



COLLECTIVE IMPACT FORUM



Virtual Office Hours

Navigating the Backbone Role

November 7, 2019

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- We want to hear from you! Share your **questions** in the question box on the right.
- A **recording** of today's discussion will be made available within 24 hours. We'll send you an email once it's online.
- Download a PDF of this presentation in the Handout Section on the right of your screen.



**Jennifer Splansky
Juster**
Executive Director,
Collective Impact
Forum

Thank you for joining

Ways to Join the conversation

1

Ask a question

Send questions via the Q&A box on the right of your screen.

2

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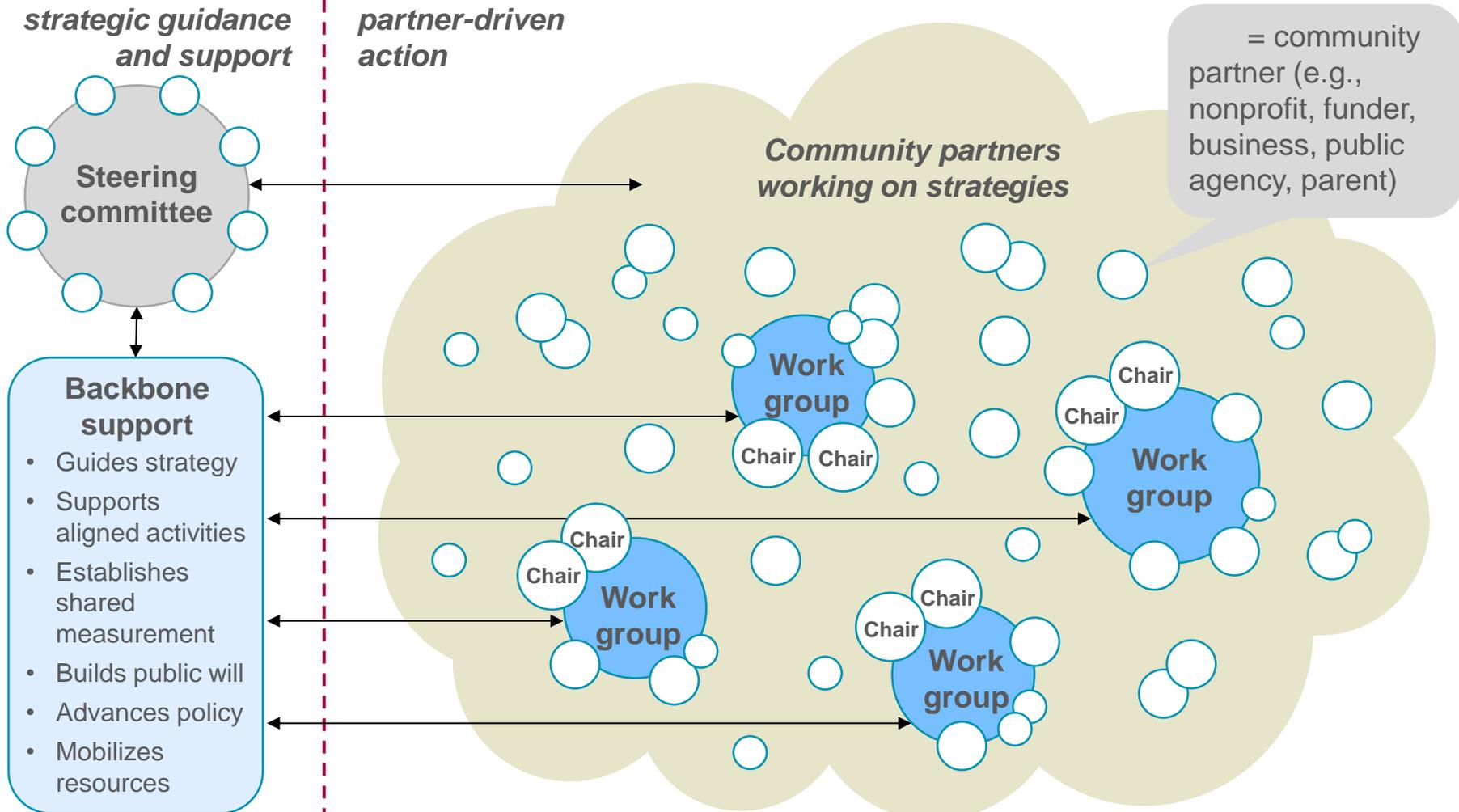
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Backbone Role

The Backbone Role Is Best Understood in the Context of the Full Collaborative

Common agenda and shared metrics



* Adapted from [Listening to the Stars: The Constellation Model of Collaborative Social Change](#), by Tonya Surman and Mark Surman, 2008.

Leadership Is Distributed Across Partners

Steering Committee

- Provides **strategic direction** for the initiative
 - **Champions** the work
 - **Aligns own work** to common agenda
 - Some Steering Committee members serve on **working groups**
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Backbone

- Provides **dedicated staff**
 - Supports the work of partners by assisting with **strategic guidance**, supporting **aligned activity**, establishing **shared measurement**, building **public will**, advancing **policy**, and mobilizing **resources**
-

Working Group

- Comprised of **cross-sector community partners targeting particular element of common agenda**
 - **Typically led by co-chairs**, supported by the backbone
 - Designs and implements strategies, involving non-working group members as needed
-

Community partner

- **Individual organizations and members of the community** (e.g, nonprofit, funder, business, public agency, student, parent,)
 - Partners should have **access to a variety of opportunities to learn about and engage** in the initiative, and will be key to implementing strategies
 - Ultimate “power” resides within the **community at large**
-

Successful backbones fulfil the following six key functions

Guide Vision and Strategy

- **Build a common understanding of the problem** that needs to be addressed
- **Provide strategic guidance to develop a common agenda; serve as a thought leader / standard bearer for the initiative**

Support Aligned Activities

Ensure **mutually reinforcing activities** take place, i.e.,

- **Coordinate and facilitate** partners' continuous communication and collaboration **Convene** partners and key external stakeholders
- **Catalyze** or **incubate** new initiatives or collaborations
- Provide **technical assistance** to build management and administrative capacity (e.g., coaching and mentoring, providing training and fundraising support)
- Create **paths for, and recruit, new partners** so they become involved
- Seek **out opportunities for alignment** with other efforts

Establish Shared Measurement Practices

- Collect, analyze, interpret, and report **data**
- Catalyze or develop **shared measurement systems**
- Provide technical assistance for building partners' **data capacity**

Cultivate Community Engagement and Ownership

- Frame the problem to **create a sense of urgency** and articulate a call to action
- Support **community member engagement** activities
- Produce and manage **communications** (e.g., news releases, reports)

Advance Policy

Advocate for an aligned **policy agenda**

Mobilize Resources

Mobilize and align public and private **resources to support initiative's goals**

Backbones require a unique skill set to support collective impact efforts

Highlights of Successful Backbones

- Have a high level of **credibility within the community**
- Serve as **neutral conveners**
- Have a **dedicated staff**
- **Build key relationships** across members of the initiative
- **Focus people's attention** and create a sense of **urgency**
- Frame issues to **present opportunities and difficulties**
- Use **evaluation as a tool for learning and progress**
- Ensure **coordination and accountability**
- Stay “behind the scenes” to **establish collective ownership**

It's not always easy to see the value of backbone support work

The role of backbone support is often described by a metaphor

- “(They are) kind of like **the quarterback**—doesn’t end up in the end zone, but they’re the ones handing it off, making a pass or calling a different play if the defense looks different.”
- “I’m at a lot of events with people in the know who don’t understand what these backbones do. But they are doing what they are supposed to do—the work **behind the scenes**. They both fill a role that, if it weren’t for them, no one would be pushing certain items.”
- “They are an **umbrella** that can say, ‘this is an issue, let’s address it together.’”
- “(The backbone) has also formed **a bridge** between early childhood agencies, corporate leaders, and funders.”

Influence without Authority

Six **sources of influence** enable backbones to shape and guide without formal authority

1 Competence

- **Technical** expertise in a relevant content area, strategic visioning and problem-solving
- **Interpersonal** skills to manage relationships
- **Conceptual** ability to take the bird's eye view and see initiative as a whole

2 Commitment

- **Track record** demonstrating dedication to the issue and / or initiative
- **Significant ongoing effort** to the initiative, inspiring confidence in others that the backbone is reliable and persistent

3 Honest Broker

- **Objectivity** of having no personal stake and no competitive dynamic with those involved
- **Inclusivity**, creating safe spaces for difficult conversations and representing the needs of others

4 Data & information

- **Quality data and research** to understand the problem, promote accountability, learn and improve
- **Perspectives from community members** and those who stand to directly benefit from the work
- **Media channels** to disseminate information

5 Network

- **Strong connections** to cross-sector players and community members, enabling backbone to broker and mediate relationships between individuals and groups
- **Endorsements** from influential champions

6 Visibility

- **Awareness** about the initiative and the backbone's contributions among partners and community members
- **Regard** for backbone and recognition of its supportive role (i.e. sense that backbone does not seek to take credit)

Evaluating the Backbone

You Can Gather Feedback / Evaluation Data from Partners on the Integral Nature of the Backbone's Role

Has the CI initiative established an effective backbone infrastructure and governance structure?



OUTCOMES	INDICATORS
The initiative's steering committee (SC) or other leadership structure has been established	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SC includes a diverse set of voices and perspectives from multiple relevant sectors and constituencies
An effective backbone function has been identified or established	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Backbone (BB) staff effectively manage complex relationships • BB staff demonstrate commitment to the CI's vision • BB staff are both neutral and inclusive • BB staff are respected by important partners and external stakeholders

To what extent and in what ways does the backbone infrastructure provide the leadership, support, and guidance partners need to do their work as planned?



OUTCOMES	INDICATORS
The backbone infrastructure (BBI) effectively guides the CI initiative's vision and strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • BBI effectively engages SC members in issues of strategic importance • BBI and SC build a common understanding of the problem that needs to be addressed • The SC makes clear and timely decisions on matters of strategic importance • BBI and SC serve as thought leaders/standard bearers for the initiative • BBI builds and maintains hope and motivation to achieve the initiative's goals • BBI celebrates and disseminates achievements of CI partners internally and externally • Partners look to the BBI and SC for initiative support, strategic guidance, and leadership

More sample outcomes and indicators in the full guide

Illustrative Backbone Effectiveness Indicators

Guide Vision and Strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partners accurately describe the common agenda • Partners publicly discuss / advocate for common agenda goals • Partners' individual work is increasingly aligned with common agenda • Board members and key leaders increasingly look to backbone organization for initiative support, strategic guidance and leadership
Support Aligned Activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partners articulate their role in the initiative • Relevant stakeholders are engaged in the initiative • Partners communicate and coordinate efforts regularly, with, and independently of, backbone • Partners report increasing levels of trust with one another • Partners increase scope / type of collaborative work • Partners improve quality of their work • Partners improve efficiency of their work • Partners feel supported and recognized in their work
Establish Shared Measurement Practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shared data system is in development • Partners understand the value of shared data • Partners have robust / shared data capacity • Partners make decisions based on data • Partners utilize data in a meaningful way
Cultivate Community Engagement and Ownership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community members are increasingly aware of the issue(s) • Community members express support for the initiative • Community members feel empowered to engage in the issue(s) • Community members increasingly take action
Advance Policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Target audience (e.g., influencers and policymakers) is increasingly aware of the initiative • Target audiences advocate for changes to the system aligned with initiative goals • Public policy is increasingly aligned with initiative goals
Mobilize Funding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funders are asking nonprofits to align to initiative goals • Funders are redirecting funds to support initiative goals • New resources from public and private sources are being contributed to partners and initiative

Funding the Backbone

Backbones highlighted several success factors for funder engagement

- ❑ **Specificity in messaging** about how the backbone affects initiative and partner success
- ❑ Thoughtfulness about **how and when to communicate** with funders
- ❑ Targeting messaging based on **funder interest and alignment**
- ❑ The ability to **track and communicate progress** at every stage of initiative
- ❑ Identifying how **various functions of the backbone role** may appeal to different funders

Resources

We have several videos on the role of the backbone



**Ross Meyer, Partners for a
Competitive Workforce (Cincinnati)**



**Chekemma Fulmore-Townsend,
Philadelphia Youth Network**



**Susan Dawson, E3 Alliance
(Texas)**



**Kat Allen, Communities That
Care Coalition (MA)**

Resources on the Role of the Backbone

- [Backbone Starter Guide](#): A Summary of Major Resources about the Backbone
- Value of backbone organizations [article](#)
- Sample [job descriptions](#) for Backbone Roles
- Backbone [Toolkit](#) – “Tools to help establish the infrastructure of a collective impact Backbone”
- Videos on the role of the backbone, housed on www.collectiveimpactforum.org
- Blog: [Securing funding for the backbone role](#)
- Blog Series: [Lessons Learned from our Conversations with Experienced Backbone Leaders](#)

Additional resources can be found on www.collectiveimpactforum.org