



Measuring Backbone Contributions to Collective Impact

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

By [Shiloh Turner](#), [Katherine Errecart](#), & [Anjali Bhatt](#) | Dec. 3, 2013

The [Greater Cincinnati Foundation](#) (GCF) engaged the nonprofit consulting firm [FSG](#) to evaluate how and to what extent backbone organizations influence their constituents. In part one of this series, we laid out six sources of influence that enable backbones to guide and shape collective impact efforts without formal authority. This post describes measures of influence that backbone organizations can use to demonstrate their contributions.

One of the major dilemmas backbone organizations face is how to articulate their role and influence in [collective impact](#) efforts. To maintain its status as an objective and honest broker motivated by the common good (a source of influence discussed in our previous post), it is critical that the backbone does not come across as “taking credit” for these efforts. However, certain stakeholders, such as funders and board members, require evidence that the backbone has added value to justify their [investments](#) of time and money. Through our research, we identified four measures of influence that can help to demonstrate the backbone’s contributions:

1. Leveraged funding

Certain stakeholders seek a single quantitative measure of a backbone’s contributions. For such individuals or groups, it can be useful to provide an estimate of the amount of funding that the backbone organization has helped to catalyze, pool, or redirect in support of the initiative’s common agenda. Such a measure can provide some insight into the extent to which the backbone has helped build momentum for the effort. For example, since 2008, [Partners for a Competitive Workforce](#) has

Sources and Measures of Influence in Collective Impact

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leveraged more than \$29 million in public and private funds from local, state, and national sources (including \$5 million in pooled funding) to support workforce development strategies in their region.

Measuring leverage is one of the most powerful ways to demonstrate the strategic nature and fundamental difference of investing in a backbone organization, as opposed to more traditional program investments. That said, leverage can be quite difficult to quantify, as the method and process for calculating funding amounts can vary. As such, it is critical to consider these amounts in context when comparing across backbone organizations.

2. Indicators of initiative progress

Backbones can also share initial project outcomes—related to either process or initiative-level impacts—as a measure of their influence. Initiative-level indicators, such as legislation passed in support of common goals, can demonstrate how a backbone is critical to moving the needle on social problems. For example, **Success by 6** has contributed to doubling the number of quality-rated preschool programs in Cincinnati and surrounding Hamilton County between 2007 and 2012. Process indicators, such as the number of involved partners or the establishment of a shared measurement system, are more closely linked to backbone activity. For example, **Agenda 360** has engaged more than 140 local organizations in its Diverse by Design action teams, which are focused on attracting and retaining high potential talent.

(See [this set of 27 example indicators you can use to measure backbone effectiveness.](#))

3. Evidence of systems change

During FSG's interviews with stakeholders in the Greater Cincinnati region, we found that one of the best ways to gauge a backbone's influence was to listen to the stories that participants shared about systems changes in their communities. These stories describe the shifts taking place in the way that the community makes decisions about policies, programs, and/or the allocation of its resources, and in the way the community delivers services and supports its citizens. Our interviews with stakeholders unearthed numerous types of systems changes that can occur, outlined below (and informed by the [Federal definition of system change](#)).

Systems Change Outcomes

Factors that support systems change:

- **Collective ownership and accountability** for community problems
- Collection, analysis, reporting and use of **quality data**
- Greater **capacity of individual organizations**

Indicators that systems change is occurring:

- Use of **joint governance and shared decision-making**
- Increased **knowledge, skills, values and motivation among citizens**
- Stronger **cultural competence**
- **Collaboration and alignment among** cross-sector partners who have not historically worked together
- **Alignment of existing resources** to initiative goals
- **New resources leveraged** to support initiative goals
- **Formal and informal policies** support initiative goals

These stories of systems change can help illustrate a backbone's influence in the community. For

example, in one of our interviews, a local business professional described how **The Strive Partnership** is helping create alignment among historically disconnected partners to support its goals across the cradle to career education pipeline:

Strive has brought this collaboration to a whole new level—now it’s just second nature to connect dots and make sure that people are talking to the relevant people. That’s now part of our day-to-day modus operandi. However, it was a process. When I think about how we started, it was difficult bringing all the partners to the same table—getting K-12 to sit at the same table with the postsecondary folks was pretty unheard of. You can’t dictate what everyone will do. Strive shifted from asking “What will you do to contribute to the goal,” to asking, “What do you need, and how can we help?” That change was pretty significant and critical to really taking the level of collaboration to a whole new place. As they went through this process, they built trust.

4. Stakeholder perceptions of backbone value

Observations from community members about the importance of the backbone organization can further help to define its influence. FSG probed this area by asking stakeholders, “If [a specific backbone] ceased to exist, what would be lost?” The responses elicited by this question highlight the extent to which stakeholders value the backbone and which specific contributions of the backbone they perceived as most valuable to the community. These contributions include cultivating a culture of collaboration, building momentum and accountability for the work, promoting a data-driven approach, and facilitating the creation of a collective voice to affect policy and funding. For example, one local participant responded that without **Vision 2015** (Northern Kentucky’s backbone organization for economic development), “We would lose both the ability to speak with one regional voice and the opportunity to collaborate across jurisdictions and categories of civic leadership.”

The Greater Cincinnati Foundation is using these four measures to understand the influence of the six backbone organizations they are funding. Each measure provides a different way for key audiences to examine the value of a backbone organization; together, they paint a fuller picture of how and to what extent a backbone influences the constituents in its community.

These four measures of influence are by no means comprehensive. Please share with us the ways that you have seen backbone organizations effectively demonstrate their contributions.



Shiloh Turner is vice president for Community Investment at The Greater Cincinnati Foundation and is responsible for all facets of its charitable investment. She was previously director of health data improvement with Interact For Health and vice president of programs at the Erie Community Foundation.



Katherine Errecart is a senior consultant at FSG with extensive experience designing, supporting, and evaluating collective impact efforts. She contributed to FSG's 2012 paper "**Collective Impact for Opportunity Youth**" and has spoken at a variety of workshops and seminars on collective impact.



Anjali Bhatt is an associate at FSG, where she advises foundations, corporations, and nonprofits on strategy and evaluation. Previously, she worked on strategic planning and impact analysis at The SEED Foundation in Washington, D.C.

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