


# Transformational change is possible

## Six essential elements for lasting change

by Liz Weaver

*Working in complexity can surface some tough challenges, but they are not insurmountable.*



**The problems our communities face are complex** and challenging. We have been lulled into a sense of complacency by trying to find micro-solutions to complex issues. Communities have compartmentalized how services are delivered. The charitable and non-profit sector in Canada is the second largest in the world with an estimated 170,000 organizations providing services and programs to communities and citizens, and yet, true change seems impossible.

In 2011, John Kania and Mark Kramer of FSG Social Impact Consultants published a paper providing a new way forward for communities. Collective impact, a framework for community and systems change, is built on three pre-conditions and five core conditions. A fundamental principle of the collective impact approach is that complex problems require a different way of working, as well as the intense engagement of a wide variety of influential partners who leverage their collective resources to drive toward outcomes.

A collective impact approach also requires that communities commit to engaging with all five conditions in the framework:

1. Building a common agenda,
2. Engaging in shared measurement,

3. Supporting the collaborative work through mutually reinforcing activities,
4. Keeping partners and the community engaged through continuous communications, and
5. Ensuring that the collective effort is supported by a backbone infrastructure.

In their first and subsequent articles about collective impact, Kania and Kramer provided examples of communities that took up this challenge to work differently. They shared the stories of the Strive Partnership in Cincinnati, the Elizabeth River Project in Southeastern Virginia, and Vibrant Communities in Canada. While the issue each of these initiatives was tackling was different – educational achievement, environmental regeneration, and poverty reduction – the approach was the same. These communities were no longer satisfied with incremental, small scale or individual change; they were collectively moving toward transformational change, toward the possible.

### The key elements of possible

Transformational change is not easy. Since the initial article on collective impact was published in the *Stanford Social Innovation Review* in 2011, countless communities and collaborative efforts have ventured

on the journey of achieving transformational change and have learned many lessons about this emerging body of practice.

The Tamarack Institute has been actively engaged in the evolving nature of collective impact efforts across Canada, the United States, and internationally. Over the course of the past four years, we have convened partners to increase our shared

## Transformational change does not rely on a single leader.

understanding of collective impact and the elements needed to move toward deep and lasting systems change. This

interest is heightened by the place-based efforts Tamarack supports in communities across Canada working toward reducing poverty, deepening citizen engagement, and revitalizing neighbourhoods.

So what does it take to get to transformational change? We need six essential elements:

- 1. Practice system leadership:** System leaders have the capacity to both see and understand the complex problem from micro and macro perspectives. They bring a relentless focus to the health of the whole.
- 2. Embrace a framework:** While each community or collaborative effort is unique, a framework provides a container for testing and proto-typing system changes.
- 3. Assess community readiness:** Change happens when all sectors of the community believe in the need for the change to occur and embrace their individual and collective contributions to this change.
- 4. Focus on data and measurement:** Two of the most challenging elements of transformational change is maintaining the persistent focus on using data to inform the problem and identifying and tracking measures that lead to outcomes.
- 5. Communicate and engage:** Often seen as a peripheral element in community change efforts, a focus on communication and deep engagement is foundational.
- 6. Ask, What's next?** Be curious about the future and embed continuous learning and reflection into the work.

These six elements are key to getting to transformational change. On the surface they may seem simple, but working in complexity can surface

some surprising and tough challenges.

## System leadership: moving from the individual to the system

Getting to possible requires a unique kind of leadership. Many have referred to this as system leadership. In their article, "The Dawn of System Leadership," Peter Senge, Hal Hamilton, and John Kania identify three characteristics of system leaders:

- 1. System leaders are not singular heroic figures, but those who facilitate the conditions within which others can make progress toward social change.**
- 2. Any individual in any organization, across sectors and formal levels of authority, can be a system leader.**
- 3. The core capabilities necessary for system leadership are the ability to see the larger system, fostering reflection and more generative conversations, and shifting the collective focus from reactive problem solving to co-creating the future.**

System leadership involves a different orientation to community change efforts. These leaders recognize that they can't drive or force the change to happen; they can inform and bring their perspectives, but collective will is the driving function. System leaders need to have a continuous and relentless focus on the health of the whole system. This is not to the detriment of individual programs and services. Rather, system leaders look for opportunities for synergy and alignment, which help move the collective forward.

Transformational change does not rely on a single leader, as Kania, Hamilton, and Senge point out, but rather on the engagement of multiple leaders who are willing to put their individual egos aside to work toward a collective outcome. This, of course, creates tension. System leaders agree to embrace the dynamic tension of this approach because they understand that the current structures, systems, and processes are not working.

In many ways, system leaders must first have conversations with themselves about the roles and contributions they want to make. How do we increase our capacity to become a system leader?

- Learn on the job: get involved in system change efforts
- Focus on outcomes

Photo: Tamarack Institute



- Have a process orientation
- Balance advocacy and inquiry
- Let go of your own agenda and work towards the collective agenda
- Invest in and build your own leadership tool kit
- Work with other system leaders
- Create opportunities for self-reflection

System leadership skills are challenging to acquire, particularly when the focus of the system is on individual achievement rather than collective outcomes. Collective impact is changing that focus in many communities, but investing in and developing a system leadership orientation is critical for collective impact efforts to be successful.

### Embrace a framework

When communities move toward transformational change, it's likely that they are looking to tackle a complex community problem. Complex problems have a number of elements that make them unique and often more difficult to address. Brenda Zimmerman, in a webinar podcast for the Tamarack Institute, described the unique attributes of complex problems which illustrates why they are so tough to tackle.

Embedded systems often work against one another. Complex problems face many independent attributes:

- **Not predictable in detail:** Complex problems are not predictable in detail. There is no one experience of homelessness, for instance. We may know that certain elements can lead to homelessness, but we can't predict that this will always be the case.
- **Order without central control:** You don't need a hierarchy where the top of the organization drives things down.
- **Natural emergence:** You can't explain the outcome from the part that created it. The outcomes are different from the sum of their parts.
- **Simple Rules:** A few key patterns of interaction can repeat over and over again to create patterns we see within systems.
- **Embedded systems:** We are never outside the system, we are always influencing systems and being influenced by them.
- **Co-evolution:** As you change your environment changes and so you are co-evolving with your environment.

**System leadership skills are challenging to acquire.**

When the problem is so complex, how do we move forward? The process for getting to possible can be helped by a framework which then can be utilized

as a path forward for the community. There are a number of different approaches to community change efforts, including collaboration, network building and analysis, asset-based community development, and neighbourhood revitalization.

The collective impact framework is well-suited to transformational change efforts and the characteristics described above. The five conditions of collective impact provide a simple design for complex interventions and intuitively enables the local community context to be amplified.

## Assess community readiness

Change happens when different sectors of the community believe in the need for the change to occur and embrace their individual and collective contributions to this change. There has to be a willingness to act, to move forward toward real, and outcomes-driven change. This is more than single sector-collaboration; this is a signal that the community is beginning to understand the underlying complexity of the issues, that systems leaders are willing to play a role, and that the community is ready to engage in a new way.

In blog posts on the “7 Habits of Highly Effective Communities,” Jay Connor identifies both the



challenges faced by communities trying to move toward transformation and the habits that need to be formed as communities and leaders venture down this path. Included

in the seven habits are: reach for an aspirational goal; move forward with who is at the table; keep the circle open; choose measurable outcomes; develop a sense of urgency; and keep going. This is wise advice for getting to possible.

Often, collaborative tables are hindered by the

obvious. In some cases, they hold off on moving forward because they feel that they need everyone at the table before they can begin. Keeping the circle open allows for movement in and out of the table and builds resiliency.

Developing a sense of urgency and measurable outcomes are connected habits. Effective collaborative practice is informed by data and builds towards results.

In the paper, *Putting Community in Collective Impact*, Rich Harwood writes about the importance

of community readiness in tackling complex issues and moving toward transformative change. In their work, The Harwood Institute has identified five “community rhythms” or stages of community readiness: the waiting place, impasse, catalytic, growth, and sustain/renew. Understanding the stage of readiness is a key element to determining how and if a community can move forward toward transformational change.

## Focus on data and measurement

Focusing on data and measurement is

fundamental to getting to possible. That famous saying, “what gets measured gets managed,” is especially true in collective impact.

Understanding who in the community is being challenged by the problem and the degree to which they are impacted is really helpful when determining strategies to employ moving forward. Transformative community change efforts also need to identify indicators to provide evidence of progress and impact, which can compel a community to continue down the path of change. Tangible signs of progress have a positive impact on the population being served. In “Five Simple Rules for Evaluating Collective Impact” (*The Philanthropist*), author Mark Cabaj notes that evaluation and measurement should be used to enable strategic learning. In order for evaluation to play a productive role in a collective impact initiative,

it must be conceived and carried out in a way that enables the participants to learn from their efforts and make shifts to their strategy. This requires them to embrace three inter-related ideas about complexity, adaptive leadership, and a developmental approach to evaluation. If they do not, traditional evaluation ideas and practices will end up weakening the work of collective impact.

## **Communicate and engage**

Engaging the broader community and growing a sense that transformational change can happen is essential to getting to possible.

For the last 12 years in Canada, communities have been working on the issue of poverty reduction. During that same period of time, this collective effort has led to some remarkable and transformative results. Vibrant Communities Canada started with a base of 13 communities and has grown to include more than 47 local and provincial/territorial community partners. All provinces and territories across the country are investing in poverty strategies including place-based initiatives and alignment of government programs and services. In May 2015, more than 300 leaders participated in a poverty reduction summit with the intent to change the conversation about poverty in Canada.

An evaluation of the Vibrant Communities initiative, called *Inspired Learning*, revealed the importance of continuous communication.

VC supports invigorated local processes by injecting energy and inspiration. They also enabled the creation of a shared language that afforded local participants a common base for communication.

When coupled with financial incentives, this common base provided the foundation for a new learning orientation. Collaborative and community based learning translated into valuable strategies in multiple communities. The supports helped communities to access the ideas and experience base of other communities, facilitating learning about specific challenges or issues, or new program or policy ideas.

Harwood and Connor also emphasize the importance of community engagement to move toward transformational change. Vibrant Communities Canada learned that the broad base involvement of diverse stakeholders at the community level, including individuals with the lived experience of

poverty, is important. Communities cannot get to possible if voices are excluded from the conversation. Harwood calls this “turning outward,” and Senge et al see it as a core capability of system leadership.

## **Ask, “What’s next?”**

The final element of getting to possible is being relentless about asking what’s next, which enables communities to probe deeper, ask harder questions, and be ever vigilant about transformation.

Communities are complex and dynamic, continually shifting and evolving; asking “what’s next?” helps surface new opportunities and challenges that might not be immediately obvious.

Getting to transformational change, getting to possible, is not the easy path. It calls for a new kind of leader and a new way of collaborating and working collectively. There are frameworks for communities to follow, but no step-by-step manual. Working in this emerging practice can be frustrating for those of us who like to follow recipes or the user manual. Instead, getting to possible evokes a different energy. But, if we lead with a system approach, embrace a framework, consider our community’s readiness, focus on data and measurement, communicate and engage, and remain future oriented by asking what’s next, that creative tension will push our communities to consider both the process of community change and also the product. There are challenges, but they are not insurmountable.

Getting to possible is happening in communities every day.

*Liz Weaver is vice-president of the Tamarack Institute and leads the Tamarack Learning Centre. Liz is passionate about the power and potential of communities getting to collective impact on complex issues. For Liz, possible evokes energy, opportunity, and the power of new beginnings. Reach Liz at: [liz@tamarackcommunity.ca](mailto:liz@tamarackcommunity.ca). //*

**Collective effort has led to some remarkable and transformative results.**