

COLLECTIVE IMPACT POST-PANDEMIC | A FRAMEWORK FOR RESPONSE, RECOVERY AND RESILIENCE

LIZ WEAVER

Through the lens of Collective Impact, this paper examines three important stages for leaders to consider when navigating our world post-Pandemic: Respond, Recover and Deepening Resilience Capacity. Within these stages, what simple rules might we follow? How will these simple rules create a different future for ourselves so that we can transform our communities at the individual and systems level?

There is no doubt that we are in a time of deep disruption. The COVID-19 pandemic and sheltering in place has meant that our lives and our communities have had to radically adjust and respond. The places we used to gather in are now silent and empty. Our capacity for collective decision-making has changed from face-to-face interactions to using technology, especially online meetings to connect. These virtual gatherings act as lifelines to keep us together during a time of physical distancing.

While this crisis has already changed us individually, it has also uncovered some of the greatest fragilities and strengths in our systems. Laid bare are the inequities in our communities where those most vulnerable are least able to navigate and survive the pandemic. Our healthcare system, while coping with the pandemic, is also experiencing challenges in ensuring there is enough protective gear, enough testing and enough ICU beds for those most ill. Likewise, our economies are going through significant shifts and all levels of governments know that while the need for response is immediate, the recovery process will take many years.

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COLLECTIVE IMPACT: A FRAMEWORK FOR DYNAMIC TIMES

When John Kania and Mark Kramer published the article [*Collective Impact*](#) (Kania & Kramer, 2011), they envisioned an approach that would move the needle on population level change. The Collective Impact framework, consisting of five core conditions, sought to engage systems level leaders in developing a common or shared agenda and then working collectively to drive change forward.

In the ensuing years since 2011, the Collective Impact approach has been adopted by communities and collaboratives working at different scales. Much has been learned and written about how the Collective Impact framework can achieve population level impact.

The Collective Impact approach was designed with minimum set guidelines or conditions. This meant that Collective Impact could be adapted to different community structures and tackle a range of complex community issues.

[*Collective Impact 3.0: An Evolving Framework for Community Change*](#) (Cabaj & Weaver, 2017) built on the original Collective Impact framework and suggested additional elements to enhance the adaptability and resilience of the framework. These elements included a re-orientation from managing the complex problem to building a community movement for change. It is this transformative idea, engaging the hearts and minds of a broad cross-section of key stakeholders and engaging them deeply in the practice of movement building for Collective Impact that can create a deep resilience that is needed to navigate dynamic and disruptive times.

In a movement-building approach, the emphasis is on reforming (even transforming) systems where improvements alone will not make a difference.

Movement-building leaders bring together a diverse group of stakeholders, including those not in traditional institutions or seats of power, to build a vision of the future based on common values and narratives. Movements “open up peoples’ hearts and minds to new possibilities,” “create the receptive climate for new ideas to take hold,” and “embolden policymakers” and system leaders. Movements change the ground on which everyday political life and management occur (Etmanski, 2016).

Much of the Collective Impact 3.0 approach sought to deepen the impact by drawing from a range of different practices including community engagement with an equity lens and developmental evaluation and sense-making.

Collective Impact 3.0 recognized that practitioners needed to increase their adaptive capacity. Community change is not static but responsive. Even as you begin to intervene in the change, the change adapts and shifts. Likewise, practitioners need to adapt and shift to maximize impact. Based on this understanding, there are three important stages that leaders will need to navigate as they lead movements for change.

STAGE ONE: RESPOND

Respond is the work that is done immediately to address the crisis. In response, we are seeking physical safety for ourselves and our family. Usually a small set of key decision makers step to the forefront providing a path forward and data about what is occurring. They provide us with the 'rules to follow' to maintain our safety and security. These decision makers are at the forefront of the response, but there is a ripple effect as each of us translates the rules into our individual contexts.

There have been many examples, since the origin of Collective Impact in 2011, where communities have experienced traumatic changes: loss of key industries and jobs, fires, floods, etc. but these events have been isolated to single communities or smaller regions.

In February 2020, we experienced something different. The COVID-19 pandemic was not in an isolated community but rather spread quickly across the globe. This shared experience provides a unique window on how communities can self-organize to respond.

Paul Schmitz, Senior Advisor at the Collective Impact Forum acknowledged in a recent post that our response happens at multiple levels. In some ways, it is very personal. We are fearful of how the pandemic will impact us as individuals, our families and loved ones whether it is through illness or economic hardship. We are worried about the impact on our organizations and colleagues as we navigate through weeks of working virtually and with less resources. And we are worried about our communities, particularly those individuals we have been trying to support.

Paul provides three ways to respond for Collective Impact practitioners:

- 1. LEAN INTO EMPATHY**

Connect to the emotions that underpin experiences and be with people in their darkness and fear

- 2. PUT ON YOUR OXYGEN MASK FIRST**

Take care of yourself but also look for the patterns that are emerging on the ground and from 30,000 feet

- 3. USE YOUR COLLECTIVE EXPERIENCE, NETWORKS AND ASSETS**

Ask questions, be ready to go off plan, watch for special vulnerabilities of your communities and partners, and adapt your approaches (Schmitz, 2020)

Tamarack has been observing and documenting how communities and Vibrant Communities poverty reduction roundtables are responding to the pandemic. In the April 14, 2020 issue of [Community Building and COVID](#), Tamarack highlighted examples of how Vibrant Community poverty reduction roundtables across Canada have ramped up their community responses. The collective action of citizens in Revelstoke, BC has ensured that the most vulnerable in the community are supported and there is a focus on investing in local business. Other examples include building neighbourhood connections in Lethbridge and Stoney Plane, Alberta and advocating for a Universal Basic Income by the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction.

In communities across Canada, Vibrant Communities poverty reduction roundtables have shifted gears to respond in new and innovative ways. They have leveraged their networks to focus on emerging needs but are also advocating for longer term systems shifts.

Similarly, Jennifer Blatz of the Strive Together Network in the US notes:

“Across the national Cradle to Career Network, these partnerships have mobilized to respond to the immediate needs, even as they prepare to drive long-term systems change. They are nimble. They practice adaptive leadership. They serve as convener, connector, data collector and analyst. They capture stories from the community and make the case for change.” (Blatz, 2020)

Collective Impact efforts are well-positioned to both respond and enable communities to lean into recovery.

STAGE TWO: RECOVER

The work of recovery is different from responding. Recovery begins with a conversation about envisioning possible futures and then making sense of these possible futures from different perspectives. What will these futures mean to me, what will they mean to my networks, partners and community and what will they mean to my country or world experience? Scenario planning is a tool which is often used in the recovery stage where a range of possible futures are emerging.

To jumpstart the conversation about Collective Impact as a framework for recovery, Tamarack recently welcomed 400 Collective Impact leaders and community change practitioners to a webinar about [Collective Impact 3.0 in Dynamic and Disruptive Times](#). In this webinar, Liz Weaver and Mark Cabaj noted that since 2011, community change practitioners have experienced many significant and deeply disruptive shifts. These shifts include the rise of movements like Me Too and Climate Striking. There has been the growth and investment in social impact and social innovation labs. Also, emerging are a range of new practices that, if woven into the Collective Impact framework, would increase its adaptability.

Social innovation tools like network, empathy and journey mapping could deepen our collective understanding of the complexity of issues like poverty, homelessness and youth disengagement. Multi-solving, agile approaches, eco-system mapping and the three horizons framework could help us look beyond the splash of the immediate outcome to the ripple effects of working collectively. Developmental evaluation, principles-focused evaluation, failure reports and contribution analysis could stretch us to be better able to articulate impact. Applying both co-design and equity lenses to our Collective Impact efforts would ensure that those most impacted by the issue share their wisdom, leading to more sustainable solutions.

During the time of recovery, we have the ability to disrupt our old patterns and begin to collectively explore tools and approaches that enhance how we work to effect change. Using the social innovation lab approach, we can rapidly prototype, experiment and learn. Can we stand in inquiry asking ourselves and others: what happened, so what was our response and our community's response, now how do we want to be moving forward?

Forward thinking is a critical part of the recovery phase. There are many organizations and individuals envisioning a different future post-pandemic. The recovery phase enables us to pause, reflect and lean forward into new possibilities.

Michael McAfee, President and CEO of PolicyLink, a national research and action organization advancing racial and economic equity in the US, recently identified a set of core principles for 'a common sense, street-smart recovery' (McAfee, 2020). These principles are:

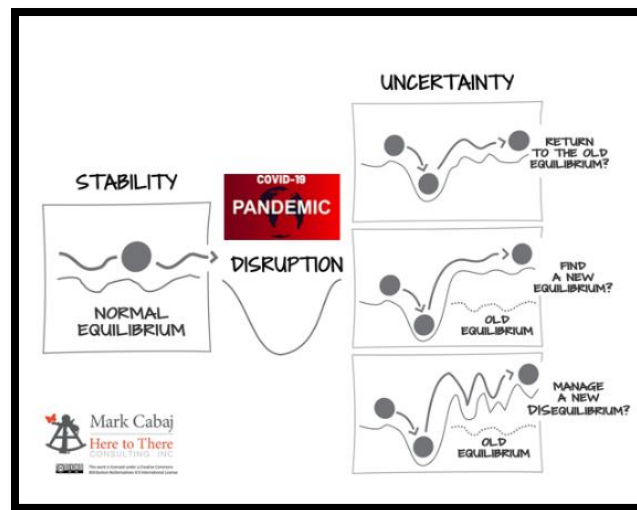
- **CREATE RACIAL EQUITY** - Build a recovery plan that benefits everyone
- **PUT PEOPLE FIRST** - Address human needs and support people at the margins
- **INVEST IN COMMUNITY INFRASTRUCTURE** - Including non-profit, cultural, philanthropic and local institutions
- **PROTECT AND EXPAND COMMUNITY VOICE AND POWER**— Low-income citizens and people of colour must shape the recovery decisions that affect their lives and communities

A People-Ready investment is as important as a shovel-ready investment in the recovery phase. Building the capacity of people, engaging in new ideas, and supporting communities are critical recovery elements.

STAGE THREE: BUILDING AND DEEPENING RESILIENCE

Resilience is the capacity to recover from difficulty or disruption. Mark Cabaj, Tamarack Associate and President of Here to There Consulting describes three different paths forward for our collective response to the pandemic. One future leads us back to our old ways with not much change. Another future leads us forward with some small improvements.

The final future is one where disequilibrium becomes the new normal. In the disequilibrium future, we learn to navigate the disruption but there are twists and turns along the path. These are three paths forward from today but there are likely more and variations on each of these paths.



Tim Brodhead, former CEO of the McConnell Foundation, in his recent paper [On Not Letting \(Another\) Crisis go to Waste](#) (Brodhead, 2020) wrote about our collective response to the 2008 financial crisis. While there were small innovations which emerged from that crisis, essentially, we collectively returned to stability and not much improvement. Some might argue that the gap between the rich and poor grew even wider in the subsequent years as many corporations received financial supports and bailouts and yet poverty levels increased.

Brodhead observes that the COVID-19 pandemic has uncovered the following responses which build community resilience:

- Charities are recognized as essential services
- Canadians are capable of mobilizing to confront an existential threat
- Decisive government action is critical
- Facts and experience matter
- Actions deemed too costly become essential and feasible

Community resilience is a process linking a set of networked, adaptive capacities to a positive trajectory. To build resilience includes engaging diverse partners and perspectives, building new knowledge sets through engagement of different perspectives, learning how to uncover and mitigate vulnerabilities, building social connections and capital and engaging in short term and rapid experiments to test what is and is not working. Essential to building community resilience is ensuring flexible and adaptable learning systems.

Community resilience is a people-first approach. It seeks to engage and access the wisdom that already exists in communities across Canada and around the world. It leverages the local capacity of individuals and institutions to drive forward change. It builds resilience in the short term through individual and group connections, but it also builds resilience over the longer

term as greater social connection and cohesion enables communities to navigate current and future disruptions. This is where Collective Impact can be a powerful framework. Collective Impact is, by its structure, collaborative and cross-sector. It connects people to a common purpose and adapts as change happens.

Royce Holladay, in a post on the [Human Systems Dynamics Institute](#) website, describes the nature of resilient networks as being sensitive, responsive and robust. Resilient networks are designed to be responsive, observing the environments and consider different kinds of information and data to make real time decisions. They respond to changes in real time. And finally, resilient networks have multiple nodes which enable them to navigate change even when a node turns from strong to weak. Other nodes step into different roles to support the networked action (Holladay, 2020).

Collective Impact, in its most effective and evolved form, should be a responsive, adaptable, networked approach where leaders are simultaneously engaged and observant of systems and network changes as they are happening. These leaders look for pivot points and then lean into them to nudge the system forward toward population level outcomes. Collective Impact practitioners should be able to pivot through response and recovery toward resilience.

Many Collective Impact approaches have embedded some of the elements of community resilience. This would, in theory, make them more able to weather the pandemic crisis. We have seen Collective Impact efforts in Canada and the US leverage their local networks to respond in ways that ensure community members are supported.

We are beginning to understand what recovery might look like and the challenge of navigating Self and systems in parallel. As we begin to focus on a new normal, Glenda Eoyang from the HSD Institute urges Collective Impact and community change practitioners hoping for a different path forward to consider and develop some simple rules to follow to bring a different future forward (Eoyang & Becker, 2020). We have witnessed the power that simple rules have played in managing the pandemic response in Canada: wash your hands frequently, stay physically distant from others, cough into your sleeve and shelter in place.

“
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SIMPLE RULES FOR SIMPLE RULES

If you want to create your own, consider these Simple Rules for Simple Rules:

- Start with a verb. It is about what you DO, not what you think or believe.
- Make the list short. If you have more than seven, you won't remember them, and they won't be useful in the moment when you need them.
- Be sure they are positive. A negative rule prohibits, but it doesn't inform. You need actions that will positively move to create the pattern you want.
- Reflect on the rules that shape your behaviour now, even if you haven't been aware of them in the past. Anyone who lives in community already follows *simple rules*.

What are yours? Are they useful today? Will they serve the future you want to build?

What might be the simple rules for community leaders, post-pandemic? These are a few that I am imagining:

- Leverage the networked capacity of Collective Impact to build resilient communities
- Engage communities to mobilize and respond quickly
- Lean into empathy
- Make responsive and quick decisions to support citizens at the margins
- Don't let another crisis go to waste

What might your response be? What are the set of simple rules that continue to build our collective resilience and adaptive capacity?

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Liz Weaver is the Co-CEO of Tamarack Institute where she is leading the Tamarack Learning Centre. The Tamarack Learning Centre has a focus on advancing community change efforts and does this by focusing on five interconnected practices including Collective Impact, Collaborative Leadership, Community Engagement, Community Innovation and Evaluating Impact. Liz is known for her thought leadership on Collective Impact and is the author of several popular and academic papers on the topic. She is a co-catalyst partner with the Collective Impact Forum.



Liz is passionate about the power and potential of communities getting to impact on complex issues. Prior to her current role at Tamarack, Liz led the Vibrant Communities Canada team and assisted place-based collaborative tables develop their frameworks of change and supported and guided their projects from idea to impact.

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