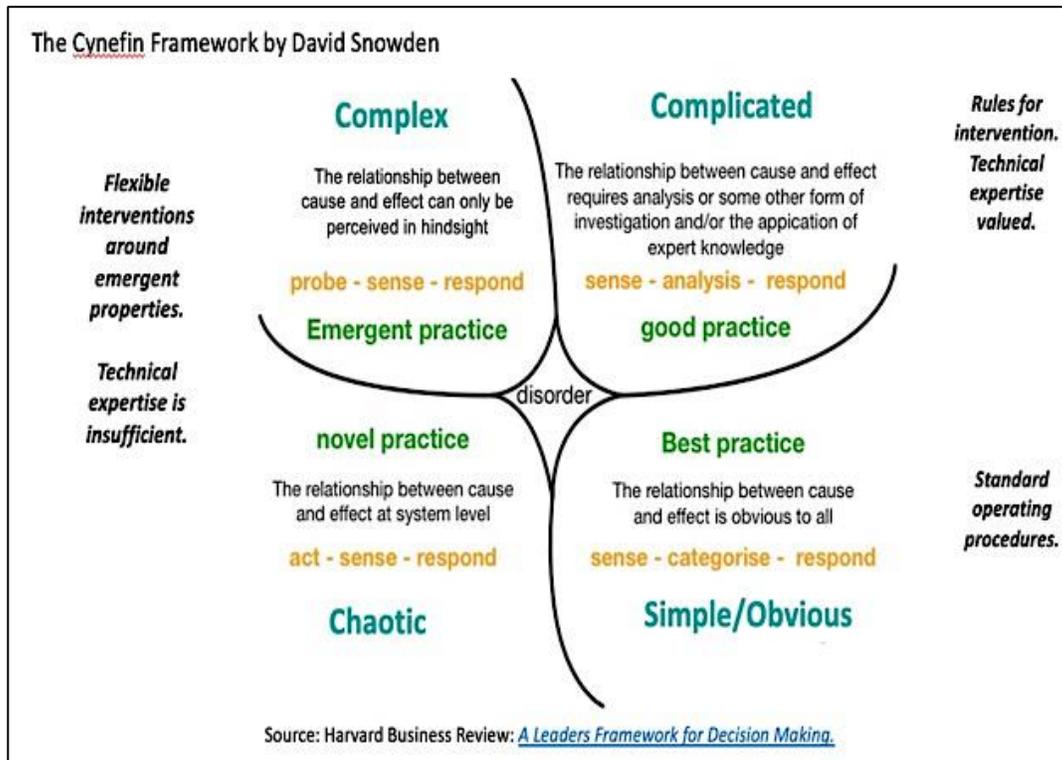# COLLABORATION | WHAT PROBLEM ARE YOU TRYING TO SOLVE?

LIZ WEAVER & SYLVIA CHEUY

One of the most challenging aspects of working collaboratively – particularly when there are different perspectives about the issue being addressed – is to reach a shared understanding of that issue and how best to address it. There are two dimensions about the issue that partners must agree on regarding the issue they are hoping to solve before beginning to work together to discover promising solutions. These two dimensions are:

1. **Confirming What Type of Problem You Are Trying to Solve** – Not all problems are the same. Confirming the nature of the problem you are facing is important because, different strategies and approaches are required to effectively navigate the type of problem the group is working to address.

2. **Defining the Goal(s) of the Hoped-For Solution** – Even in situations where there is a strong consensus within a community that change is needed, opinions about the goal(s) of the hoped-for change and what is likely to achieve it, are rarely clear or shared. That's why It is essential that, before diving into action, those leading a collaborative effort invest time exploring, assessing, testing, and reaching consensus on the nature and focus of your shared issue and the desired result(s) you hope to achieve.

The **Cynefin Framework**[1] is a tool developed by David Snowden and his colleagues to make sense of and categorize the nature of the problem we are facing. It outlines four possible domains that a problem or issue can fall within. Different responses are needed to effectively find solutions to the problems within each domain.

The Cynefin Framework by David Snowden

Complex
The relationship between cause and effect can only be perceived in hindsight
probe - sense - respond
Emergent practice

Complicated
The relationship between cause and effect requires analysis or some other form of investigation and/or the appication of expert knowledge
sense - analysis - respond
good practice

Rules for intervention. Technical expertise valued.

Flexible interventions around emergent properties.

Technical expertise is insufficient.

disorder

novel practice
The relationship between cause and effect at system level
act - sense - respond
Chaotic

Best practice
The relationship between cause and effect is obvious to all
sense - categorise - respond
Simple/Obvious

Standard operating procedures.

Source: Harvard Business Review: *A Leaders Framework for Decision Making.*

The four domains identified by the Cynefin Framework are:

1. **Simple/Obvious** – In this context, the relationship between cause and effect is clear to everyone and the options for how to address it are also clear. In simple contexts, we know what to do to solve the issue because we've seen it before. Addressing simple/obvious problems requires the identification and implementation of "best practice" solutions

2. **Complicated** – Problems in this domain are difficult to solve because the relationship between cause and effect may not be easy to see. Symptoms of the problem may have been identified, but there is a lack of clarity about how best to address it. Experts can be very helpful in analyzing complicated problems and helping to determine what the best possible response for the group to pursue. Solutions to complicated problems are found by agreeing on a "good practice". Individuals with technical or specialized expertise can also be very helpful in identifying a good enough solution to solve this type of issue

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[1] Cynefin.io wiki

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3. **Complex** – Problems within this domain have too many unknowns and are the result of multiple interacting causes. There are often several competing hypotheses about what is happening, and possible solutions are not evident. Complex problems are unpredictable which makes it virtually impossible to distinguish cause-and-effect. They are also impossible to solve by tackling one part at a time because the relationships between the parts is often as important as the individual parts themselves.

    The good news is that, while complexity makes problems unpredictable, it **IS** possible to discern patterns that can inform possible pathways forward. The search for solutions begins with inquiry and conversation and relies on innovation and creativity to develop and prototype new solutions. Environments that include a diversity of thinking, high levels of idea generation and frequent communication are more likely to generate the most effective solutions in situations that are complex.   Those working on problems in the realm of complexity must be patient in their identification of possible solutions and be willing to embrace "safe fail experimentation" and iteration

4. **Chaotic** – This is the final domain of the Cynefin Framework. This is a crisis situation where problems require a rapid response.[2] These problems often have no cause-and-effect because they exist in an environment that is shifting rapidly. The most effective response to chaotic situations is to create a sense of order by acting quickly to mitigate the most immediate negative impacts, determine areas of stability, and find ways to leverage them in order to transform the issue from a chaotic to a complex one.

If the work of your collaboration is focused on addressing an issue where there is a low level of **agreement** about what success looks like, the goals you want to achieve or how best to reach them **AND** there is little **certainty** about the cause(s) of the problem and/or no previous, widely accepted solutions, then you are dealing with the domain of complexity. This means that the solutions you are searching for cannot be transformed by "spending time and resources collecting more data or developing better theories. The only way to truly understand a system is to interact with it."[3]   As outlined by the Cynefin Framework, this requires "high levels of creativity and innovation and freedom from past constraints to create new solutions."[4]   An ability to be adaptable and agile are highly valued skills for undertaking this work. It is also important to assume that rather than identify a single, best solution, the issue will be most effectively addressed as a result of a strategy that focuses on multiple actioins/approaches.

There are times when a complex problem might contain potential solutions that are complicated or even simple and obvious. The **Cynefin Framework Problem Tool** helps collaborative partners identify the different parts of the problem and also potential approaches to getting closer to solving the problem. The Cynefin Framework Problem Tool can assist

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[2] *A Leader's Framework for Decision Making* by David J. Snowden & Mary E. Boone
[3] SOURCE: *7 Differences between complex and complicated* by Sonja Blignaut)
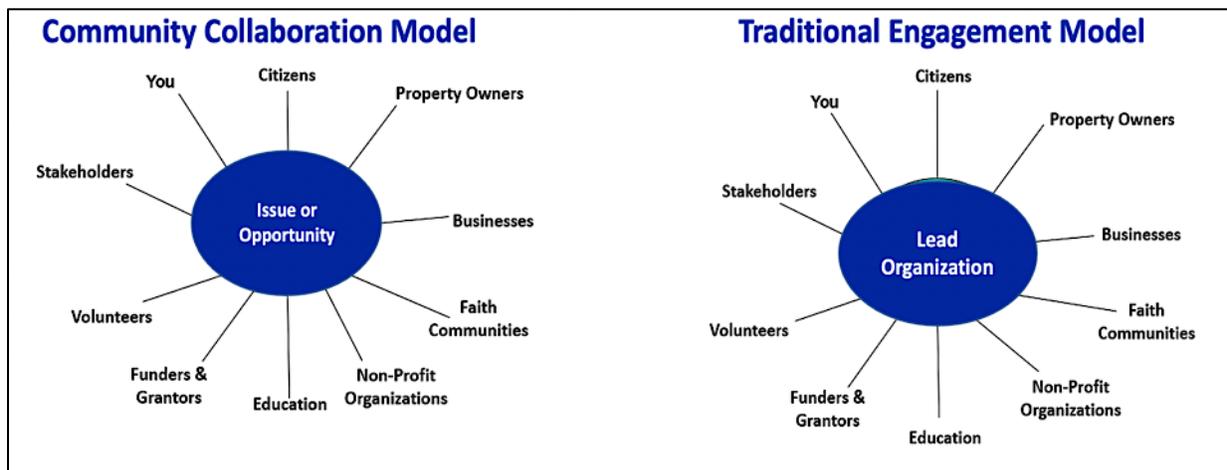[4] SOURCE: The zone of complexity - Praxis Website

collaborative groups in deepening their understanding of the type of problem they are seeking to resolve. The tool can also assist in identifying strategies and potential partners to engage.

COMPLEX PROBLEMS REQUIRE COLLABORATIVE SOLUTIONS

Complex problems are particularly well-suited to collaborative solutions because collaboration engages diverse perspectives to explore and deepen collective understanding about the shared issue. As partners engage in conversation and learn from each other they begin to appreciate its impact in a variety of different ways. This enables them to develop a shared understanding of the issue that is richer, more nuanced, and holistic. This, in turn, helps to generate new possibilities for action and creates the conditions needed for innovation and prototyping of new responses to thrive. These conversations also offer partners an appreciation of each other's challenges and limitations which increases the likelihood that the new solutions being proposed will have broad support and will therefore be more likely to be implemented.

The perspective of context experts – people with lived and living experience of the issue – brings an essential perspective to collaborative efforts to address complex issues. George Aye of Greater Good Studios notes that we tend to "value learned experiences, but discount lived experiences." This common assumption minimizes the essential contribution that context or lived-experience experts bring to addressing complex issues because they are the people who are often "closest to the problem."[5] Context Experts also provide a much-needed reality check that helps ensure that proposed solutions are practical and usable. Because context experts are "trusted messengers" within their communities, they also play a valuable role in helping to ensure that the collaborative's efforts to gather input and feedback about those most effective by the issue are successful.

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[5] SOURCE: WEBINAR | Overcoming Power and Privilege in Community Change, George Aye, Greater Good Studio

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Another reason that collaboration is the most effective response to addressing complex issues is that the "blind spots" or assumptions of sectors and perspectives are more quickly identified and heightens the likelihood that possible solutions will be more effective.

Successful collaboration requires a different mindset and approach than the more common, organizationally driven, problem-solving approaches that many of us are familiar with. As the visual[6] above illustrates, one difference in mindset is that collaborative efforts assume that "ownership" of the issue and the generation of possible solutions is shared. Organizational or sector-driven approaches, in contrast, tend to assume that they "own" responsibility to address an issue and if they do engage the input of others, this often takes a "focus group" approach which fails to engage the contributions of other partners and reinforces the belief that they are ultimately "in charge" of developing and implementing solutions.

> **Successful collaboration requires a different mindset and approach**

Organizationally driven responses are typically well-suited to addressing simple or complicated issues but are problematic when addressing a complex issue. Single sector responses to complex issues are usually too narrow in their scope; often lead to competing solutions that undermine each; and usually fail to mobilize the contributions of other groups, organizations, and sectors.
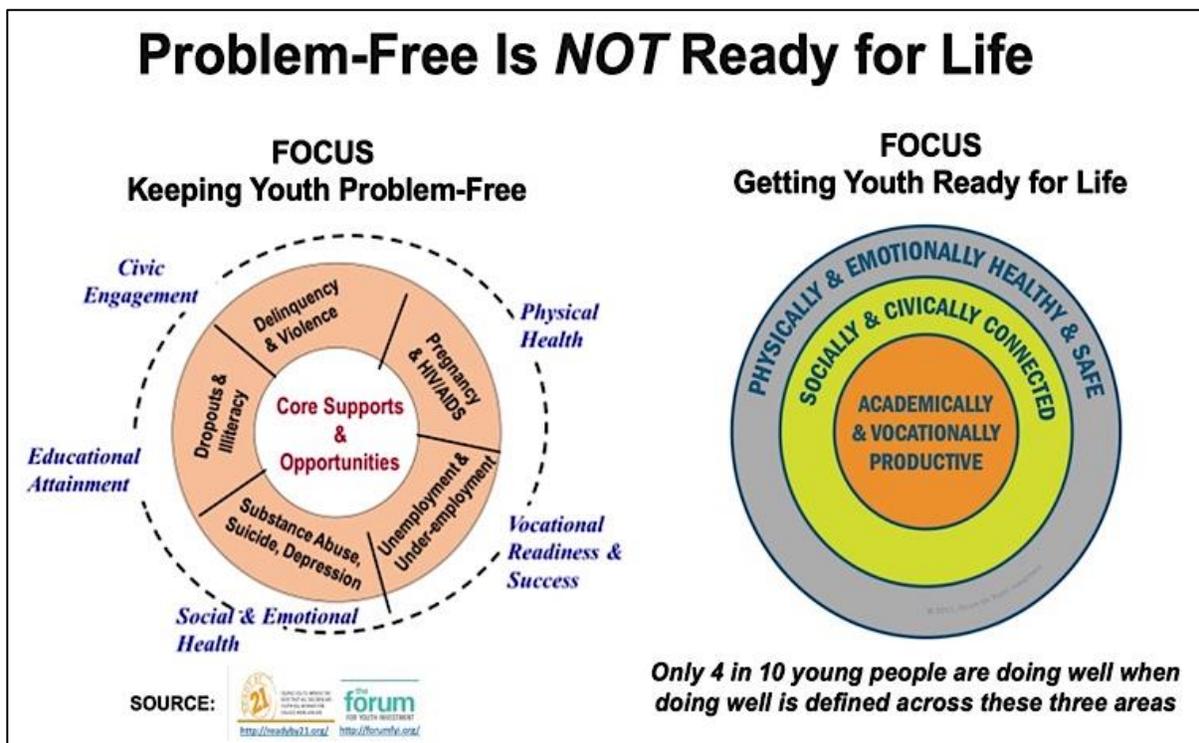
Another difference in the mindset required to effectively work collaborative is reflected in *HOW* a problem or issue is addressed and the stance required to effectively address it. These differences in approach are summarized in the table[7] below which highlights how the design and focus of a multi-sector collaborative efforts emphasizes curiosity and leverages the diversity of knowledge and insights at the table. In contrast, single-sector efforts are more apt to assume that they have successfully diagnosed the issue/problem and therefore tend to embrace more action-oriented, problem-solving approaches.

A SINGLE-SECTOR, PROBLEM-SOLVING STANCE	A MULTI-SECTOR, SOLUTION-GENERATING STANCE
On solving problems	On envisioning possibilities
On making statements	On asking questions
On advocating for preconceived notions	On being open to new ideas
On separation, isolation, silos	On wholeness
On people's deficiencies	On people's gifts
On blaming, fault-finding, or making demands on government	On accountability and responsibility of citizens
On relying on leaders	On empowering citizens
On government and/or business organizations	On voluntary associations
On large organizations	On small groups
On residents as customers	On residents as citizens

[6] Source: ***Community Building: How to Do It & Why It Matters*** by Ed Everett

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THE POWER OF FRAMING AND STORYTELLING

Frames are guides or stories that help people to interpret and make sense of what they are seeing and help us to be heard and understood. The FrameWorks Institute says that people wanting to advance social change, "need to make these (framing) choices wisely and purposefully" because they effect how "people understand, interpret and respond." If framing helps people to better understand complex issues reframing can create change in how those issues are viewed. Good framing is often the result of rich dialogues between perspectives/sectors and can spark new value-added solutions and strengthen existing programs and services.

The importance and impact of how we choose to frame the issue we want to address is beautifully illustrated in an example from the work of the Forum for Youth Investment. FYI convened the leaders from several youth-serving organizations together. One of the insights that emerged from this meeting was that the missions of many of these organizations focused predominantly on prevent specific set of problems being experienced by youth. Data was then shared that only 4 out of 10 youth in the United States, even those who were not experiencing any of the problems these organizations were addressing, were actually ready for life.[8]

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[8] WEBINAR | Youth Readiness: Mobilizing for Impact with Karen Pittman and Alex Bezzina

This reframing of what supports youth need to be successful created an opportunity for a new dialogue that broadened the thinking about the mandates of each organization and also built energy and excitement about a collaborative opportunity with the potential to make a significant positive impact on all youth. It also illustrates the importance of framing in how we think about an issue and the power of creating new ways to view it.

In a complementary way, powerful stories are an effective and engaging way to communicate a compelling case for change. In **_How to Tell Stories About Complex Issues_**, author Annie Neimand suggests that a critical skill for changemakers is the ability to tell stories that "that help people make sense of the different complexities that shape the issue they are tackling. This is particularly true when communicating with people who do not easily see problems." She also shares that one of the most common weaknesses in the stories told by changemakers is that they tend to use 'data and abstract terms like equity and justice but this approach' leaves space for people to insert their assumptions and biases about what those words mean, and no one has ever acted because of a great graph or data point."

> **Powerful stories are an effective and engaging way to communicate a compelling case for change.**

Ella Saltmarshe's article **_Using Story to Change Systems_**, reminds us that stories have always been central to how humans make sense of the world. Today we are confronting many complex and interrelated issues including climate change, inequity, and poverty that require programmatic and systemic solutions. Saltmarshe believes that stories are foundational to this work because they are able to help us see and act systemically.

Stories engage both are rational mind and our emotions. This is why they are very powerful in their ability to enable us to create meaning out of patterns, foster a sense of community, encourage empathy across differences so that it is possible to change the values, mindsets, rules, and goals of a system.

She identifies 3 qualities of story that leaders of multi-sector collaboratives can use to mobilize individuals and communities to "effectively navigate turbulent times, and generate new solutions and advance systems change." These are:

1. **Story as Light** – These stories illuminate the past, present and future in ways that reveal system "cracks" and shine a light on possible visions for the future

2. **Story as Glue** – These are stories that generate stories that help us find our commonality and connect us together in spite of our differences

3. **Story as Web** – These are stories that help us to change the current stories we hold about ourselves, our world, and our place within it

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How we frame a complex issue and the stories we tell about why change is needed are essential to advancing positive community change.   Collaborative leaders recognized the importance of both of these practices as they work to confirm the problem they are trying to solve because they understand that "when we change the story and how we tell it, we can change the world." [9]

SKILLS AND CAPACITIES FOR NAVIGATING COMPLEXITY

Collaborative leaders whose work involves addressing complex challenges recognize that command and control leadership approaches are not effective. They understand that the solutions they seek can only be discovered through collaboration, experimentation, and iteration. This requires them to be self-aware, strategic thinkers who have a unique capacity to engage others to discover meaningful solutions."[10]

Comfort in Uncertainty

The ability to be comfortable in the face of differing perspectives about an issue where there is no proven set of solutions to clearly address it requires the ability to move forward in uncertainty by taking the next wise step in front of you, even when the path forward is still unclear. Eight skills that collaborative leaders can rely on to help cultivate the ability to navigate, and lead, in times of uncertainty include[11]:

Stay Grounded	The ability to be fully aware and present in the moment and regain your sense of balance when it is disrupted.	**Voice and Space**	Being aware of what is needed in a given situation. When is my voice needed? What other voices need to be heard? How am I impacting others with how I am showing up?
Listening	The ability to listen openly and deeply, which nables us to hear and encourage new possibilities.	**Awareness of Power**	Awareness of the dynamics of power in relationships, how issues are viewd, how actions are taken, and the systems and structures we work in.
Asking Powerful Questions	Embracing curiosity over assumptions and control. Having the bravery to ask questions that may disrupt the status quo.	**Zoom In, Zoom Out**	The ability to zoom in and be present in a task, and also zoom out to notice how your actions align with a larger purpose and notice the emerging patterns

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[9] SOURCE: ***What's In a Frame?*** | FrameWorks Institute
[10] SOURCE***: Leadership Capacities*** by colab
[11] SOURCE: ***Leadership Capacities* by Colab**

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Compassion	The ability to reflect on oneself and others without judgement	Systems Awareness	The ability to see the bigger picture, the relationships impacting the whole, and their interconnections to make informed decisions.

Pattern Recognition

Complex issues are fraught with uncertainty but paradoxically also exhibit identifiable patterns that can be worked with. The benefit of discerning the patterns is that they can help to "uncover "obstacles, accelerants, traps, or enablers" and spot "strange bedfellows" and "powerful strangers"[12]

Al Etmanski is a renown social innovator whose work has included advancing change for disability issues as well as a deep exploration of successful social change efforts. In his book, ***Six Patterns to Spread your Social Innovation***, Al highlights the importance of pattern recognition when navigating complexity. He defines these patterns as a "codified collection of insights, lessons, relationships stories, values, and desires" that are not just something you can train yourself to observe but also offer you something that you can follow and apply to your own work.[13]

Leaders who cultivate the ability to recognize patterns can "become more deliberate and intentional about your actions and helps reveal meaning in seemingly random or irrelevant events."[14] This is particularly valuable when navigating issues where there is more unknown than known and in situations where there is a general goal that folks are heading towards but no precise definition of the end-goal or a clear plan for how to get there.

FINAL THOUGHTS ON DEFINING THE PROBLEM YOU ARE TRYING TO SOLVE

Einstein wisely stated, 'If I had an hour to solve a problem, I'd spend 55 minutes thinking about the problem and 5 minutes thinking about solutions." Successful collaborative efforts invest time in exploring, defining, and framing the nature of their issue to ensure they are operating with a consensus and clarity of focus. They develop compelling stories to inspire the broader community to envision possible solutions and engage stakeholders and community members in helping to test and iterate possible solutions. This is the most effective approach for issues within the domain of complexity and which are the result of multiple interacting causes.

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[12] SOURCE: ***Getting to Maybe: How the World is Changed*** by Frances Westley et al
[13 & 14] SOURCE: ***Six Patterns to Spread Your Social Innovation*** by Al Etmanski

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This paper provides an overview of the Cynefin Framework, which is extremely useful in assessing the nature of an issue and the most effective strategies for addressing it. It explains when multisector collaboration is the most useful, and why it is the best approach for addressing issues that are complex. The importance of framing, storytelling, and pattern recognition as important dimensions of collaborative work are also highlighted. Their effectiveness in creating understanding, generating new possibilities, and building wide-spread commitment for change is invaluable in building momentum and supporting implementation.

Tools for Defining the Problem You Are Trying to Solve:

1. The Cynefin Framework - https://cynefin.io/wiki/Cynefin
2. Leadership Capacities - https://static1.squarespace.com/static/58ab6d33893fc06cb72925a5/t/5a974c42ec212d796ca7f0bf/1519864903665/LeadershipCapacities_colab.pdf
3. The Cynefin Framework Problem Tool - https://www.tamarackcommunity.ca/hubfs/Resources/Tools/TOOL%20The%20Cynefin%20Framework%20%E2%80%93%20Defining%20A%20Collaborative%20Problem%20or%20Opportunity.pdf

The Collaborative Governance and Leadership Series
This is the fourth paper in a series about Collaborative Leadership and Governance. The papers will be released over the course of fall 2022. We invite your comments and feedback. If you are a member of a collaborative table, we would love to hear from you. Please email Liz Weaver – Liz@tamarackcommunity.ca

ABOUT LIZ WEAVER

Liz Weaver is the Co-CEO of Tamarack Institute and leading the Tamarack Learning Centre. The Tamarack Learning Centre advances community change efforts 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.

ABOUT SYLVIA CHEUY

Sylvia is a Consulting Director of the Tamarack Institute's Collective Impact Idea Area. She is passionate about community change and what becomes possible when residents and various sector leaders share an aspirational vision for their future. Sylvia believes that when the assets of residents and community are recognized and connected they become powerful drivers of community change.