DISRUPTIVE TIMES REQUIRE SKILLED COMMUNITY CHANGEMAKERS

LIZ WEAVER, CO-CEO, TAMARACK INSTITUTE

Community change is challenging. As an individual or organizational changemaker, we are often better at deploying program-based or focused strategies to solve simple problems than we are at shifting the systems which are holding the problem in place.   It is difficult to shift large and complex systems on our own. Even working in the context of a single organization, scaling systems change is challenging given limitations on resources. Achieving deeper and more robust systems change, especially within communities, requires a new set of skills and mindsets that results in a different way of approaching and working through change.

Liz Skelton, a co-founder of [Collaboration for Impact](#) in Australia, a colleague organization of the Tamarack Institute, says that working collaboratively and collectively is countercultural for many changemakers. She notes that many of us are paid to solve simple problems and to be quick decision makers. Most funding flows to individual organizations, rather than collaboratives. While intuitively we know that our communities are facing increasingly more complex and interconnected problems, the shifts in resources, both human and financial, are slower to adapt to this complexity.

There is slower traction on resolving the bigger issues that our communities are facing. Most funding flows target short term, micro-shifts rather than long term fundamental changes that get at addressing the root causes of these types of problems. Our political systems shift in four- and five-year cycles which means focusing on the short term rather than long term impacts. This obsession with the short term, is challenging when the issues facing our communities is becoming increasingly more interconnected and complex.

The complexity of community change requires a different type of leadership and a different type of practice. This paper will make the case for framing a new approach to community change by looking at the following contexts:

1. **Leadership in disruptive times**
2. **Mindset shifts and why it matters**
3. **Structuring systems change by becoming agile**

Next, the paper will profile five interconnected practices which Tamarack has identified as core competencies required to drive community change forward, particularly in times of rapid change and disruption. The paper provides the context for community changemakers to consider a new way to approach community change for today's evolving, fast-paced, complex environment.

As a community changemaker, we invite you to contribute your thoughts to the premise and interconnected practices identified in this paper. This is an emerging area of thinking at Tamarack and we invite you to share your perspectives.

LEADERSHIP IN DISRUPTIVE TIMES

Community change doesn't just happen. Change occurs when a leader invites others to join them or a group of leaders come together because they want to build something new or are dissatisfied and want to shift the status quo. David Chrislip calls this the Collaborative Leadership Premise: *If you bring the appropriate people together in constructive ways with good information, they will create authentic visions and strategies for addressing the shared concerns of the organization or the community* (Chrislip, 2002).

The challenge that changemakers face is that we live in rapidly moving and disruptive times. There are seismic shifts occurring in the digital communications that are impacting our social and political systems and in how individuals are connected to each other. Recent studies in Canada, the UK and elsewhere point to increasing levels of social isolation and loneliness (Ali, 2018) being reported across populations. This new phenomenon, of our hyperconnectedness through technology and growth of social isolation, creates new challenges for community changemakers to deal with. Today's community challenges are embedded with many interconnected factors that require engagement from a broad and diverse range of leaders crossing the political, economic and social spectrums to tackle the issues and determine sustainable solutions.

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This socio-technology disruption calls for a new leadership approach. In a recent paper, *Making Sense of the Multiple Faces of Leadership* (Weaver, 2019)*,* I explored and identified five leadership approaches for community changemakers including:

1. **Make the voice of people central**
2. **Work across boundaries**
3. **Catalyze change and work adaptively**
4. **Engage in systemic thinking and action**
5. **Be courageous**

Community change leadership requires us to navigate our way across local and community dynamics. It is leadership at the edge, always observing change in real time and making sense of how things are shifting. It is being alert to opportunities and recognizing when to pull back from failure. It embraces the Collaborative Leadership premise by encouraging us to engage diverse voices, while also pushes leaders beyond this premise to consider the whole system. It calls on us, as changemakers, to be courageous, ask challenging questions, to be impatient and continue to move forward.

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To truly get traction on systems-level problems requires a leader to be connected. A recent paper about Ashoka Fellows, a global network of community changemakers, provided examples of how Ashoka Fellows leveraged their connected network to tackle complex problems. Ashoka's mission is to "envision a world where everyone is a changemaker", and currently there are more than 3,500 Ashoka Fellows in over 92 countries. One of the strategies deployed, when tackling complex challenges, is to build a team of teams. This approach extends the capability beyond a few and leverages diverse perspectives and inputs to deal with the challenge. In a recent article about interconnected leadership, the authors cited that Ashoka Fellows employ an average of 58 team members to lead change (Rahman, Febech, Freeman, Herbst, & Matielo, 2019).

The authors identify five major reasons for pursuing a collaborative approach that supports both scaling social innovations and solving complex challenges. This interconnected and networked approach for leaders is:

- An effective way to tackle the nature of complex social problems. Certain social problems have the qualities of being large-scale, multi-sector, interconnected, and constantly changing, so they require solutions that have those same qualities as well;
- Designed to remain accountable to having impact that reaches the entire community served;

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- A more efficient way to optimize resources to overcome fragmented, service delivery chaos by leveraging resources outside of just a single organization;
- An essential way to keep up with the hyper-pace of innovation and change and ensure sustainable value chains; and,
- A more realistic way to ensure sustained impact because they pay deliberate attention to diversifying the stakeholders as co-owners.

In the paper, the authors share a model for moving from the traditional leadership paradigm to collective leadership. Embedded in the model is the development of a network of teams guided by a core set of agreed-upon values and principles and a distributed decision-making framework. Resource flows are transparent with a strong focus on communications across the collective leadership team. There is a focus on learning and sense-making which includes mastery and engagement. In this collective leadership approach, leaders lean in with empathy, and embrace the tension that conflict and ambiguity bring. They recognize that no single leader or organization has all the answers but rather through collective leadership, together they can uncover solutions.

This new form of leadership requires leaders to have a different mindset to work collectively together to scale innovation and social change.

MINDSET SHIFTS AND WHY THIS MATTERS

A mindset is characterized as a series of self-perceptions or beliefs that people hold about themselves. These beliefs and perceptions lead them to act in a certain way. Tackling community change requires a mindset that working collaboratively is more productive than trying to address the challenge as a single organization or entity. This mindset shift recognizes the power of the collective, embraces collaborative leadership and community engagement and values innovation.

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John Kania, the author of many papers about Collective Impact, often speaks about the essential mindset shifts required to move progress at scale. In the case of Collective Impact efforts, Kania identifies four specific mindset shifts required to shift systems. The first mindset shift is to consider whose eyes need to be on the problem so that a deep understanding of the nature and context of the problem is developed. This shift is significant because community change efforts are often dominated by those in a position of power, whether organizational or elected power. Kania and his colleagues note that bringing people with lived or living experience to the table changes the nature of the conversation about the problem. The second

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mindset shift focuses on how people work together, moving from individual perspectives to a shared or collective agenda for change.

The third mindset shift required in Collective Impact efforts is how progress happens. The work needs to happen at the scale of systems change rather than programmatic change or outcomes. The fourth mindset shift suggested by Kania is that Collective Impact focus on shared and adaptive leadership rather than the leadership of a single person. This is important because it enables leadership to emerge from all parts of the collective. No single individual is required to bear the burden of leadership but rather leadership can be leveraged and shared thereby creating additional resources to drive the change forward.

In the **Enabling Power of Trust** article (Ready, 2018), Douglas Ready identified four mindsets required to drive change in a business context. These mindsets are also useful and relevant to enabling community change.

> **MINDSETS FOR ENABLING COMMUNITY CHANGE**
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> **RESULTS:** because customer loyalty is fast becoming a quaint concept from the olden days whereas achieving superior results never goes out of style.
>
> **RESILIENCY:** because despite how brilliant you think your business model might be, you can bet there are teams of people dedicated right now to making it obsolete.
>
> **PURPOSE**: because the best and brightest next-gens are inspired not only by interesting work but also by feeling that their work is contributing to making the world a better place.
>
> **TRUST**: because we feel safer taking risks, innovating and speaking our minds when doing so in trust-based environments.

Mindsets matter. To achieve broader scale impact, changemakers must have a mindset that systems change is possible. Changemakers also need to believe in the value of collective wisdom. Beyond this, they must also focus on purpose and results.

STRUCTURING FOR SYSTEMS CHANGE BY BECOMING AGILE

Collective leadership and embedding a system change mindset are two foundational steps. But community and system change are an evolving and moving target. Many businesses in the corporate sector have begun to adopt an agile approach to their portfolio of strategies. McKinsey & Company describe an agile organization as a network of teams within a people-centred culture that operates in rapid learning and fast decision cycles, enabled by technology, and guided by a powerful common purpose to co-create value for all stakeholders (Aghina, De Smet, Lackey , Lurie, & Muraka, 2018).

How many of us can describe our community change work, both as an individual organization or collective, as agile? The authors identify four trends that are driving change in the corporate sectors and these are also relevant to community changemakers. These trends, that are creating an environment that is constantly evolving at a fast pace, include: constant introduction of disruptive technology; the acceleration of digitization; democratization of information; and, the new war for talent.

In the community context, this means that changemakers need to be more aware of how these environmental trends influence and impact the flow of change within the community. The evolving nature of these trends require community changemakers to develop agile capabilities that enable them and the team to quickly identify the changing environment/situation, track the change as it happens, to leverage opportunities as they emerge, and course correct the established change plan to ensure sustainable solutions.

McKinsey and Company provide a very useful framework which identifies five trademarks for agile organizations which you can see below. These trademarks focus on strategy, structure, process, people and technology. Each of the trademarks also identifies a series of practices for members of the agile organization team to adopt.

The McKinsey & Company approach for agile organizations has similar parallels to the collective leadership approach, identified by Ashoka in describing their community change efforts. There are lessons that community changemakers can learn by both looking inside the sector and to the private and social innovation sectors. To scale community change requires leadership, shifting mindsets and adopting practices that will enable the collective to be agile and evolving.

Trademark			Organizational-agility practices[1]
Strategy	North Star embodied across the organization		• Shared purpose and vision • Sensing and seizing opportunities • Flexible resource allocation • Actionable strategic guidance
Structure	Network of empowered teams		• Clear, flat structure • Clear accountable roles • Hands-on governance • Robust communities of practice • Active partnerships and ecosystem • Open physical and virtual environment • Fit-for-purpose accountable cells
Process	Rapid decision and learning cycles		• Rapid iteration and experimentation • Standardized ways of working • Performance orientation • Information transparency • Continuous learning • Action-oriented decision making
People	Dynamic people model that ignites passion		• Cohesive community • Shared and servant leadership • Entrepreneurial drive • Role mobility
Technology	Next-generation enabling technology		• Evolving technology architecture, systems, and tools • Next-generation technology development and delivery practices

[1]The 5 trademarks include 23 practices for organizational agility; 18 are based on survey research. Five additional practices are included that have emerged from recent experiences with large global companies transforming into agile organizations.

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A NEW WAY: THE FIVE INTERCONNECTED PRACTICES

At the Tamarack Institute, we have been observing local change efforts across a spectrum of community issues and experiences. When Tamarack was formed in 2002, the key leaders believed that communities needed to leverage the capacity of leaders from across a broad range of sectors. Tamarack was influenced, even in the early days, by the wisdom of David Chrislip and the collaborative leadership premise. Over the past 15 years, we have watched changemakers build their skill sets in a variety of ways, adopting new tools and approaches to deal with complex and evolving environments. Our work with a network of place-based poverty reduction roundtables across Canada has increased our understanding that change can be both local and scalable. To truly move systems, learning and engaging local community efforts are required to build a collective network of leaders who are focused on moving the needle on poverty.

Tamarack has also learned that there is value in collective leadership. In an evaluation of the learning supports provided to the Vibrant Communities network of leaders between 2002-2012, the investment and building of a learning network of cities and city leadership was foundational to moving the collective poverty reduction effort forward. These investments paid dividend and enabled the impact of the network to reach provincial and national scales (Tamarack Institute, 2012). The Vibrant Communities story did not end in 2012, but rather has continued to scale as a national and now international network of cities working collectively to reduce poverty locally and build capacity to scale systems change.

As communities drive towards improved population level outcomes, like those achieved by the Vibrant Communities – Cities Reducing Poverty network, we have learned that changemakers need to build their skills in a variety of different practice areas. The Tamarack Learning Centre is focused on increasing the capacity of community changemakers to grow their leadership skills and become more agile and adaptive.

The five interconnected practices identified by Tamarack include: Collective Impact; Community Engagement; Collaborative Leadership; Community Innovation and Evaluating Impact. Building competency in any one of these practices individually is beneficial but building collective competency across the practices can lead to more deep and durable impact.

Three years ago, my colleague Paul Born wrote a paper called *Our Community Can*

Change which described these five core practices for community change, and over the last three years Tamarack has identified these five practices as interconnected. Individuals interested in community change, should be conversant in these practices and embed them into their change strategies.

In his paper Paul described the five practices in the following way highlighting the practice, impact and requirements for effective implementation.

PRACTICE	IMPACT	IMPLEMENTATION
Collective Impact	Most powerful	Employ a framework that enables large scale change and population level impact
Community Engagement	Most important	Achieving large scale change requires the wisdom and engagement of diverse stakeholders
Community Innovation	Most critical	Rethink current tools and approaches to bring new practices and insights
Collaborative Leadership	Most personal	Consider how you show up in the work
Evaluating Impact	Most essential	Scaling change requires knowledge of outcomes and impacts

Paul Born launched Tamarack's exploration of these five interconnected practices for community change. Since that time, the Tamarack Learning Centre has intentionally begun to build a learning approach which is designed to assist changemakers. We believe that addressing complex challenges requires a mindset, an agile and adaptable approach and knowledge and skills in each of the five practice areas.   The following section describes each of the practices individually and builds on the latest thinking and action in each of the practice areas.

COLLECTIVE IMPACT

The first practice is understanding collaboration and systems change through the lens of Collective Impact. The Collective Impact approach, launched by John Kania and Mark Kramer in the winter of 2011, is a defined framework which contains five conditions including: building a common agenda; employing a shared measurement approach to determine progress; leveraging mutually reinforcing activities; engaging in continuous communications ensuring that the collective network is informed and engaged; and, investing in a backbone infrastructure to provide supporting to move the community change effort forward.

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Since the launch of the Collective Impact framework, thousands of communities and community changemakers, have been using this approach to tackle some of the most complex challenges facing their cities. Collective Impact requires a diverse network of community changemakers to become engaged in the challenge. They leverage their individual and collective resources to resolve or make progress on the challenge their community is facing.

For Collective Impact efforts to be successful, these efforts require both an interconnected network of leaders and deep Community Engagement.   It is through the deepening of these two practices that communities can leverage resources and human capital to drive community change forward. Engaging in innovation and evaluating results are key to building momentum and actualizing impact.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Deep Community Engagement takes community change to the next level. Often intractable problems are held in place by implicit and semi-explicit barriers, including mental models, relationships and connections and power dynamics that exist in communities. In the paper, The *Water of Systems Change*, John Kania and Peter Senge, describe these as three of six conditions which can be shifted to achieve systems change and impact. The other three conditions include: shifting policies, practices and resource flows (Kania & Senge, The Water of Systems Change , 2018).

Kania and Senge argue that systems transformation requires changemakers to advance equity by engaging individuals most impacted by the problem or dilemma in the community change effort. This is not about consultation; this approach requires deep Community Engagement.

Tamarack has written extensively about the engagement of both context and content leaders. Context leaders bring their skills, knowledge and experience in navigating the systems that are not currently working for them. Content leaders are professionals who can draw upon research and evidence but do not have the same on-the-ground experience (Attygalle). Engaging both sets of leaders is vital to building a transformational community change effort. There is a mindset shift required by community changemakers who are leading processes requiring authentic Community Engagement. This practice is more about 'doing with' rather than 'doing for'. Doing with is about the active engagement of the changemaker with the community in a shared and collective practice.

COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP

Earlier in this paper, we discussed the importance of networked or collective leadership. Collective and collaborative approaches require a multi-varied approach drawing upon different leadership strategies. Ashoka Fellows build large networks of leaders to tackle challenging problems. In advancing poverty reduction efforts across Canada, Tamarack invested in building local leadership capacity as well as strengthening the collective capacity of the network to scale change.

Engaging both context and content leaders in community change means being aware of the situations when each type of leader might have greater impact and leverage. There is no one size fits all approach in the practice of collaborative leadership, instead, it is a practice which draws on adaptive and agile leadership knowledge and capacity, and then draws the leaders forward in a shared and coordinated way. Collaborative leadership, at its core, requires a mindset shift that working collectively will scale change more efficiently than working in silos. It requires leaders to commit their knowledge, resources and capacity to the shared effort. It requires courage and the practice of showing up with your whole self.

COMMUNITY INNOVATION

This paper has explored the concept of building an agile approach to community change work. In the five trademarks of agile organizations presented by McKinsey & Company, they identify 23 practices that are required by changemakers. These practices require new and innovative ways of working and collaborating.

The community innovation practice draws from a wide range of sectors and experiences including business, government, social innovation, and entrepreneurship. Too often, communities lag in building their agility and innovation skills. There are several reasons for this lag, including slower decision-making practices and lack of innovation resource flows. Building a practice to learn about and engage with social innovation and agility tools can shift our thinking and approach to intractable problems.

Community innovation is about engaging the commons in new and creative ways. It's about unleashing the practice of systems change and impact.

EVALUATING IMPACT

For progress to be made, it must be tracked and documented. Evidence is vital to building commitment and capacity. One of the core conditions of Collective Impact is the practice of shared measurement. This condition includes establishing a baseline of indicators which represent the current condition for the problem and then tracking progress over time. The Collective Impact effort should lead to population level changes and leaders should engage in conversations about how their collective efforts contributed to the population level results.

Evaluating Impact has many benefits for collective and collaborative efforts. It enables groups to build their change story. Under the right conditions, it can increase momentum toward the change. When used as a learning and continuous improvement strategy, it can enable agility, by focusing on strategies that are having an impact and letting go of those strategies that are not.

Evaluating Impact is challenging for community changemakers. It can require the sharing of information and it can also lead to making some tough decisions about focus. However, with the right questions and the right set of evaluation tools, communities can make impressive progress on the challenges.

MORE THAN THE SUM OF THE PARTS

The work of community change is challenging and complex. It requires individuals to build their individual and collective leadership capacities. Tamarack has approached community change by identifying five interconnected practices for changemakers. The five interconnected practices require leaders to increase their knowledge and skillsets to be able to drive the change forward at a pace that is both dynamic and agile. The interconnected practices also require a different leadership mindset, one that focuses on engaging the collective rather than the individual in the change effort.

There are lessons that can be drawn from the thought leaders cited in this paper. Ashoka Fellows adopt a collective leadership approach and engage a wide and diverse network to push forward their change. Business leaders are transforming their work environments to also engage connected and collaborative leadership networks to deal with the volatility they are facing in an ever-changing marketplace. As leaders, we need to be aware of hyper-connectivity and the increasing rate of social isolation and engage in an approach that leverages both. This requires an eye to innovation and emerging Community Engagement tactics that combine digital and human connections.

In the community sector, we need to draw deeply from the wisdom emerging from diverse sectors and ways of working to scale social innovation, community change and impact. Building knowledge and skills in the practices of Collective Impact, Community Engagement, Collaborative Leadership, Community Innovation and Evaluating Impact are important steps forward for the field.

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 strategic areas including Collective Impact, Collaborative Leadership, Community Engagement, Community Innovation and Evaluating Impact. Liz is well-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 and leads a Collective Impact capacity building strategy with the Ontario Trillium Foundation.

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.

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