

HOW TO DEVELOP A COMMON AGENDA FOR A COLLECTIVE IMPACT

A 5-STEP GUIDE

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I am writing this paper to share my experience in building a common agenda. On a monthly basis, I currently support five cities and one state, helping them to form and implement their collective impact plan. I started my own collective impact initiative back in 1996, and it has grown to a network of more than 75 cities using collective impact methods to reduce poverty.

This paper is a bit of an experiment for me. I have written it in a fairly prescriptive way, not because I want you to do what I say, but rather for you to learn from “my way” of building a common agenda to help inform “your way.” I find so much of the literature I and others have written on collective impact to be “idea-based” rather than like a “how-to” guide. I do believe idea-based learning is better than how-to learning because learning about ideas allows you to build what works uniquely for your community. Really, the only right way to bring about change in your community is finding the way that works within your unique set of circumstances in the place that you are trying to implement it. I have found, though, that once people get the idea of collective impact, they long to hear how other communities have done the work and use this understanding to fine-tune their own methodology. It is for people who want to understand my experience of “how” through hands-on learning that I am writing this paper.

BUILDING A COMMON AGENDA

Building a common community agenda is fundamental to all community change requiring a collective impact. It is, however, one of the most difficult phases of a community change process, and if done incorrectly will cripple effectiveness as a community moves to implement its collective impact plan.

A common agenda has three primary purposes, each as important as the other:

- First, it is a document of the key goals and strategies that a network of partners (the people who have joined together to change their community) have agreed to and that they will use to implement their strategy. It forms a common understanding between the partners for what they have agreed to do together.
- Second, it is the outcome of broad-ranging research and consultations and a way of sharing what those partners have learned within their broader community (including the journey of learning) and provides a rationale for the goals they have chosen to work on together.
- Third, it is a road map for how those partners have agreed to work together, including a budget and their governance model.

But, of course, it is so much more than that.

The building of a common agenda is about engagement: a bringing-together, for listening and dialogue, of those who care about the issues that are being worked on and who seek the common change that is desired.

Building a common agenda involves exploration and curiosity. If we “think the way we have always thought, we will get what we always got.” To build a common agenda we need time to release old patterns and explore and accept new approaches and ideas.

The building of a common agenda is also about building commitment. To be committed to change is to bring our organizational assets and individual talents collectively together in order for the whole to be greater than its individual parts. A common agenda is the outcome of a shared vision, and it mobilizes communities to change.

Three common agenda examples include:

- The Maine Cancer Foundation has a vision to reduce the effects of cancer by 20% in the State of Maine. They formed a network of organizational leaders to promote collaboration because they realized early on that connecting with their community and learning from people with lived experience of cancer was essential. Over nearly 18 months they listened to their community, and twice during that time they brought together more than 100 people to form a vision, engage in research and ultimately to join together to implement their vision. They have just launched their community plan.
- The United Way of Central Iowa wanted to create a more equitable society. Though they run many programs to help those in need in their community, they wanted to develop a collective impact process to unite their community efforts. In addition to an extensive listening campaign, they brought their top 100 leaders together to implement a vision they call Opportunities Central Iowa. Today nearly 200 organizations meet quarterly to review their goals and monitor the progress of the network.
- Key leaders in the city of Hamilton, Ontario, Canada joined together to tackle their most pressing issue: child poverty. Hamilton had the highest child poverty rate in Canada. By listening to their community and forming a network of key leaders they formed a network called Hamilton: The Best Place to Raise a Child. For more than 10 years this network has worked tirelessly to reduce child poverty and have achieved some impressive results.

When a network of partners join together for a collective impact initiative to improve their community, they build a common agenda in such a way that it results in people being engaged, curious and committed. Without these elements, no one's going to give of their time and resources to implement the plan we build together unless they are coerced or even bullied into doing so. When people are not committed to act together, our effectiveness is compromised and our work becomes immeasurably harder.

A common agenda is more about building a collective commitment to community change than it is about having a plan.

A COMMON AGENDA IS NOT A STRATEGIC PLAN

In working with dozens of groups throughout North America, my experience is that building a common agenda is misunderstood by many groups. Most of us have been trained to develop strategic plans, and so when we embark on a common agenda journey we often “snap back” to strategic planning approaches. This results in a highly regulated and efficient process of doing some version of an environmental scan, developing a vision, strategies and an implementation plan. Often a small group will be formed to take on this task. Once the plan is complete, groups then present the plan to their network and proceed by “selling” the plan to them in hopes of achieving buy-in.

Though strategic planning methods are useful in building a common agenda, they are not effective. What we require is not more planning, but rather a process that results in collective strategic thinking and commitment. Henry Mintzberg, an important business academic and strategist, writes in his now famous Harvard Business Review paper, “The Fall and Rise of Strategic Planning,” that the purpose of strategic planning is not just about putting together a plan. It is a creative process helping everyone to get onto the same page about what it is we are going to do together, and then documenting our common commitment.

When we engage in strategic planning we tend to think that a good plan is needed to work together. “The problem is that (strategic) planning represents a calculating style of management, not a committing style,” says Mintzberg. Strategic planning methods are often about developing a plan that is predictable, doable and something we can calculate.

“**The problem is that (strategic) planning represents a calculating style of management, not a committing style.**”
- Henry Mintzberg

In contrast, Mintzberg asks us to consider “a committing style (to) engage people in a journey. They lead in such a way that everyone on the journey helps shape its course. As a result, enthusiasm inevitably builds along the way.” In his paper Mintzberg seeks a process that evokes a broad sharing of ideas that arouses our intuition and creativity. He calls this strategic thinking.

COLLECTIVE STRATEGIC THINKING

I cannot over-emphasize how predominant the planning model is, and how embedded it is in our approach to developing a path forward. Every group I have worked with on developing a common agenda has had a challenge breaking out of it, and as a result they limit the role of creativity and intuition. They develop a strategic plan and limit strategic thinking.

To develop a common agenda, we first need to converse with one another – to discover, to debate, and to deliberate about the issue we are trying to improve. David Boehm, a theoretical physicist with a passion for understanding dialogue, states, “the goal is really to create a conversation that helps people to think together.” We need to create the space for thinking together in such a way that we can collectively discover the change that needs to be done.

I am fond of asking groups who are working on a common agenda these questions: How many of you think that if we all just work a lot harder things are going to get better in our community? How about if we wrote just one more paper? Would it change things if we just got a little bit smarter? What if we spent a whole lot more money on the issue? Would this change things in the long term? The answer to all of these questions is most often an emphatic “No.” So I ask: if working harder, smarter and spending more money are not going to make things better in the long term, then what will?

We need to move away from a strategic planning mentality and move toward that which allows us to think together. Here are four ideas for doing just that.

- **From** writing a plan **to** building a common commitment
- **From** involving experts **to** involving everyone who cares
- **From** a planning mentality **to** arousing and following our curiosity
- **From** a quick plan **to** taking the time for broad engagement

Three examples of communities engaging in strategic thinking are:

- Des Moines is one of the wealthiest cities in America and yet, like most American cities, poverty is constant. Opportunities Central Iowa asked the question: how can we share opportunity in our community? They spent nearly 18 months engaging their community and “holding” them in this question, resulting in an amazing community plan.
- The Maine Cancer Foundation has done a wonderful job including the voices of people with lived experience of cancer. Their community plan is practical and hands on, and truly reflects the needs of real people in need.
- Hamilton Roundtable on Poverty Reduction wanted to talk about reducing poverty. A seminal moment came when a single mother living in poverty said, “this conversation is good, but for me it comes down to one thing: I want Hamilton to be the best place to raise my child.” This one statement gave their idea a key focus and in turn sparked the imagination of an entire community.

First, building a common agenda is about building a common commitment between stakeholders, and to build a network of partners committed to bringing about change. Building a common commitment is mostly about deepening relationships and learning together, sharing common experiences and, most of all, moving from a place of, “I know what to do, listen to me” to a place of questioning, “why with everything we know are things are not getting better?” And finally to a collective knowing, “if we work together in this new way we will get to better outcomes.”

Second, building a common agenda is about reaching out to our community, and to all of those who care about the issue. It is not only about experts, professionals, and all those who are paid to care about the problem agreeing on what to do. It is especially important that we involve those with lived experience of the issues. If we are working to reduce poverty, it is important that we engage with people experiencing poverty to listen to their stories and ideas. When we want to improve graduation rates we need to talk to more than teachers and school administrators, we need to talk to the students themselves and their parents as well, especially those who are struggling and who have not graduated. When we involve everyone who cares we broaden our scope of engagement and we have a much better chance at establishing a collective wisdom.

Third, a common agenda is about evoking our curiosity and creativity. I have already spoken about a planning mentality and how it turns a common agenda journey into a process of efficiency over creativity. The biggest tragedy when people implement a strict planning process is they seem to shut down people’s ability to imagine and explore. Ideas are controlled and input is grouped and often quantified. I keep reminding groups that it only takes one good idea to change everything. The difficulty is that finding that good idea requires a broad exploration and ultimately focus to have an impact.

Fourth, a common agenda requires us to take the time for broad engagement and to build widespread agreement. I am sure the most common challenge groups have is assigning dedicated people to lead the commitment process. Everyone is busy with their own jobs, and often groups will hire a contract staff person from outside the network (who does not have the key relationships to mobilize a network) to lead the planning process, or ask network partners to do this work on top of what they are already doing. Broad engagement requires a plan and a lot of work and in turn a dedicated commitment. The best common agenda process is one where we have taken the time to develop and implement a community engagement strategy with targets and outputs.

Building a common agenda is about:

- 1. Building a common commitment**
- 2. Reaching out to our community**
- 3. Evoking our curiosity and creativity**
- 4. Taking the time for broad engagement**

The very idea of a common agenda defines it as involving a lot of people where there is debate and an iterative discussion; where creativity and commitment have time to emerge; where new ideas are embraced, and where excitement builds. A good common agenda process takes into account the assets a community has in place and builds on these. It considers the community's readiness to take on a collective impact idea and strengthens relationships and deepens commitment.

ARE WE READY TO BUILD A COMMON AGENDA?

Before we consider the five steps to building a common agenda, I would like us to consider how ready is our community for a common agenda and collective impact process on the issue we are trying to improve? Early in the process I ask groups to consider a four-question assessment that will help them utilize the assets and strengths of their community, and also help them to understand the unique challenges they might face in building commitment and a momentum for change. These questions are most often noted as the pre-conditions for success of collective impact.

As you consider these questions it is important to note that it does not matter if your answer is weak in some areas. A weak answer just means that we have work to do to get ready and it will be harder and take longer for your community to form a collective impact approach. If there is very little history of collaboration on your issue, you just need to take more time to learn together. If funders are not yet onside, then it will take time to craft an approach and enter into a conversation with them. If you have strong answers in each category then you can move much more quickly through the steps I am recommending later in this paper.

Question one: **What is your community's history of collaboration on this issue?**

Consider how collaborative your community is by listing some of the issues or projects that have been addressed collaboratively. Brainstorm the people who were involved in these collaborative projects and take the time to interview some of those who led the process. Now focus on the issue you are working on and consider how are the people who care about the issue working together? Can you bring forward examples? Can you identify who the leaders have been? Take the time to visit with them. Identify potential challenges for collaboration on this issue going forward. Are there any champions that must be involved for you to be successful?

Question two: **How important is this issue to your community?**

Who cares about the issue you want to see changed and how are people talking about it? How has the issue been covered in the local media? Is the issue a priority strategy for some organizations, and how are they addressing it? How long has the issue been a priority for the community?

Question three: **Is the appropriate leadership involved?**

Do we have the people involved that have leadership roles and bring us the credibility we need

to be taken seriously when we reach out to the community? Have any expressed interest in a collective impact approach to this issue? The appropriate leaders are those who will inspire. They are the kind of people that when they invite ten people to a meeting, eight always show up because they evoke people's respect. These people should be identified from four sectors including government, business, not for profit and people with lived experience.

Question four: **Do funders care about what you are doing?**

Are the appropriate organizations or individuals that fund services or solutions for this issue onside? When funders are brought onside early it is easier to keep them engaged through to implementation. Funders also have valuable information that will be needed to bring about long-term change. Funders that are not onside can also be blockers of large scale change in communities.

When all four of these conditions are considered and addressed, a common agenda process is easier and more effective. Easier, in that you have checked in with people who can either be supportive or difficult in moving this issue forward, and more effective because you have taken the time to give people notice that you are planning to undertake a high-profile and intensive campaign that will result in important advances and changes in your community. By having addressed these four questions we have set the stage to ensure that we will always have a unique mix of people at our consultations. We've helped ensure that the people we respect are there and that people with formal power as well as people with lived experience are involved. When the people present at your common agenda events are respected, there is an unwritten assurance for all those involved that "this is a good thing," and the right thing to do. People will then make your collective impact work a much higher priority of their time and resources.

5 STEPS TO A COMMON AGENDA

I now want to recommend a five-step approach to developing a common agenda for collective impact. As mentioned earlier, my way is not necessarily the right way, it is just one way to success. I recommend this five-step approach because I so often see groups "spinning" for their first year, never sure what to do, and so they spend a lot of time talking within a very small, inward looking group. This is exhausting, and often groups just give up and many leaders drop away. Another reason I recommend this five-step approach is to overcome the incredible tendency most leaders have toward an efficient strategic planning approach that I shared about earlier. The approach I am recommending ensures you are identifying and engaging key people in your community very early in the process. Finally, this approach is both motivating and action-oriented, giving leaders of your collective a real sense that there is momentum and that they are making progress.

And yes, I get the irony of asking you not to use a prescriptive strategic planning process and then writing a seemingly prescriptive five-step program.

Nonetheless, the five steps I recommend are:

1. Form a team that will work together for 12-18 months and are tasked to own the common agenda and shared measurement of your collective impact work.
2. Identify and bring together the top 100 people from the four sectors (Community or not for profit, Business, Government and people with lived experience) critical to the success of your collective impact work.
3. Implement a broad-based community engagement strategy in order to really hear your community.
4. Develop short term Action Teams (mandates of no more than 6 months) in order to implement early win strategies.
5. Write your common agenda and shared measurement strategy. Present the plan and solicit partnerships with your top 100 people and the organizations they represent.

STEP ONE – FORM A STAFF TEAM:

There is a lot of work to do in developing a common agenda for a collective impact. It is a full-time job for at least two people in most communities. Most networks do not have the money to hire these people and even if they do, newly-hired people do not normally have the kind of connections and community knowledge to bring key leaders together. The team I recommend is most often made up of people who have dedicated a percentage of their time to the common agenda process. One person may get a 50% time allocation from their organization for one year. Another may get 25%, and so on. Some networks hire one person to do most of the heavy lifting and bring on 4-5 people who have a percentage of their time allocated by their organizations to do the work at hand. The more we can formalize the time allocation commitment of each team member, the higher the probability of getting the work done.

I recommend that this team meets bi-weekly to complete the following tasks:

- ✓ Develop a work plan and keep it on track
- ✓ Identify the key people (top 100) they want to engage
- ✓ Plan a gathering of the top 100 (see step two) and draft an invite
- ✓ Draft a short description of the purpose, desired outcomes and process they plan to follow to achieve a common agenda and shared measurement that can be used publicly to engage their community
- ✓ Create a database using customer relationship management (CRM) software and start to add names (especially your top 100) and strategic information to the database. Think long term and consider the functionality you will want to communicate with and engage your community (for example email, social media, webpages, forms, etc.)
- ✓ Research and write short papers that answer the following questions:

1. What is the current state of the issue we want to address? It is important to include key data points that should be considered.
2. What assets do we have in our community to address this issue and how will these help us be successful?
3. What have other communities done to address the issue that are applicable to our community?

The work of developing a common agenda is critical to forming a collective impact network. Without proper time allocation and effective human resources to lead the process it is nearly impossible to get this work done.

Three examples of teams forming:

- The Maine Cancer Foundation hired an exceptional leader early in their formation process. They also provided staff time of key individuals from the foundation and formed a leadership roundtable that provided early hands-on support. They sent a team of ten to Tamarack's Community Change Institute for 5 days to learn deeply together.
- The United Way of Central Iowa assigned 4 key leaders from their own staff who worked tirelessly to lead their community. Once their plan was launched they hired their first full time staff person to work on the plan.
- RECESS, an emerging collective impact initiative in the Bay area of California, received a percentage of time for 6 people from 5 different organizations to implement their common agenda process.

STEP TWO – BRING YOUR TOP 100 TOGETHER:

As early as you can, identify and bring together your top influencers who care about this issue. An exercise I use with most groups is The Top 100 Exercise (See Community Conversations page 117 for a full description or the link in the references section). This exercise will help you identify your top 25 leaders from each of the four main sectors: Community or not for profit, Business, Government and people with lived experience. It is important that your invite is broad and goes beyond just those organizations with a formal mandate around the issue.

For instance, if your goal is to reduce the effects of cancer in your community you will want to include:

1. Community organizations and people from hospitals and community health centers, as well as doctors, nurses, support and counselling organizations, advocates, etc.
2. Business leaders who have shown an interest in the issue of cancer. Look for companies that have sponsored events or funded cancer-related organizations or business leaders we know who have had cancer or are related to someone they care about who has cancer.
3. Government leaders representing a local municipality, a region, state or province, or even

at the national level – the broader the players the better.

4. Most importantly ensure that at least 25% of your top 100 are people who are experiencing cancer or who are survivors.

Work of the Staff Team:

- ✓ Plan a gathering and draft an invite letter signed by an influential representative from each of your sectors.
- ✓ Draft an agenda that includes presenting your research, and allow plenty of time for conversation
- ✓ Form a Leadership Roundtable: these are 7-8 people who represent your top 100 and will act as advisors and active listeners at the gathering, and who will work together after the gathering to finalize the community plan.
- ✓ Develop an “Ask” that will be used during the top 100 gathering which will garner commitments of ongoing involvement like:
 - A willingness to receive ongoing communication
 - A willingness to sit on an action team (see step four)
 - Host a consultation

This gathering is your first large-scale consultation and engagement event. Completing it will give you a huge sense of accomplishment and it can really accelerate your work. Most groups are able to host such an event within three to six months of being formed. Here are some outcomes you can expect:

- You have identified the top 100 people from your four sectors (complete system) who care about the issue you are addressing, and you have actively engaged them.
- You have completed base research on the issue, and have identified possible shared measurements.
- Your staff team has worked together well, you have a leadership roundtable, and now volunteers for your action teams.
- You have held a highly strategic consultation and have broad input from the community on the current state of the issue, the change they want to see and ideas for working together to achieve that change.
- You have a growing database of people who care about the issue
- And most importantly you have launched your initiative. Often media attend this gathering, which helps build the community you will need to make your issue a priority.

By gathering your key leaders (top 100) from the four sectors (whole system) together early in your collective impact process your work will feel like it is leaping forward. People will start talking and a new sense of hope will emerge. People will begin to ask how they can be involved and how they can help. Many will want to jump right into action, believing they have the right idea that will “change everything” and improve the issue.

From here, step three and four can be implemented at the same time. Listening to your community slows everything down (in a good way) and it provides an opportunity for you to truly hear the stories of people affected by your issue. You will be collecting the wisdom of everyone who cares and at the same time you will broaden engagement. Testing your quick win ideas will in turn accelerate your outcomes.

STEP THREE – LISTEN TO YOUR COMMUNITY BY IMPLEMENTING A BROAD-BASED COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY

To achieve collective impact, we need a growing community of people willing to implement change. This happens primarily through asking people to share their ideas to help us understand the current state of the issue and what changes people feel are necessary to achieve better outcomes. Many groups I work with form a listening team – a group dedicated to reaching out to the community to listen and engage them. They first work together to identify key partners who might co-host a consultation. Most groups emphasize the need to consult with many people who have lived experience of the issue (if reducing cancer, then people living with cancer; if reducing poverty, then people who are poor etc.) though they typically want to hear equally from all four sectors.

The top 100 gathering noted in step two makes the work of the listening team much easier. People who attend the gathering have a good understanding of the issue and have spent time talking with others about it. They recognize the need for broad-based consultation and are willing to help us organize consultations.

The work of the Listening Team includes:

- ✓ Reaching out to partners
- ✓ Creating a plan that includes listening to all sectors
- ✓ Developing some key questions to guide the consultations
- ✓ Working with the staff team to schedule consultations
- ✓ Hosting, attending and documenting the consultations
- ✓ Gathering names and email addresses of the people they consult with and adding these to the database
- ✓ Developing communications to provide updates and findings from the consultations
- ✓ Writing a listening report
- ✓ Testing the listening report with some of those we held consultations with by asking them, ‘Did we hear you?’

The listening to your community campaign often takes 4-6 months and has two functions. The first is to hear from people what they think needs to change, and the second is to broaden engagement. Many groups will hear from more than 500 people and some as many as 1,000. The database for the network grows substantially. The communications they share connects people and often generates excitement and hope. For many networks, the listening campaign is when they really begin to feel that a collective impact is possible.

STEP FOUR – DEVELOP SHORT-TERM ACTION TEAMS TO TEST YOUR QUICK WIN IDEAS

At about the six month point most networks implementing a collecting impact process experience tremendous pressure to implement ideas that lead to a concrete action. People are weary of talking. We know that a lot of talking and learning is critical in developing new and innovative ideas. Yet, as one of my clients reminded me, “there are thinkers and there are doers and we need them both.”

One of the best ways to harness this pressure for “doing” over “talking” is to implement Action teams. These are teams who have a 6-12-month mandate to implement concrete actions. Quick win ideas will arise in the gathering we spoke about in step two. They will also arise as the listening team holds consultations.

Here are a few ideas to help you:

- Typically, you want to pick ideas where there is a strong champion who will lead the team.
- Frame the issue so that it takes 6 months to complete. Remember, we want a quick win and at this stage we do not require a comprehensive change.
- Action teams are designed to test ideas. Remember we have not yet developed our 5-year strategy and we do not want these short-term action team ideas to dominate what we will do to achieve long term systemic change.
- Action teams are great “practice” for implementing mutually reinforcing activities later on in your initiative. Try to form them with people from all four sectors.

Quick win Action Teams provide concrete action at a time in our process when we are gathering information and writing about our ideas. One city I worked with redirected more than \$5 million in funding toward their goal and provided me with a three page document of concrete outcomes that they had achieved in reducing poverty. All this before their network had adopted their community plan.

Three examples of Action Team projects:

- A poverty reduction network identified an opportunity to reduce the number of people on a waiting list for affordable housing by 10% with no new investment. They identified the most housing-ready people on the waiting list and worked with private sector landlords to open up affordable and quality units.
- A cancer reduction group felt they could reduce high levels of bladder cancer by recruiting well diggers and drillers to hand out water testing kits. They took three months to develop the kits and three months to distribute them.
- A group interested in improving graduation rates worked with business leaders to implement a one month stay-in-school campaign.

STEP FIVE – WRITE YOUR COMMON AGENDA AND SHARED MEASUREMENT STRATEGY AS A 5-YEAR COMMUNITY PLAN AND FORMALIZE YOUR PARTNERSHIP

Most community plans are written within 12-18 months of a network forming. I encourage groups to take their time in writing a community plan for three reasons:

1. In the first-year community leaders need to release from their current thinking and way of working. It takes time to learn to work together, to understand a systems approach to change and to find new synergies between network partners.
2. The formation year is a time for emergence, where new ideas come easily and there is heightened creativity and often hope. This can be a highly productive period for new ideas to emerge, new actions to take shape and collective wisdom to emerge.
3. Writing a plan is about agreeing what we want to do together more than it is a plan for what needs to be done. Of course, we want to do what needs to be done, though agreeing collectively on the work ahead of us takes debate, compromise and requires trusting relationships to form. We also need our community network to sign on to the plan.

I encourage networks to write a 5-year community plan. I know this sounds like a long time, and that many are used to developing 3-year strategies. I like five years because, from experience, it takes a year to really implement the plan. By year two you move toward peak outputs. Year three and four are peak output years and when you get most of your results, and year five is for wind-down, transition or renewal. While a 5-year plan helps to simplify the framing of the process, it should be recognized that many issues collective impact initiatives take on can take 10+ years to address, given how deeply rooted the issue is, and so see the timeframe as a guide and not a given.

When writing a Community Plan to capture our common agenda, we want to cover these topics:

- **A listing and acknowledgement of all the partners.** The most important reason for collective impact is to bring a network of partners into focus around an issue so we can collectively achieve better outcomes. This plan is the collective agreement of what we will do together.
- **Who are we and what we want to accomplish.** The staff team will have already written this and the network will have adopted it early in the process. We just need to update it for our plan as most likely our statement of purpose and outcomes has grown and deepened.
- **Our last 12 months (tell the story).** I like the community plan to tell the story of the formation and give some details about the process taken to achieve a common agenda.
- **A data report – toward shared measurement.** Before the first gathering of the partners (see step one and two) we wrote several short papers which were used throughout the first year and have formed much of the base information needed for a collective impact. A

summary of these papers should be in your community plan. I find it easier to focus on comprehensive shared measurement in the first year of implementation. What we can do in the community plan is to give some key measures identified through consultations and research that are important to the network of partners.

- **A Listening Report** – For almost a year the listening team has reached out to the community. A description of this process and what you learned should be in the report.
- **Key strategic directions and strategies we will implement over the next 5 years.** One of the most important sections in the Community plan is an articulation of the broad strategic directions you will work on together and the specific strategies you will implement. If you describe the outcomes you hope to achieve for each strategic direction this can be very helpful.
- **Governance plan.** The Backbone for collective impact is typically made up of the fiscal sponsor (who can accept donations, and has exemplary HR and financial policies), a staff team, a leadership roundtable and Action Teams. The plan should articulate how the backbone capacity will be created.
- **Budget.** Funds are required to effectively implement a collective impact. An operational budget (revenue sources, staff and expenses) and a short fundraising plan is extremely helpful as it gives notice to donors that an ask is imminent.

PRESENTING THE COMMON AGENDA TO THE COMMUNITY AND FORMALIZING THE PARTNERSHIP

Similar to the gathering from step two, it is important to bring the Top 100 and all those who have been consulted together when launching the community plan. Here are some tips for this gathering:

- **Participants** – Make it a whole system gathering by ensuring your audience is made up of approximately 25% from each sector: business leaders, government, not for profit and people with lived experience.
- **Agenda** – Share the community plan and ask the question: Is there something we missed or that we need to change? I also like to have the group look at each strategic direction and suggest strategies that are important and where they or their organization can bring assets and be involved.
- **Document** – Normally given that there are more than 100 people in the room, we recommend grouping people into 10-12 tables. Each table has an assigned note-taker and a chair. Conversation highlights are then documented so they can be used to revise and upgrade the community plan after the event.
- **Invite** – Ask, how do you want to help? We want people to commit to help implement the plan. Most often we hand out a commitment form asking people to share if they want to serve on the Leadership Roundtable, an Action Team, receive communications, provide

funding, become formal partners, and adopt the community plan and include its collective implementation into their organizations' mandate and planning. Consider using the Wheel of Involvement as a tool for this (see the references).

- **Revise and Share** – Rewrite the plan and share it out to all who came. Often the database is more than 1,000 people by now. This includes our top 100 from the two gatherings, all the people who have come to consultations, and people who have expressed interest. Sending them a PDF version of the plan plus an Executive summary and a letter of thank you is an exceptional way to wrap up this phase of your collective impact work.

Writing a Community Plan and presenting the Common Agenda to your network and broader community is a tremendous achievement. When done well you will have these outcomes:

1. A database of more than 1,000 supporters
2. Community partners (organizations representing all four sectors) that have made a formal commitment to the plan.
3. A comprehensive, system-changing community plan and a shared measurement commitment. Often this will be the first such plan in the history of your community on the issue you are addressing.
4. A backbone structure to achieve impact with partners that have tested the work of Action Teams, governed collectively, achieved collected outcomes, built trust and had long complex conversations.
5. Your issue will be a community priority.

Building a common agenda and a 5-year community plan is mostly about mobilizing a community toward action. Achieving a collective impact in a community requires a large group of people working together. Establishing mutually reinforcing ideas requires people from different sectors collaborating. Broad community support is required to achieve system-changing outcomes. The result of rushing a common agenda, or minimizing our efforts in consultation and broad engagement, is that we draft a plan that needs to be “sold” to our network. We have not built community will and our issue is seldom a community priority. If you do the work of building a common agenda well, the work of implementation is much easier and you have a much greater probability of effectiveness.

I end by reminding you that this is “my way” of building a common agenda. I do not want you to implement “my way” but rather to use what you learn to build “your way.” It is more helpful for you to see this paper as a case study to learn from, than to use it as a paint-by-numbers approach to community development.

Much joy as you do the most satisfying work of changing our communities for good.

ABOUT PAUL BORN

Paul implemented one of the first collective impact initiatives in North America founding Opportunities 2000 in 1996 – a millennial project to reduce poverty in Waterloo Region to the lowest in Canada. He also founded Vibrant Communities to grow this initiative from one city to more than 75 cities in Canada (and one in the U.S.) all of whom are using collective impact approaches to reduce poverty. Paul is President of the Tamarack Institute, leading an amazing team and a learning community of more than 23,000 people. The author of 5 books including two Canadian Best Sellers, Paul teaches about community change around the world. In addition to writing, teaching and leading a staff of 20, Paul loves hands-on work and provides direct monthly coaching and consulting services for six collective impact initiatives in North America. This paper is based on his experience. Learn more at www.paulborn.ca and www.tamarackcommunity.ca



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