The Essential Mindset and Skillsets of Backbone Leaders – Written Responses to Live Audience Questions
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Q: *What's the difference between the Backbone Organization and a Community Based Lead Organization? Is it the same thing?*

Using clear labels to describe the different aspects of collective work is important. Unfortunately, there isn't a lot of consistency in labeling from one collaborative to the next and this causes confusion. The term "backbone" is not a universally adopted label, nor should it be. The label is less important than being clear about the roles.

The following is how I distinguish between these types of entities. I'll apply this approach in my answers to the next two similar questions.

Backbone: While backbones can vary widely in their design, the functions of a backbone are somewhat consistent and include:

- Facilitation and coordination of the collective efforts of the members of a collaborative
- Communication with the members and on behalf of the collective.
- Providing data and insight that help members understand the current state of affairs with data, as well as the progress they are collectively making toward their goals.

As it relates to backbone design, the backbone does not have to be a new or a stand-alone entity. An existing entity (or entities) may be asked by the members of a collaborative to perform backbone functions. In this case, the entity assumes an additional mission – to provide backbone services – beyond its original mission.

Community-Based Lead Organization: An entity that has been given responsibility by the collaborative to lead a strategy or initiative of the collaborative. In this role, the lead organization may perform roles of a backbone, but it does so only for the aspects of the collaborative it is leading. If the members of a collaborative give an existing organization responsibility for leading the entire collaborative, I'd say that such an organization is the backbone. And it's perfectly fine to call it a Community-Based Lead Organization instead of a backbone. What's important is that its role is clear and well understood.

Q: *Could you give an example of an individual who would be a backbone leader versus an engaged community leader who brings assets and skills forward in their work?*

Backbone Leader: A person employed to provide backbone services to a collaborative or a person who is serving on the leadership body (board or steering committee) of the collective effort.

Community Leader: A person who works for a member of a collaborative who contributes their assets, skills and other gifts to advance the shared goals of the collaborative. One way such a person could exercise leadership is by joining the board or steering committee.

Q: *What is the relationship between backbone leadership and the role of conveners in communities of practice?*

The distinction between these roles I believe is rooted in the purpose of the collaborative.

Backbone Leadership: The roles and responsibilities of backbone leadership are very high when the purpose of the collaborative is very high – such as expanding the scope and scale of change in the community or, even higher, transforming systems within the community so that the inequitable status quo is disrupted. For example, the backbone leadership in this type of collaborative would be expected to advocate for public policy changes to advance the shared goals of the collective effort.

Convener of Community of Practice: If the community of practice's purpose is to increase communications and build relationships among the practitioners, the convener may provide some services that are similar to those of a backbone, but the convener probably wouldn't be asked to advocate for public policy change. If the community of practice aspires for system change, then the convener is likely performing the same roles that a backbone provides in the collective impact framework.

Q: Regarding the mindset of not being in control, how do we get this to really sink into our team?

What a wonderful question to explore. I'd start by being very explicit with the team that this is indeed the case and it is normal. Some people do not thrive in such environments and those people should be encouraged to pursue other career paths. People without strong facilitation skills are more comfortable with their ability to move people forward even though they don't have control. Helping your team develop their facilitation skills is important. Resources to help your team include: [Facilitating Breakthrough](#) by Adam Kahane and [Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-Making](#) by Sam Kaner and others. Polarity management – helping members balance values that are in tension with each other – is an important tactic in helping members of a collaborative move forward. [Polarity Partnerships](#) has a lot of resources on this tactic and helping your team get good at polarity management will help them better adapt to not being in control.

Q: What tools can we use to evaluate "how" we are working together?

Three metrics that can be relatively easily tracked to evaluate "how" the members of a collaborative are working together are:

- **Participation:** Which can be as simple as tracking meeting attendance and the level of engagement in meetings.
- **Commitment:** Which includes a member's commitment of time, money and leadership to support the collaborative.
- **Trust:** Which includes the depth of relationships that members have built with other members and the backbone.

These can be tracked via observation, interviews, surveys and self-reporting mechanisms. Some of the evaluation can be done by the backbone staff. There may be a need for third-party evaluation.

[Developmental Evaluation](#) is an approach that can also be helpful in evaluating both how well members are working together and what they are achieving together.

Q: Often when we speak to folks about this Collective work, I assume they have their own filters of models or frameworks of how they hear this, because I know I do! So how do you speak about it as, yes, perhaps a newer framework, but something they can relate to?

Even in the most hierarchical of organizations there is little that anyone does all on their own. People are very familiar with collective work. Highlight the similarities between working on a cross-functional team within an organization and working on a cross-sector collaborative. The fundamental difference who has the power to set the purpose and goals of the collective work. In an organizational setting, normally there is a person or a small group with positional power that make those decisions. In a collaborative environment, the members make that decision together.

Q: Can you give examples of Backbone organizations and how one becomes part in them?

There are many entities performing backbone functions for collaboratives. You can find more information on backbone entities and job opportunities at the [Collective Impact Forum](). Also, The Strive Together Network consists of backbones across the United States that are working to improve education outcomes in their respective communities. [Where We Work - StriveTogether]()

Q: How does the backbone staff respond when a member, especially a funder, attempts to exercise control over the collaborative work?

The response will be context dependent, but an initial step would be for the staff of the backbone to engage with other members (such as the chair or co-chairs of the effort) to explain the situation and enlist their support in working with the funder to advance a healthier power dynamic. The backbone serves the members and it therefore cannot effectively push back against a member or a funder on its own. The backbone needs to be supported by its members – and sometimes that requires members to step forward and influence the behavior of other members.

Q: How do we help recognize and support those that are exercising equitable, collaborative leadership, as it is both rare and rarely recognized?

First, the members of a collective impact effort should be explicit that they expect both the members and the backbone staff to exercise such leadership. This expectation can be expressed in the guiding principles that all members of a collective impact effort commit to when they join the effort. And it should be clearly defined in the job description of staff. Compensation and promotion can be based on their ability to exercise such leadership. Members of a collective impact effort can agree to be evaluated on their exercise of such leadership. The backbone staff and board can also promote examples of the exercise of such leadership by specific members.

Q: Can you provide more perspective on the distinction between power and structures?

During the webinar, I referenced this [article by Richard Bartlett]() that makes a compelling case that how power is exercised is more important than the structure that is used to organize an effort. Whether an effort is organized with a hierarchical structure or a horizontal one doesn't determine the health of the power dynamic. We need to be thoughtful of how power is exercised, not just the design of our structures.