Leadership for Navigating Uncertainty

Liz Weaver, Tamarack Institute and Bill Fulton and Jodi Hardin, The Civic Canopy

Given the scale of disruptive forces unleashed by the global pandemic, the social movements which inspired action to respond to racial justice and the economic shockwaves that have followed, the need for effective leadership has risen to the forefront in profound ways. This paper attempts to draw upon the growing literature around leadership models and applies it to the current context based on what we are observing in communities, states, and provinces across Canada and the United States.

We stop short of providing a declarative solution or recommendation, but rather share our musings about responsive, collaborative, and disruptive-emergent leadership, and how we might use this understanding of these leadership forms to ensure we lean into deep, durable and transformative change. Each approach to leadership we describe is necessary, but each is not enough on its own to lead to transformative outcomes. If we don't embrace more disruptive-emergent leadership, the goal of true equity will not be realized.

For each of the three forms of leadership we describe—responsive, collaborative, disruptive-emergent—we will share the characteristics, strengths and limitations, providing case studies to help visualize what each might look like in action.

It is important to note, that we don't know the length of the race we are running. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in early March, many of us believed that by summer we would be returning to our old patterns. Now, six months into the pandemic, things continue to shift and churn. This observation about forms of leadership might help each of us better navigate the uncertainty ahead.

DISRUPTION AND CHAOS NEEDS LEADERSHIP

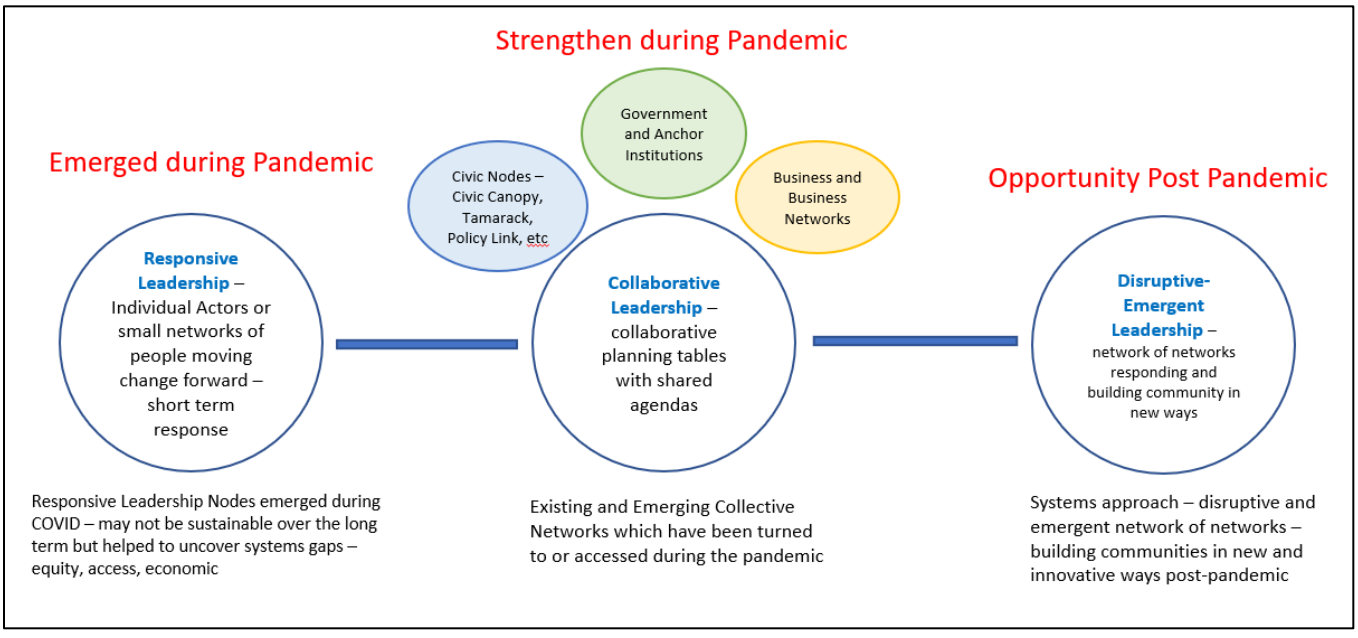
The world is in a rare moment of epochal shifts. Things are being bent and shaped into a different reality, distinct from the flow and continuity to which we have become accustomed. This is both a time of peril and a time of innovation. We are seeing with new eyes long-standing patterns of injustice--disparities in health outcomes, oppressive structures within policing, and precarious economic states.

In *Collective Impact Post-Pandemic*, Liz Weaver describes how communities are responding, working toward recovery and eventually how they might build toward resilience. As we move from the initial response phase into the recovery phase, we run a great risk. Not just a risk of going back to the "way things were," but even worse, going back to the old ways of solving large-scale and complex problems—through polarized political institutions and inequitable economic structures. We know that solving problems the old way did not work. We need something new.

We believe we need to choose a different path that expands beyond typical ways of thinking about the mitigation phase often focused on reducing potential harms. We believe we need to embrace the turbulence of the current moment and draw on the varied forms of leadership which have emerged and are required in times of great change. Understanding and leveraging these different forms of leadership will, we believe, help to collectively transform systems. A transformative approach is needed to rebuild better with justice and equity in the forefront.

We believe we need to embrace the turbulence of the current moment and draw on the varied forms of leadership which have emerged and are required in times of great change.

Over the past six months, we have witnessed heroic acts of individual compassion, collaborative leadership generating innovative solutions, and emerging examples of even broader systemic change across networks. The leadership approaches identified in this paper—responsive, collaborative, and disruptive/emergent—are ways in which individuals and collective groups of citizens have responded to and dealt with the uncertainty and crisis of this time. Each form of leadership has its strengths and limitations. Each is needed at different times and for different reasons. Combined strategically, they offer the potential for channeling community energy in powerful ways to address both immediate needs and systemic root causes of community problems.



RESPONSIVE LEADERSHIP – (Emergency Response)

The sense of urgency and immediate crisis that characterized the earliest phase of the pandemic gave rise to a type of leadership best suited for addressing immediate needs: Responsive Leadership. Responsive leadership is timely and focused. It is typically manifested as individuals or small rapid response groups reacting to immediate needs within their communities. These exciting and inspiring responsive nodes are often grassroots in nature and arise from an empathetic sense of "what can I do right now to help?"

CHARACTERISTICS

Charity, Giving and Connection: Many responsive leadership nodes emerged quickly during the initial phase of the COVID-19 crisis. They mobilized and acted with nimbleness and agility, rapidly learned and adapted, and "got things done." We witnessed examples of people coming together in remarkable ways during the first weeks and months to preserve the health care capacity of hospitals and to support family and neighbors through the initial phase of the pandemic.

For example, "caremonger" networks and mutual aid groups were set up to purchase groceries and get prescriptions filled for seniors. School parking lots were transformed to distribute drive-by breakfast and lunches to students and families, and large afterschool program spaces were transformed to provide childcare for essential workers. It was a response that was driven by immediate and pressing needs, informed by data and a sense of urgency, and unburdened by complex structures or bureaucracies.

In this way, responsive leadership prompted collective action designed to care for individuals and to help flatten the curve of COVID-19 spread and the related pressure on health care systems.

Raising One's Voice: Additionally, we have witnessed the growth of spontaneous protests in response to the police brutality spotlighted by the viral video George Floyd's murder. Overnight, individuals and groups around the globe took to the streets to protest not only this single death but the institutional racism it represented. While protest movements are rooted in longer term strategy and enduring structures, the specific marches and acts of protest they gave rise to were examples of responsive action.

CASE STUDIES

Care-mongering Hamilton is an example of a responsive community network which continues to provide individual and collective supports and resources. Often within a few minutes, individuals are able to find the tools, links and resources they need to prevent them and their families from falling into crisis.

The Tamarack Institute, during the first few weeks of the COVID pandemic, published weekly stories about how communities and citizens were responding. The COVID and Community Building newsletter highlights how individuals and leaders across Canada rose to the challenge of responsive community change.

Over time, the marches mobilized around calls for significant systems transformation, police reform, and other important systems change that are years in the making (see Disruptive/ Emergent Leadership below) but the marches also provided an immediate outlet for a deep and shared desire for action in the face of clear need. The marches exemplified the role of responsive leadership in community change.

STRENGTHS

These responsive leadership nodes were **nimble and adaptable**, quickly making decisions and activating resources. Some rapidly **innovated** in terms of repurposing and redeploying existing infrastructure in new and different ways and others created new mechanisms for deploying resources. Businesses shifted from making soccer jerseys to making face masks. Communities brokered new partnerships between restaurants, food banks and transportation workers. Government, business, and non-profits quickly figured out how to mobilize hazard pay, offer sick time coverage, and move to remote work. Foundations created flexible funding opportunities so non-profits could quickly respond to local need. Marches and protests sprung up seemingly overnight, with word of events spreading quickly across social media.

All sectors, including governments, business and non-profits, responded in nimble ways, gaining **alignment with unusual partners** that resulted in significant shifts. The Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) provided individuals who had lost employment, contract workers, consultants, and students with access to monthly financial benefits to keep themselves and their families stable and secure. Landlords were prevented from evicting tenants and the annual April 1 deadline for filing of income taxes was moved. These examples show that governments can act quickly and responsively.

Technology played an important enabling factor in the rise of responsive action. Individuals in local communities connected through social media platforms in new and different ways, quickly tapping into a wide array of individuals who had resources to share or needs to be met.

These initial responsive leadership actions also highlighted and uncovered the historical and systemic gaps that exist in communities. They **stretched our understanding** of the critical nature of front line and essential workers—from health care workers to grocery clerks to child care providers—to deliver services; underscored the number of Americans and Canadians who don't earn a livable wage; and exacerbated stress and mental health challenges. In short, response leadership actions during COVID-19 and racial justice marches **highlighted the long-standing inequities that persist across communities**.

LIMITATIONS

Responsive leadership is adaptive because it is fueled by a sense of urgency and immediacy, but it is fragile for the same reason. This makes sustaining initial and responsive solutions and leadership even more challenging. Response fatigue can occur if the crisis takes too long to resolve. Eventually, even the most responsive leader must take care of his or her own needs or

gets refocused on other priorities. Resources dry up, attention wanes, and focus returns to the more traditional forms of service delivery by government and non-profits.

Another limitation of responsive leadership is that it f**ocuses primarily on treating symptoms**, not the deeper root causes that produced them. This is of course appropriate—when people are without food, they need an immediate remedy rather than waiting for a coalition to redesign the food system. Yet as the pandemic continues these initial rapid response leadership nodes are often **inadequate to ensure the deeper systemic changes needed**. They are designed to circumvent existing systems. But they also highlight the fact that many systems may need to be imploded and built anew. This style of leadership, if maintained, may lead towards spotty outcomes and ultimately not address racial equity.

Finally, to quickly respond, these solutions often **did not engage those most impacted** by the issue. The short-term adaptations and innovations may not be designed in a way that those who most experience challenges can fully tap into and use over time.

LEVERAGING STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS

While there are limitations to this level of leadership, there are important assets to preserve as well. Emerging from this responsive leadership action is a new network of leaders who have made a commitment to act in ways that improve and enhance community life. What motivated them to act and respond? What do they envision for themselves as a next step? What lessons have they learned which can be drawn into community change efforts. What can be done to connect these individuals to structures and systems in communities? How can this type of leadership approach be used to uncover how current systems are broken? What lessons are being learning?

COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP – (Collective Impact)

As the pandemic passes the six-month mark, some of the responsive leadership that emerged as part of the crisis began evolving into longer term collaborative leadership methods in hopes of developing a “new version of normal.”

As well, other forms of collaborative networks filled the void by connecting people, distributing resources, and sharing support. When individuals and organizations moved into remote workplaces, the need for formal and informal connections became even more important. Collaborative leadership approaches evolved to create places to exchange ideas, hear the latest about community change efforts and exchange stories about how to respond effectively to the pandemic. In many cases, community collaboratives saw their members increase during the pandemic, sometimes by more than 50%.

CHARACTERISTICS

Collaborative leadership approaches typically include non-profit, government, anchor institutions, and business collaboratives working together in a shared purpose. In some cases, they might have formed to address immediate needs but adapted to more proactive efforts that understand and **address root causes** in a longer term, **sustainable way.**

In other instances, existing community coalitions and collective impact efforts shifted their attention to leverage their existing infrastructures to **better align and maximize recovery efforts**. These initiatives are striving to understand the broader community and organization stressors, assessing their priorities and strategies, and re-formulating their approaches.

STRENGTHS

Existing collaborative leadership approaches are recognized and valued as places where **different viewpoints and perspectives** are already committed to working together towards shared goals. **Relationships**, **trust, and commitment** are seen as strengths to build on and adapt from to address new needs emerging across communities. The theory, processes, and learning from the collective impact field provides a solid foundation for collaborative work to develop and grow. There is a shared understanding that a single organization or sector will not be able to solve the inequities highlighted by the pandemic. Collaborative leaders have the skills to bring different perspectives together, create space for an open dialogue that challenges the status quo, mobilize collective action towards a shared vision, and adapt solutions to get to the root causes of issues. Many of them are also connected, in real ways, to community needs.

Additionally, most collaboratives have **community engagement strategies** as part of their work, providing access to or engaging those most impacted by issues. The value and impact of community collaboratives was realized as a result of the actions and roles they had during the pandemic, especially among Latinx communities that are often underrepresented from decision-making tables. Roque Barros from the Ford Family Foundation recalled how a community member from one collaborative noted that it felt like their stock had risen because of the pandemic.

CASE STUDIES

The Vibrant Communities network of 81 members representing 328 communities in Canada reflects how existing coalitions can pivot and adapt, mobilizing at first around immediate needs and then shifting focus to potential policy solutions such as exploring Universal Basic Income and other long-term solutions to poverty.

PolicyLink has helped galvanize its members around issues of affordable housing, police reform, and public transit.

The Ford Family Foundation's network of community builders in the northwest found that coalitions who had spent time building a strong foundation of trust and collaboration were called upon to meet the immediate needs in communities surfaced by the pandemic.

LIMITATIONS

Coalitions seeking to adapt to new needs during the pandemic saw new opportunities, but many also experienced **turf wars**—constrained government and philanthropic budgets and overlapping non-profit missions—and a lack of informed or collective leadership within the community sector. Few of these connected actors fundamentally changed what they are doing in effort to work towards collective action. Further, while these networks brought stability, this stability frequently brought less **adaptability to the deeper needs of communities** and those who seek to challenge the status quo. Many of these coalitions have long term funding arrangements, and specific outcomes tied to deliverables, and are thus more hesitant to risk veering off-course from commitments to foundations, government agencies and donors.

In other cases, some of the partners around the table faced **resource constraints** and internal staffing challenges to meet the demands required during disruptive times. As a result, opportunities were missed. It is also more difficult to learn from and leverage how collaborative leadership might better address the deeper systemic problems that have emerged through the pandemic crisis and citizen protests because of the pressure to respond.

Coalition work has progressed over the years and is more aware of and intentional about **community engagement**. While there are signs of moving from transactional models of engagement to true transformative engagement, this progress has been slow and not fully realized. Starting from a grass tops approach, as is often the case in early collective impact efforts, creates a hard turn towards authentic grassroots involvement that many coalitions never make.

Finally, collective impact and coalition efforts have sometimes stalled at the promise of identifying and **addressing deep systemic challenges**. While some coalitions have dabbled in systems change, there has been limited movement on wholesale change that results in significant population-level impact, decreasing disparities and increasing equity.

LEVERAGING STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS

While there are limitations to collaborative leadership, there are important assets to preserve as well. Emerging from existing collaborative leadership are leaders who are asking the tough questions that challenge the status quo. What prompted the willingness to question everything? What motivates them to take new and big risks? What are they excited about and worried about? What can be done to provide these leaders with increased freedom from funding or bureaucratic constraints?

The responsive leadership and collaborative leadership examples highlighted that, during the earliest stages of this pandemic, communities and leaders can be nimble and adaptable, can get things done, and can prioritize and commit. They also underscored that relationships and partnerships matter, authentic community engagement is essential, and an elevating line-of-sight mobilizes shared action. Most importantly, they elevated a shared understanding that equity—and racial equity specifically—is the north star, that systems need to be deconstructed, redesigned and rebuilt, and that leadership is an attribute (not a position) that any and all can activate. This understanding gives birth to a third type of leadership: disruptive-emergent leadership.

> **"Relationships and partnerships matter, authentic community engagement is essential"**

DISRUPTIVE-EMERGENT LEADERSHIP – (Systems Transformation)

As the pandemic and social justice movement move into what is often called the mitigation phase, there is fear that creating a new normal won't go far enough. Encouraging compassionate acts of individual response, and realigning current services, programs and collaborative leaders in adaptive ways is important and valuable, but it is not sufficient. To truly change systems and rebuild better, an additional form of leadership is needed.

A collective capacity must be cultivated which disrupts many of the current mental models of leadership. This form of leadership is adaptable and better able to respond to complexity. It is a form of leadership to challenge the underlying conditions, transform systems, and ensure equity. We describe this as disruptive-emergent leadership. You will note that we use a hyphenated word to describe this form of leadership. We recognize the need to disrupt old ways of working but also the importance of embracing agility and emergence.

CHARACTERISTICS

This form of leadership leans into embracing the **complexity and ambiguity of systems change**, recognizing the importance of dramatic revisioning that **centers equity** as the guiding purpose and force. There is **certainty around the overarching WHY** of working together, yet fluidity around the who, what and how. There is a north star, yet the strategies, actions, and actors are fluid and **emergent** in nature, learning and adapting along the way.

Unlike collaborative leadership, disruptive-emergent leadership is **convened and coordinated from both nowhere and anywhere** at the same time since it is not centered around a person(s) or organization(s). Disruptive-emergent leadership is more distributed among the multitudes of individuals united by a shared commitment to an overarching vision that guides behavior in service of a common cause.

This key shift from collaborative leadership to disruptive-emergent leadership is the evolution beyond a single "container" that can organize and coordinate the specific strategies of known actors. 4th Quadrant Partners describe this as the shift from adaptive strategy to emergent strategy: "Strategy shifts from simply adaptive to fully emergent when the locus of strategy changes – from driving results to creating the conditions where the whole community can participate in developing solutions that continue to adapt."

Disruptive/emergent leadership thrives within the messiness of diverse approaches because the **end goal is clear**: achieving the unfulfilled promise of equity. Reflecting on the response to Hurricane Katrina, Meg Wheatley made these observations about the kind of leadership that emerged to successfully address the crisis: "human networks always organize around shared meaning. Individuals respond to the same issue or cause and join together to advance that cause. For humans, meaning is a 'strange attractor'—a cohering force that holds seemingly random behaviors within a boundary. What emerges is coordinated behaviors without control, leaderless organizations that are far more effective in accomplishing their goals."

CASE STUDIES

Over 2,000 communities across the nation organized spontaneous protest marches under the larger banner of Black Lives Matter, but with no single coordinating body dictating direction. Instead, the movement describes itself as decentralized but united by a set of guiding principles that allow it to adapt to new circumstances and avoid the patterns of hierarchy and patriarchy that have limited prior movements.

The Human Systems Dynamics Institute provides useful tools and approaches to navigating fluid and dynamic change. Their international network includes more than 400 practitioners advancing systems change using inquiry, pattern recognition and simple rules.

PolicyLink, a national network of partners engaged in advancing an equity conversation in the United States. This network is advancing a set of principles for a common sense, street smart recovery. These principles can be adopted and adapted by disruptive leaders, organizations and networks.

STRENGTHS

Disruptive-emergent leadership pushes against and **breaks open dominant cultures**, established organizations, and typical ways of doing things. It has a **strength in numbers**, mobilizing a broad base of voices and welcoming in new voices when they emerge. This type of systems leadership understands that it is inherently bigger than and can influence more than one sector, one issue, one wicked problem—**spanning boundaries** and connecting often disparate parts. Thus, it welcomes, **includes and connects grassroots efforts, grass tops work** and everything in between.

Disruptive-emergent leadership can be responsive to contextual changes and advancements, **reinventing and experimenting** based on societal changes over time. Instead of rigid strategies defined from centralized bodies and implemented by others, disruptive-emergent leadership is comprised of actors applying the approaches that best work in their immediate contexts, held together by a sense of mutual accountability to the same vision but free to act as their context dictates.

Human Systems Dynamics Institute recognizes the critical importance of inquiry, reflection and pattern recognition as key capabilities of disruptive-emergent leadership. They ask difficult and probing questions, organizing through a set of simple rules or agreements which may evolve over time and support leaders to observe and engage with emerging opportunities to shift the systems.

LIMITATIONS

While disruptive-emergent leadership may sound exciting and bold, it comes with challenges. This form of leadership requires a significant shift in mental models, from leadership as an individual role or attribute to investing in the collective capacity of all involved as leaders. This often requires a leap of faith many are hesitant to make, especially in an atmosphere of blame and finger pointing for failed responses to COVID-19. It is also confronted with uncertainty around the specifics of the destination. There are high levels of dynamism and an inability to reliably and consistently shape the system in a specific direction. This might lead to frustration and in-fighting.

When a movement is convened from many places, by many different actors, there can be **confusion as to who is in charge, what is contributing to success, and how to measure progress**. Because of the distributed power, it is typically not possible to manage collective action in this form through standard non-profit or governmental structures, which often constrain power or over-organize work into action plans, rubrics, and roles/responsibilities grids. Likewise, because there is more dispersed participation through things like social media, collaborative technology and civic associations, it can be a challenge to attribute and measure progress and impact. This is where a shared vision is helpful, focusing on the values holding the movement together, rather than the specifics.

The tendency to ask "who is in charge?" usually assumes a single entity—person or body—rather than the notion of "we are all in charge." Overcoming this hurdle poses both theoretical and practical challenges, as it is difficult for people to **let go of the need for control** and trust in a distributed network. At the first signs of perceived chaos and confusion, it is easy to revert to more bureaucratic and traditional leadership structures.

The tendency to ask "who is in charge?" usually assumes a single entity - person or body- rather than the notion of "we are all in charge."

Disruptive-emergent leadership is also more **vulnerable to internal and external threats** than traditional forms. The open architecture of disruptive-emergent leadership can be exploited by those with goals that are not aligned with the larger movement. The ability to maintain focus and coordination over time may be more difficult. If the agenda remains broad, such as protesting systemic racism or raising awareness of the climate crisis, people can mobilize in service of a broad vision fairly easily. When specific

policy stances are required, or more focused actions are needed, disruptive nodes of activity can fall prey to factions and dissolution. The entrenched ways of doing things have created structures so deeply developed and engrained that they become "ruthless recruiters of the status quo" that threaten to disperse the energy gathered through emergent leadership.

At the same time, disruptive-emergent leadership may run the risk of "snap back" as challenging and imploding existing systems is tough. The seemingly nebulous structure of disruptive-emergent leadership can concern or confuse those in formal power or those with resources who may not understand the full value and be **hesitant to invest time, resources and commitment.** Additionally, those in power may feel challenged by the groundswell of momentum and action that threatens the very status quo. Those familiar with or used to being in positions of formal authority can often continue to try to assert positional power, jeopardizing the emergent leadership approach.

FINAL REFLECTIONS AND OUR INVITATION

While it is tempting to end an article like this with a tidy set of five key steps to promote more disruptive-emergent leadership as the sure way to improve our collective course ahead, that is neither possible nor prudent at this juncture.

Instead, what is called for is a test of collective sense-making to see if this framework is useful for people exercising all forms of leadership described here. Does this reflection help envision new ways of connecting, leading and achieving equity? To this end, we welcome a continued discussion to refine the merits of this framework, including responses to questions like these:

- In what ways does this framing of leadership add to our collective understanding of what is needed in communities today? How might it be improved?
- What trends, shifts, opportunities taken and missed have you observed?
- What does this mean for leadership?
- What difference have these forms of leadership made, and in what ways?
- Where can additional leverage points be found?
- How might we best join forces, rooted in our local contexts but leading more broadly together, to ensure equitable systems?

We look forward to hearing from you and continuing this critical discussion about leadership.

This paper is co-published by The Civic Canopy and The Tamarack Institute. We welcome your comments and ideas.

ABOUT BILL FULTON

Bill Fulton provides strategic leadership for the overall organization, ensuring that The Civic Canopy's methods, model, and mission are carried out through its projects and lived out through its culture. He founded The Civic Canopy in 2003 to create a comprehensive community change platform to help communities transform individual efforts into collective action. He has over twenty years of experience in team development, collaborative problem solving, multi-stakeholder dialogue, and results-oriented network development. He received his BA in history at Brown University, MA in education at the University of Colorado at Denver, and PhD in religion and social change at the University of Denver and Iliff School of Theology.

ABOUT JODI HARDIN

Jodi Hardin guides the organization-wide strategy, securing the partnerships and resources needed to develop and deliver The Civic Canopy's core service and support offerings. She applies a strategic lens to all Canopy project areas and supports team members to ensure fidelity to the Canopy's Community Learning Model. Jodi is known for her expertise in strategy and systems development, cross-sector partnership building, and connecting often disparate efforts into a more cohesive whole in addition to content expertise in early childhood systems. Over the past decade, she has overseen a diverse portfolio of community, state, and national projects. She received a Master's in Public Health from the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

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 interconnected practices including Collective Impact, Collaborative Leadership, Community Engagement, Community Innovation and Evaluating Impact. Liz is 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. 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.

Funded by the Government of Canada's Social Development Partnership Program.

Canada

The opinions and interpretations in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Government of Canada.

Copyright © 2020 by **Tamarack Institute** and **The Civic Canopy**
tamarackcommunity.ca

THE CIVIC CANOPY

TAMARACK INSTITUTE