "new normal," but this was not always the case. Like many regions, individual organizations and initiatives were doing important and effective work. But the overall economy still lagged behind its peers around the country. For this community, the collective impact model developed, almost organically, as organizations convened collaboratives and coalitions to invent more effective methods for creating powerful and lasting social change. Over the last 10 years or so, many strong backbone organizations were created to coordinate community initiatives and accelerate change. GCF played an important role in funding, incubating, or otherwise supporting many of these initiatives.

As an anchor institution, GCF has taken the long view on complex social problems when few others could; it has evidence that progress can be made when the community sticks with large-scale initiatives. Supporting collective impact has been a natural evolution in GCF's community leadership. The Foundation believes that, by providing change capital to a group of backbone organizations, it will be able to accelerate progress toward social change in the region.

GCF and FSG's Work Together

In addition to a leveraged, multi-year funding strategy, GCF chose to invest in evaluating the work of a cohort of backbone organizations and in creating a community of practice among them. Using this approach, regardless of sector or issue, these organizations would learn from each other, continuously improve their practice, and encourage greater collaboration across overlapping initiatives. GCF engaged FSG to assist in this work. As a nonprofit strategy, evaluation, and research consulting firm, FSG believes evaluation is a powerful way to inform strategy and help organizations learn. The firm's strategic learning and evaluation practice helps individual organizations and groups design and implement program evaluations, shared measurement systems, and organizational evaluation systems.

The Greater Cincinnati Foundation's Cohort of Backbone Organizations

- **Agenda 360** advances regional economic competitiveness as a program of the Cincinnati USA Chamber of Commerce
- **LISC's Place Matters** supports comprehensive community development in Greater Cincinnati neighborhoods with investment from a consortium of philanthropic funders and the national organization LISC
- **Partners for a Competitive Workforce** improves regional workforce development efforts, housed by United Way of Greater Cincinnati
- **The Strive Partnership** is a cradle to career initiative that focuses on improving outcomes for children and students in the urban core
- **Success By 6** focuses on improving early childhood education and kindergarten readiness, also housed by United Way
- **Vision 2015** supports economic competitiveness in Northern Kentucky and is closely aligned with Agenda 360 across the river

In early 2012, GCF and FSG began a partnership built around evaluating backbone effectiveness and answering the above four questions. GCF selected six backbone organizations (see text box) to participate that are all beyond the initial "start-up" phase of forming their collective impact initiatives, and are refining and sustaining their initiatives. They all have at least one full-time staff person, but operate using a lean staffing model and mobilize many partners to help further their work. While the issue areas they address have some overlap, there are clear differences in the breadth and depth of the initiatives, the scope of the backbone organizations' role, and the context in which they do their work.

GCF's Challenge

The work of a backbone organization is complex. The roles played in accelerating change can be challenging to articulate as, by design, their work is largely behind the scenes. Therefore, GCF's new approach to community leadership means that evaluating and communicating the *value* of backbone organizations has become all the more important. In addition, defining and communicating what "effectiveness" really means is another driver of the Foundation's work. The backbone organization is an emerging concept necessary to the collective impact approach. GCF needs to paint a clear picture for stakeholders—board members, staff, donors, volunteers, current and potential grant recipients—of what success looks like and why this strategy is ultimately worth pursuing. This is the challenge and task before us.

Follow our story over the next three posts, as we share our process, results, and next steps for tackling this work.

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Understanding the Value of Backbone Organizations in Collective Impact: Part 2

An in-depth review of what it takes to be a backbone organization, and how to evaluate and support its work.

By Shiloh Turner, Kathy Merchant, John Kania & Ellen Martin | Jul. 18, 2012

Understanding the Value of Backbone Organizations in Collective Impact

An in-depth review of what it takes to be a backbone organization, and how to evaluate and support its work.

The Greater Cincinnati Foundation (GCF) and the nonprofit consulting firm FSG have partnered to understand and evaluate the role of backbone organizations in collective impact efforts. The second in a four-part series, this blog post defines key backbone activities and expected outcomes of that work.

Key Learning: What Backbone Organizations Do

It is tempting to say (and our backbone organizations feel) that there are as many backbone models as there are collective impact initiatives. However, we found that there is, at some level, a common theory of change for backbone organizations that ultimately seeks to improve social outcomes by organizing cross-sector groups of partners to transform an often inefficient, fragmented system.

In order to fulfill this vision—regardless of their focus area—backbone organizations essentially pursue six common activities to support and facilitate collective impact which distinguish this work from other types of collaborative efforts. Over the lifecycle of an initiative, they:

1. Guide vision and strategy
2. Support aligned activities
3. Establish shared measurement practices
4. Build public will
5. Advance policy
6. Mobilize funding

As a collective impact initiative initially launches and gets organized, a backbone organization is likely to prioritize *guiding vision and strategy* and *supporting aligned activities* as two key activities. For example, in 2006, the Strive Partnership established the first ever "Cradle to Career" vision for the region's urban core, including a roadmap for student success with shared goals and measures of student achievement. For the past six years, the Strive Partnership has maintained an active and engaged executive committee comprised of cross-sector leadership from Cincinnati (OH), Covington, and Newport (KY) to ensure that the shared vision and strategy continues to guide the work of the partners.

Another example highlights two regional backbones working across state lines to address a large-scale issue. Recognizing a leadership gap in the area of environmental sustainability, Vision 2015 (KY) and Agenda 360 (OH) have played a critical role in organizing and incubating an intermediary organization, Green Umbrella. With their support, Green Umbrella has brought together several organizations—including many of the region's businesses, education institutions, nonprofit organizations, and government agencies—to sustainably develop and grow the Greater Cincinnati area.

As backbone organizations mature, they often shift focus to *establish shared measurement practices* on behalf of their collective impact partners. For example, Partners for a Competitive Workforce (PCW), with its partners, has created a common, region-wide workforce data collection and reporting system to track results and improve performance for multiple agencies. To date, approximately 50 public and nonprofit agencies are utilizing the system, and a regional workforce dashboard is being built to aggregate key measures. Agenda 360 and Vision 2015 have also begun to identify and report on shared measures around several issues in the region as part of their regional indicators effort.

As backbone organizations seek to expand their impact and build a stronger community presence, they are likely to increase focus on other key external activities such as building public will, advancing policy, and mobilizing funding. For GCF's cohort, these activities are by and large still areas for continued development and improvement, though we are seeing some early successes.

In order to *build public will*, LISC works with its neighborhood partners to engage community members at the grassroots level. Its Place Matters neighborhoods have generated increased attention from the city's elected officials and policymakers. As an example, neighborhood leaders have taken on foreclosure as a policy issue, successfully bringing together diverse groups in the community to formulate a foreclosure response. Working with the city and courts, they have helped pass local legislation to mitigate the impact of foreclosure on their communities.

At the state level, Success By 6 is *advancing policy* by using local best practices and outcomes to educate policymakers and elected officials in Ohio and Kentucky about effective strategies to improve kindergarten readiness. Through its focus on measuring progress and using data to inform their work, Success By 6 and its partners have influenced the states' thinking about measurement systems and the development of kindergarten readiness standards. Success By 6 is actively involved in efforts to create aligned early education and care systems, with membership on state committees such as the Early Childhood Advisory Council in Ohio and Kentucky. The work of Early Childhood Advisory Councils in both states created a comprehensive vision for early childhood which resulted in securing a $70 million Race to the Top Early Challenge Grant in Ohio. Through its committee participation, Success By 6 has played a role in defining elements of the system, identifying gaps in service and making the case for investing more in the region's youngest children.

In order to *mobilize funding* for its partners, PCW is coordinating funds from diverse sources to support common priorities and strategies. Since 2008, PCW has leveraged more than $25 million in public and private funds from local, state, and national sources toward shared goals and strategies. This includes $4.6 million in philanthropic funds, $8.5 million in state and federal grants, and $11.9 million in aligned training funds from the region's public workforce system.

The above examples illustrate how individual backbone organizations have approached these key activities. Yet, as we've learned by looking across the cohort, each organization engages in these activities to different degrees and in different ways, depending on the context and capacity of the organization and the scope and maturity of the initiative.

Why It Matters: Expected Backbone Support Outcomes

When asked how they know their work is making a difference, backbone leaders almost always talk about evidence of moving the needle on big community indicators, such as increasing the percentage of young people who enter kindergarten ready to learn. In fact, these six organizations already track progress on "big picture" indicators on behalf of their partners. But the focus of the GCF evaluation has been different.

Individual interviews and group working sessions generated the short-term and intermediate outcomes that could demonstrate the influence of backbone organizations' activities on results of the collective impact

process. Defining backbone process outcomes was an important step to tie the influence of their work to long-term initiative- and community-level outcomes. Some examples of expected outcomes generated by backbone organizations are listed below.

Based on the common activities and outcomes we defined, FSG asked external stakeholders and the backbone leaders themselves to assess their activities and contributions in each of the six areas, including the relative importance of each area, and to tell us what difference the backbone organizations had made in their respective collective impact efforts. Because assessing poses a significant challenge for many backbone organizations, FSG asked their stakeholders to complete the sentence, "If not for x backbone organization, y, z would not have happened in our community."

Activity	Short-term Outcomes (Illustrative)	Intermediate Outcomes (Illustrative)
1. Guide vision and strategy	Partners share a common understanding of the need and desired result	Partners' individual work is increasingly aligned with the initiative's common agenda
2. Support aligned activities	Partners increasingly communicate and coordinate their activities toward common goals	Partners collaboratively develop new approaches to advance the initiative
3. Establish shared measurement practices	Partners understand the value of sharing data	Partners increasingly use data to adapt and refine their strategies
4. Build public will	Community members are increasingly aware of the issue(s)	More community members feel empowered to take action on the issue(s)
5. Advance policy	Policymakers are more aware and supportive of the initiative's policy agenda	Policy changes increasingly occur in line with initiative goals
6. Mobilize funding	Funding is secured to support initiative activities	Philanthropic and public funds are increasingly aligned with initiative goals

Through surveys and interviews, we gathered compelling data. And as we completed the baseline analyses this spring, we grew excited to share the illuminating perspectives of roughly 130 stakeholders with the backbone leaders.

We'll share some of these findings with you in tomorrow's post.

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Understanding the Value of Backbone Organizations in Collective Impact: Part 3

By Shiloh Turner, Kathy Merchant, John Kania & Ellen Martin | Jul. 19, 2012

Understanding the Value of Backbone Organizations in Collective Impact

An in-depth review of what it takes to be a backbone organization, and how to evaluate and support its work.

The Greater Cincinnati Foundation (GCF) and the nonprofit consulting firm FSG have partnered to understand and evaluate the role of backbone organizations in collective impact efforts. The third in a four-part series, this blog post shares highlights from our evaluation findings. In our first two posts, we defined the roles of backbone organizations in collective impact, laid out the parameters for this evaluation, and shared what we have learned thus far about specific value-added activities that backbone organizations share in common across sectors.

Results of Inquiry: What We Learned

The evaluation of six Cincinnati area backbone organizations was designed to answer the following questions:

- How and to what extent are backbone organizations **effective catalysts** for achieving community-level progress?
- How and to what extent do backbone organizations **contribute** to improved social outcomes?
- How is **success** best measured for backbone organizations?
- What **common challenges and best practices** can be shared across backbone organizations?

As we described in the previous post, we defined the key activities of backbone support as: guiding vision and strategy, supporting aligned activities, establishing shared measurement practices, building public will, advancing policy, and mobilizing funding.

With our common activities and outcomes for the backbone organizations in hand, FSG set out to collect the data to answer these questions. We heard many valuable perspectives on the backbone organizations' work from partners, funders, advisors, and community members.

1. **Their value is unmistakable**. If not for the backbone organizations' contributions, stakeholders believe that "even more decisions in our community would be made by a small group of folks," "communities would be simply in survival mode," "the public wouldn't have near the understanding of the challenges," and "there wouldn't be any coordinated program at all." As one stakeholder said, "If they weren't asking the right questions, we wouldn't be [where we are today.]" In essence, individual organizations could not do the work of collective impact without backbone support. These representative comments help the backbones articulate their value and purpose to stakeholders.

2. **GCF's backbone cohort shares strengths in *guiding vision* and *strategy* and *supporting aligned activities***. All six backbone organizations received the highest marks for their effectiveness in these core areas. Interviewees said: "Prior to the establishment of [the backbone organization], our community lacked a collective direction for our region," and "[the backbone organizations] bring a lot of people together; they are out understanding what activities are going on and how to align them." The backbone leaders have been attentive to delivering value to their partners in these areas and are likely to continue to do so to maintain momentum. Furthermore, **some backbones were also recognized for *mobilizing funding***, as exemplified through their success winning a Social Innovation Fund grant and other national

funding opportunities.

3. **Backbone organizations shift focus over time**. By and large, this cohort of six backbone organizations has not yet placed a great deal of emphasis on *building public will* or *advancing policy*, but all expect to increase their time allocations and capacity in these areas in the future. Backbone organization leaders and their stakeholders alike feel that there is a natural progression from *guiding vision and strategy, supporting aligned activities*, and *establishing shared measurement practices*—all "inner circle," partnership-focused activities—to gradually building toward broader externally-focused, community-level activities. For many, attention is beginning to shift to incorporating more external-facing activities into their work.

4. **Backbone organizations' partners need ongoing assistance with data**. Although *establishing shared measurement practices* was seen broadly as a strength of many of the backbone organizations, building partners' capacity to contribute and use data in a shared measurement system is a common area for improvement. As one partner described, "We do not have enough manpower to input data." Backbones with limited staff capacity found it particularly challenging to consider taking on a greater technical assistance role in this area.

5. **External communications, *building public will*, and *advancing policy* are common backbone challenges**. We heard many stakeholders encourage the backbone organizations to improve communications about their own value and progress on the initiative. For example, we heard that "people don't know what is being accomplished," and "it's hard to know how much progress they are making against their goals." This mirrors the challenge we mentioned in part 1 around articulating the backbone organizations' value. In addition, stakeholders spoke of the need to build a more intentional strategy around public will and advocacy: "Even if there is not a lot of money available, to shape the public mind as to what the issues are is terribly important." Most of the backbone organizations recognized that these areas needed additional attention and capacity, though they were also reluctant to place too much emphasis on advocacy without a clear opportunity to advance policy in a specific, targeted area.

While evaluation findings revealed many commonalities across backbone organizations, there were also several organization-specific challenges. For example, one organization has been pulled in too many directions and is now likely spread too thin to be very effective in all areas. Another needs to enlist more partners representing a broader cross-section of the region in order to effectively tackle the scope of the initiative. As GCF and the backbone leaders considered the relative importance of the messages emerging from the data, we started to identify the contextual nuances that can affect backbone performance, such as:

- The **phase** of the collective impact initiative (for example, whether the backbone is helping to initiate action, organize for impact, or sustain action and impact)
- The **capacity** of the backbone organization (for example, headcount, areas of expertise, financial resources)
- The **geographic reach and scope** of the collective impact effort (for example, one neighborhood versus a three-state region, early childhood learning versus community development)
- **Structural** opportunities and constraints created by a parent organization (for example, independent nonprofit versus program underneath a local chapter of a national network of organizations)

For many backbone organizations, the evaluation findings confirmed and clarified what they instinctively knew already about their work. FSG's independent work had the additional benefit of providing a vehicle and forum for sharing the backbone organizations' stories, raising awareness about common issues, and generating learning opportunities. The findings from our baseline assessment launched us into our hoped-for community of practice, and a new set of opportunities for learning and technical assistance over the coming months.

We'll share our plans for next steps in tomorrow's post.

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