CREATING CONTAINERS AND CO-DESIGN:

TRANSFORMING COLLABORATION

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COLLABORATION AND COMPLEX PROBLEMS
THE COLLABORATIVE PREMISE

It starts with collaboration. This is the coming together of two or more organizations to work collectively, share authority, decision-making and accountability to influence or resolve community opportunities or challenges. Collaboration is viewed as an opportunity for partners to create something new or scale up an existing approach together that might be impossible for a single organization to do on its own. Collaboration has dominated the horizon of organizing for at least the last thirty years and perhaps longer. Funders have been encouraging and investing in organizations to collaborate to address complex community challenges. There are many reasons for collaboration to happen:

- The partners have a shared concern or shared problem they want to address
- There is an opportunity to pool power or resources
- The collaborative effort would benefit from the diversity of individuals, perspectives, and resources
- The collaborative effort will help a group get unstuck or bring in new ideas
- The collaborative effort will Increase their collective ability to tackle more complex issues
- The funders have identified collaboration as an investment strategy

In 2002, David Chrislip authored *The Collaborative Leadership Fieldbook: A Guide for Citizens and Civic Leaders*. In this book, Chrislip, described a way of working for

individuals and organizations who had the intent to collaborate. Chrislip called this the collaborative premise.

> *If you bring the appropriate people together in constructive ways with good information, they will create authentic visions and strategies for addressing the shared concerns of the organization or community.* (Chrislip, 2002)

In *The Collaborative Leadership Fieldbook*, Chrislip described a different kind of collaboration. The partners around the collaborative table were involved and encouraged to come up with a shared vision and strategy bringing their expertise and knowledge to the table. It was not about an individual organization agenda but rather the engagement of all the partners to build a shared or collective agenda. Chrislip also identified that effective collaboration did not just happen, it required good information and constructive processes. The collaborative premise can be considered a forerunner to what many now call, Collective Impact but it also has some interesting nuances. Chrislip, in the Fieldbook, provided different case study examples of communities coming together to tackle complex issues from joint ventures in Silicon Valley to the Colorado Partnership for Educational Renewal.

The Fieldbook explored in detail a process for collaborative groups to follow which included analyzing the context for collaboration and determining a collaborative strategy; identifying and convening stakeholders; identifying an effective process; building capacity, engagement and communications; determining what needs to be done and moving to action. (Chrislip, 2002)

In this approach, Chrislip identified the need to spend time upfront preparing for collaboration by exploring the local or community context, identifying the right people and building their capacity to collaborate. This focus on preparation and investing in process before action is particularly useful when organizations come together to tackle a more complex community issue. Chrislip highlighted the duality of both people and process in The Collaboration Fieldbook.

COLLABORATION AS A MECHANISM FOR SOLVING COMPLEX COMMUNITY CHALLENGES

David Chrislip understood that communities were facing increasingly more complex problems and these required a new way of collaboration. These complex problems can be overwhelming. They require the skills and competencies of more than one organization. Complex problems or issues are often difficult to frame as each of the partners considers the issue from their own lens or perspective.

For example, when trying to decrease the number of people living in poverty, business leaders might be concerned about the implications that poverty has on their corporate tax rate or their ability to attract skilled employees; service providers might be concerned about the increasing demands for programs; government might be looking at managing costs; and, individuals with the lived experience of poverty might be looking at how to navigate these systems to meet the needs of themselves and their families. Effectively reducing poverty requires the knowledge and engagement of this broad range of stakeholders. Each of these stakeholders are important actors in the system of reducing poverty. They also have unique perspectives about why poverty exists and how to manage it. Each of the systems actors may not agree on the scope and challenges embedded in the problem and will likely focus on very different strategies to solve the problem. It is in their perspectives, experiences and understanding of the complexity of poverty that a shared understanding of the dilemma can emerge. Complex dilemmas or problems require different perspectives, the engagement of different actors who are impacted by the system that surround the problem and different processes to move toward change and impact.

> **TYPICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF COMPLEX PROBLEMS**
>
> - No agreement on the scope of the problem
> - Lots of uncertainty, disagreement around the data
> - No clear solution
> - Many perspectives and ways to look at the problem, issue or opportunity
> - Political leaders are very anxious
> - Competing futures
> - Values and ethical consideration important
> - No clear path forward

Complex problems also span across different scales. While the problem might be experienced locally, policy changes made through a higher order of government can positively influence the issue at the local level. These are longer term problems which, on the surface, are seen as very difficult to solve. As collaborative groups begin to intervene in the complex problem, the nature of the problem often adapts and changes. Government policies might shift, funding mechanisms might shift, leadership might shift and each of these changes exacerbate or enhance the ability of the collaborative group to scale their strategies.

To impact and move the needle on complex problems, understanding the complexity of the issue and building processes to work across different views and perspectives are key. Engaging the key actors and preparing to do the difficult work of framing before moving to action is a critical step in tackling complex problems or dilemmas.

COLLABORATION AND COLLECTIVE IMPACT

In 2011, a new type of cross-sector collaboration emerged as a mechanism to try and move the needle on complex community problems. The Collective Impact framework (FSG, 2014), developed by FSG, included five conditions to tackle complex issues: the development of a

common agenda and framework for change; agreement on shared measurement to determine progress and results; the deployment of mutually reinforcing activities to drive community change forward; continuous communications across all partners and a backbone organization.

The Collective Impact framework includes both the process of organizing and the engagement of people in its design. The process elements are: developing a common agenda, shared

measurement, and mutually reinforcing activities. The people elements include the structuring of backbone support and continuous communications.

The simplicity of the Collective Impact framework has led to its adoption by a large number of collaborative efforts with the goal of trying to move the needle on a wide range of complex issues from decreasing poverty to increasing educational and health outcomes to improving environmental outcomes.

However, the simplicity of the framework has also left those engaged in community change processes wanting more details. Who are the right people to bring into the conversation? How does the work actually get done? Since 2011, the Collective Impact Forum, practitioners and the Tamarack Institute have been adding to knowledge and tools the field of practice about Collective Impact and how to deploy the framework in different contexts. The following sections of this paper explore the concepts of people and process in collaborative change in more detail. These two ingredients, people and process, need to be mixed together in unique ways to move change forward. They are important factors to consider when deploying a Collective Impact approach.

PEOPLE AND PROCESS:
KEY INGREDIENTS IN THE CONTAINER FOR COLLABORATIVE CHANGE

In a previously published paper on Collective Impact, Mark Cabaj and Liz Weaver raised the idea that the design for the Collective Impact backbone structure should be considered as significantly different from that of traditional governance structures. This is not business as usual. Collaborative approaches tackling complex issues are effective when they bring together many diverse individuals, perspectives, ideas and ideologies. It is in bringing together people

with different perspectives about the issue that you can begin to tease out the complexity of the issue. When this is done well, solutions that might not have been immediately apparent begin to emerge.

In cross-sector collaboration or Collective Impact efforts, the backbone or convening structure needs to be distinct in both form and function. Rather than just considering the structure of a backbone organization, Cabaj and Weaver proposed that the roles and tasks of community collaboratives be framed as a container for change.

Building a strong container for change requires paying attention to different dimensions of backbone stewardship. Some of the more important ones are the following:

BACKBONE STEWARDSHIP KEY CONSIDERATIONS:

- The mobilization of a diverse group of funders, backbone sponsors, and stewardship arrangements that demonstrate cross-sectoral leadership on the issue.
- The facilitation of the participants' inner journey of change, including the discovery and letting go of their own mental models and cultural/emotional biases, required for them to be open to fundamentally new ways of doing things.
- Processes to cultivate trust and empathy amongst participants so they can freely share perspectives, engage in fierce conversations, and navigate differences in power.
- Using the many dilemmas and paradoxes of community change –such as the need to achieve short-term wins while involved in the longer-term work of system change – as creative tensions to drive people to seek new approaches to vexing challenges without overwhelming them.
- Timely nudges to sustain a process of self-refueling change that can sustain multiple cycles of learning and periodic drops in momentum and morale. It is difficult to overestimate the importance of creating a container for change.

(Cabaj & Weaver, 2016)

Cabaj and Weaver described the container as a holding environment for both the individuals engaged in the collaborative effort and the processes which lead to effective engagement. The metaphor of a container is powerful as it allows for the interplay of ingredients, allowing them to mix together. A container builds on the concept of a Collective Impact backbone structure but provides deeper understanding of the ingredients and process to consider.

In each community and in each context, the combination of container ingredients might be different. In some cases, there might be a high level or trust and relationships already existing amongst the partners and this can expedite the coming to shared agreements around expectations, rules and consequences. In other cases, the community partners may need to build trust first through conversation before coming to agreement.

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INGREDIENTS TO INCLUDE IN THE CONTAINER FOR COLLABORATIVE CHANGE:

What to Consider: People Ingredients	What to Consider: Process Ingredients
- Leadership Style - Member characteristics: Influence, diversity - Member motivation - Member commitment - Member selection - Member skills - Staffing - Community involvement - Power relationships - Group Culture: risk oriented, process light or heavy, etc. - Levels of trust between participants - Commitment to the shared agenda and shared purpose of the collaborative work - Community ownership - Understanding of the reputation and community perceptions - A Common set of values - A focus on building relationships between key stakeholders	- Government mandate - Geographic proximity - Financial capacity - Resource capacity - Individual organization missions and core values - Availability of facilitation or process guides - Clear function of authority with rules and sufficient structure, policy and rituals - Knowledge and capabilities to hold tension - Development of shared expectations, rules and consequences - Accountability and transparency - Decision-Making: majority, consensus - Authority - Communications: informal, formal - Sponsorship arrangements: number, roles - The establishment of time boundaries - A physical space to hold the collective effort together (meeting space, etc.)

The container becomes the holding space for these ingredients and how they are combined to move toward community impact. It is also important to note that these ingredients may shift and change over time as the collective group matures or new individuals or processes are brought into the mix.

For longer term change efforts, being flexible and adaptive are skills worth learning and embracing. Too often, leaders think the work of people and process happens only at the formation of a collaborative group, but then realize that people and processes evolve over time as people shift, funding shifts, priorities shift and other ingredients shift. Paying attention to the people and process ingredients in the container are equally important in the short term and also over the longer term as the collaboration evolves.

MIXING THE CONTAINER INGREDIENTS THROUGH CO-DESIGN

The engagement of elements in the container is the mixing of the people and their ideas and the process by which the collaborative work can lead to impact. As noted in this paper, working on complex community issues requires a focus on both people and process. But it is how the two ingredients are mixed that the magic happens.

In an article titled Lessons on *The Best of Both Worlds: Collaborative Governance* in the Huffington Post, the authors identified four key lessons to move collaborative work forward.

- **Know the stakeholders.** Get a clear handle on who all the potential public and private players are, or should be, and engage them all in trying to understand what their common goals and needs are. Show them how they might employ collaborative governance to advance their shared interests.
- **Focus on outcomes and stay flexible on process.** Collective, collaborative long-term arrangements need well-thought-out rules and funding sources carefully focused on their particular objectives and must be mindful to not be too dogmatic too early about exactly how their case will be managed. Trial and error for a while may be desirable.
- **Recognize core competencies.** Make sure all the necessary skills are in the same rooms at the same times: technical, financial, human and political, in an intricate, interdependently balanced process.
- **Establish benchmarks and milestones.** There must be clear and well understood goals and standards by which all activities are measured, both before and after problems arise, in order to head off excessive expectations and false promises. (Weil, 2011)

Similarly, in an article in the Stanford Social Innovation Review, 2018 identified a roadmap for effective collaboration. The authors described five components of collaboration which they saw as remarkably consistent across the various collaborative efforts they studied. These included: clarifying the purpose of the collaboration; convening the right people; cultivating trust; coordinating existing activities and collaborating for systems impact. The authors identified that this set of activities helped to navigate the personal, political, cultural and organizational dynamics that are inherent in collaborative efforts. (Ehrlichmann, Sawyer, & Spence, 2018)

In *The Collaborative Leadership Fieldbook*, Chrislip also highlighted key stages of the collaborative process. Each of these authors identify that people and process matter.   But how do communities effectively manage these two key ingredients of people and process?

In Australia, a consulting firm came up with an approach which they called co-design. In their book, *The Power of Co – The Smart Leaders' Guide to Collaborative Governance,* the authors detailed a useful approach to melding together the ingredients of people and process in a deeply collaborative design.

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The authors describe collaboration as a process by which the partners 'co-labour' to move toward 'co-creation'.   The collaborative governance pathway begins with a dilemma that the community is trying to resolve. Before any collaborative work can be undertaken, the partner are asked to co-define the dilemma. It is in the co-defining process that the partners begin to understand where potential synergies might exist as also where they will disagree about the nature and impact of the dilemma. In the next step, the partners are then asked to commit to the idea of collaboration. They must agree that collaboration is the best way to tackle the dilemma and that they commit their skills and resources to working together. The next and subsequent stages of this shared approach are focused on working in sync with one anther by co-defining the problem or dilemma; co-designing their collective process; co-creating solutions and co-delivering actions. No single individual or organization leads but rather it is the collaborative process and the engagement of all partners in each phase that moves the community forward from dilemma to solution.

(Twyford, Waters, Hardy , & Dengate, 2012)

Included in the co-design process are the notions of an appreciative mindset, deliberative processes and a focus on a solution that is both impactful and enduring. The power of co-design can be particularly helpful when addressing complex problems. As noted earlier, complex problems or dilemmas are such that no one individual or organization has the complete answer and the problem shifts over time. In committing to collaboration and co-defining the problem and solutions together, the collaborative or collective group can harvest the wisdom and perspectives of all the leaders around the table. The collaborative group can also begin to identify the resources that are currently in place and can be leveraged and the additional resources that might still need to be secured.
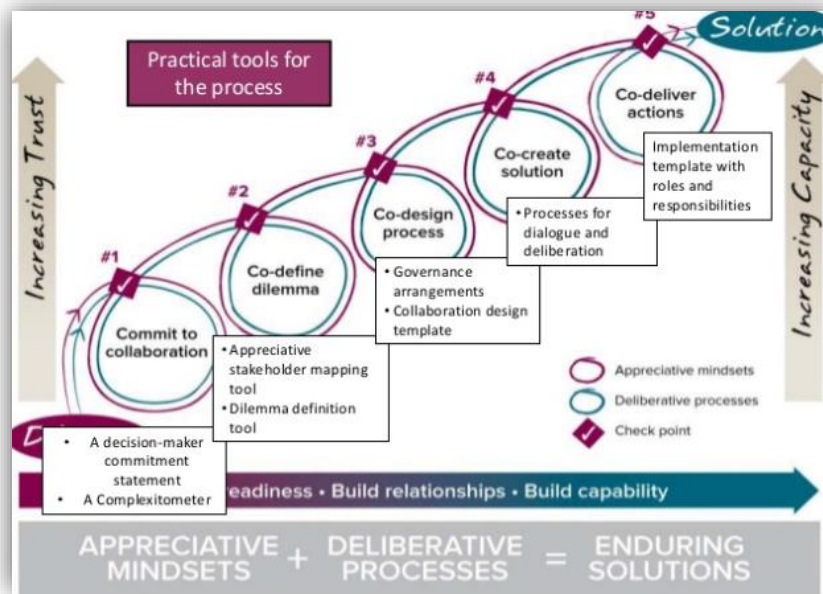
(Twyford, Waters, Hardy , & Dengate, 2012)

To facilitate the process, the authors of **The Power of Co** have also identified different processes which can be used to move the collaborative work forward. These include the development of a commitment statement, appreciative stakeholder mapping, agreement on the governance arrangements and processes for dialogue and deliberation.

Co-designing community change focuses on bridging the commitment of the people involved in the collaborative work with a process which deeply engages them at every stage of the collaboration. The process requires commitment from the onset and then this commitment and shared ownership builds through deliberative processes throughout each stage. **The Power of Co** takes collaboration to the next level, particularly when community leaders are charged with working together to tackle a complex issue or dilemma.

COLLABORATION, CONTAINERS FOR CHANGE, AND IMPACT

Too often collaborative efforts focus solely on the problem or issue that they are trying to tackle. They do this at their peril, particularly when the issue is complex and multi-dimensional. The collaborative partners need to also consider the process and the people engaged in this shared work. These ingredients of people and process are unique to the context of each community but it is how they are combined that can either lead to success or failure.

This paper explored four key concepts. The first concept is collaboration itself. The collaborative premise provides a useful framing for collaboration and identified that people and process were critical ingredients in the design. The second concept illustrated that complex community issues, dilemmas or challenges require us to consider the people and process mix more diligently. Complex issues adapt and change and reflect the context in which they are

found. They require less of a prescriptive approach but rather a more adaptive and engaged approach.

The third concept in this paper is to consider the people and process ingredients which, when mixed together in a container, can lead to community change and impact. These people and process ingredients might be combined in different ways in different contexts. They also might adapt and change over time.   The fourth and final concept considered in this paper considers a process for co-designing collaborative work. The co-design approach means that each phase or stage engages the people and the process ingredients in a deeply collaborative way. It moves collaborative efforts from dilemma to solution.

As our collaborative efforts shift to tackle complex challenges, they have to be more fluid in design and in structure. And yet, fluidity is a challenge, because they can't be so fluid as to not move us from idea to impact. Identifying the people and process elements, building a strong container or holding environment for collaboration and then effectively engaging the people in the co-design process are strategies to move toward impact.

Tamarack's Five Ideas for Community Change

Tamarack has focused expertise in five idea areas that our experience has shown to be central to the work of community change.

Collective Impact – One of the biggest challenges facing community change leaders is impacting systems and policies to improve the well-being of citizens. The Collective Impact idea provides a useful framework for community change that promotes a disciplined form of multi-sector collaboration that enables different sectors to work together effectively, in a comprehensive way, to address complex social and/or environmental issues with a focus on systems and policy change,

Community Engagement – Community Engagement is the process by which citizens are engaged to work and learn together on behalf of their communities to create and realize bold visions for the future. Tamarack stresses the importance of approaching engagement with an outcomes-based lens, of always involving context experts, and to provide broad community ownership of solutions whenever possible.

Community Innovation – We see Community Innovation as a particular form of social innovation that is place-based within the specific geography of a community. As dynamic "living labs," communities offer the perfect container for innovation.

Collaborative Leadership – The premise of Collaborative Leadership is that if you bring the appropriate people together in constructive ways, with good information, they will create authentic visions and strategies for addressing the shared concerns of organizations and communities. At Tamarack, we believe that collaboration is the new leadership and we work with communities and organizations to implement it.

Evaluating Impact – New approaches to community change require different ways of evaluating impact. We are experimenting with new ways of measuring change, exploring who is responsible for outcomes, developing methods that adapt to the pace of community change, creating alternate ways to involve change-makers involved in the assessment process, and using the results to drive new thinking, better strategies and deeper impact.

Source: *Tamarack Institute 2017 Progress & Impact Report* (Tamarack Institute, 2018, p. 6)

ABOUT LIZ WEAVER

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 strategic areas including collective impact, collaborative leadership, community engagement, community innovation and evaluating community impact. Liz is well-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 and leads a collective impact capacity building strategy with the Ontario Trillium Foundation.

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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