



PERSPECTIVES FROM THE FIELD

A CONVERSATION ABOUT COLLECTIVE IMPACT AND COLLABORATION FROM AUSTRALIA AND CANADA

LIZ WEAVER & MAX HARDY

Over the last month, Liz Weaver, Vice President, Tamarack Institute and Max Hardy, Principle, Max Hardy Consulting have been engaged in an email exchange puzzling out the answers to many wicked questions about collective impact and community change.

Do you agree with their perspectives? Do you have other questions they should consider? What are the challenges you are facing as you engage in collective impact? We invite you to add your comments and join the conversation at:

<http://www.tamarackcommunity.ca/library/perspectives-from-the-field-a-conversation-about-collective-impact-and-collaboration-from-australia-and-canada>

HOW DO WE ENSURE THAT IT IS TRULY A 'COMMUNITY AGENDA' NOT JUST THE SHARED AGENDA OF FOLKS AROUND THE COLLECTIVE IMPACT (CI) TABLE?

MAX HARDY:

I believe in going in 'messy.' Generating conversations with the broader community of interest before a project has a name; before objectives have been written up and before any business case has been developed for funding. The temptation for organisations meeting together to discuss an issue is to scope the project, work out some key messages, make sure organisations are not falling over each other, and to identify resources.

All good reasons to get all the ducks lined up. However, it's risky. By the time there is a project announced, and key partners identified, it can look like it's just another government or NGO led project designed to fix a problem. The rationale is then sold. The importance of working together is marketed. From the community's perspective, they have not yet got their fingerprints over the project. This looks like another thing that will be done for us or to us.

Going in messy means there is genuine intent to frame the project in a way that is meaningful for those who are meant to benefit by, or contribute, to an initiative. Going in messy means the project can be shaped. Every project has to start somewhere. But don't go too far without knowing your community has had genuine involvement in identifying the purpose, and the key questions to be answered.

What advice do you have Liz?

LIZ WEAVER:

Many collective impact initiatives start as a response to a community need, issue or opportunity of some sort. There are usually two or three people who get together and say, this is not right or this is an opportunity that we can't miss out on. Their conversation usually leads to other conversations about who we need to connect with whether there is support for at least moving this conversation forward.

Being comfortable with the messy, being open to different perspectives allows us to really unpack the problem.

Keeping the conversation open at the beginning is challenging. Many of us want to jump to the solution quickly given our area of expertise. But what we have learned is that collective impact issues, problems or opportunities are often very complex. There are multiple players in the system, multiple perspectives and multiple solutions. Being comfortable with the messy, being open to different perspectives allows us to really unpack the problem.

But there will be a time where clarity is required. This is when data disaggregation and community mapping become useful. What is the data telling us about the complexity of the problem and how it is impacting different individuals in our community? Who is already delivering services and how are these services connected? Who cares about this issue and how are they connected?

Approaching complex challenges is tough and messy work. In collective impact approaches, we can't jump quickly to solutions. We need a tolerance for ambiguity, for learning about how forces are impacting the problem, and then we can bring in tools that help to bring focus and clarity.

If we do this well, the issue becomes owned, not only by us, but by the community.

HOW CAN WE MEASURE PROGRESS WHEN SO MANY OF THE MEASURES OR INDICATORS ARE LAGGING INDICATORS?

MAX HARDY:

This is a really important question to consider, especially in the early days of an initiative. I'm a big believer in the power of appreciative inquiry; and the saying 'What you focus on will grow.' The question then becomes more specific; what kind of behaviours and practices would we like to see more of?

We need to be wary of indicators that measure a range of things. For instance, simply measuring, 'What percentage of meetings does a certain organisation or individual attend?' will give you some data, but not information. If someone attends very regularly it may not necessarily tell you whether they are committed. It could mean they are there because they don't trust others at the table and they want to see what is going on, for instance.

So, we need to pay attention to, and yes, measure, more than simplistic data. Perhaps it would pay to measure things like, 'What additional information is being shared to help our collective endeavours?' 'How much are we all learning from each other?' 'To what extent are we following through with commitments we each make in between meetings?' 'How much do we enjoy, or at least look forward to, our gatherings?' 'To what extent are we confident we are working with our community of interest rather than just designing another way of delivering services?'

These questions are not always that easy to measure, but they might be easier than people think. For instance, noticing the body language as people arrive, and how willingly people stay longer to have a one on one conversation, may provide really useful information about the level of enthusiasm. Reviewing progress will be much richer if we talk about how much we are learning from each other and sharing with each other, than simply counting bums on seats. If we focus on some of these things we are likely to measure our progress in a more meaningful way; and if we focus on these things they are likely to grow.

How about you Liz?

LIZ WEAVER:

Lagging indicators are data points that are a few years old. This type of measure often is generated through a national survey. In Canada, every five years there is a national survey that Statistics Canada conducts which looks at several population indicators. The data is then analyzed and released a few years or more later. This data is helpful, and can be useful to determine population trends over time. But, the lag time is an important factor to consider. If your initiative is only a three-year initiative, national statistics data may not be carried out with the type of regularity that is required and therefore may not be relevant to your effort.

Some collective impact efforts also consider leading indicators. A **leading indicator** is a measurable economic factor that changes before the economy starts to follow a pattern or trend. **Leading indicators** are used to predict changes in the economy, but they are not always accurate.

In the case of leading and lagging indicators, the group must determine the relevancy of the indicator to the context of the initiative. Sometimes there just aren't the right set of indicators in place and that is when the evaluation questions that Max suggests may be more helpful to determine how the initiative is moving forward. For shorter term efforts, focus on a small set of indicators but also ask questions to determine how behaviour is changing by key stakeholders over time. These short-term behaviour changes have the potential, if supported and encouraged, to lead to major impacts over time.

WHY IS LOCAL CONTEXT A CRITICAL SUCCESS FACTOR IN COMMUNITY CHANGE EFFORTS?

MAX HARDY:

This is an interesting question as some might believe local context is important simply because every

local context is unique. While that may be somewhat true, I believe what makes local context important is the extent to which the 'community of interest' have ownership of the solution they are co-designing. Having evaluated many pilot programs there was one feature that jumped out at me. Pilot schemes were often much more successful than when a fuller program was rolled out. I am convinced that one of the reasons for this is that programs or initiatives work when we rely on something new being developed. There is no 'newness' about being told that an initiative will be rolled out in a particular location because it was deemed to be a successful approach in another location. In Australia, I have observed some resentment in locations when told that government is tackling a certain problem using a 'best practice' model that worked somewhere else.

Local context is more than unique characteristics; it is about local ownership of the process. If the process is being 'done to' a community, it will not be welcomed. If it is being done by the community, or being led or actively influenced by a community, the energy is completely different. There is something motivating about trying something new without being certain if it will work or not. Being told something will work because it has elsewhere tends to kill motivation. Indeed, in Australia there is a tendency to try to prove the bureaucrats or professionals wrong about the promised success of some new model. The factor present, when pilots or initiatives work, is the excitement and curiosity in trying something new or different. This is something which is very hard to replicate or roll out. When pilots succeed, the very factor that led to its success is denied in other areas.

Beyond this, local context is important because it is about respect; identifying local strengths to build upon; and engaging the community as an asset to understand and work with rather than as something broken needing to be fixed.

So, here are my thoughts about it. What have you found to be important about local context?

Over to you Liz!

LIZ WEAVER:

I agree with you Max. Local context is more than unique characteristics, but it is also important to understand and leverage those 'unique, local characteristics.' Among the local characteristics to pay attention to include the demographic make up of the community; the degree and engagement of community leadership in the initiative; the history of collaboration in the community; the willingness and ability of key players to become engaged; the amount of financial and human resources it will take to move an issue forward; the community's knowledge, commitment and passion around the issue being tackled; and, the initial convening leadership. There are likely many more characteristics but these are the ones that I have seen to be pivotal.

These local characteristics factor into key topic areas: leadership commitment and capacity; resources; issue passion, commitment and data knowledge; and community readiness. It is the mix of these ingredients that create a base for communities to be able to tackle complex problems. Many others have written about community readiness including [Rich Harwood](#) and [Jay Connor](#). By understanding the readiness of the community to move forward, you can begin to work on the elements of what it will take to get to community change and impact.

That is where the co-design and co-development elements that you have highlighted Max are critically important. That is also where philanthropy may get it wrong. True community change occurs when the community is passionate about the issue and there is a sense of urgency to get things done. Having issues imposed by external, if well intentioned, forces does make it more challenging to get things done because it takes longer to build buy in. I experienced this directly when a funder offered substantial funding to my organization to build a community leadership program. While the idea was great, we needed to develop the leadership program to suit our local context and build broad-based leadership support around this idea. It took us two years of work to get from idea to launch and often felt like we were pushing against a boulder.

When we finally got there, the program was a success, but it was because we put in the time, built the relationships and did not just take something off the shelf. This experience, for me, emphasized the critical importance of connecting into our local context.

WHAT MAKES THE STATUS QUO SO CHALLENGING TO CHANGE?

LIZ WEAVER:

The status quo is deceptive. We are entranced by the busyness of our work. Our days are filled with meetings, applications for funding, telephone calls and endless emails. This frenetic pace feeds our ego and makes us feel important and at times, invincible. And yet, the problems that our communities are facing are not going away and many are getting worse.

We know that complex problems need the engagement of diverse stakeholders to get a deep understanding of the problem. We also need to move beyond the status quo, the partners we usually work with, to bring new partners to the table.

This frenetic pace feeds our ego and makes us feel important and at times, invincible.

The status quo does not allow us to go deeper, to ask the difficult questions. A number of years ago my colleague and friend, Jay Connor asked me these provocative questions: Just who are you doing this work for? Are you here to maintain your job or impact the community?

The status quo does not invite provocative questions.

If we are dissatisfied with the growing inequity in our communities. If we are dissatisfied with going to work every day and seeing increases in the demand for services that meet crisis but are not preventative. If we want a change, we need to rail against the status quo. We need to do something different. We need to ask tough questions, engage in systems and work to impact policies. This means railing against the status quo.

MAX HARDY:

I reckon you've nailed it Liz. What I would add is that systems exist for a reason. Being explicit about the pay-offs for the status quo somehow makes it easier to change it. The status quo is working for some. It may be a CEO whose primary concern is to their own career and reputation, or to please their board (to keep their job or receive a pay increase). The status quo may serve organisations who are primarily focused on meeting KPIs set by their funding bodies. More provocatively, the status quo can also serve socially disadvantaged groups in a curious way. It may be easier to remain in a dependent,

oppressed state and give up, or complain, than to accept the opportunity to be part of a solution.

I recall my work as a social worker reading extensively about family dynamics, especially Salvador Minuchin. He talked about homeostasis being the 'tendency towards a relatively stable equilibrium between interdependent elements, especially as maintained by physiological processes'. Applying this concept to a family system Minuchin posed that while most people in a family will collude with the family dynamics, it will only take one player in the system to behave differently for the whole system to change. It may go into chaos, or a state of flux until a new, hopefully healthier homeostasis is achieved. I think the same applies to collective impact initiatives. There is a kind of collusion that occurs in the current system, otherwise it wouldn't be there. Once understood, people and organisations can make choices because there is a higher purpose involved, or different pay-offs, by daring not to collude.

WHAT MIGHT WE BE PREPARED TO GIVE UP, OR SUSPEND, TO WORK TOGETHER DIFFERENTLY?

LIZ WEAVER:

Getting to systems change and impact requires leaders to work differently. This means employing some strategies that they may not have employed in the past.

This includes determining which partners needed to get to impact. This can mean working with partners that you already have a relationship, but it also means working with partners you have never engaged with. For example, having an impact on youth means that they must be at the table. This means investing in their capacity and leadership and supporting them. It also means leading from behind or servant leadership.

In some cases, there might be another partner who is doing work that has a greater impact. This means determining who is best positioned to deliver the service.

The final strategy is to engage deeply with data and results. Understanding the problem from a data perspective is critical, who is impacted and how. But it also means tracking outcomes and impact. Is the community better off as a result of these interventions?

Working differently requires an enhanced leadership skillset. It includes servant leadership, a curious and persistent approach focused on results, and understanding the nature of systems.

What are your thoughts Max?

MAX HARDY:

I couldn't agree more Liz. I would only add that having more tolerance for failure, throughout the system, is necessary to create a shift. It is worth freeing up the expectation or demand that everything must work. Invariably, it is unclear if and how well, a new arrangement or initiative will work. Being curious, learning, and not being lured back to the default setting is important. But also, being able to say 'Hey, this isn't quite working as we had hoped. A few unintended consequences - what can we learn and how might we pivot? Or perhaps we stop this, draw on what we have learned to try another way.'

One of the ways the status quo remains, and why it so difficult to shift, is seeing any frailty or weakness in attempts to change it; and then play the blame game. To ridicule the effort and to promote the ways things were better in the past. It is important to build on what has worked in the past, but generally a collective impact initiative comes about because the results are simply unacceptable. Therefore, returning to the way things were should be no more acceptable than continuing with a new approach that is not working as well as hoped.

During a recent piece of work with Peer Academy in Melbourne, looking at innovating in the public sector, an important reframing occurred. We stopped using the term 'safe to fail' and replaced it with 'safe to learn'. It is not about celebrating failures, and there is no excuse for not attempting to succeed. It's about having the system increasingly curious, willing to adapt, and to open to new ways.

Well that is probably enough for now. It's been great conversing with you about this Liz. I am looking forward to feedback and further commentary. There is certainly lots of wisdom out there. Any final comments Liz?

LIZ WEAVER:

I agree Max, these are challenging questions. I know that the work of community change and collective impact is about acting, reacting and adapting. I think our responses reflect the need to community change leaders to be flexible as well as purposeful. Thanks Max for your thoughts.

ABOUT LIZ WEAVER

Vice Present, Tamarack Institute, Canada

Liz is passionate about the power and potential of communities getting to impact on complex issues. Liz is Tamarack's Vice President and Director of Operations. In this role, she provides strategic direction to the organization and leads many of its key learning activities including collective impact capacity building services for the Ontario Trillium Foundation. Liz is one of Tamarack's highly regarded trainers and has developed and delivered curriculum on a variety of workshop topics including collaborative governance, leadership, collective impact, community innovation, influencing policy change and social media for impact and engagement.

Prior to this role, Liz led the Vibrant Communities Canada team and assisted place-based collaborative tables to develop their frameworks of change, supported and guided their projects and helped connect them to Vibrant Communities and other comprehensive community collaborations.

ABOUT MAX HARDY

Max Hardy Consulting, Australia

Max works with leaders and organisations to achieve **results through collaboration**. His focus is on their toughest and most complex projects while building their ongoing capacity to collaborate and engage, across their organisation, with other organisations/stakeholders, and with their communities of interest.

Working as a coach, facilitator, process designer, trainer and strategic advisor, his approach is to work with people where they are at, understand their unique, and not so unique, challenges, and to co-create new ways of responding to those challenges.

Max is also an associate of Collaboration for Impact, (CFI) Australia's leading organisation for learning how to respond to complexity through effective collaboration.