



# ARTICLE | DEVELOPING COLLECTIVE IMPACT STRATEGIES

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This article contains tools and approaches designed to help with the development of Collective Impact strategies. This resource is meant to serve as a guide for you and your colleagues as well as to stir your thinking.

## THE CONTEXT: COLLECTIVE IMPACT

Collective Impact is a long-term, multi-sectoral effort to bring about significant change in a community. Whether driven by the community's need to solve a problem, fix a crisis, or create a vision of a better future, there comes a time to develop strategy. The five conditions of Collective Impact are as follows:

- **Common Agenda**  
All participating organizations (government agencies, non-profits, community members, etc.) have a shared vision for social change including a common understanding of the problem and a joint approach to solving it with agreed upon actions.
- **Shared Measurement System**  
Agreement on the methods that will measure and report success, along with a short list of key indicators that will be used across all participating organizations.
- **Mutually Aligned Activities**  
Engagement of diverse stakeholders, typically across sectors, coordinating sets of differentiated activities through a mutually reinforcing plan of action.
- **Continuous Communication**  
Ongoing communications over time among key players within and across organizations, to build trust and inform of ongoing learnings and adaptations.

- **Backbone Organization**

Ongoing support provided by dedicated staff (ideally independent). The backbone staff tends to play six roles to move the initiative forward: guide vision and strategy, support aligned activities, establish shared measurement practices, build public will, advance policy, and mobilize funding.

At some point, formulating strategies to achieve the common agenda and the shared measurements identified becomes a key activity. Strategy development is what this article is about, but if you want to read more about Collective Impact and how Tamarack sees its evolution unfolding, please read *Collective Impact 3.0* by Mark Cabaj and Liz Weaver (See sources at end of article).

How a Collective Impact initiative unfolds varies across communities, but I suggest that there is a general work flow (see sources).

## THE FLOW OF COLLECTIVE IMPACT

People gather to discuss an intractable problem or to explore a new vision for the community (or subsection, e.g. youth). If these discussions resonate and create continued interest of those around the table, others are invited to join in, whether to sit with the original group, or to feed into its thinking.

Eventually, these discussions lead to what I call a big “what’s next” question. At some point the conversations, as important as they are, need to converge into something more organized and focused in order to foster actions and momentum toward large-scale change.

The short story is that at some point, people around the table have reached a sufficient understanding of the problems or challenges they face together and a desire to do something more than have conversations, do research, and so forth. This is when the group finds itself talking about things like “strategic intention,” “community aspiration,” “shared purpose,” or “common agenda.”

How these conversations take place over time and the level of community engagement vary from group to group. There is no *one way* all of this unfolds. In fact, the evolution towards a Collective Impact approach to making large-scale change is not necessarily a neat and tidy undertaking; it can be messy, and at times confusing. After all, these conversations tend to foster divergent thinking among the participants.

Getting to a common agenda is about converging all of the ideas, perspectives, data, and sense-making into statements of aspiration and desired outcomes that those around the table agree to rally around. Sometimes, groups mix together both divergent and convergent thinking, which can cause confusion, frustration, as well as time-delays in moving forward at a reasonable pace.

Understanding and acting on how divergent and convergent thinking work together, as well as the types of “thinking” that tend to be predominant, can help groups address complex challenges to move towards clarity on what everyone understands to be the problem or the solutions they wish to work on.

## DIVERGENT & CONVERGENT THINKING

The diagram on the following page is an overview of the process involved in engaging both divergent and convergent thinking as a deliberate part of strategy building. This approach can be used in a variety of contexts. It can help identify a common understanding of the problems the group wishes to focus on. It can also identify some go-forward solutions that address these problems. It can be deployed to help improve understanding about why everyone is sitting at the Collective Impact table, by first having a divergent conversation about why “I” am at the table, that later, through sense-making, can become the reasons why “we” are here. In other words, it is a versatile way of welcoming diversity as part of the process to get to a common place.

The shift from divergent thinking to convergent thinking involves time and space for sense-making. This is when people might negotiate, work together to address conflicting ideas, and ensure there is sufficient group understanding of the many ideas, so that some of them can be combined or grouped together, while others might end up not being addressed at all.

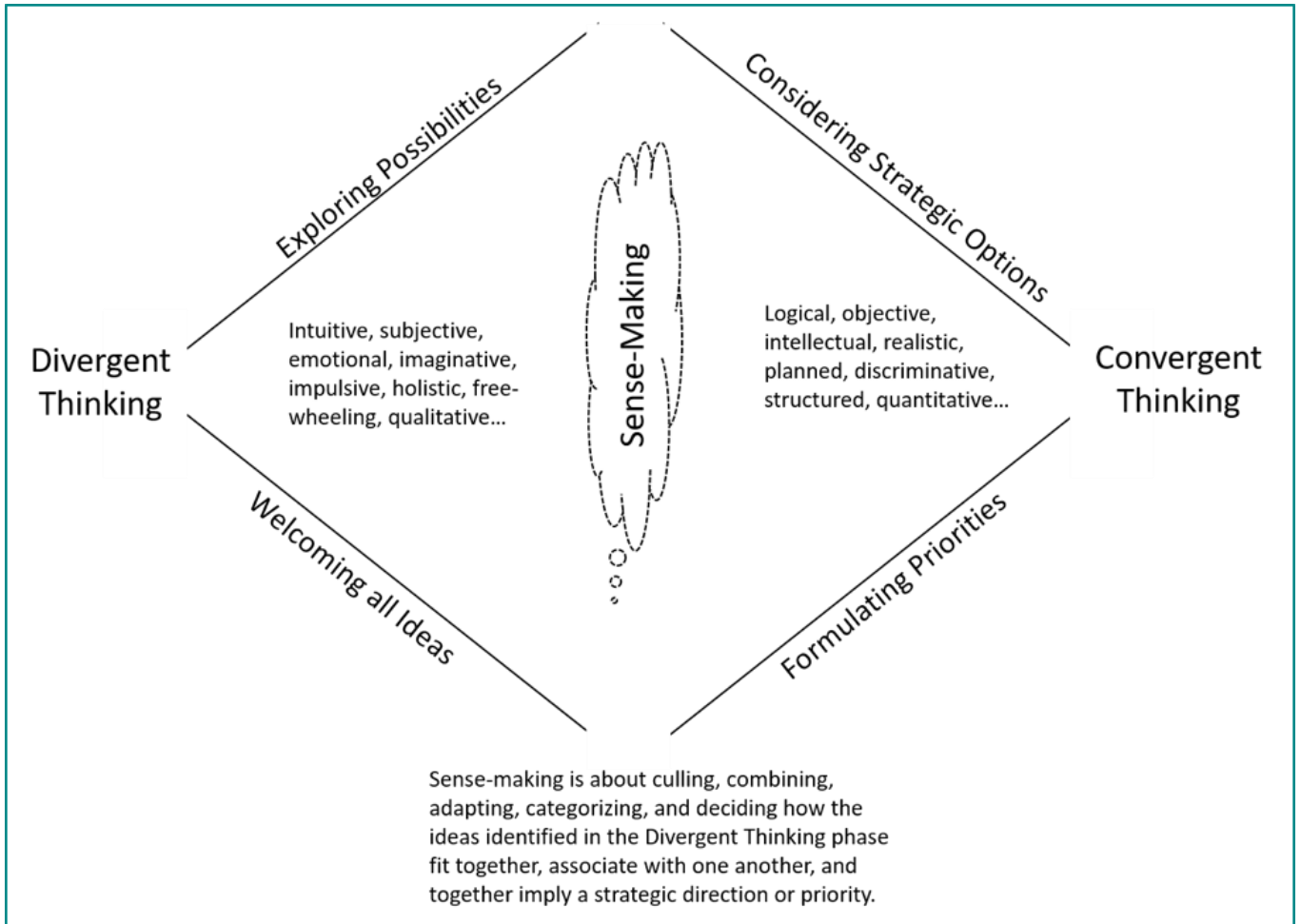
*Understanding and acting on how divergent thinking and convergent thinking can work together, as well as the types of “thinking” that tend to be predominant in each can help groups addressing complex challenges to move toward clarity on what everyone understands to be the problem or the solutions they wish to work on.*

Typically, groups begin with a sense of aspiration for the big change they wish to bring about. For example, the group might express a common interest in significantly increasing the high school graduation rate. How to do that is where many ideas are or should be welcomed (divergent thinking) in order to get to a place where priorities begin to emerge, and even then, where some priorities may be more important than others.

For example, some years back in Erie, Pennsylvania, the community identified an aspiration that was generally about increasing the number of children who grow up to be successful adults. They came up with several strategies and one of them was to improve the high school graduation rate, which is a “game-changer” outcome that, if met, becomes a significant driver of future success for a young person.

Within that game-changer, they identified these ways to contribute to a higher education rate:

- 1) Having children ready to enter kindergarten
- 2) Reading at a third grade level or better by grade three
- 3) Receiving education and counselling on career choices by grade eight



Through research and looking at data, it was shown that reading at a grade three level or better by the third grade was a significant predictive measure of high school graduation. It is not that the other strategies were not important, but third grade reading levels were what Jay Connors, their consultant and long-time Tamarack thought leader, identified as a *keystone* outcome. In other words, it was an area that called for increased attention and as such could be seen as a greater priority than the other two. Think about the role of divergent and convergent thinking, replete with sense-making, that went into understanding and acting on what matters most to get to improved rates of high school education.

An aspiration will bring people together, but it does not determine the major outcomes and strategic priorities required to make the dream come true. Undertaking a process of divergent and convergent thinking is one key tool that a group can use throughout their Collective Impact work.

This process involves the core group discussing the goals or outcomes they believe should be addressed to get where they want to go. Discussions ensue about what other people are doing

in the community about these goals and outcomes, what is working and what isn't, and the kinds of changes in services and systems that require attention in the group's go-forward work.

Groups may design and launch a community engagement effort to ensure inclusiveness in finalizing the common agenda and the big changes (outcomes) to strive for. They may choose to engage in a Top 100 exercise to ensure key movers and shakers are included and contributing.

The initial roll out of Collective Impact takes time. Getting people at the table and getting them to not only stay there but to become increasingly committed to the work can take a year or longer. At some point, however, the common agenda and agreed upon shared measures require the development of strategies that will achieve both.

The identification of strategies is not a simple, linear process. While the approach described here might be seen as a neat and tidy way to formulate strategy, it is actually a challenge to pull off. It can be messy at times and should be seen as an iterative undertaking that connects with all five conditions of collective impact, in particular the common agenda and its shared measures.

While effective strategies require outcomes to target, it is also true that the implementation of strategies can reveal unexpected benefits. These benefits should be identified as additional measures to track, and prompt consideration of how to either adapt the current strategy or create a new one to achieve emerging measures.

## STRATEGY CRITERIA

When developing strategies, it can be helpful to reference each strategy against a list of strategy criteria. Doing so helps to ensure that there is consistent rigor to crafting strategies that are viable and leveraged toward success.

You can find some examples from my own work on the following page. You are invited to add to the list. These criteria have a subjective flavour at times. For example, "Vulnerability" is a criterion I have used in past work as it related to poverty reduction. If the word resonates with you, it still may be that you wish to rewrite the "details" to fit your initiative. The intent here is not that you sign on to the following criteria list, but rather that you consider how such a list of criteria can help guide *your* strategy development.

| STRATEGY CRITERIA |   |
|-------------------|---|
| Criteria          | Details   |
| Clarity           | The strategy is clear about its intent.   |
| Leverage          | Able to build on existing work, partnerships, and funding.  |
| Vulnerability     | Will impact those most vulnerable.  |
| Achievable        | We believe it can be done.  |
| Best-At           | The strategy reflects what we can be best at.   |
| Alignment         | What we want to do is aligned with funders, key stakeholders, and our ambition.   |
| Timing            | The “market place” is “ready” or can become ready.  |
| Capacity Building | The strategy will increase the capacity of target populations to live more fully in the community, as participants rather than problemed clients. |
| Empowerment       | Community members will gain power over their own lives.   |
| Sustainable       | The strategy will produce lasting change.   |
|                   | Add your own  |

Keep in mind that you are making judgement calls. Certainty is elusive, but the test here is if you believe your strategies have a good chance to hit these criteria. Assessing strategy against a set of criteria often occurs, but typically in more of an ad hoc manner than as a deliberate part of the process. As well, the risk with ad hoc conversations is that not all pertinent criteria are addressed. The question to ask is whether a systematic approach to assessing a strategy against criteria the group has identified together adds value to strategy formulation. If you believe it will, think about a simple way of doing the assessment, as in the following example.

| STRATEGY CRITERIA |            |                               |
|-------------------|------------|-------------------------------|
| Criteria          | Assessment | Rationale for your assessment |
| Clarity           | 1 2 3 4 5  |                               |
| Leverage          | 1 2 3 4 5  |                               |
| Vulnerability     | 1 2 3 4 5  |                               |
| Achievable        | 1 2 3 4 5  |                               |
| And so on...      |            |                               |

Identify, as an individual, the extent to which you agree the strategy meets each criterion (1=Significant Disagreement, 5=Significant Agreement) and then add a quick statement about your rationale. Compare all individual assessments and rationales as a group to get a clear sense of how to adapt the strategy.

## STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT

What follows is an approach to strategy development that can help you produce a set of strategies that, while different from one another, have been formed through applying some common elements that create consistency across your body of strategies. Here is my definition of a "effective" strategy:

***An effective strategy identifies a solution and a goal, how it will be pursued by whom, who is being targeted, and a frame that identifies both scope and boundaries.***

Below are two examples of strategies that are sourced from my past work on poverty reduction. I have indicated how the various elements of each connect to the definition above.

| Example One: House the Homeless  | Example Two: Employ the Homeless  |
|--|---|
| <i>Through our Outreach Housing Team, locate, engage, and house 200 homeless individuals per year through assertive street outreach and in-reach at other locations where the homeless frequent.</i> | <i>Collaborate with governments and employers to find good paying jobs for 100 homeless people per year who are able and wanting to work through the provision of temporary labour and permanent placement services in the manufacturing, construction, and warehouse industries.</i> |
| "Outreach Housing Team" – who<br>"200 per year" – goal<br>"Locate and house" – solution<br>"Homeless" – target<br>"Assertive outreach/in-reach" – how<br>"Street and other locations" – frame        | "Governments and Employers" – who<br>"100 per year" – goal<br>"Find good paying jobs" – solution<br>"Homeless able to work" – target<br>"Temporary & permanent placement services" – how<br>"Manufacturing, construction, warehouse" – frame  |

Clearly, these two strategies require further thinking and articulation of the actions required to achieve them. In Example One, you likely would need to define the nature of "assertive street outreach," the specific services that will be provided, and where the outreach team will go (such as which streets/strips and other locations such as libraries, malls, drop in centres, etc.) How will you recruit and support landlords for this work? How you will measure success and generate learning along the way will also be important.

Further questions for Example Two include: What is a good paying job? How will you perform and manage relationships with good employers? How will you monitor the market place over time to ensure that the frame of this strategy (manufacturing, etc.) is still valid next year and the year after?

Other goals and targets will likely emerge as well, such as how many landlords and employers are needed? Will there be activity goals? For instance, in Example One, will the outreach team



have contact goals like how many homeless people will be approached on the street or how many partners will be recruited (from library, drop ins, etc.)?

The details of how to live this strategy become easier to grasp if the overarching strategy statement covers necessary ground at a high level. Granted at some point, you will also need to identify resources that can be applied to this work and/or that need to be found, whether through re-allocation of existing funds or the attainment of new money.

It could very well be that your development of the high-level strategy is an iterative process, where your consideration of the points raised in the above paragraphs result in changes to the overarching strategy. This will not be a linear process.

The two examples above are perhaps more organizational in focus. Below are two more examples that are about moving the needle on community change.

| Example Three: High School Graduation  | Example Four: Living Wage  |
|--|--|
| <p><i>Through a formal collaboration of school boards, universities, and family serving agencies, increase the high school graduation rate to 90% by 2020 for Indigenous students through the delivery of school-based and community efforts and the increased involvement of parents in their children’s education.</i></p>   | <p><i>Working with Living Wage Canada, the Chamber of Commerce, and our Employers’ Roundtable, calculate the living wage in our community and create a Living Wage Campaign in our city that enlists 40 employers as living wage employers.</i></p>  |
| <p>“School boards, universities, family serving agencies” – who<br/>                     “90% by 2020” – goal<br/>                     “School-based, community efforts, parents” –solution<br/>                     “Indigenous students” – target<br/>                     “Formal collaboration” – how<br/>                     “High school education” – frame</p> | <p>“Living Wage Canada, Chamber of Commerce, and our Employers’ Roundtable” – who<br/>                     “40 employers” – goal<br/>                     “Living Wage” – solution<br/>                     “Employers” – target<br/>                     “Living Wage Campaign” – how<br/>                     “In our city/community” –frame</p> |

This approach to strategy development should help you with this phase of your Collective Impact planning. Like all methods or models, see this as a framework, not a prescription. Make it your own. Whatever models you use must be alive for you and your colleagues. If you have any comments or ideas on how to improve upon what I have offered above, I am keen to hear them. Write me at [mark@tamarackcommunity.ca](mailto:mark@tamarackcommunity.ca).



## ABOUT MARK HOLMGREN



Mark is driven by the desire to change community conditions that cause and perpetuate poverty and the marginalization of the vulnerable and disadvantaged. A proven leader of poverty reduction efforts, Mark is known for his innovative eye and his ability to converge big picture thinking with on the ground implementation. As the Director of Vibrant Communities Canada, Mark leads Tamarack's engagement of 57 member communities leading local poverty reduction efforts and works with his team to develop learning opportunities and resources that add value to this Pan-Canadian network. In addition to his ability to facilitate groups of all sizes around strategy development and solution-building, Mark has built and delivered curriculum related to Collective Impact, community innovation, strategic planning, and non-profit leadership. Mark is a provocative speaker who challenges the status quo and fosters new and innovative ways of seeing and addressing social issues. Read more at <https://www.tamarackcommunity.ca/markholmgren>.

## SOURCES MENTIONED IN THIS PAPER

*Collective Impact 3.0, An Evolving Framework for Community Change* by Liz Weaver and Mark Cabaj: [https://cdn2.hubspot.net/hubfs/316071/Events/Multi-Day%20Events/Community%20Change%20Institute%20-%20CCI/2016%20CCI%20Toronto/CCI\\_Publications/Collective\\_Impact\\_3.0\\_FINAL\\_PDF.pdf](https://cdn2.hubspot.net/hubfs/316071/Events/Multi-Day%20Events/Community%20Change%20Institute%20-%20CCI/2016%20CCI%20Toronto/CCI_Publications/Collective_Impact_3.0_FINAL_PDF.pdf)

*Collective Impact Self Assessment and Planning Tool*:  
<https://cdn2.hubspot.net/hubfs/316071/Resources/Tools/CI%20Self%20Assessment%20Tool.pdf>

*Sometimes to Hear the Music, You Have to Turn Down the Noise: A Game-Changer Approach to Poverty Reduction Strategy and Evaluation*:  
<https://www.tamarackcommunity.ca/library/game-changer-approach-to-poverty-reduction>

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

*Idea Generation: Divergent vs. Convergent Thinking*:  
<https://www.cleverism.com/idea-generation-divergent-vs-convergent-thinking/>

*A Guide Book for Strategy Evaluation*, Southern California Injury Prevention Research Center (SCIPRC), UCLA School of Public Health, June 2008. This guide was written with a focus on municipalities: [http://www.ph.ucla.edu/sciprc/pdf/Evaluation\\_Guidebook\\_July08.pdf](http://www.ph.ucla.edu/sciprc/pdf/Evaluation_Guidebook_July08.pdf)