



# Backbone Leadership Is Different

The Skills and Mindset Shifts Needed for Collective Impact

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August 2024



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## Acknowledgements

We would like to thank our interviewees, the many partners we have worked with and learned from, and our colleagues at the Collective Impact Forum for their helpful feedback, especially Frank Mirabal, Courtney W. Robertson, Cindy Santos, Jennifer Splansky Juster, Tracy Timmons-Gray, and Junious Williams. We would also like to thank Michelle Lugalia-Hollon for her feedback informed by extensive research on network theory and collective impact. Lastly, we offer our sincere gratitude and appreciation to Alicia Dunn for her design and layout work for this article.

## Photo Credits

Photos courtesy of Lift to Rise, Milwaukee Succeeds, N.E.W. Mental Health Connection, and UP Partnership.



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**Leading a collective impact initiative is different and more complex than leading a traditional organization.** Unlike a more hierarchical organization, a successful collective impact initiative requires collective leadership distributed among various roles—the steering committee members, workgroup co-chairs, implementation partners, and the backbone staff who facilitate, coordinate, and project manage the initiative.

The backbone staff hold a unique servant leadership<sup>1</sup> role stewarding the agreements of their network through seemingly contradictory practices: facilitation skills that build inclusive, trusting cultures that engage partners; and management skills that align and hold partners and systems accountable for moving results together. To play this unique role well requires a shift in both mindsets and skills from the way one typically leads in organizations. These shifts are difficult to do and unfortunately too rare in collective impact initiatives.

Consider examples that illustrate how collective impact initiatives can get off track:

### **Losing the “Collective”**

A new collective impact initiative is formed after a planning process that engages more than 100 stakeholders in 27 planning meetings to build a common agenda around four systems change goals. Workgroups are launched with co-chairs, strategies, performance measures, and work plans. Backbone staff are hired, but they find the engagement time-consuming, inefficient, and invasive, with too much decision making vested in the network. The backbone team also views the common agenda as a starting point instead of a road map. Rather than facilitate implementation through partners and workgroups, they begin developing initiatives and programming on their own. Workgroup meetings become less frequent and more advisory, with occasional requests to collaborate on specific tasks or events. The collective atrophies and the initiative becomes another nonprofit with limited partnerships and a less likely chance of moving the results that brought them together.

### **Losing the “Impact”**

A collective impact initiative hires a backbone leader who has excellent experience with facilitation but lacks experience managing a strategy or working to move systems change. The group has a bold change agenda. Instead of assessing data to align, coordinate, and manage progress with a line of site on their result, meetings focus on programmatic activities that may or may not

contribute to the overall result. Participation shifts from a mix of systems leaders, organization leaders, and program implementers to primarily program implementers. The group eventually decides to jettison the more ambitious, challenging elements of its common agenda, downsizing the goals and broadening the strategies to support partners' existing programs and make sure everyone's work fits in. Outcomes are defined as activities and outputs instead of measurable change. Magical thinking returns as they make the case that the partners' activities will produce the change that brought the group together despite a lack of clear logic and data that demonstrate this path will work.

We see patterns like these too often. Leaders either lack or stray from the mindsets, skills, and practices needed for successful collective impact. Similar patterns were highlighted in the article "The 10 Dangers to Collective Impact."<sup>2</sup> **It becomes easier to default to what we already know, focus more on aggregating existing activities than innovate new strategies, and rely more on our own teams instead of engaging, aligning, coordinating, and managing a broader network.** Whether the backbone team consists of a single person or a larger team, or works as employees of a host organization, a host fiscal sponsor, or as its own nonprofit/nongovernmental organization, we have found that the same mindset and skill shifts are necessary. Our interviews with five experienced backbone leaders reinforced this.

## Shifting Mindsets and Skills

Leading a collective impact initiative requires a leader to intentionally change—to rethink the mindsets and approaches they have used within organizations and apply them to a network.

**First, the leader's role is not to set the vision but to facilitate the network to agree on a common result<sup>3</sup> and build a common agenda to achieve it—the strategies, performance metrics, and partnerships sufficient to move their result.** The leader's role, then, is to steward the collective vision, keeping partners aimed, aligned, and collaborating to implement the common agenda and make progress on the result. **Beth Clay** has been leading a collective impact initiative for more than a decade as the executive director of [N.E.W. Mental Health Connection](#). She explains, "When you talk to me, I am a representative of my membership. I am a reflection of the group and its agreements. Knowing who you are and who you serve is a big part of the backbone role."

**The second key shift is zooming out to population rather than program results, making explicit connections between those results and the contributions partners must make to achieve them.** The focus must always be on how one's work is contributing to the ultimate result and whether that ultimate result is moving. Pursuing a population-level result is a bold move, and many leaders balk at planting a public flag around one, being held accountable for it, and holding others accountable for it—shying away from the very purpose for doing collective impact. **Heather Vaikona**, who has led an affordable housing collective impact coalition called [Lift to Rise](#) in Coachella Valley, California, for the past seven years, shares the following: "The result clarifies the work, what we do and say 'no' to. Folks had anxiety about setting a big number, but now are fully bought in. The clarity of that number led us to be more creative about who needs to be at our table and about the work that will be needed to get us there."

**A third mindset shift is from organization-centric thinking to network-centric thinking. Collective impact requires aligning, motivating, and managing a network to move results**

**together.** One has to engage a diverse network—from grassroots neighborhood resident leaders to grassroots systems leaders—to prioritize this work among other interests and be accountable for their contributions. This work can be complex, inefficient, and even frustrating since backbone staff do not have direct supervisory authority with those whose work they rely on and who need to change. It is often easier to fall back on old habits of organization-centric thinking—doing the work one’s self, utilizing partners as advisors, and aggregating partners’ existing activities, outputs, and outcomes as progress. Leaders and groups turn to the collective impact approach because no one organization can achieve the result alone, but if one fails to keep network engagement in the front of their thinking, they risk falling back to centering the backbone, which cannot alone achieve the ultimate result. **Ryan Lugalia-Hollon**, who has led an education-focused collective impact initiative for seven years in San Antonio, Texas, as CEO of the **UP Partnership**, adds, “The result cements that we need each other and creates the conditions for organizational interdependence. It puts every partner in more relationship with our incapacity—none of us can do this without each other. The biggest mistake is to act like we [the backbone] are [the] smartest people in the room. Partners have the knowledge.”

### Essential Mindset Shifts for Successful Backbone Leaders

**From** independently setting a vision



**To** stewarding the network to agree on a common result and build a common agenda to achieve it

**From** focusing on program-level results



**To** pursuing population-level outcomes

**From** centering the backbone organization



**To** aligning, motivating and managing the network to act together

Along with these mindset shifts, there are six skill sets we have observed successful backbone leaders do well. The skill sets are:

1. Results-Based
2. Equity-Focused
3. Political Savvy
4. Project Management
5. Inclusive Culture
6. Adaptive Leadership

We have found our list is consistent with and reinforced by lists we have seen in other reports and studies.<sup>4</sup> **It is important to note that one person typically will not hold all of these capacities—it will often take a team (even when there is just one backbone staff member, steering committee members or key partners can augment their skills and help them fulfill this role).** Collective impact initiatives should be intentional about hiring, orienting, and supporting backbone staff teams to practice these skills and qualities.

## The Six Successful Backbone Skill Sets

### 1. Results-Based

**Successful backbone leaders keep everyone focused on and accountable to the ultimate goal of the initiative.**

Collective impact initiatives do not come together to share information on their existing programs and collaborate better. **They come together to move population and systems changes that improve conditions and outcomes for people on a larger scale than any one organization can achieve alone.** Yet, we have witnessed many backbone leaders who see the immense challenges of actually moving change at a population or systems level and abandon their original purpose by downsizing the result and scale of their collective's work to be closer to partners'



existing programs and services. The form of the collective impact initiative (who joins and sits at which tables) should follow the function (the common agenda strategies) rather than adjusting the common agenda to meet the interests, capacities, and existing programs of partners. The table is built to achieve results not to dilute results.

**Backbone leaders need to be bold and audacious enough to engage and motivate a network to achieve a common agenda that may feel just out of reach.** Importantly, the common agenda must be created by and agreed to by the network defining ultimate results, data-driven and community-informed strategies that add up sufficiently to move the results, performance metrics to continually measure progress, and clarity about what actions partners will need to take to achieve them. The clarity of the agenda—how clearly people can see that their work contributes to move the needle—will help align and motivate the network. The clarity of result can also help keep partners aligned, seeing how failure to align or complete action steps actually impedes the whole network from making progress on results (i.e., it is not that one's competitive behaviors hurt the group but that it prevents the group from helping 400 more kids read at grade level). Keeping that result front and center is why a collective comes together and how it holds together.

Keeping that result front and center is the first task of backbone leaders and the steering committee. It is important to keep partners' eyes on the prize, especially as many will be focused on activities and can lose sight of whether those activities are sufficiently aimed at and contributing to the result. It is also important for partners in the collective to translate percentage goals to clarify "their number," i.e., that 20% improvement means moving 400 more children to grade level reading, or cutting infant mortality by 50% means 30 fewer infant deaths each year. In order to lead toward results, the backbone team must commit to building data capacity in-house or through partners so that real-time information on population level and partners' program-level progress can be regularly assessed and shared to guide continuous improvement. Leaders cannot be afraid to keep partners mindful of and motivated by the goal that brought them together, making sure partners are aware of progress, accountable for performance metrics, and continually working across workgroups and the steering committee to learn and improve their ability to reach it.

**John Jacobs**, the director of K-12 and Justice at UP Partnership, highlights the importance of keeping the result in front of the group: "Having a clear, concise North Star is essential. You can't mess it up in terms of articulating it. We repeat it over and over, asking how things align with our North Star. We get excited when we see partners include it in their slide decks and materials about their own work."

**Clay**, from N.E.W. Mental Health Connection, found that articulating a clear result was a game changer. "At first, we were very aspirational talking about systems-ish change and big goals, but the gap between these goals and what we were actually doing was a wing and prayer. Results-based accountability tools helped us fill the gaps between our aspiration and activities and define indicators we could regularly assess to monitor and pivot along the way. It was a completely different way of thinking about the work. It made things real."

N.E.W. Mental Health Connection also created an innovative tool to keep their initiative from straying into the activity trap—broadening and diluting the common agenda to include activities and interests of partners. "People have great ideas and there are so many important issues in the community. Because we were successful, funders and others wanted us to take on more." Their network agreed to a set of yes/no criteria based on their agenda that would determine if some new activity could be added to the agenda. "We even ran some past initiatives that had failed through the criteria and found our new criteria would have screened them out. We can't get distracted and diffuse our resources and power in this space or we will not reach our results."

**Dave Celata**, who has served for more than nine years as the deputy director of the education collective impact coalition **Milwaukee Succeeds** in Wisconsin, explains how they narrowed their agenda over time: "Having a result is essential. To have a clearly articulated

result builds clarity so people know they are at the right table. It allows you to re-focus the group because it is easy to drift. In this type of work, there are opportunity costs all over the place. So many things you can do. One can easily argue for shoehorning things and layering on programs under the collective umbrella. But there are limited resources, and you need to direct them to where they can have the greatest impact. At one point we had 11 indicators. We were stretched thin and couldn't drive bigger policy and systems changes. We went through a prioritization exercise to see which ones we felt were most feasible to change and which ones we were best positioned to change. We chose the two where we had a clear line of site on systems changes we could gain traction on. It is better to have a smaller coalition who is fully committed to change than a bigger table with people unwilling to change."



## Building Capacity: Results-Based

If these skills aren't natural to a backbone leader, they can:

- Hire someone with the skills to hold and manage a strategy.
- Work with the steering committee to hold this work.
- Hire someone to manage data or create a data and evaluation workgroup.
- Seek training in approaches like Results-Based Accountability.

## 2. Equity-Focused

**Successful backbone leaders need to be accountable for leading in ways that redress inequities in opportunities, outcomes, and representation in both the network and the community.**

You cannot move population change without addressing racial and other disparities in your population. In "Centering Equity in Collective Impact,"<sup>5</sup> Paul Schmitz joined our colleagues at the Collective Impact Forum in outlining five practices to ensure racial equity is at the center of a collective impact initiative's work:

1. Ground the work in data and context
2. Focus on systems change in addition to programs and services
3. Shift power within the collaborative
4. Listen to and act with the community
5. Build equity leadership and accountability

Backbone leaders set the tone, modeling and encouraging the network's embrace, development, and implementation of these practices.

**To lead equity work in their networks or communities well, leaders must commit to their own continuous learning on equity, beginning with their own internal experience.** In our "Racial Equity Toolkit,"<sup>6</sup> we recommend some activities for individuals and teams to begin or continue that journey:

1. **Be aware of your own equity journey.** What have been key insights, lessons, experiences, and "aha moments" that have shaped how you understand your commitment to and work with others on equity?
2. **Explore historical factors and legacy.** How has history shaped or limited the opportunities

you have had, and how have those factors also impacted your community and the issue(s) you are working on?

- 3. Reflect on patterns and biases.** What are the habits, assumptions, and ways of being you practice—often unconsciously—that shape how you encounter or engage with people who are different?
- 4. Examine your network.** Who do you seek counsel from and listen to most? How reflective is it of the network you engage and the residents you serve?

**In the toolkit**, we also share some practices that leaders who embrace equity do well. We believe that backbone leaders who demonstrate these practices model a commitment for the network:

- **Seek out authentic relationships** with people of other races, ethnicities, genders, sexual orientations, etc., to share and learn.
- **Actively seek diverse perspectives** before making decisions about communities or populations not your own.
- **Promote anti-racist narratives** about communities, populations, and issues, and interrupt biased or racist narratives you hear.
- **Name your bias patterns** and invite others to hold you accountable when they see them.
- **Convene racially diverse and inclusive groups and tables** and continually analyze and correct for disparities in participation.
- **Show up** for leaders of color, organizations led by people of color, and public issues impacting communities of color (not just when your interests are involved).
- **Visibly take stands** and be willing to risk and sacrifice resources and relationships in order to stand up for racial equity and justice.

As backbone leaders, the most important thing beyond implementing the equity practices outlined above is to pursue continuous learning and improvement; share your journey; encourage others to do the work; and create space for difficult conversations, difference, and even mistakes. Backbone leaders sometimes need to help build the capacity of partners, bring others along on their journeys, translate the work for people who are new to it, and even help the network address attacks on this work. Many groups expect people of color to carry the obligation and the emotional burden of helping bridge people into their racial equity journeys. It is important that equity work is shared with awareness of the appropriate roles for diverse staff to play.

According to **Jacobs**, UP Partnership actively works to build the capacity of their partners: “They are constantly learning about the history of San Antonio, the colonialism, redlining, the intersection of Hispanic and Afro-Latino culture, etc. We ensure workgroup members are constantly reading about, learning about, and experiencing our context. Keep it in front of them. It helps us do strategies through our context, within the history, experience, and realities here. Helps us lean into how we do things together. We’ve had to have crucial conversations about what is happening in Texas, finding unique ways to support our partners’ equity work amid attacks on equity.”

**Lugalia-Hollon** adds: “We are clear-eyed about the environment. There are now limitations on higher education and K-12 schools, and local government in some cases. The thing I think is essential is creating levels of engagement. Some partners can be explicit and some can’t but are committed to all young people thriving. When we can be explicit, we are, but we need to be flexible on language. Many partners have the commitment and recognize disparities and inequities, but they have to navigate their tensions. We don’t judge them, but help them find a way to contribute to reducing disparities. Internally, there could be a temptation to opt

out of language and accountability because of politics, but we don't have those restrictions and staff have held us accountable. We have to apply our continuous improvement to how we better share power, deepen belonging, and assess equity within the backbone."

**Celata** explains how Milwaukee Succeeds has turned to community engagement as a key part of their equity strategy in early childhood education: "Our ECE (Early Childhood Education) work is focused on Black and Brown neighborhoods with the lowest access to high-quality programs. We have come to prioritize centering youth and parent voice to identify what strategies need to look like at the tactical level, how change is driven on the ground. We have been intentional about shifting backbone capacity and budget for this. We now have 3+ FTEs on our team focused on community engagement. We also budgeted living wage stipends for parent and youth ambassadors."

At Lift to Rise, **Vaikona** also focuses on community engagement: "Because of the long history of exploitation, there is a lot of relational strife. Our work has to both be about paving a path to the future and repairing the past. Resident participation and power building is hard to step into because you are stepping into disconnection and it takes years to build trust. It is human-centered work and is messy, not simple. It takes a lot of time and investment to do well."



## Building Capacity: Equity-Focused

To build this skill set backbone leaders can:

- Seek out a consultant or coach.
- Identify internal partners from your coalition who can help you build this work.
- Widen your network.
- Seek professional development.

The Collective Impact Forum's "Racial Equity Toolkit" and "Community Engagement Toolkit"<sup>7</sup> can also be helpful.

## 3. Political Savvy

**Successful backbone leaders need to understand both "big P" and "small p" politics among leaders, organizations, and systems; they need to know what it takes to influence and move change.**

**To move population and systems change, a leader must know how to move change at a systems level, understanding how to influence relationships, narratives, processes, and policies.** We use the definition of systems change from "The Water of Systems Change": changing the conditions that hold the problem in place.<sup>8</sup> This includes public narratives, understanding, and even biases about an issue or community; the way organizations and systems work together or do not; who has power, voice, and influence; how public and philanthropic resources flow; the rules and practices that allow one to access or receive help; and the public policies that govern the work. Leaders need to be able to assess and work in each of these six areas of systems change, know how they relate to each other, and understand what it takes to influence change across them.



Leaders must also continually scan the environment and be attuned to emerging initiatives and changes in the community. It is important to be aware of what elected officials, public administrators, philanthropists, and organizations are planning, pursuing, and debating on relevant and connected issues. **It is also important to know how different leaders, organizations, and systems relate to each other, the different or competing interests they hold, and how to best engage and influence them.** Building trusting relationships and spending time with people outside of meetings is essential to be

aware of what is happening in the community and to understand both the “small p” politics (the interests, needs, motivations, and differences among stakeholders) and the “Big P” politics (the processes, protocols, rules, and relationships among systems leaders).

**Vaikona** believes this is essential to the backbone role: “Being savvy is knowing that if you want to get results, shifting public systems is the biggest opportunity. You need to listen, understand, build trust, and then step back and discern what is possible and what is not. Find the ‘maybe,’ because that opens a door. Our public partners are vocationally mission-driven with passion and values, but they sit in a political apparatus where they have to maneuver constantly. We sometimes roll the dice to the edge and be provocative, but we know the temperature. If we lose the relationship, we have nowhere to go, and that doesn’t help the people we serve. We talk to people every day. Our whole team does this well. If there is a challenge with a city [in our region], I talk to five people I trust who know them and ask how to solve it. The more you crowdsource, the more you get the pulse or temperature of the situation and the people, and the better you can be at finding solutions.”

**Jacobs** also believes relationships are critical here: “It can be difficult in a large city and county, but relationships are the work. I’m always meeting with partners and the conversation is 60% relationship, 40% work. I’m always trying to take the pulse. When there are shifts in leadership at partners, I am trying to understand how it may impact the partnership or what they may need. Our communications team is always asking about what is going on, so they can lift up partners’ work. The way we are structured allows us to have continuous conversations at multiple levels. We make sure the relationship is not just with one person but throughout the partner. We use the term deep coordination.” **Lugalia-Hollon** emphasizes the importance of the backbone not being seen as favoring or being submissive to certain partners or systems leaders: “It is important to be really clear about structural choices you make and how you aspire to neutrality. You have to do everything in your power to protect that role of neutral convener.”

**Celata** shares about the importance of emotional intelligence to address “small p” politics. “This work is inherently people-centric. If there were technical solutions to all this stuff, we would have figured it out. Everyone has their own priorities. When you center results, it can put people on the defensive that they are being blamed. You have to make clear that when a

system does not produce a result, it does not reflect on them as individuals. You have to pay attention to how people are showing up and the divergence between what they say and their actions and hold them accountable. You need to know and understand what motivates them. It is never ending. This is where you need to hold your role. You can have people handle data, facilitation, and project management, but the leader needs to be astute in emotional intelligence deeply rooted in the community. They need to be willing to be political.”



## Building Capacity: Political Savvy

The best way for backbone leaders to learn this is via mentorship. Some ways to get started include:

- Engage people who are really good at this, who know leaders and what motivates them, and who seem to be in the know about the community.
- Do not just seek one mentor.
- Meet with mentors regularly to ask what they are seeing, what is emerging, who you should be building relationships with, and how to influence various leaders or systems.

## 4. Project Management

**Successful backbone leaders actively manage partners across the network to complete the key actions that advance common agenda strategies that move the ultimate result.**

This seems to be the most under-appreciated quality and practice among backbones. And it completely undermines the backbone’s ability to motivate their network’s engagement and achieve their ultimate result.

**The work of collective impact is to align, coordinate, and manage stakeholders to implement a common agenda. The backbone needs to be systematic about managing the network to do that.** This often begins with translating the common agenda into annual workplans<sup>9</sup>, which define the key actions that need to be done to advance each strategy, determine who will drive and be accountable for that action, describe what other partners will be contributing, when it will be done, and how you will know when it is done and/or done well. A strategy or a workplan is useless unless it is regularly managed. The workplan should drive the agenda of every workgroup meeting, keeping the work in front of partners, assessing progress, enabling continuous learning and improvement, coordinating tasks among partners, problem solving impediments, and adapting when needed to changes in systems or the community. This should be a living document, continually updated and renewed each year. Ideally, it should roll up to a high-level dashboard that the steering committee can use to assess common agenda progress across workgroups.

Accountability is also critical to advancing collective impact. One tool we have found helpful to encourage partners to fulfill action commitments is what we call the NAG (Normalizing Accountability in the Group) email.<sup>10</sup> It is a simple chart sent to partners after each meeting that outlines what key action commitments are needed before the next meeting, who committed to do them, when they need to be done, and why they are important to advance the agenda. These are sent out after meetings to everyone, sent again a few weeks later directly to those who have listed action commitments asking if they need any help or support, and sent again one week before the next meeting to those with commitments to remind them they will be reporting their progress at

the beginning of the next meeting. Work group meetings always begin by reviewing commitments made at the previous meeting (and in the workplan) and begin by reviewing progress on the commitments outlined at the previous meeting. This makes accountability fair and transparent, keeps partners aware and accountable, and enables backbone staff to step in reluctantly as a last resort rather than taking on all the work between meetings.

**Workplans and accountability mechanisms are important to document and track progress, but this also requires relationships.** Checking in with partners, hosting meetings to support completion of tasks, and being aware of partners' competing priorities is important. It is also essential that backbone staff be consistently reliable in completing their own tasks on time to model accountability for the group. Backbone staff must have the trust and credibility that comes from their relationships, reliability, and support for others to move the collective work and hold partners accountable.

**Clay** shares the importance of being flexible with tools: "The way we do this is reflective of our partners. Different partners work in different ways. They have tools they use that allow us to watch the work going forward. We use weekly huddles with our teams and touch those documents, always seeking to detect movement, needs, and guide decisions about what needs to be done. Some teams have shared spreadsheets. Other teams we pull together and capture their work orally. We are responsive and flexible. Some groups love the tools, others we have to get in their face and follow up. But we are always touching the work weekly so we know what is moving or if there are challenges."

**Celata** agrees with Clay: "You can't just have a to-do list and expect people will do it when all are busy and have competing priorities. It does take basic project management templates and skill sets. There is a balance one needs to make culturally. We are working in sectors and with nonprofits where you can't be too rigid. It doesn't mean you don't use project management tools, but you can't dive head first into something like Six Sigma methodology. Your tools need to be meaningful for everyone at the table. Big part here is how committed the table is to the common work. You then need to keep nurturing engagement. We customize project specific project management templates to build engagement. There is a lot of checking in."

**Lugalia-Hollon** shares: "You need people with that mindset on the team, people wired for that who can manage time and accountability. We have had ebbs and flows of that. The management trick is to build systems over time that make it less personnel dependent. Ultimately, you have to figure out operational planning across institutions, and put more focus on building those systems across partners. Contracts and incentives make accountability stronger. If it is voluntary, then it is about how strong the relationship is with the backbone staff. We have found it helpful to have multiple points of contact with any partner, so we can solve at the right level, bring in the partner or their executive if work isn't being done. It is clear that accountability must be handled in an abundantly relational way."

**Vaikona** emphasizes: "The relational matters here. As a backbone, you have to make sure you are continuing to cast the line of site for partners to make contributions. The path has to be clear. When it is not clear or there are major obstacles, draw people in to solve. Across the work, we do deep listening. Have clarity for folks to participate and set the pathway by talking with people, listening, finding out what pressures they have. When things are conflicting, I step back and think of ways I can facilitate a bridge that doesn't turn into something it doesn't need to be."



## Building Capacity: Project Management

If backbone leaders are not naturally skilled at project management they can:

- Ensure that someone on the team has a Project Management certification or experience using project management tools.
- Look up various project management and workplan templates and find out what partners use and find most useful to assess what might work for your group.
- Look into hiring a consultant who can help with this, but be aware that it will require partnership and support from backbone staff, especially for the relational side of this work.

## 5. Inclusive Culture

**Successful backbone leaders create processes that instill trust, inclusion, learning, celebration, and even healing into the collective.**

Leaders build and support a culture. The backbone staff create, nurture, and maintain a culture that enables and supports diverse leaders working together effectively. Without intention and attention to building a collective culture, the initiative will not be very collective or have much impact. As Peter Drucker famously said, “Culture eats strategy for breakfast.” Culture is built through the way meetings are designed and facilitated, the values that are practiced in the group, the rituals and protocols stakeholders come to expect from the backbone staff and each other, and the way people are engaged individually and through workgroups and committees.



**An effective collective impact culture makes everyone feel they belong, have influence, and see that their contributions matter to the ultimate result.** Many groups establish core values or ground rules to define their culture and what is expected of members. This can be helpful provided that they are (a) created and agreed to by the group; (b) kept before the group at every meeting (i.e., posted on the agenda and/or reviewed at the beginning); and (c) referenced as criteria for big decisions. Importantly, values and ground rules should not be defined in flowery language that belongs on posters with birds and rainbows but should describe specific behaviors for which people can be held accountable.<sup>11</sup>

Facilitating meetings is a key part of building culture. Ideal meetings are highly interactive, productive, and positive. If meetings revolve around report outs they will not motivate and sustain commitment.

Effective meetings:

- **Build community** by inviting people to check in with the group, learning new things about each other and how people are doing
- **Focus** on assessing workplan progress on strategies and performance measures
- **Problem solve** impediments
- **Coordinate** implementation among partners
- **Plan** systems advocacy
- **Scan** for changes emerging in the external environment
- **Celebrate** wins<sup>12</sup>

Most of this work happens in small-group breakout conversations. Any announcements or reports should be brief or just emailed. Celebration and fun sustain engagement—building momentum and motivating partners by continually recognizing contributions and milestones.

According to Stephen M.R. Covey, “collaboration moves at the speed of trust.” The most important component of a collective impact culture is that the backbone staff are trusted by and actively build trust among stakeholders across different backgrounds, roles, and organizations. Trust does not just happen. It must be built, nurtured, and often repaired. There are several practices that build and support trust<sup>13</sup>:

1. **Build authentic relationships:** Get to know people and let them know you beyond your role—why you do this work, what brought you to this work, and what you love to do outside of it.
2. **Recognize people’s assets:** When people’s gifts and contributions are recognized, they will better listen to and consider feedback and difference.
3. **Practice empathy:** When you seek to understand people’s perspectives and how they are feeling, it lets people know you care.
4. **Build agreements:** When groups have agreed to expectations, core values, or ground rules, and they are enforced fairly, then everyone knows what is expected.
5. **Be reliable:** Get things done, and if someone is not trusting things will get done, confirm their expectations up front and confirm again when they are met.
6. **Be consultative:** When someone knows that you will check in and seek feedback on progress and ask for help if you get stuck, they will delegate and trust you to get things done.
7. **Be transparent:** Make sure you are not gatekeeping information or resources or sharing opportunities with only some favored partners, and do not make decisions with implications for partners without their engagement. If people believe there’s an exclusive meeting before the meeting where decisions are made, you’ve lost them.
8. **Own mistakes, failures, lessons:** The backbone leader’s humility and vulnerability set a tone for the group. The reason one does collective impact is because existing and past efforts have not moved the needle. When things do not work, own it, learn from it, and share that learning. It is a practice critical to trust, healing, and continuous learning and improvement.

By building core values and/or ground rules, building an effective and engaging meeting culture, and actively building and maintaining trust (along with the equity and accountability practices mentioned earlier), collective impact initiatives can create belonging among diverse partners and help them maintain engagement and commitment to achieving goals. It is also important to note that building a trusting and inclusive culture will mean that difficult conversations will emerge and that many of these are tied to people’s and organization’s histories and require attention to healing.<sup>14</sup>

**Clay** believes that building an inclusive and trusting culture all comes down to relationships. “Time spent with partners, that’s the starting point. Don’t bring a member on without breaking bread with them. We believe deeply in transparency and humility of role and using any power we have to share and support. Transparency and power sharing is especially important around money. We leverage relationships we have to help people get meetings. We’ve also tried to demonstrate the servant leadership role by helping grassroots groups access money and contracts they normally wouldn’t have capacity to manage. We will take on the risk, monitoring, and auditing. We’ll do the ‘shit work,’ let partners focus on delivering services. We also share tools and resources we learn like Results-Based Accountability to other networks and groups in the community because of how it has helped us. Our core beliefs are not just words, but we are accountable for them. You build trust by doing it right.”

Lift to Rise’s commitment to hospitality originates from **Vaikona’s** experience growing up in Tonga: “In Tongan culture, if you see someone while you are eating, you offer to share your food. That expression of recognizing their need as a human helps people feel seen and valued. This work should not be academic—we are all humans who want to care for others. Amplify that. Our approach begins with always being kind and considerate and caring. We need to take care of the people for them to take care of others. We also want there to be joy. We see stuff getting done and see evident joy in our work. If it was not there, work would be too heady and frustrating. It creates a lot of connection to have relief as you navigate difficult things. People release their interests and imagine better when they are connected to their sense of fun, joy, and care. When people feel secure and celebrated, they trust, and when people trust, you can do harder stuff.”

When starting his role on the backbone team, **Jacobs** was new to facilitating a workgroup that had been meeting for six years: “I was the new kid on the block. I listened and had lots of one-on-ones. This also included showing up at partners’ events, championing their work with others, telling their stories. We highlight partners at every meeting.”

**Celata** adds: “It is essential to have trust and without it, things can go sideways quick. You can’t do this if people hold their cards close. People come and say polite things, but then no change happens. You need to say what needs to be said and people can’t feel they will be attacked for that. That is when you get below the surface and get at what really makes a difference.”



## Building Capacity: Inclusive Culture

To build this skill set backbone leaders can:

- Hire a facilitator.
- Take facilitation training courses.
- Get coaching.

Hosting and facilitating meetings that generate action need to be invested in appropriately (**for in-person:** good rooms, small tables, supplies, snacks; **for virtual:** using breakouts, using Google Slides as flip charts, calling on people to avoid awkward silence etc.).

## 6. Adaptive Leadership

**Successful backbone leaders need to be able to manage change, complexity, tensions, and conflict within their network.<sup>15</sup>**

One of the biggest challenges groups face is treating “adaptive” challenges as “technical” ones. Technical challenges are those for which one has the skills and experience necessary to solve, for which there are clear best practices and tools available, and which do not require people to change beliefs, loyalties, or interests.

**Adaptive challenges are those that require people to change, learn new skills, change behaviors and priorities, work across new boundaries, and address difficult differences. Groups get into a lot of trouble when they try to apply technical solutions to adaptive challenges.** We once worked with a coalition that was having major trust issues, and someone mentioned that a big reason was lack of communication. Another member blurted out, “What we need is a newsletter!” We guarantee that creating a newsletter might be a good thing but will not repair trust. Solving adaptive challenges means (a) managing change; (b) engaging and solving for the complexity of issues, including those that generate difference and conflict; and (c) holding tensions to keep the diverse group work together productively.

Again, groups turn to collective impact because their community needs change. Partners’ best efforts currently are not moving the needle. **Creating and aligning around a common agenda means partners will need to change their work—the programs they deliver, how they deliver them, who they deliver them to, and who they deliver them with.** It is also a big change to begin working within a collective impact network. Most coalitions come together to protect partners’ existing programs and interests. Collective impact requires partners to change outcomes, expectations, practices, protocols, and work styles. Managing change is essential to collective impact, which means signaling the changes coming, being empathetic to people’s resistance to change, orienting people to the logic and decision behind the change, acknowledging what one may lose or trade off to change, and giving people responsibility and a road map on how to inform and implement the necessary changes. People have to be reminded and supported in their changes continually because there will always be the gravitational force of the status quo and comfort that will pull them back to how they have always done things.

**This work is also complex because backbone staff have to manage implementation by aligning and coordinating partners with competing interests, priorities, beliefs, and personalities.** We often joke that this work would be much easier if it were not for all the humans. People get stuck in different ways on different things. It is important to build relationships that enable you to continually consult with others to understand and imagine potential points of resistance—how an idea, situation, or decision might be perceived by different stakeholders based on their interests and experience. It is also important to have the courage and skill to engage in difficult conversations to address issues in the coalition, particularly conflicts that arise among individuals and groups.

**A key part of the backbone role is holding tensions rather than resolving them and being comfortable with discomfort in the group.** The backbone leader must often maintain balance among competing interests or ideas, where weighing down on one side or the other could lose the strength of the coalition. For example, leaders must often hold the tension between being bottom-up and top-down, as a coalition needs the whole spectrum of partners to move results. Another tension is between building an inclusive culture where everyone belongs and an accountable culture where backbone staff manage performance—getting that balance just right

is difficult. If half of your network thinks you are moving too fast and half think you are moving too slow, you are probably moving at the right pace and everyone is a bit uncomfortable. There are many other tensions. The leader's job is to know how to turn up or down the temperature on discomfort or difference in the group to keep a diverse group moving forward together and resolving differences along the way. If everyone is happy and things are too easy, the group is probably complacent and not stretching enough to move big change.

**Jacobs** acknowledges that resistance is part of the process: "Moving population change is not easy. We are building a map and working backward. This is agile, and will shift and change as we work on this. We are prepared for naysayers—expect it—and enable them to communicate how they feel and ask them for solutions. You can't bulldoze. You need to build relationships and listen first because you can attract more bees with honey. You have to understand their plight, what is behind their concerns, get inside their perspective. You have to have crucial conversations in the room and set a framework and trust for those to happen." **Lugalia-Hollon** adds: "The nature of what distinguishes leadership and management is that management doesn't have built-in tensions; leadership handles tensions. There are many you have to hold. You have to have both-and relationships with them."

**Celata** shares that balancing tensions is a skill learned experientially: "This is a skill very few people have on the first day that you need to learn on the job. There are cycles to this work with ebbs and flows and you have to pay attention to where the coalition is because you have forming, storming, norming, performing, and you need to know at what points to turn up and down the heat to create just enough discomfort. The tensions drive creative solutions. When a table accomplishes something, they can get comfortable or declare victory instead of pick up the next big thing. You need to turn up the heat again. Otherwise, not every group has to stay together indefinitely. They might stick around too long."

**Vaikona** explains the importance of leaders taking care of themselves when holding tensions: "You have to adapt to do equity work and get result. When you are holding tensions, you have to pay attention to how you tend and care for yourself to hold them, recognize how your person metabolizes, comports, and repurposes the tension you experience and hold in your work. For me, that means I had to get disciplined about self-care. I think I want to get rid of the tension and then all will feel OK. This is not true. There is always discomfort moving from where you are to somewhere new. You need to have a support system to lean on, and communicate with honesty and vulnerability so you are not holding it yourself. One of the biggest tensions is people are not used to seeing conflict. Elected officials avoid it, funders fear it. Normalizing it, especially for a woman in leadership, you have to decide if you want to lead or be liked. It will suck holding this, but if you hold your values and the people close, it is a normal part of the path."



## Building Capacity: Adaptive Leadership

There are many books, articles, and resources on Adaptive Leadership.

For backbone leaders to be successful at adaptive leadership it may be helpful to:

- Work with a core group to identify the tensions you will need to hold.
- Develop plans on how to make sure you are testing ideas across our network.
- Learn about change management and difficult conversation practices.

# Backbone Work Is Relational

Being relational is required across all of these key backbone skills and mindsets. As Celata, Clay, Jacobs, Lugalia-Hollon, and Vaikona attest, relationships are the fuel that moves this work. **Collective impact requires leaders who will continuously build and maintain diverse relationships across the network.** This is essential to building the trust and credibility necessary to facilitate and manage a diverse network. This does not happen in steering committee or workgroup meetings, but in one-on-ones or small groups over coffees, lunches, and visits to others' offices. It means getting to know the people behind your partners—their motivations, interests, and needs; their skills and ways of working; their conflicts and challenges; their relationships with other partners and systems. It means them getting to know you likewise.

To do this relational work well, leaders need to be authentic and self-aware. One must be open to share your own story, motivations, style, and interests. It is important to hold confidence about what you do well and to have humility about what you do not—being able to articulate both makes it easier for others to collaborate with you. A leader needs to get to know people well enough to gain greater empathy and perspective—to understand and anticipate how decisions or actions might be perceived by different stakeholders and how to address resistance or concerns. Relational leaders constantly ask diverse network members for feedback to understand how others are seeing and understanding things. These relationships also make it possible to give constructive feedback, resolve differences among partners, and hold partners accountable.

Since the pandemic, it has become easier just to hop on a Zoom call, but this work also requires face-to-face contact whenever possible, especially when you are observing or sensing conflicts, competing interests, or lapses in progress on action commitments. Visiting someone or picking up the phone will generate much better results than an email that can leave the sender and receiver filled with assumptions. Beyond individual relationship building, you can also help diverse coalition members build relationships and trust with each other, bringing small groups together for a gathering or meal with no agenda other than getting to know each other. The investment of time and attention in the relational work pays off in greater trust, perspective, credibility, and authority across the network. This investment in relationship building is especially helpful as over time the collective will inevitably face hard choices or significant shifts in the external environment.

## Conclusion

Intentionally hiring for, developing, supporting, and evaluating these mindsets and skills in backbone staff are critical for the success of collective impact. This work is complex, and it is too easy to backslide into something less collective and less impactful. To align, motivate, and manage a network to achieve big common agenda results, the backbone team needs to practice the mindsets and skills that make success possible.

# Endnotes

- 1 Servant leadership was coined by Robert K. Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1977)
- 2 Paul Schmitz, "[The 10 Dangers to Collective Impact](#)", Stanford Social Innovation Review, December 6, 2021.
- 3 We use the language of results rather than goals based on our use of the Results-Based Accountability (RBA) approach. For more on RBA approaches, see Mark Friedman, *Trying Hard is Not Good Enough* (Santa Fe: FPSI Publishing, 2005); and Raj Chawla, *Choose Results* (Madison: First Person, 2018). One can also learn more about this approach through the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Results Count initiative and the software provider Clear Impact. We first learned this approach from Marian Urquilla through her work with The Annie Casey Foundation.
- 4 For example, David Phillips, "[Lessons Learned from our Conversations with Experienced Backbone Leaders](#)", The Collective Impact Forum (blog), August 1, 2016; "[When Collective Impact Has an Impact: A Cross-Site Study of 25 Collective Impact Initiatives](#)," The Collective Impact Forum, April 11, 2018, and Judy Touzin, [Building Strong, Sustainable Backbone Leadership: A Field Study of Cross-Sector Collaborative Organizations](#), EdRedesign Lab at Harvard Graduate School of Education, April 2023. Thank you to Layers of Change consultant Michelle Lugalia-Hollon, who shared several articles on network theory that further confirmed our list.
- 5 John Kania, Junious Williams, Paul Schmitz, Sheri Brady, Mark Kramer, and Jennifer Splansky Juster, "[Centering Equity in Collective Impact](#)", Stanford Social Innovation Review, Winter 2022.
- 6 Dominique Samari and Paul Schmitz, "[Racial Equity Toolkit](#)", The Collective Impact Forum, February 9, 2023.
- 7 Paul Schmitz, "[Community Engagement Toolkit](#)", The Collective Impact Forum, March 15, 2017
- 8 John Kania, Mark Kramer, and Peter Senge, "[The Water of Systems Change](#)", FSG, accessed June 18, 2024.
- 9 There are many different project management tools we have seen, from very sophisticated integrated online systems to simple spreadsheets. Groups should use tools that make it accessible and easy to manage for partners who have various levels of capacity. Overcomplicating it can actually make it harder for you to gather what you need.
- 10 Paul Schmitz, "[Making Meetings Work](#)", Collective Impact Forum (blog), August 29, 2018.
- 11 For example, instead of "Racial equity: we are committed to social justice and racial justice," a more precise version would be "Racial Equity: we seek and value all types of diversity, and strive to dismantle inequities, including those present in ourselves, our organizations, and our communities (Lift to Rise)." The second enables more accountability. For another example of operationalizing values, see Brené Brown, *Dare to Lead* (New York: Random House, 2018).
- 12 Paul Schmitz, "[Making Meetings Work](#)", Collective Impact Forum (blog), August 29, 2018.
- 13 We have built this list over time from experience and inspired by other sources including: Brené Brown, *Dare to Lead* (New York: Random House, 2018) and Robert Solomon and Fernando Flores, *Building Trust in Business, Politics, Relationships, and Life* (Oxford University Press, 2001).
- 14 For more on the trauma and healing in this work, see Laura Calderon de la Barca, Katherine Milligan, and John Kania: "[Healing Systems](#)", Stanford Social Innovation Review, February 12, 2024.
- 15 For more on Adaptive Leadership, see Ronald Heifetz, Alexander Grashow, and Marty Linsky, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business Press, 2009).



## About the Collective Impact Forum

The Collective Impact Forum is an initiative of FSG and the Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions. We work to inspire and support people using a collective impact approach to bolster community-driven solutions that achieve equitable outcomes for individuals and communities. The Collective Impact Forum hosts convenings, facilitates peer learning, curates an online resource center, and offers custom workshops and coaching. Learn more at [collectiveimpactforum.org](https://collectiveimpactforum.org).

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