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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 | 2 | Jul. 17, 2012

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—

Achieving Large-Scale Change through Collective Impact Involves Five Key Conditions For Shared Success

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

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Understanding the Value of Backbone Organizations in Collective Impact: Part 1 | 2

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

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

Understanding the Value of Backbone Organizations in Collective Impact: Part 4 | 4

and evolving—practice. The community has embraced this approach to accelerating change across systems. And the

results consistently across all participants ensures efforts remain aligned and participants hold each other accountable

Mutually Reinforcing Activities: Participant activities must be **differentiated while still being coordinated** through a mutually reinforcing plan of action

Continuous Communication: **Consistent and open communication** is needed across the many players to build trust, assure mutual objectives, and appreciate common motivation

Backbone Support: Creating and managing collective impact requires a separate organization(s) with staff and a specific set of skills to **serve as the backbone for the entire initiative and coordinate participating organizations and agencies**

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.

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.

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

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.

- **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

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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Ellen Martin is a senior consultant at FSG, where she advises foundations, corporations, and nonprofits on strategy development, and strategic learning and evaluation. She also serves on the advisory board of the Global Social Venture Competition.

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