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Partnership Brokering & Collective Impact

How partnership brokering creates foundational conditions for success in Collective Impact initiatives

Well-intentioned efforts to solve complex community issues with Collective Impact processes risk failure without sufficient attention paid to the formation and management of the partnership. Communities throughout the US have eagerly embraced Collective Impact as a framework for their work. However, without sufficient attention paid to the foundation and development of the partnership, these groups are ripe for the collapse of relationships, hurt feelings, wasted resources, and worst of all, not making progress on the very issue they are seeking to address. This paper submits that the role of a Partnership Broker is integral in bringing a disciplined method and proven philosophy to the formation and maturation of a partnership, helping to create conditions favorable for using sophisticated processes such as Collective Impact.

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BASED IN: USA - Waukesha, Wisconsin - in the Midwestern part of the US
ACCREDITED: 2018
EDITION: 11
THEMES: Collective Impact; Power dynamics and equity; Group development

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The Community Imagine a room filled with people from a variety of backgrounds, including government, non-governmental organizations, philanthropic foundations, education, healthcare, business, faith communities, tribes. Everyone was invited



individually by a well-known Community Leader who is recognized for her passion in addressing a condition bringing pain to people in the community. The condition is also negatively impacting the local economy and straining resources of community organizations and the public sector. Some in the room have a personal story

that relates to the impact of the condition. Some are funding efforts to address the condition.

The Community Leader welcomes the group, thanking them for their devotion to addressing the condition. “All of us, including myself, haven’t been able to do enough to address the condition. I’ve personally invited each of you here because I think we have an opportunity to really make change. I’m grateful that our community foundation is supporting our gathering today. The foundation introduced me to new terms that seem to describe our issue – terms like complex social conditions and root causes. I’ve read about a new way to talk about the condition, called Collective Impact.

The Community Leader continues. “The way that we’ve been trying to address the condition isn’t working, or we wouldn’t still have the condition. You may be wondering what will be different this time. All of my reading keeps coming back to phrases like ‘working together differently,’ ‘developing mutual trust,’ ‘a joint approach to solve the problem,’ collaboration goes at the speed of trust.’ ” She pauses here to catch her breath.

“Would you all take out the document that we handed out so you can follow along? Collective Impact includes five distinct parts: a common agenda, mutually reinforcing activities, a backbone organization, continuous communication, and shared measurements. We’re going to learn together what all of this means, and decide as a community if it’s the right way for us to address the condition. But before we do any of that, we need to think about *how* we are going to work together. This might be more difficult than we think, and we need some help to figure out how we are going to work together. I’d like to introduce someone who I believe can help us. The person I’m about to introduce you to is a Partnership Broker.”

She continues “I believe that it’s important for us to start with a Partnership Broker because...”

What happens next? Why does the influential Community Leader feel that it is important to engage a Partnership Broker? If the condition is urgent, why isn't the group starting their work by discussing the condition? Why doesn't the influential leader begin with the tools of Collective Impact?

*"It's not called Impact Collective. If you haven't achieved "Collective" you may not be ready to tackle "Impact."*ⁱ

Aim of the Paper The intent of this paper is to illustrate how Partnership Brokering can increase the likelihood of success by focusing on the formation and health of the partnership before the five conditions of CI are addressed.

Collective Impact is utilized throughout the world as a process tool to address complex social issues. "Collective Impact brings people together, in a structured way, to create social change. It can be instrumental in creating significant change precisely under the circumstances of austerity. By building upon the UK's rich legacy of cross-sector partnership, Collective Impact puts a new twist on the old English art of collaboration. The five elements of Collective Impact (see below) seem quite simple, yet they are exceedingly powerful in their impact."ⁱⁱ

THE FIVE CONDITIONS OF COLLECTIVE IMPACT

Common agenda – All participants have a shared vision for change that includes a common understanding of the problem and a joint approach to solving the problem through agreed actions.

Shared measurement – Agreement on the ways success will be measured and reported with a short list of common indicators identified and used across all participating organisations for learning and improvement.

Mutually reinforcing activities – Engagement of a diverse set of stakeholders, typically across sectors, coordinating a set of differentiated activities through a mutually reinforcing plan of action.

Continuous communication – Frequent and structured open communication across the many players to build trust, assure mutual objectives, and create common motivation.

Backbone support – Ongoing support by independent, funded staff dedicated to the initiative, including guiding the initiative's vision and strategy, supporting aligned activities, establishing shared measurement practices, building public will, advancing policy, and mobilising resources.

Not every collaboration is ready to embark upon Collective Impact. John Kania & Mark Kramer, writing for the Stanford Social Innovation Review, Winter, 2011 note: "Shifting from isolated impact to Collective Impact is not merely a matter of encouraging more collaboration or public-private partnerships. It requires a systemic approach to social impact that focuses on the relationships between organizations and the progress toward shared objectives."ⁱⁱⁱ

The Collaborative Readiness Assessment details pre-conditions for Collective Impact: "In studying and working with organizations interested in doing Collective Impact work, much of the initiatives' success is dependent on having the right conditions and context

for the work. Three key elements have emerged as critical pre-conditions: the presence of influential champions, sufficient resources to support the planning process and Collective Impact infrastructure, and the urgency to address the issue in new and different ways. For practitioners that do not have these pre-conditions in place, we strongly suggest focusing on cultivating these elements before beginning a robust Collective Impact planning process.”^{iv}

Even when a collaboration has evidence of the three-preconditions, there is no guarantee that the practitioners will have success utilizing the structure and tools of Collective Impact (CI). Success in CI relies on partners working differently, across systems, and with representatives from diverse sectors. As noted above, the five conditions of CI include terms such as shared vision, common understanding, joint approach, agreement, open communication, build trust, common motivation. These phrases could easily describe the activities of a highly-performing group, or a group in the Performing Stage as defined by researcher Bruce Tuckman: "With group norms and roles established, group members focus on achieving common goals, often reaching an unexpectedly high level of success. By this time, they are motivated and knowledgeable. The team members are now competent, autonomous and able to handle the decision-making process without supervision. Dissent is expected and allowed as long as it is channeled through means acceptable to the team.”^v

Tuckman identified four stages of group development – Forming, Storming, Norming, and Performing, adding a fifth stage, Adjourning, ten years later. These five stages are recognized as universal to all teams regardless of the group's members, purpose, goal, culture, location, demographics and so on.

According to Tuckman’s work the group of stakeholders in our opening example are embarking upon a Forming Stage. “The team meets and learns about the opportunities and challenges, and then agrees on goals and begins to tackle the tasks. Team members tend to behave quite independently. They may be motivated but are usually relatively uninformed of the issues and objectives of the team. Team members are usually on their best behavior but very focused on themselves. Mature team members begin to model appropriate behavior even at this early phase. The meeting environment also plays an important role to model the initial behaviors of each individual. The major task functions also concern orientation. Members attempt to become oriented to the tasks as well as to one another. Discussion centers around defining the scope of the task, how to approach it, and similar concerns. To grow from this stage to the next, each member must relinquish the comfort of non-threatening topics and risk the possibility of conflict.”^{vi}

Let's look more closely at one of the Norming steps. In many collaborations, the step of "relinquishing the comfort of non-threatening topics and risking the possibility of conflict" is an impossible feat without modeling and support. Partners with existing power

How will a group of impassioned, well-meaning individuals from different organizations handle conflict?

dynamics, for example, may not know how to approach one another during conflict. How does an NGO disagree with a funder without fearing loss of funding? Can a community member impacted by the condition have the confidence to speak honestly to wealthy

philanthropists? The stakeholders in our example may be experts in the community condition, or the impact of the condition, but as noted above they "are usually relatively uninformed of the issues and objectives of the team ... very focused on themselves."

How will stakeholders become partners? How will a group of impassioned, well-meaning individuals from different organizations handle conflict, develop a decision-making structure, bring in new partners, and successfully manage departures of partners? They will need to work differently if they are to achieve change, but how can partners be expected to work differently without support in knowing what "work differently" means?

What happens to our group of stakeholders if these questions aren't addressed?

Why Collective Impact Fails A review of unsuccessful CI initiatives points quickly to the reasons for failure. Groups ignoring the important work leading to foundational partnership dynamics will become dysfunctional work groups. Put another way, groups that attempt to begin in the Performing stage will never reach that stage, having neglected the stages of Norming, Storming, and Forming. "Most of these challenges appear to be related to the fact that too many people using the Collective Impact framework jump to "impact (how do we solve the complex problem) and neglect "collective" (how do we create the environment and partnerships to ensure success).

- How do we prevent our partners from fighting among themselves?
- How do we get involved so it's not immediately about our money?
- How do we transition from a funder initiative to a community initiative?
- How do we help create a culture of collaboration?"^{vii}

Partnership Broker's Role A Partnership Broker pays attention to the "Collective" in Collective Impact - the evolving, changing, and growing dynamics of the partnership, and can support a group in developing the skills to move through the stages leading up to the Performing stage. A Broker is focused on aiding partners in learning new skills and supporting giving up old ways of working to develop a better way to address the condition. A group that invests time and energy in surfacing issues and addressing partnership dynamics begins to build a solid, trust-based foundation that will support the generative work of addressing complex social issues.

A Partnership Broker is responsible for objectively holding the space for the health of the partnership. Lacking a stake in the outcome of the work of the partnership, the Partnership Broker can remain neutral in the developing work toward resolution of the condition, while challenging partnership behaviors that detract from the progress of the partnership. Partners involved in a CI may bring high levels of passion and emotion, and initially are likely to be very motivated to try new activities and interventions. CI, however, needs more than activities and interventions. Participants may need to confront their own well-engrained institutional practices and programs. For example, CEOs of NGOs may need to address well-loved but ineffective programs, and philanthropic organizations may need to change long-standing funding practices that aren't impacting the social condition.

In our example, the Community Leader states "The way that we've been trying to address the condition isn't working, or we wouldn't still have the condition. Some of us have been trying to work together, but it feels like we're not getting anything done." The Community Leader, or Influential Champion, sets the stage for the Partnership Broker. The leader starts by modeling honesty, one of the conditions needed for trust to be developed. The Community Leader knew that the condition couldn't be solved without all the participants, but she admitted that there could be everything from territorialism, lack of respect, fear, mistrust, and downright hostility if the group dynamics weren't handled correctly. She spent considerable time with the Partnership Broker to talk candidly about previous community efforts and the reasons that they had failed. The Community Leader had correctly identified why previous efforts failed, but needed expert guidance to lead the community in new approaches to solve the condition.

Collective Impact successfully provides tools and a structure to develop the relationships between institutions, while Partnership Brokering successfully addresses the relationships between the people representing institutions. CI cannot begin until relationships between people are strong and honest. When individual relationships are developed from trust, respect, and transparency, the relationships between institutions will begin to develop. Collective Impact requires strong relationships between people and strong relationships between institutions. When both types of relationships are sincere and committed, the stage is set for CI conditions to be developed, the solution can be institutionalized, and ultimately, the approach developed by all participants will have the highest chance of being sustainable.

Objectivity A certified Partnership Broker brings training and experience in holding a space for exploring, developing, and managing the health of the partnership. An external Partnership Broker also brings *participant* objectivity – not biased by a position

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regarding the condition, or having a role in one of the participant organizations, not impacted by power dynamics, for example. An internal Partnership Broker, meaning that the Broker is a representative from a stakeholder organization, might be seen as biased. It is vital that the group agrees that the Broker's role in the partnership is

holding the space in a neutral way, not representing a specific organization or viewpoint. Objectivity means that a Partnership Broker can see possibilities for both the group, and the individuals. "What brokers can do (more easily than the partners themselves, usually) is to see the richness of contribution that each partner can bring and how this diversity can be aligned and combined to create something far greater than the sum of its partners. A good broker will actually explore and exploit sectoral differences to expand the possibilities, rather than drive relentlessly for consensus." ^{viii}

Let's take a closer look at how a Partnership Broker would bring value through the competency of Empathy. Using Tool 5, Guidelines For Partnering Conversations of The Partnering Toolbook, the Broker in our example could meet with individual stakeholders to ask generative questions such as "What do you envision to be a break-through for the condition?" A skilled Partnership Broker would seek to determine each stakeholder's understanding of their position within the collaboration, as well as any barriers to achieving breakthroughs. Does a stakeholder have an institutional requirement about sharing data? Does a citizen impacted by the condition want to be involved but feel intimidated by other stakeholders? Using the core skills of Reviewing and Revising, the Partnership Broker would analyze data gained from interviews, meetings, and surveys to form a picture of the partnership at different points in the process of the initiative. The Broker can help the Partnership to measure its progress in working together and develop skills needed to achieve the breakthrough.

Core Skills and Competencies A Partnership Broker brings core skills in Negotiation and Facilitation, "to practice active listening and understand diverse perspectives, desires and concerns of partners, and then process them through a partnership lens."^{ix} In our example, the people in the room attend the meeting at the invitation of the Community Leader. This is a common way to bring together a diverse group who have a shared interest. Perhaps the Community Leader is a donor to the NGOs so the NGOs feel compelled to attend. Maybe she is the elected leader of the community, so the government representatives are compelled to attend. Still others may know her personal story related to the condition, so they attend to support her. These are examples of how the Community Leader can bring together the group, but if these

power dynamics continue to be the only reasons that people attend the meetings, the group will not build genuine commitment to one another. Instead, they will attend only until the influential leader stops attending. The Partnership Broker will seek to surface views from all participants, ensuring that the partnership is attending to equity.

Tom Dewar, writing for The Aspen Institute Roundtable Report, notes that comprehensive community initiatives, Collective Impact being one example, must align outside resources and power. “To overcome the obstacles, a range of actors must expend significant time and political, social and economic capital to broker relationships between communities and external powers. They must literally and metaphorically “subsidize” alignment between sectors and interests until new habits of thinking, acting, and collaborating enable these alignments to occur more naturally.”^x

Why is a Partnership Broker needed for these efforts? Certainly, a good evaluator can utilize tools to gather and analyze data, a meeting facilitator can ensure that there is a good agenda and a well-run meeting, and an interviewer can meet with individual stakeholders. A Partnership Broker brings skills including evaluation, facilitation, and interviewing. However, the Partnership Broker utilizes these skills to aid the partnership by assessing the relationships, connections, and dynamics that develop and change during the non-linear process of an evolving multi-sector Collective Impact initiative. The Partnership Broker focuses on the health, development, and sustainability of the partnership ensuring that key principles are attended to, including “striving for diversity, equity, openness, mutual benefit and courageous practice when operating in a partnership brokering role, modelling this behavior to partners.”^{xi} A Partnership Broker also needs to recognize when deeper skills in the different roles – project manager, facilitator, interviewer, for example - are needed for the partnership to move forward. The Partnership Broker must be self-aware of limitations in these areas, and recommend when experts are needed.

“Coalitions are often built from the passion of champions, but over time need to adapt to new partners and changing conditions. Developing capacity for collaborative work is not particularly flashy and often does not directly impact the social issue being addressed, but by building this infrastructure multiple Collective Impact initiatives will benefit.”^{xii}

Can a collaboration succeed without the contributions of a certified Partnership Broker? Yes, but it could be argued that the more a group increases in diverse sector representation, the more it experiences unbalanced power dynamics, and the more the group involves individuals of both wealth and poverty, the greater the likelihood that brokering activities will need to occur.

Can a Collective Impact collaboration succeed without paying attention to the dynamics of the partnership? No. Evidence suggests that a collaboration, or coalition, attempting to utilize Collective Impact as a tool to address a complex social condition must develop a strong partnership to sustain itself through the inevitable changes of new leadership, ebbs and flows in funding, external pressures to adopt quick fixes, and shifting power dynamics. Experts from Tamarack Institute, Collective Impact Institute, FSG, and the Aspen Institute Roundtable point to the important need to develop the partnership. Passion alone will not change the way people work together, no matter how well-intentioned those people are. Groups seeking to address complex social conditions that span systems and sectors are breaking ground, embarking upon a way of working that the participants have never experienced. Partners that invest in themselves and their partnership will be positioned to successfully and generatively create new interventions, programs, and system changes.

Our Community Leader stated eloquently “I believe that it’s important for us to start with a Partnership Broker because...this time I want to do this right. We’re going to work together in unexpected ways and we’ll benefit from the continuous hard work and determination of someone who makes it their business to support our partnership process.”^{xiii} The condition we’re facing is too important to do this any other way.”

The Partnership Broker steps forward to begin...

ⁱ Ron Dendas, MS – Program officer, The Rider-Pool Foundation, Christine Carpino, Ph.D. – Program manager, Collective Impact Fellowship, Emerging Trends in Building Capacity – Insight from Funders, October 31, 2016, page 5.

ⁱⁱ Mark Kramer and Flynn Lund, Collective Impact: A New Twist on an Old English Art, *Trust & Foundation News*, July 2016, retrieved from <https://www.fsg.org/publications/collective-impact-new-twist-old-english-art>

ⁱⁱⁱ John Kania & Mark Kramer, Collective Impact, Winter, 2011, *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, Volume 9, Number 1, pages 36-40.

^{iv} Collective Impact Forum, Date not available, Retrieved from <https://collectiveimpactforum.org/readiness-assessment>

^v Bruce W. Tuckman, "Developmental sequence in small groups". *Psychological Bulletin*, 1965,63 (6): pages 384–399.

^{vi} Manges, Kirstin; Scott-Cawiezell, Jill; Ward, Marcia M. (2017-01-01). "Maximizing Team Performance: The Critical Role of the Nurse Leader". *Nursing Forum*. 52 (1): 21–29. doi:10.1111/nuf.12161. ISSN 1744-6198

^{vii} Ron Dendas, MS – Program officer, The Rider-Pool Foundation, Christine Carpino, Ph.D. – Program manager, Collective Impact Fellowship, Emerging Trends in Building Capacity – Insight from Funders, October 31, 2016, page 5.

^{viii} Ros Tennyson and Julie Mundy, Partnership Brokers in Action, Training Course Workbook 2nd edition (April 2017), page 21

^{ix} Being a Partnership Broker: Tools for self-assessment and reflection, March 2016, Partnership Brokers Association.

^x Anne C. Kubisch, Patricia Auspos, Prudence Brown, Tom Dewar, Voices From the Field III, 2010, The Aspen Institute Roundtable on Community Change, p. 77.

^{xi} Ros Tennyson and Julie Mundy, Partnership Brokers in Action, Training Course Workbook 2nd edition (April 2017), page 130.

^{xii} Ron Dendas, MS – Program officer, The Rider-Pool Foundation, Christine Carpino, Ph.D. – Program manager, Collective Impact Fellowship, Emerging Trends in Building Capacity – Insight from Funders, October 31, 2016, page 4.

^{xiii} Ros Tennyson and Julie Mundy, Partnership Brokers in Action, Training Course Workbook 2nd edition (April 2017), page 11.