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Power Dynamics in Collective Impact

By Mary Jean Ryan

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Long-term support is just as important as flexible dollars. Collective impact initiatives address systemic issues and have long timeframes for change, so grantmakers must be willing to stick with them for the long haul and maintain realistic expectations about the pace of change.

"We are putting in a $5 million, five-year commitment to the Learning Network and recognize even that's not sufficient. Funders have to go into this with their eyes wide open," says Pickett-Erway.

Grantmakers can support collaboration in other ways as well. In addition to providing funding, the Kalamazoo Community Foundation supports collaboration by dedicating staff time to lead the communications work for the Learning Network.

"Without that dedicated staff capacity from our foundation staff, the Learning Network just wouldn't be," says Pickett-Erway. "But it requires us to do that in a way that downplays the community foundation identity as much as possible, so that all the other partners don't feel like it's just another community foundation initiative."

Questions for grantmakers to consider in funding the costs of collaboration:

- How are we covering the time and expenses this collaboration requires?
- Are we giving appropriate resources and attention to evaluation for this initiative?
- What are we doing to ensure the long-term sustainability of this initiative?
- Does this initiative have the flexibility it needs to adapt to changing circumstances?

PROVIDING A STABLE PLATFORM FOR SUCCESS

To make the most effective contributions to collective impact initiatives, grantmakers must be mindful of the ways that they engage in these partnerships. They must balance the varied assets they bring with their own agendas and recognize the inherent power differential. Being an effective partner in collective impact requires flexibility, long-term commitment, and a willingness to share power and decision-making with others. For many grantmakers, this requires a fundamental change in approach. When grantmakers are able to strike the right balance, however, they are more likely to meet the needs of the initiative and provide a stable platform for success.

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Power Dynamics in Collective Impact

Collective impact initiatives must build the power needed to accomplish their common agenda.

BY MARY JEAN RYAN

Collective impact initiatives are movements for social change, and they cannot succeed without achieving significant shifts in power and practice in their communities. Collective impact work requires the creation and activation of new forms of power as well as the use of powerful strategies, tools, and tactics to create large-scale systemic change. For these reasons, people involved in collective impact initiatives must understand and carefully consider power dynamics.

To achieve large-scale change, collective impact initiatives must disrupt the status quo. In each community, a particular array of power holds the present system structures in place and accounts for present-day outcomes. Generally, the status quo has been built over a long period of time by the actions of many. The central actors are often unaware of the full extent of their complicity in any negative outcomes, or of how their roles and actions reinforce those of others.

Over time, systems often become servants to themselves. The actions of many reinforce the system's strong hold and its resistance to change. This change resistance can be seen in many education institutions, which, even in the face of enormous change in labor market requirements and student demographics, operate as they have for decades.

For the past four years, my organization, Community Center for Education Results (CCER), has helped support the development and implementation of the Road Map Project, a "cradle to college and career" collective impact effort in South Seattle and the South King County area of Washington State. CCER provides the backbone support for this effort.

The Road Map Project region is very diverse demographically, and poverty rates in the area have skyrocketed over the last two decades. The project's geographic area includes seven school districts serving more than 120,000 students. Our goal is to double the number of students in South King County and South Seattle who are on track to graduate from college or earn a career credential by 2020 and to close racial and ethnic opportunity gaps. Effectively managing and engaging power has been central to our ability to make progress in our work, as it is for many collective impact efforts. As the work evolves, we are constantly learning about the dynamics and use of power. I want to share a few of the lessons that we have learned so far.

Know your context | It is not a simple thing to develop power and use it effectively for change. Collective impact leaders need to know who holds the reins of power and how these actors are best influenced. They need to understand their allies as well as their foes. They need to know how to build powerful coalitions composed of a diverse group of actors, and they must accept conflict as a natural part of social change.

To understand the dynamics of power it is essential for collective impact leaders to understand the context within which they work and to stay vigilant because context shifts frequently. For example, when we started the Road Map Project, the economy was in a recession and governments were retrenching. Now, four years later, the context has shifted; money is beginning to flow again, and the opportunities are different.

Test for favorable wind conditions | About a year before the formal start of the Road Map Project, I did a lot of digging into our regional context to assess the appetite for change. I talked with a host of regional leaders including education advocates, neighborhood youth service providers, K-12 superintendents, community college presidents, foundation leaders, nonprofit executives, housing authority leaders, and city officials. To a person, they felt a strong discontent with the status quo

Mary Jean Ryan is the executive director of the Community Center for Education Results, which staffs the Road Map Project. She was previously director of the City of Seattle's Office of Policy and Management.

and expressed a willingness to work in new ways. Their frustrations and their commitment to work for change were essential ingredients for building a new counterforce. Conditions were looking favorable.

Even more important than widespread discontent, however, community hopes and aspirations were also pointing toward the need to dramatically improve educational attainment. One way we initially gauged community attitudes and priorities was by conducting a large public opinion poll of our region's parents. The poll found an overwhelming desire of parents of all races and income levels for their children to be able to go on to college. The community's hopes and dreams—as well as the widespread desire of many stakeholders to change the status quo—were like gathering winds that eventually join together to become a gale.

Build collective power | Collective impact initiatives develop their power by building large, diverse, multi-sector coalitions committed to a clear purpose and a common agenda. By working beyond individual agendas, one can create strength in numbers. When hundreds of organizations and community leaders band together in pursuit of common objectives, new power is generated.

Develop alliances between "unusual bedfellows" by focusing on common goals | The power of a collective approach to create social change often comes from creating alliances among constituencies who don't usually work together and may even have been traditional foes. Building these alliances can be effective in creating change because it brings pressure to bear on the status quo from multiple angles. For example, an alliance of unusual bedfellows was one of the driving factors behind the Washington State legislature's rather unexpected passing of "Dream Act" legislation, which makes undocumented immigrant students eligible for state-funded financial aid for college.

The coalition that worked to gain passage of the law was composed of the most unlikely allies. Leading immigrant-rights groups joined with school district leaders and suburban Republicans, and all pushed the measure to victory. Just one year earlier, the measure was not even brought forward for a committee vote. Good timing played a role, but so did having the common goal of helping more students attend college. The common goal allowed people from a variety of political perspectives and social circumstances to defy stereotypical stances, move past partisan battling, and get something done for an important group of young people in Washington State.

Apply pressure from the outside and inside | Often, the best way to create change is to apply pressure simultaneously from both the outside *and* the inside of a system (or important institutions within the system) while engaging people from varied power positions. I have seen situations in which grassroots activists have enormous power, and where people in positions of formal power have far less actual power than others imagine. Strong alliances can emerge when people and organizations from the outside and the inside come together around a common goal. Savvy leaders of institutions see the ability of grassroots activists to push from the outside as a gift rather than a threat because it helps them lead for change. These leaders can use the outside pressure to fight the necessary internal battles.

An example of effective outside-inside power dynamics can be seen in the Road Map Project's parent engagement work. The project believes that strong parent engagement is fundamental to student success: it has tried a number of tactics to elevate the importance of parent engagement across the region. Along with many partners, the project hosted a successful regional parent forum in the spring of 2013. It then worked with University of Washington researchers, school districts, and community-based parent engagement practitioners to develop a set of common indicators to measure whether parent engagement improves over time.

By putting greater external focus on the need for more effective parent engagement strategies, the Road Map Project is now seeing growing evidence of institutional commitment. Districts are adopting the parent engagement indicators, hiring family partnership directors, and expanding innovative parent leadership approaches. Momentum around this work is accelerating rapidly.

Use competition and data to accelerate progress | In 2007, the state of Washington created the College Bound Scholarship. Low-income students can receive a full-tuition scholarship, but to become eligible, a student and her parents must sign up by the end of the eighth grade. When the state created the scholarship, it did not put many resources into marketing. With a few exceptions, the school districts did not see themselves as responsible for getting students and their families signed up.

Because of the lack of outreach only about 50 percent of low-income students signed up for the scholarship. To push the program forward, the Road Map Project created a large coalition from various sectors that has subsequently completed three sign-up campaigns. It included mayors recording robo-calls to families, community-based organization staff members and school counselors knocking on doors, and public housing authorities and libraries sending home information.

The project's approach to the sign-up campaigns has revealed that data, produced in the right way and delivered at the right time into the right hands, can be an incredibly useful tool. Every week during the sign-up campaigns, the Road Map Project sent the scholarship sign-up data to school district superintendents, mayors, local newspapers, and parent groups. The data spurred constructive competition among the seven school districts in the project's region. Best practices were shared and have now become systematized. In the last sign-up campaign, the coalition achieved a 94 percent sign-up rate in its targeted region, signing up 4,858 students in last year's eighth grade class.

The effect of the sign-up work has extended into the school system itself. In the past, many high schools tracked low-income students away from college readiness courses. The students placed in college prep classes were those believed to be "college material"—typically white and more affluent. Now almost 100 percent of the low-income students entering ninth grade know that they have a college scholarship waiting for them at the end of high school. The power dynamics and school cultures are shifting as students and their parents demand access to college prep classes as well.

Step by step, a positive counterforce is being built in South Seattle and South King County that, over time, will shift power toward low-income students and their families and will help support courageous leaders trying to do new things inside of old systems.