



# ARTICLE | CONNECTING THE DOTS: COLLABORATIVE GOVERNANCE AND THE COLLECTIVE IMPACT BACKBONE

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A common topic of interest in the implementation of Collective Impact (CI) is the Backbone infrastructure and how it relates to the concept of collaborative governance. This article explores insights into the role of a CI Initiative's Backbone infrastructure, highlights some common misperceptions about the Backbone role and offers some initial thoughts aimed at "connecting the dots" between it and the collaborative governance required.

Knowledge of Collective Impact (CI) as a proven way to address complex community issues is now widely accepted. The credibility and effectiveness of Collective Impact – a disciplined form of multi-sector collaboration – has grown steadily since it was first articulated by John Kania and Mark Kramer almost a decade ago. Today there is growing interest in evolving and deepening the practice of Collective Impact with tools and approaches that consider what is needed to accelerate impact and sustain and scale this work as it matures. One topic area that is generating considerable interest is the concept of collaborative governance and how it relates to a Collective Impact Initiative's Backbone Infrastructure. This article hopes to share some thinking that will help to "connect the dots" between these two concepts and highlight how they can work well together.

## WHAT IS A COLLECTIVE IMPACT BACKBONE?

Backbone support is one of the five conditions of Collective Impact. It refers to the core infrastructure – both financial and human – that is needed to enable the CI Initiative's strategic partners to implement their shared action plan. Effective collaboration among partners from a diversity of sectors and perspectives is essential to the success of Collective Impact initiatives and this requires coordination. But this coordination takes time and rarely do participating organizations have that time to spare. The rationale for establishing a Collective Impact Backbone was clearly noted by Kania and Kramer in the original paper, [Collective Impact](#) when they said, "The expectation that collaboration can occur without a supporting infrastructure is one of the most frequent reasons why it fails."

In most Collective Impact Initiatives, the Backbone includes the Initiative’s Leadership Table and a small, dedicated staff team of 2-3 individuals with specific skills that typically include: project management, facilitation, data management, communication, technology and administration. Together, the CI Initiative’s Leadership Table and staff “embody the principles of adaptive leadership: the ability to focus people’s attention and create a sense of urgency, the skill to apply pressure to stakeholders without overwhelming them, the competence to frame issues in a way that presents opportunities as well as difficulties, and the strength to mediate conflict among stakeholders.”

## EVOLVING OUR THINKING: FROM BACKBONE ORGANIZATION TO BACKBONE INFRASTRUCTURE

Thinking and language about the Collective Impact Backbone has evolved over the years. The function and intent of the CI Backbone remains consistent, but in recent years, the original term “Backbone support organization” has since been adapted and replaced by the terms “Backbone infrastructure” or “Backbone support.” This seemingly slight change in language highlights an important evolution in the practice of Collective Impact: the importance of NOT designing your Collective Impact Initiative as though it is an organization. There are two primary reasons for this:

- **CI Initiatives Need to Remain Agile** – One of the strengths of a Collective Impact Initiative is that it operates in a way that aims to keep its governance and administrative infrastructure to the minimum necessary to maintain trust and accountability. This ensures that the CI Initiative remains nimble and able to adapt and respond quickly to opportunities. It also keeps the partners’ energy and emphasis focused on taking action to address their shared issue.
- **CI Initiatives Shouldn’t Be Viewed As “The Competition”** – For much of the 20th century, the organization was the structure that we have relied on to coordinate ourselves to get things done together. If we are not intentional, the default structure of a Collective Impact initiative, will be an organization. This is problematic if the organizational partners of a CI Initiative begin to view it as a “competitor.” The network structure – which emphasizes distributed decision-making, minimal structure and an emphasis on relationships and connections – may in fact be a more promising alternative structure for CI Initiatives

## COLLECTIVE IMPACT INITIATIVES: CO-CREATED SPACES FOR COMMUNITY INNOVATION

In most organizations, the majority of the staff's time and focus is spent implementing existing programs and services that align with their organization's mandate and strategy. The beauty of Collective Impact as an approach is that it offers organizational leaders and others a fresh vantage point from which to address their shared issue. It's a vantage point that highlights the multitude of actions already underway across an array of players and invites us to imagine how, we might better align the work of our organizations and work together to fill gaps and create new opportunities and solutions.

Perhaps one of the best descriptions I have ever heard for a Collective Impact Initiative was to describe the CI Initiative as a "co-created innovation space" that the partners had established to learn and prototype new approaches to better address their shared issue – while their respective organizations continued to deliver programs and services that were needed and valued – but insufficient.

In their 2016 paper, [Collective Impact 3.0](#), Liz Weaver and Mark Cabaj described the next evolution in Collective Impact as moving from a common management paradigm to a movement-building paradigm. This evolution emphasized a shift towards community engagement around—and shared ownership of – the Collective Impact Initiative's issue and its possible solutions.

Thinking of your Collective Impact Initiative as a "shared innovation space" that is supported by a Backbone infrastructure that embraces the operating principles of a network facilitates the movement-building paradigm of Collective Impact by:

- **Creating an Inclusive Container** – Designing as a network enables the CI Initiative to act as a mechanism that enables collaboration and co-operation across sectors, organizational boundaries, social and economic strata, origins, backgrounds and jurisdictions.
- **Fostering an Opportunity to Change Paradigms** – In providing an alternative way of working together, Collective Impact initiatives create opportunities to change beliefs, working relationships, authority flows and stories; this provides a climate for new ideas to flourish and shifts boundaries of what is socially acceptable. This creates the collective will that is often the needed catalyst for organizations to change.

“A great way to describe Collective Impact Initiatives is as a co-created innovation spaces where leaders can learn together and innovate new approaches to address their shared issue.”

A robust Backbone Infrastructure is essential to the success and sustainability of a Collective Impact Initiative. The challenge is to design the Backbone with enough structure to create clarity across the initiative and foster a sense of trust among diverse partners. Core functions of the Backbone include:

- Guide Overall Vision & strategy
- Advance Policy
- Mobilize Resources
- Building Community Engagement & Will
- Support Aligned Activities
- Establish Shared Measurement Practices
- Ensure a Focus on Equity

The art for leaders of Collective Impact Backbones lies in balancing the tension between coordinating and maintaining accountability, while staying “behind the scenes” enough to establish collective ownership for the initiative amongst all partners.

## COLLABORATIVE GOVERNANCE: A FRAMEWORK FOR LEADING TOGETHER

In the work of Collective Impact, the working relationship amongst partners is vital. Collaborative Governance encompasses the agreements that a diverse group of partners have reached about how they intend to share responsibility, work and lead together. The Backbone brings the collaborative governance agreement between the partners to life by coordinating and facilitating the work of the Collective Impact Initiative. The Backbone’s role also encompasses supporting and aligning the activities of various Working Groups or Action Teams to ensure the Common Agenda of the Collective Impact Initiative becomes a reality.

At Tamarack, our thinking about Collaborative Governance within the context of Collective Impact has been inspired by the [Constellation Governance Model](#) developed by Toronto’s Centre for Social Innovation. This model emphasizes an approach to governance that is “light and nimble” and well suited to the emergent nature of Collective Impact Initiatives.

## COLLABORATIVE GOVERNANCE: SOME TIPS

A good principle to keep in mind in crafting a collaborative agreement is: “less is more.” Emphasis should be to provide enough clarity through the collaborative governance structure that participants feel confident, safe and willing to work together.

The key is not to strive for perfection. A successful Collaborative Governance arrangement is one in which:

- The group is making satisfactory progress;
- The effort and conflict required to make progress is reasonable;
- Members are achieving some personal/organizational objectives;
- Everyone involved is learning much more about the complex issue;
- The overall process is self-refueling, leading to greater ambition and capacity

Ideally an initiative's collaborative governance framework should be considered a "living" document that is periodically reviewed and updated as needed. At minimum, the core elements to include as part of a Collaborative Governance agreement include:

- **An Articulation of the Big Picture** – This includes the common agenda and community aspiration; guiding principles for how partners agree to work together; and, an articulation of the partners' Framework for Change – which is a high-level depiction of the CI Initiative's shared plan of action;
- **Collaborative Governance Agreements** – These agreements, or memorandums of understanding, typically encompass the following topics: membership and decision-making; funding; communications and reporting; conflict resolution processes; terms of reference for key roles in the collaborative; as well as policies and procedures.

In addition to the Collective Impact Initiative's Leadership Table and Backbone staff, other roles that can be part of a Collective Impact Initiative's governance structure include: a fiscal sponsor or host which is the organization who administers the CI Initiative's funds as well as Working Groups or Action Teams. Working Groups or Action Teams can be time-limited or ongoing and should be formed around ideas and opportunities NOT around existing organizations. Working Groups are typically formed to advance key priorities of the Collective Impact Initiative and they should operate in ways that are consistent with the CI Initiative's Common Agenda, principles and values. The Backbone – the CI Initiative's Leadership Table and core staff – ensure that there is alignment and coordination across these various Working Groups.

Communities are dynamic and perpetually changing. Collective Impact Initiatives need to remain agile and responsive – providing enough structure to facilitate effective collaboration amongst partners – and yet not so much that the initiative's ability to be agile and responsive in adapting its strategy to capitalize on emerging opportunities is hindered.

## LEARN MORE:

- Learn more about: [Collective Impact Backbones - Different Approaches](#)
- Listen to: [Collective Impact Backbones: What We Are Learning](#) a webinar with John Kania and Liz Weaver
- Go Deeper: [Compendium of CI Resources II: Leadership, Governance, and Backbones](#) for more on governance and the Backbone