

# Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION REVIEW

Informing and inspiring leaders of social change

## NONPROFIT MANAGEMENT

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

By Shiloh Turner, Kathy Merchant, John Kania & Ellen Martin | 4 | Jul. 20, 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 final post in a four-part series describes what's next for our work. In our first three 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.*

### What Next? Leading and Learning into the Future

When GCF invested in supporting the core budgets of six local backbone organizations over a period of five years, the Foundation also undertook a broader effort to support evaluation and develop a community of practice for these grant recipients. Since January 2012, GCF and FSG have been focused on launching the latter effort.

A key question guiding our evaluation has been: How and to what extent are backbone organizations effective catalysts for achieving community-level progress? In FSG's previous work on collective impact, reported in "Channeling Change," the "intangibles" of the work—a key one is *leadership identification and development*—can be incredibly important in driving the progress of an initiative. In our baseline data collection, stakeholders shared with FSG their deep convictions and heartfelt sentiments about the backbone leaders they know best. In aggregate, the synthesized feedback confirmed a compelling picture of the importance of effective leadership among backbone organizations and the potential

### 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.

**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

of collective impact overall. (See text box)

If you are considering how to undertake or support a **collective impact** initiative, one fundamental truth about backbone effectiveness is that its leader can make or break the organization's success. This component of the evaluation captures some of the intangible "secret sauce" that helps us understand the backbone role going forward.

**Common Characteristics of Effective Backbone Leadership**

- **Visionary:** "In addition to setting the agenda items, she has a **very clear vision** of where we need to focus and has the ability to drive focus towards those."
- **Results-Oriented:** "This is a really results-oriented staff, and they are **constantly pushing** the community and all of us to not just talk about something, but to act on it."
- **Collaborative, Relationship Builder:** "[He] style is a **collaborator, consensus builder**, she works very well with partners. We do a good job with making everyone feel like they're important."
- **Focused, but Adaptive:** "[There is a] combination of **laser focus**, a willingness to listen to almost any idea, [and an ability] cut to the chase and not act on every idea. They are so focused on being sure that whatever is done is focused on the end goal."
- **Charismatic and Influential Communicator:** "[She] is extraordinarily **articulate and passionate** about her work and...she is a true leader in the field."
- **Politically Savvy:** "Probably a little **political savvy**, and more of an ability to filter what they say than I have. [He] understands when to listen."
- **Humble:** "[He] sees himself as a **'servant-leader'**."

"Someone who has a big picture perspective—[who] understands how the pieces fit together, is sensitive to the dynamics, and is energetic and passionate."

Source: FSG interviews

As the GCF-FSG team looks back on our process, we heavily front-loaded the first six months of developing the evaluation and technical assistance aspect of GCF's funding initiative in order to ensure that it was built on a solid foundation. We established a community of practice with the cohort of backbone organizations. We developed the common theory of change across backbone organizations, as well as individual logic models. We conducted the baseline assessment of each backbone organization. And we established a shared learning agenda to provide ongoing technical

assistance. Now we can step back, take a deep breath, and reflect on what's next.

For GCF, the Foundation plans to continue to **"learn in public"**, as Beth Kanter says, by sharing the lessons we learned with local funders and other community partners. One way GCF plans to do this is by convening a local community conversation around collective impact this fall. In Cincinnati, the community has been so busy doing collective impact that leaders haven't actually stepped back to reflect on the mechanics or importance of the work. The purpose of the community convening is to make sure that everyone is on the same page about what collective impact is, to share how GCF and the backbone organizations are using the model to drive change, and to discuss and solidify everyone's role in advancing the work. GCF will bring together the boards, volunteers, and partners of GCF and other funders, as well as the backbone organizations, to establish a common understanding of collective impact.

GCF also plans to share this learning with the field, initially via publications, such as *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, social media channels, conference presentations, and perhaps ultimately through a more formal white paper. Besides sharing what we have learned, GCF also needs to hone its communications and messaging about the approach. The foundation needs to succinctly answer the questions: What are we doing? Why are we doing it? What do we expect success to look like? GCF is off to a good start answering the first question through a slide presentation and **video** that adopts a rowing metaphor to communicate what the model looks like, and specifically, to provide greater detail about each core tenet in the model. We found that this

subject matter is complicated and tends to be very heavy on jargon, so the foundation will continue to make an effort to improve in its own communications. Together with FSG, GCF has also developed a reporting template and dashboard that will help easily communicate results of the funding initiative.

GCF's backbone grant recipients are already using what they've learned to inform and improve their work. Each has taken results back to their governing leadership, partners, and core supporters to discuss the implications their evaluation results have for their work. One backbone organization is challenging its current evaluation process and looking to collect more granular, neighborhood-level data. It has also researched best practices on effective communications strategies to show both quantitative and qualitative results, and has hired a communications team to develop a communications plan. Other backbone organizations are using the six core activities framework (see [part 2](#)) to help align their organizational structure around each activity area, and ensure that key activities are otherwise properly resourced.

Less than six months into the development of the community of practice, we are already seeing synergy across groups. Vision 2015, Agenda 360, Partners for a Competitive Workforce, and the Strive Partnership are working together on a labor market study called "2020 Job Outlook." Four backbone organizations will share resources—leadership, connections, and cash—to develop a dataset that can drive the region's collective vision and goals on job training and educational attainment. This example shows true partnership with a common agenda, driving a high impact regional initiative together.

The role of GCF in supporting collective impact also continues to evolve and grow. GCF provides support primarily through its grantmaking and capacity building support of backbone organizations. It has also been a partner in mobilizing funding by aligning its [community investment framework](#) with widely adopted community initiatives. And GCF has collaborated with [United Way of Greater Cincinnati](#) to lead the community dialogue around further refinement of shared community outcomes and measures FSG plans to expand the depth of its support for those groups pursuing collective impact by further exploring what it means to be a backbone organization. FSG also has other research efforts underway to develop insights on shared [measurement](#), the role of funders, and the role that collective impact plays in addressing the complexity of social change.

With this incredible cohort of backbone leaders fully engaged in a community of practice, we now embark upon our next phase of work. We hope that the rationale, process, and results of our experience to date will resonate with other funders and practitioners who are making similar investments and facing similar opportunities and challenges. Creating large-scale systemic change via collective impact is a long-term proposition. Both GCF and FSG are dedicated to providing continued knowledge and tools for Cincinnati and other communities to help speed progress along the way.

Finally, we are very interested in hearing your perspectives on the work in Cincinnati.

- If you consider yourself a **backbone organization**, does our articulation of the backbone role resonate?
- If you're a **funder** of a backbone organization, does our story help to give you more confidence in investing in backbone organizations?
- If you're a **collective impact partner or direct service provider**, do you see value in the backbone activities we've outlined?



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### Tags

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