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NONPROFIT MANAGEMENT

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.

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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 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

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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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