

Emerging Trends in Building Capacity – Insight from Funders

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The Rider-Pool Foundation is a small, private foundation located in the Lehigh Valley of Pennsylvania. The Lehigh Valley, which encompasses the cities of Allentown, Bethlehem and Easton, is the third largest metropolitan area in Pennsylvania and is located 60 miles north of Philadelphia and 75 miles west of New York City. The Rider-Pool Foundation’s mission is to improve the quality of life in the community, to build on the community’s strengths and add to its vitality, and to increase the capacity of the community to serve the needs of all its citizens.

Since 2014, The Rider-Pool Foundation has been actively focused on building the capacity for collective impact and other models of cross-sector partnerships. The Foundation’s Board has directed half of its annual grant making to an intense nine-month, place-based Fellowship focused on training cross-sector leaders in collaboration. The Fellowship adds to The Rider-Pool Foundation’s support of backbone development and community engagement. Additionally, The Rider-Pool Foundation, in conjunction with other funders and anchor organizations, supports data sharing and access throughout the region.

On June 7, 2016, The Rider-Pool Foundation was invited to present its approach to building capacity in the Lehigh Valley at the Collective Impact Funder Convening in Seattle, Washington. In addition to sharing its preliminary findings concerning capacity building strategies, Rider-Pool was also interested in learning about the capacity needs and capacity building solutions identified by other communities and funders. Although we did hear about some interesting capacity building approaches, we were surprised to hear a common message coming from many funders:

“Although we were early adopters of the collective impact model, we are struggling because we did not fully address aspects of capacity and infrastructure before implementing collective impact initiatives. These struggles are impeding on our progress.”

Since then, we have had dozens of conversations with other funders and collective impact experts who shared similar thoughts, insights and experiences.

We are highlighting the issues that emerged from the presentation breakout session and the follow-up conversations we had with peers and colleagues in philanthropy. As funders and community organizations delve more deeply into collective impact, they are experiencing many of the same challenges. Acknowledging similar obstacles and sharing best practices can create a learning community focused on enhancing and strengthening community capacity.

We by no means feel like we have “solved the problem.” Nor do we intend this document to be read as a primer on how to effectively address these issues. This paper reflects our colleagues’ voices, concerns and ideas with regards to using a collective impact framework and is meant to connect and accelerate the learning of funders immersed in this work.

Capacity Building Challenges

Based on small group dialogues with 20 foundations at our June 2016 presentation, conversations with dozens of other funders, and reinforced by our experience in the Lehigh Valley, we identified six capacity building areas that, if not properly addressed, create challenges for people using a collective impact framework. **Most of these challenges appear to be related to the fact that too many people using the collective impact framework jump to “impact” (how do we solve the complex problem) and neglect “collective” (how do we create the environment and partnerships to ensure success).**

1. **Building trust among funding partners, grantees, and community** – Many participants recognize and value the need to develop trust among stakeholders, but are challenged by the best way to do so.

Concerns Raised by Our Peers

- How do we prevent our partners from fighting among themselves?
- How do we get involved so it's not immediately about our money?
- How do we transition from a funder initiative to a community initiative?
- How do we help create a culture of collaboration?

Thoughts and Reactions of Our Peers

- Other capacity building challenges depend on trust, so creating trust should be a top priority.
 - The clearer we all are about desired results and strategies, the easier it is for all of us to get on the same page. Loose results and strategies allow people to stay in the status quo.
 - Funders can and should model the type of trust behavior they want to foster. Rather than making collective impact a condition of funding, funders can connect grantees and create conditions for organic and authentic collaborative relationships to emerge. Modeling trust means being open and transparent about goals and interests. If a funder must initiate and lead a collective impact plan, it should have an up-front, transparent exit strategy or transition plan to a community partner or to multiple community partners who can support the process moving forward.
 - Funders need to openly acknowledge that they are one component of a larger dynamic that includes other stakeholders. Grantees are often habituated to particular cycles of funding and funding guidelines that are counter-productive to collaboration. Breaking those habits will be hard and take time. Funders can support a new way of approaching grantees by working in partnership with grantees from the beginning of a new initiative.
 - Collective impact and other cross-sector partnership models are not for everyone. Making collective impact a condition of funding can cause partners to shoehorn in collaboration where it is not suited.
2. **Developing and strengthening community voice** – Connected with building trust, many funders faced the challenge of finding inclusive, productive, and equitable strategies for authentically and continuously engaging with community. Funders and community organizations also faced the challenge of striking the right balance between gathering as much community input as possible while also moving forward in a timely fashion.

Concerns Raised by Our Peers

- Inclusion is hard. Do we start the initiative and then include the community, or include them from the start?
- Trainings and workshops alone aren't achieving our equity goals. What else can we do?

Thoughts and Reactions of Our Peers

- Don't invite community to the table if you've already decided what's on the menu. Community needs to be part of the “menu planning.”

- When the table reflects those closest to the pain and when all the members feel like their opinion is being valued, you're ready to take your next step. Until then, you're not ready.
 - Strengthening community voice relies on building trust, particularly in communities that have a history of distrust. Funders need to focus on building trust as a worthwhile investment before moving forward and be more intentional about making initiatives community driven from the start.
 - One way to build trust is to focus on achievable short-term goals while in the process of listening to community voices.
 - Equity must be a part of all conversations. Equity is fairness achieved through systematically assessing disparities in opportunities and outcomes (by race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, and/or other factors) and addressing those disparities through targeted actions. Equity must be discussed as part of the work. It's meant to bring us together, not drive us apart.
 - Funders need to develop comfort with non-traditional leaders. One means of identifying such community leaders is to develop a network map that highlights those who are well-connected within the community and those who are well-connected across the collaborative. Funders can support these individuals through training, leadership development and providing opportunities to collaborate. Such support targeted toward young, emerging leaders is especially important.
 - It's a long game. Often, progress needs to be measured over a generation, not a two-year grant.
3. **Developing the leadership necessary for cross-sector work** – Successful collective impact initiatives require a new type of leadership. The idea of a “champion” or “charismatic leader” showing us the way just isn't enough to achieve the partnerships and collaborations we seek.

Concerns Raised by Our Peers

- How can we help resolve power struggles among the partners?
- We're all at maximum capacity. How do we do more?
- People equate leadership with power and being in charge. How do we stop ourselves and our partners from falling back into the status quo?

Thoughts and Reactions of Our Peers

- Collective impact leadership is different than the leadership that contributes to solo organizational success. Collective impact leaders value others, are open to different opinions, encourage and build trust, and share leadership and power. Leaders don't tell the group which way they should go. Instead, they help the group decide which way they want to go.
 - We're all working as hard as we can. Rather than thinking of collaboration as one more thing, we need to engage in a mindset shift that recognizes that approaching the work differently is not the same as “doing more work”, but working with a focus on measurable progress.
 - We need leaders that can engage multiple stakeholders from multiple sectors. We also need to acknowledge that there not “just one table”, rather multiple tables where these conversations are occurring.
 - Funders can invest in collaborative leadership development and training.
 - Shared leadership can emerge when there's trust and respect.
4. **Using and sharing data** – Funders and community members highlighted two key areas of concern around data: comprehension and logistics. The issue is often not a lack of data, but knowing and accessing what data exist, what data to collect, and how best to synthesis, analyze and communicate “data that matter”.

Concerns Raised by Our Peers

- Good data on the front end (planning and focus) is just as important as data on the back end (evaluation and measurement). What do we do if we have neither?

- We have little capacity for data gathering and sharing. How do we increase it?
- We haven't figured out how to share public data yet. How can we possibly share proprietary data?

Thoughts and Reactions of Our Peers

- Data sharing goes beyond swapping reports and reams of raw data.
- Logistical data hurdles need to be negotiated among all participants, not dictated. A well-written data sharing agreement is a good starting point. It should include the purpose, scope, duration, specific data to be shared, legal and moral implications, re-disclosure intentions and communications plan.
- Overcoming data hurdles are also connected to trust and clearly defined results and strategies. Partners and community members are more likely to share data and information if they trust and value the work that is being done. Funders often have the perceived authority to bring community data players together. They can provide the space to build trust and share concerns around data use.
- The logistics of data sharing is often time-consuming and expensive. If there is an expectation that grantees will use shared data and metrics, such an expectation must be met with the means to do so. Funders can support data training for grantees and other organizations. Funders can also invest in a shared data platform; funding and maintaining such a database is a rigorous and expensive undertaking that require continuous management.

5. **Collective Impact Resilience and Sustainability** – A common theme that emerged was the difficulty in maintaining initiative momentum over time. Coalitions are often built from the passion of champions, but over time need to adapt to new partners and changing conditions. Developing capacity for collaborative work writ large is not particularly flashy and often does not directly impact the social issue being addressed, but by building this infrastructure multiple collective impact initiatives will benefit.

Concerns Raised by Our Peers

- How do you “sell” the value of developing capacity to different audiences, including donors, trustees and other funders?
- We've launched our initiative too soon! How do you know when you are ready to launch?
- How do you sustain your effort after it's been launched?
- We told grantees what we wanted, and we aren't getting it. Now what?

Thoughts and Reactions of Our Peers

- Funders engaged in supporting collaborative and collective impact initiatives can't assume that their donors, boards or trustees understand the collective impact framework. Educating audiences around the collective impact model and the unique role that funders can play in providing support may generate more excitement around capacity building.
- On the flip side to that, much of the detail of collective impact gets lost on donors, boards and trustees. We need to be clear, concise and results-based. That's the language they understand.
- In the same way that short-term achievable goals can start to build trust with community, it can also serve as a return on investment to funder audiences. But, funders will need to educate stakeholders on new benchmarks that can be achieved in collaborative work. Evaluating and measuring capacity building is not new. Funders can draw on the research and literature available to incorporate capacity building assessment into their grant-making strategies. These data points can be shared with trustees, boards and donors.
- It's easy to get caught up in the excitement around collective impact. However, before accelerating a nascent coalition, funders can share and publicize the various tools available to determine if collective impact is right for a particular issue in their community.
- One participating funder provided the example of a Resource Center that incubates and launches collective impact initiatives while also providing access to consultants and other resources.

- Funders can support collaborative initiatives by funding, in part or in whole, a coach/navigator/project manager/coordinator who shepherds an initiative. This role can be conceived as a proto-backbone or a bridge during a transition from a funder-driven initiative to a community-driven initiative.

6. **Backbone development** – Backbones are often viewed as the linchpin of collective impact initiatives. Whether the backbone is one organization or the combination of roles spread among multiple organizations, funders play a key role in developing the skills and resources necessary to support, guide and maintain a collective impact initiative through backbone leadership.

Concerns Raised by Our Peers

- We think we selected the wrong backbone. How do we find the right organization?
- Many equate “backbone” with being in charge. How do we prevent them from harming our collaborative?
- We’re paying, so don’t we get to pick the backbone organization?

Thoughts and Reactions of Our Peers

- Effective backbones rely on many of the capacity building skills outlined above. Backbone effectiveness entails building trust across sectors, utilizing a new type of leadership, collecting, interpreting and disseminating data among partners, and ensuring that initiatives are strong and sustainable for the generational change that occurs. Funders need to recognize that backbones not only need funding to provide administrative support to a broader coalition but that backbone staff and leadership need unique professional development that is geared toward facilitating collaborative work.
- Backbones are not self-appointed or selected by the funder. It’s best when they are agreed upon by the collaborative.
- Funders can also play the role of collective impact advocates among other funders. While many funders embrace the collective impact model and see themselves as partners, many other funders do not. Backbones need to seek funding support from a variety of sources and having collective impact-attuned funders advocating for the role backbones play can be a valuable service.

Conclusion

It’s not called Impact Collective. If you haven’t achieved “Collective” you may not be ready to tackle “Impact”. Capacity building is really “collective building”.

The capacity building challenges identified above are not unique to a single community, but are shared, to various degrees, by many funders and communities. Ensuring that collaborative initiatives are founded on trust, with inclusion from community partners, focused on leading in new ways and driven by data, with an eye toward long-term sustainability, requires commitment and intentionality. Funders play a unique role in providing the support – financial and otherwise – to champion capacity as a necessary precursor to doing the tough work that moves the needle.

We value and appreciate the openness and honesty of the participants in our breakout session at the Funders Convening in June 2016 in Seattle. We are grateful to them and all of the other funders and colleagues we spoke with for sharing their frustrations and their hopes. Funders can learn from each other; sharing challenges and best practices in building capacity is an important step in pushing forward collective impact.