



# ARTICLE | BUILDING ORGANIZATIONAL READINESS FOR COLLECTIVE IMPACT

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For leaders who are considering whether or not to start – or join – a Collective Impact initiative, this article explores key considerations for building organizational readiness for Collective Impact to strategically assess the opportunity and make informed decisions about the benefits, risks and expectations in order to determine whether a collaborative effort is the best way to advance positive change.

There is growing recognition among community, non-profit, public, and business sector leaders that, single-sector strategies to address the complex issues facing residents are important but limited in their ability to meaningfully address root causes. The popularity of Collective Impact (CI) as a framework is that it offers leaders, and others, a different way for sector leaders to work together – beyond the scope of their individual organizations – to align their existing work and also develop, implement and scale systems-change strategies together.

For leaders who are considering whether or not to start – or join – a CI initiative, this article explores key considerations for building organizational readiness and strategically assess the opportunity of being part of a Collective Impact initiative by making informed decisions about the benefits, risks and expectations of joining collaborative effort to advance positive change.

## IS COLLECTIVE IMPACT THE RIGHT APPROACH?

Collective Impact is a disciplined form of multisector collaboration that is proven as an effective framework for achieving high-impact community change with an emphasis on advancing systems and policy change. The Collective Impact framework includes five conditions: a common agenda; shared measurement; mutually reinforcing activities; continuous communication; and, backbone infrastructure. For more on Collective Impact, check out Tamarack's [Collective Impact Planning Canvas Tool](#) for a quick overview of the three preconditions and five conditions of Collective Impact and highlight on key aspects of how CI Initiatives typically evolve as they mature.

Collective Impact is one of many approaches to affect positive change in community. It is a particularly effective approach when dealing with complex and dynamic social and/or

environmental issues whose impact is not limited to the boundary of any one organization or sector.

There are five framing questions that offer a good starting point for any group or organization that may be considering becoming involved in the type of multi-sector collaborative effort required by Collective Impact. These questions outline key considerations about the type of commitment that is required when using a Collective Impact approach. The five questions are:

### FIVE QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER BEFORE USING COLLECTIVE IMPACT

1. Do we aim to affect a needle-change (i.e., 10% or more) on a community-wide metric?
2. Do we believe a long-term (3-5+ year) investment is needed by diverse stakeholders to achieve success?
3. Do we believe cross-sector engagement is essential for community-wide change?
4. Are we committed to using measurable data to set the agenda and improve over time?
5. Are we committed to having community members as leaders, partners and producers of impact?

Source: The White House Council on Community Solutions

Tamarack's experience suggests that, any group or organization cannot answer yes to at least three of the five questions outlined above, does not yet have the readiness necessary to participate in and/or lead a Collective Impact initiative. Rather it suggests work needs to be done internally – engaging the board, staff and volunteers – to build a compelling case to support for working collaboratively and establishing a strong foundation for working well with partners.

Four questions, outlined below, offer a good starting place for cultivating readiness for Collective Impact. Building internal consensus within your organization – and Board – around these questions will enable your organization to: identify promising potential partners; articulate your organization's value-add; and, clearly identify the intended benefits you want from collaboration. The four questions are:

- What are the skills, knowledge, unique value and/or resources your organization is willing to contribute to the Collective Impact initiative?
- What opportunities and benefits would your organization hope to gain – for your clients and for your organization – through your involvement in the Collective Impact initiative?
- What constraints or boundaries might affect your organization's capacity to participate in the Collective Impact initiative?
- What principles and values would your organization want to see guide how collaborative partners work together?

## FOUR QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION BY ALL COLLECTIVE IMPACT PARTNERS

Hosting internal dialogues around each of the questions helps organizations to take stock and evaluate both the potential risks and opportunities of choosing to work collaboratively with a diversity of partners on a common agenda. When this level of consensus-building has been done by all partners it can accelerate the development of a Collective Impact initiative overall as well. When each partner within a CI initiative is able to understand, and clearly articulate, what they can give and is also clear about the benefits they hope to gain by working together, this clarity can accelerate the building of trust and mutual understanding that is at the heart of an effective Collective Impact effort.

For partners, the case for Collective Impact is built on: a commitment to a shared aspiration; knowledge of partners' individual and collective strengths; a focus on achieving high-impact outcomes that no one partner can accomplish alone; and, a shared appreciation that their work together holds the potential of new and increased benefit to the community and/or people they serve.

The iterative process by which partners make the case for collaboration taps into people's heads and hearts and builds the commitment needed to sustain their Collective Impact effort through the inevitable tensions that emerge as traditional paradigms are challenged; new innovative possibilities are cultivated and tested; and the impact of their collective effort is tracked and evaluated.

## CLAIMING YOUR ORGANIZATION'S STRENGTHS AND UNIQUE CONTRIBUTION

What are the skills, knowledge, unique value and/or resources that your organization is willing to contribute to the Collective Impact initiative? Perhaps your organization has built strong relationships of trust in the community and you can help engage and bring that voice to the Collective Impact table. When individual organizations can clearly articulate the strengths and resources they can contribute, a shared appreciation of the collective assets develops. This enables the CI Initiative to leverage the partners' collective assets effectively in support of the common agenda. Tamarack's [Personal Asset Inventory Tool](#), outlines a quick exercise which can be easily adapted to reflect an organization's context. The exercise helps make the skills and strengths of individual partners and their organizations visible to all.

## ARTICULATING THE BENEFITS YOUR ORGANIZATION HOPES TO GAIN

It is not uncommon in the early stages of a Collective Impact initiative for the partners' enthusiasm about their shared work to lead folks diving right into what they want to do together. However, being intentional about creating shared understanding about the motivations and needs of various partners is essential in order to build a strong foundation of trust needed to support collaborative work. This is one example of the importance of managing the tension between process and product which is a reality throughout the Collective Impact journey.

Establishing a practice that encourages partners to clearly state their organization's needs and hopes periodically throughout the process ensures that partners' realities are factored into decisions about the Collective Impact initiative's strategies and plans. Tamarack uses a [Gives, Gets and Constraints Tool](#) to help partners identify and explicitly communicate the benefits they hope to glean through their involvement; the contributions they can make; and finally, identify any constraints that may impact their involvement in the Collective Impact effort over time.

**“Making time to create shared understanding about the motivations and needs of various partners is important to building a strong foundation of trust to support collaborative work.”**

## NAMING YOUR ORGANIZATION'S CONSTRAINTS

Constraints are the limitations that affect what an individual organization or group is permitted to do. For example, non-profit organizations who receive external funding must agree to follow guidelines set by the funder(s) of that program. Creating shared understanding of the constraints that limit what individual partners in a Collective Impact initiative can and cannot do is critical in order to build a Collective Impact initiative's shared action plan. In fact, for some organizations, a strategic advantage of their involvement in a Collective Impact initiative, is that it offers them an opportunity to be part of a broader effort that can affect change beyond what they can achieve alone.

## DEFINING PRINCIPLES AND VALUES TO GUIDE THE COLLABORATIVE WORK

In a Collective Impact effort, **WHO** the partners are and **HOW** they choose to work together is as important as their shared action plan. We all make assumptions and have 'blind spots' based on the mental models we have and/or the biases that are embedded in our sector's perspective. One of the early benefits of a CI Initiative is its ability to engage a diversity of perspectives from different sectors and experiences in order to co-create a richer, more

nuanced, understanding of the partners' shared issue.

The opportunity for subject-matter experts and context experts with lived experience to learn together helps identify unintentional system barriers that can be addressed together and creates the fertile soil needed for collaborative action to take root. The ability to convene and host a rich dialogue is an act of leadership.

In his book [\*Six Patterns to Spread Your Social Innovation\*](#), renowned Canadian social innovator, Al Etmanski identifies four characteristics of a good convening. These are:

1. **Civility** - More than being polite or courteous it enables us to share our opinions with kindness.
2. **Personal Agency** – Striving to bring out the best in everyone, convene around gifts and engage ideas. People will be committed to act on ideas they've had a hand in creating.
3. **Hospitality** – Make people feel welcome and comfortable; create environments that foster connection and belonging.
4. **Curiosity** – “Hold the space” for something new to emerge; “Listen with respect to what the problem is telling us, spot the patterns keeping the system unhealthy and help it heal itself.”

Having partners invest time upfront agreeing to a core set of values and principles can save time over the course of your Collective Impact initiative in resolving conflicts, making decisions and navigating unexpected issues. Tamarack's [Establishing Values & Principles for Working Together Tool](#) is a useful resource in undertaking this work.

Collective Impact initiatives offer the possibility of generating impact at a scope and scale that exceeds what any one organization working alone can accomplish, but they also require a long-term investment and commitment from all the partners involved. Building organizational readiness for Collective Impact requires leaders to make time to do work internally within their organization to build consensus on the contributions, benefits, risks and constraints of becoming involved in a Collective Impact initiative.

## LEARN MORE

- Review Tamarack's [Collective Impact Planning Canvas](#) here
- Use the [Personal Asset Inventory Tool](#) to help identify your organization's strengths
- Check out Tamarack's [Gives, Gets and Constraints Tool](#) here
- Access Tamarack's [Establishing Values and Principles for Working Together Tool](#)