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Exerting Influence Without Formal Authority

Part one of a two-part series on how backbone organizations shape the work of collective impact without formal authority.

By [Shiloh Turner](#), [Katherine Errecart](#), & [Anjali Bhatt](#) | Dec. 2, 2013

Last year, the [Greater Cincinnati Foundation](#) (GCF) engaged the nonprofit consulting firm [FSG](#) to help understand and evaluate the role of backbone organizations in collective impact efforts, which culminated in a four-part blog series for Stanford Social Innovation Review entitled, “[Understanding the Value of Backbone Organizations in Collective Impact](#).” This year, GCF engaged FSG as evaluators to assess the importance of backbone organizations in collective impact, with a targeted focus on the question of how and to what extent backbone organizations influence their constituents without formal authority. This series summarizes the findings from this effort, outlining in part one the sources of influence that enable backbone organizations to shape and guide the work of collective impact, and in part two the measures of influence that can help to demonstrate the backbone’s contributions to the collective impact effort.

Sources and Measures of Influence in Collective Impact

A two-part series on how backbone organizations shape the work of collective impact without formal authority.

Exerting Influence Without Formal Authority

Measuring Backbone Contributions to Collective Impact

Much of the work of [collective impact](#) depends on the ability to change the attitudes and behaviors of a diverse array of stakeholders. After all, you need to build consensus to establish a common goal; you need all partners to agree on the same set of shared metrics to collectively monitor progress; and you need collaboration and communication to identify mutually reinforcing activities that can help drive the work forward. The responsibility for affecting these changes in attitudes and behaviors often falls to the backbone organization, which has no formal authority over those it seeks to influence.

So, how do backbone organizations shape the work of collective impact when they operate in a collaborative system without “command and control” leadership? Through our research, we identified six sources of influence that enable them to guide constituents in their [community](#) without formal

authority:

1. Competence

Backbone organizations with relevant content knowledge, and experience with strategic visioning and problem-solving, provide thought leadership, enabling them to influence others by explaining the benefits of a given course of action. Similarly, when backbone staff has strong interpersonal skills, they are more influential, as constituents trust that the organization can help them work together effectively. When we asked what unique value the backbone GCF backbone **Success by 6** provided, one person said: “[**Success by 6’s** backbone leader is] very good at managing relationships and making sure key people are kept in the loop and feel included. And she knows the work—she has credibility because she’s so knowledgeable about early childhood development.”

2. Commitment

Collective impact partners and broader community stakeholders often look to backbones as influential leaders because of their track record demonstrating dedication to the issue at hand. Also, those that demonstrate significant ongoing effort to the initiative inspire confidence in others that they are reliable and persistent. For example, one stakeholder explained that the **Vision 2015** backbone team members were “very clear about their role and priorities, and haven’t moved to the next shiny object. They haven’t lost focus.”

3. Objectivity

Backbones are most influential when community constituents view them as honest brokers with no personal stake in the collaboration’s ultimate course of action and no competitive dynamic with those involved. In these situations, constituents trust that the backbone is motivated by the common good and not personal gain. Further, backbones that are inclusive demonstrate that all viewpoints are welcome. They create safe spaces for difficult conversations and represent the needs of others; this enables them to exercise influence by appealing to shared values. One individual we interviewed said: “**Partners for a Competitive Workforce** is an unbiased third party. They’re not in the trenches doing the work—they’re convening, they’re connecting the dots. It’s that neutral party that allows for common ground for all of us to get together and work together on an issue.”

4. Data and information

Quality data and research can help constituents understand the problem, promote accountability, learn, and improve. Meanwhile, perspectives from community members and those who stand to directly benefit from the work offer a valuable source of information. And media channels assist in disseminating information. Using these tools, the backbone can exert influence by providing data and

proof. An example from our interviews: “[[The Strive Partnership](#)] has put data behind the work to show what these interventions can actually do. This helps to professionalize the work. They have built credibility around the work and made it something that people want to do.”

5. Network

Strong connections to cross-sector players and community members enable backbones to broker and mediate relationships between individuals and groups, while endorsements from influential champions enhance people’s trust that that backbone organizations will get the support they need to be successful. “[Agenda 360](#) is the connective tissue between the business community and all the other communities—for example, African American organizations, Hispanic organizations, the United Way, the Greater Cincinnati Foundation,” explained one stakeholder. “They are an umbrella for communities that don’t naturally find themselves together.”

6. Visibility

Backbones can be effective only when there is sufficient awareness among partners and community members about the initiative and the backbone’s contributions. Further, there must be regard for the backbone and recognition of its supportive role if the organization is to be effective and influential. One final example drawn from our interviews: “[LISC](#) is about as good as I’ve seen in terms of communicating success without sacrificing humility. They have a dedicated person assigned to communication who has helped to increase the organization’s visibility exponentially and build its reputation in the community. Going down the road, this will be critical to the organization’s success.”

The Greater Cincinnati Foundation and its cohort of backbone organizations (see right) have observed the importance of these six sources of influence that enable backbone organizations to carry out the work of shaping attitudes and behaviors so critical to advancing a collective impact initiative.

In part two of this series, we will discuss four measures of influence that demonstrate the backbone organization’s contributions to a collective impact initiative.

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The Greater Cincinnati Foundation's Cohort of Backbone Organizations

- **Agenda 360** advances regional economic competitiveness as a program of the Cincinnati USA Chamber of Commerce
- **LISC's Place Matters** supports comprehensive community development in Greater Cincinnati neighborhoods with investment from a consortium of philanthropic funders and the national organization LISC
- **Partners for a Competitive Workforce** improves regional workforce development efforts, housed by United Way of Greater Cincinnati
- **The Strive Partnership** is a cradle to career initiative that focuses on improving outcomes for children and students in the urban core
- **Success by 6** focuses on improving early childhood education and kindergarten readiness, also housed by United Way
- **Vision 2015** supports economic competitiveness in Northern Kentucky and is closely aligned with Agenda 360 across the river

Tags

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