Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION Review
Informing and inspiring leaders of social change

SPONSORED

Collaboration

10 Dangers to Collective Impact

A look at the worst practices in using the collective impact approach for social change and lessons on how to avoid them.

By Paul Schmitz | Dec. 6, 2021

(Illustration by Hugo Herrera)

After seven years visiting and consulting with more than 100 collective impact efforts around the world, I've drawn one main conclusion: Collective impact is really, really hard. On one hand, the approach makes common sense—of course it takes a variety of leaders and groups working together to address complex social challenges that no one person or entity can solve on their own. On the other hand, it runs contrary to traditional organization-centric approaches leaders have learned and been incented to follow for decades.

Thousands of collective impact efforts have sprung up over the past decade, but many have struggled to achieve intended outcomes, and I have found some common barriers prevent success. On the flip side, my work under the hood of dozens of initiatives has also illuminated three particular lessons learned that can help groups avoid these dangers.

The 10 Dangers

Collective Impact, 10 Years Later

This series, sponsored by the Collective Impact Forum, looks back at 10 years of collective impact and presents perspectives on the evolution of the framework.

FOLLOW THIS SERIES

1. Strategy Drift

Many groups put good work into developing a common agenda, defining clear results and strategies that require them to work in new, more collaborative, and often more ambitious ways to move the needle. But then when it comes to implementation, they do not manage the collaborative or hold partners accountable to that strategy. They become focused on activities, often taking on new ideas from partners that veer from the original strategies, and lose sight of ultimate outcomes. Of course, the collective impact strategy should respond to changes in the external environment (such as a global pandemic!) and lessons learned from evaluation results, but in general two things should drive any change: (a) data that informs us that our strategies are not meeting their intended outcomes; and/or (b) partners revise strategies by undergoing the same kind rigorous and inclusive process that informed the original agenda. Too often, partners make changes because they fail to make hard choices or want to please different individual's or organization's interests.

2. Culture Drift

Many groups build a culture that supports this kind of collaboration early on, but then abandon it over time in pursuit of efficiency. Check-ins at meetings stop, core values disappear, meetings become quick reports, cliques replace transparency, community engagement becomes an afterthought, and accountability lapses. Just when hard choices and difficult conversations become necessary, the conditions that make them possible atrophy. Even when it feels unnecessary or redundant to continue with practices that maintain a strong collaborative culture and reinforce shared values, sticking with them is essential.

3. Treating Workgroups Like Committees

Collective impact work groups exist to align and integrate partners to implement one or more strategies to move the ultimate results. Work groups often act like traditional committees, sharing information better conveyed in emails. Instead, they should follow a workplan with measurable objectives that advance their strategies, assess data on progress, identify gaps in populations and outcomes, and build commitments for improvement and alignment. Members should be authorized to speak for their agencies at the table, and the result of every meeting should influence members' daily work when they

return to their organizations. When workgroups are relevant, inclusive, and productive, members show up and fully engage.

4. Lack of Transparency

Nothing kills trust in a collective faster than a belief that there is a meeting before the meeting that is the real meeting. Any sense that there is an in-group—especially if it comprises primarily white, male, executives of large institutions—poisons the culture. Backbone staff need to be fair, inclusive, honest brokers of relationships, attention, and resources, and hold everyone accountable for participation and performance. Of course, individual and small-group meetings are necessary, and participants don't always need to share their content. But they should not include information that privileges certain members of the collaborative, have implications for others not in room, or undermine decisions or work of other groups without formal authority to do so.

5. Having the Wrong People at the Table

I have seen three ways that collective impact efforts are held back by not having the right people at the right tables: (a) the governance table is too top-down with executive leaders who lack connection and credibility with partners and community members; (b) the group has big ambitions but little authority to influence partners and resources to implement their agenda; and (c) the table does not represent or reflect the community served, which holds the initiative back. Governance tables should include individuals who reflect and are trusted by various members of the ecosystem—from intended beneficiaries to leaders who control resources. Building a clear strategy, an inclusive culture, and effective backbone leadership can support this kind of diverse group to work better together.

6. Lack of Accountability

When unfulfilled commitments and poor performance are not addressed, it signals that members can over-commit and under-perform without consequence. Collective impact efforts need to balance inclusion and accountability. The desire to involve everyone can lead the collective to avoid hard choices, critical feedback, and holding partners accountable for action commitments and progress on outcomes. Groups become more committed to personalities and feelings than the change they seek. It is important for backbone staff and other leaders to always hold the ultimate result at the center of the work, and follow up on action commitments. Upholding accountability within a coalition sets expectations that the coalition is serious about its results and collaborative work.

7. Funder and Political Hijacking

Shifts in funder or public official agendas can endanger collective impact efforts. Imagine that a manager at a public agency spends six months facilitating community groups and residents to create a coalition and common agenda, and then their boss attends a conference, hears about an innovative project in another city, and instructs the manager to do that instead. Or imagine that a collective impact effort aligns organizations around a data-driven plan, and then a major funder issues a request for proposals that fosters competition among collective impact members and diverts efforts away from the common agenda. To avoid these kinds of scenarios, it is important to have philanthropic and public leaders at your table, or people who have the influence to get them on the phone when necessary to advocate for alignment with the common agenda.

8. Managing a Network Like an Organization

Most institutional leaders have mental models for governing, managing, and building organizations that do not apply to a networked collective impact effort. After an inclusive planning process to create a common agenda, a new steering committee may begin acting like a traditional board and believe it is their job or the backbone leader's job to set a vision and direction. Rather than a hierarchical organization to be centrally managed, their job is to support alignment and commitment across a network of diverse actors who participate by choice. Steering committee members are stewards of the common agenda and their role is to nurture alignment, encourage shared leadership, and hold leaders and partners accountable to it. The role of the backbone leader is not to build an organization but to facilitate, coordinate, manage commitments, build capacity, and celebrate members to advance the common agenda.

9. Insufficient Time Frames

Collective impact initiatives that set unrealistic timelines for reaching their outcomes set themselves up to fall short and lose momentum. Most efforts take five-10 years to achieve population or systems change. It usually takes two years just to build relationships, the common agenda, and the coalition needed to begin implementation. When creating a work plan, it may be helpful to identify areas for quick wins, even if the impact is relatively small, to demonstrate noticeable momentum. This can also be important for political leaders who want to see visible progress, and funders who may be impatient investing in process over outcomes. Annual work plans with clear objectives that contribute to ultimate

outcomes also help collective impact efforts see their progress concurrently on present performance measures and on long-term goals.

10. Lack of Adaptive Leadership

Partners sometimes create a common agenda, and then, when the work shifts to implementation, resist the changes they need to make in their organizations and programs. Collective impact is a change management process that may require partners to:

- Stop, start, or change programming;
- Integrate programming with former competitors;
- Cede some organizational decision making to the collective;
- Have evaluation data scrutinized by peers and funders in real time;
- Work concurrently on different strategies and timeframes;
- Manage new interpersonal and team dynamics.

To manage complexity and change, groups need adaptive leadership skills. This includes learning to see challenges from multiple perspectives, addressing difficult interpersonal and team dynamics, and continuously learning and adapting work based on data and changes in the external environment in pursuit of ultimate results. It may also include managing one's team or organization through change by signaling early that change is coming, communicating clearly why it is important and how the decision was made, acknowledging tradeoffs or losses that may result from the change, clearly describing the responsibility team members will have in the change, and having empathy for different people's comfort or stress with change.

The Three Lessons

Through my work in collective impact, I have also seen what works, and there are three lessons that I believe help efforts avoid these 10 dangers.

Lesson 1: Clear Strategy Guides Clear Commitment

When a collective impact initiative has a clear strategy, everyone knows what to do, why they need to do it, and what metrics they must meet. When backbone staff and active partners complain about a lack of

commitment in the collective, strategy is often the problem. I have found that groups that use results-based strategies tend to use clear measures to target and direct their work to support specific populations. Strategies must include both a racial equity analysis of disaggregated data and an analysis of systems-level change factors that allow the problem to persist. Instead, many groups create either overly aspirational or insufficient strategies that become collections of activities that don't necessarily advance the ultimate result and don't elicit confidence, commitment, or alignment from partners.

For example, if the goal of a collective impact effort is that in two years all third graders will read at grade level in our city, programs will likely continue their existing programs, coordinate a little more with other programs, and reading scores are unlikely to rise substantially. However, if the initiative aims to increase grade level reading from 60 percent to 80 percent in five years, which translates to 400 more kids each year, and disaggregated data show the largest disparities are among Black children at 12 schools, then partners can adopt more targeted strategies that align partners to equitably move 400 more children toward grade-level reading each year. Good strategies require that organizations focus, align, and be accountable for their contributions; bad strategies align the work around organizations' existing programs and measure activities instead of outcomes.

Having clear strategies is the foundation of commitment, but to shape the path for accomplishing them, the steering committee and work groups need to adopt clear work plans. These plans need to indicate who has to accomplish what tasks by when in order to advance their strategies. The backbone staff must then consistently track and manage partners' commitments.

Lesson 2: Form Follows Function

Collective impact efforts come in all shapes and sizes, and that is a good thing. A cradle-to-career model in a large urban area organized around five education outcomes may need seven work groups and an eight-person backbone staff. A project aimed at behavioral health outcomes in a small town might have two work groups and one full-time and one part-time person on the backbone staff. The collective should determine its structure and organization by the needle it aims to move, the community context where they are working, and who all will be needed to implement the strategies.

As initiatives progress, groups typically evolve their governance and work groups in service of the common agenda. The partners who create the collective's strategy might not be the ones who need to govern or implement it. This means letting people go. Too many collective impact initiatives try to fit the work to the partners instead of the partners to the work.

In addition, the emphasis on cross-sector leadership often results in top-down steering committees with leaders who are there because of their titles rather than their experience or commitment to the results and the community the initiative aims to serve. Cross-sector leadership is a means, not an end. Partners need to focus on centering racial equity in the practice of collective impact, and pursuing a mix of leaders whose influence and credibility can align with the diverse ecosystem of partners needed to move the results.

Lesson 3: Culture Eats Strategy for Breakfast

Getting diverse individuals, groups, and systems to collaborate well is really hard. Partners bring dysfunctions to the collective from their own organizations, their history with other organizations, and interests born from years of competition for resources. I've often begun workshops asking audiences to create a list of conditions that prevent effective collaboration, and it is always the same: unclear goals, big egos, top-down leadership, competing interests, more talk than action, distrust, insufficient diversity, lack of community voice, and little follow through or accountability.

Building a culture that prevents these conditions begins with clear agreements on roles, responsibilities, decision making, and shared values. Importantly, values should not be vague, inspirational statements but should define specific expectations and behaviors that will hold backbone staff and partners accountable. Rather than define diversity as "our differences are an asset," a clearer definition would be: "Our work will always aim to redress rather than reinforce or exacerbate racial and other historical disparities in outcomes and representation." Shared values should always remain present, guiding decisions and accountability for behavior in the group. Ideally, they should be printed on every meeting agenda.

Backbone leaders and the meetings they facilitate also support a strong collaborative culture. Meetings should be organized around interaction and action. Having everyone sit around a big table and listen to reports stifles engagement, advantages extroverts and those with positional power, and doesn't produce shared ownership or action commitments to action. Effective meetings promote relationships, problem solving, continuous learning and improvement, and the alignment of partner's actions. Every meeting should end with clear action commitments that backbone staff specifically follow up on with partners at the next meeting. Clear agreements, values, and process build a culture that supports collaborative leadership and action.

Collective impact efforts have shifted the way many communities work to solve complex social problems, but I have seen more promise than progress in terms of achieving population-level and

systems-level change. Applying these lessons and avoiding or correcting for these challenges can help position efforts for greater success.

Read more stories by Paul Schmitz.

Paul Schmitz is the CEO of Leading Inside Out and a senior advisor to the Collective Impact Forum. He is also the author of *Everyone Leads: Building Leadership from the Community Up*.

DOI: 10.48558/8n8n-jt36