



READY THOUGHTS

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ON THE LATEST NEWS AND RESEARCH ABOUT YOUTH AND YOUTH WORK.

Ready by 21 and Collective Impact

Every now and then, you run across an individual or organization that not only understands what you are trying to do, but articulates your theory and validates your actions with elegance and simplicity. Everyone involved with Ready by 21 just received that gift, through the powerful words of John Kania and Mark Kramer, managing directors of Boston-based FSG (Foundation Strategy Group).

Many of you know about their buzz-creating article, “Collective Impact,” in the Winter 2011 Issue of the Stanford Social Innovation Review. A few excerpts will show why what they said matters so much to those of us in the Ready by 21 community:

“Organizations have attempted to solve social problems by collaboration for decades without producing many results. The vast majority of these efforts lack the elements of success that enable collective impact initiatives to achieve a sustained alignment of efforts. ...

“Shifting from isolated impact to collective impact is not merely a matter of encouraging more collaboration or public-private partnerships. It requires a systemic approach to social impact that focuses on the relationships between organizations and the progress toward shared objectives. And it requires the creation of a new set of nonprofit management organizations that have the skills and resources to assemble and coordinate the specific elements necessary for collective action to succeed.

“Our research shows that successful collective impact initiatives typically have five conditions that together produce true alignment and lead to powerful results: a common agenda, shared measurement systems, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication, and backbone support organizations.”

The Forum spoke this month with Kania and Kramer about their research on collective impact and how Ready by 21 aligns with that work; those discussions will continue. Meanwhile, let's reflect on that ourselves. Looking at the article through our Ready by 21 work, we find two main takeaways.

Not all collaborations are equal

What they say: Partnerships and collaborations are common responses to social problems. Kania and Kramer distinguish between “technical” and “adaptive” social problems, and suggest that collective impact initiatives are essential for solving the latter. Technical problems are well-defined and have a clear answer, like building a hospital. Adaptive problems are complex and messy. The authors note, “The answer is not known, and even if it were, no single entity has the resources or authority to bring about the necessary change.” Adaptive problems, consequently, require more change, more commitment and a structure to manage the adaptations.

The authors also offer definitions and assessments of the types of collaborative efforts commonly found in communities and argue that most are not designed to produce results.

Reflections: These clarifications are valuable, and we should include them in Ready by 21 discussions.

Kania and Kramer's descriptions of the weaknesses that plague the “typical” types of collaborations are spot on. On the other hand, it would be prudent to use “collective impact” as a set of standards toward which any collaborative effort can aspire, rather than as the label of a particular type of collaboration.

The authors then offer five conditions for the success of collective impact initiatives. When met, these conditions would make a multi-stakeholder initiative, a public-private partnership or even a funders collaborative more effective. All of these types of collaboratives can have actors from different sectors. All can be focused on a common goal. From our experience, there is a critical need to strengthen the capacity and align the efforts of the array of public-private partnerships, multi-stakeholder initiatives, networks and funder collaboratives that own some piece of their community's “cradle to career” pipeline or health care puzzle.

The Ready by 21 National Partnership, for example, is working in a Strive community in which both the official “collective impact” initiative, as well as the funder collaborative and a social sector network focused on improving out-of-school learning opportunities, are building their capacity to meet the five conditions so they can better contribute to the collective effort. (Strive, a nonprofit partnership that focuses on education, was a prime example in “Collective Impact.”) All should be applauded and supported.

Mapping and assessing the “moving trains” in a community is a critical part of Ready by 21. Our goal is not to eliminate these collaborations, but to align them (perhaps reducing their number), binding them to the communications, management and measurement systems developed by the overarching leadership group that establishes accountability for improved outcomes from birth to young adulthood.

We know the conditions for success

What they say: Kania and Kramer nail the success criteria. The text that we've highlighted in the box below tracks with the standards that the Forum uses to assess communities' readiness to undertake a complex change effort. The authors' five conditions for success correlate with Ready by 21's four Building Blocks for Effective Change: Bigger Goals (common agenda), Better Data (shared measurement systems), Bolder Strategies (mutually reinforcing activities) and Broad Partnerships (backbone support organization with continuous communication).

Reflections: We're heartened that there are more similarities than differences between the criteria for change identified by the authors and by the Forum, and that the differences are about perspective, not principles.

First, Kania and Kramer describe the conditions needed to have collective impact on any complex social problem. The Ready by 21 standards are geared toward improving child and youth outcomes. Even more specifically, the Forum's standards are geared toward improving the full complement of child and youth outcomes, not just health or education. The Forum has a very clear point of view about the desired end states:

- for children and youth, represented by our "readiness target";
- for families, communities and schools, represented by our "insulated pipeline";
- for all leaders focusing on community change, represented by our four Building Blocks: broader partnerships, bigger goals, better data, bolder strategies.

Second, Kania and Kramer offer a powerful recipe for building a collective impact initiative. The Forum starts with the assumption that there are already dozens of collaboratives, partnerships, networks and initiatives that have laid claim to particular problems, strategies, resources and stakeholders. From our experience, the first step toward building an effective collective impact initiative is mapping a community's existing initiatives, collaboratives and partnerships to get a sense of their combined footprint (e.g., how well their agendas cover all age groups, address all outcomes and engage all needed partners).

The next, more difficult step is assessing the abilities of these efforts to develop common agendas, shared measurement systems, continuous communications, adequate support structures and coordinated activities in order to help the community decide whether to build a new collective impact partnership or support organization, strengthen an existing partnership and structure, or merge several of them.

We need more examples

The power of the "Collective Impact" article comes from combining clear concepts with practical examples. The Ready by 21 National Partnership is working to increase examples of how to change community conditions to improve children and youth outcomes. You can see some of those examples in our Ready by 21 case studies.

Kania and Kramer have turned on a light in the black box of community change strategies. It is important that we keep that light on, especially in the child and youth fields, where fragmentation is high, expectations are low, and doing good has replaced doing well as a goal in far too many communities.

— March 2011

The Five Conditions of Success

From "Collective Impact"

1. **Common Agenda** | Collective impact requires all participants to have a shared vision for change, one that includes a common understanding of the problem and a joint approach to solving it through agreed upon actions. ... All participants must agree, however, on the primary goals for the collective impact initiative as a whole.
2. **Shared Measurement Systems** | Developing a shared measurement system is essential to collective impact. Agreement on a common agenda is illusory without agreement on the ways success will be measured and reported. Collecting data and measuring results consistently on a short list of indicators at the community level and across all participating organizations not only ensures that all efforts remain aligned, it also enables the participants to hold each other accountable and learn from each other's successes and failures.
3. **Mutually Reinforcing Activities** | Collective impact initiatives depend on a diverse group of stakeholders working together, not by requiring that all participants do the same thing, but by encouraging each participant to undertake the specific set of activities at which it excels in a way that supports and is coordinated with the actions of others.
4. **Continuous Communication** | Developing trust among nonprofits, corporations, and government agencies is a monumental challenge. Participants need several years of regular meetings to build up enough experience with each other to recognize and appreciate the common motivation behind their different efforts. ... Even the process of creating a common vocabulary takes time and it is an essential prerequisite to developing shared measurement systems.
5. **Backbone Support Organizations** | Creating and managing collective impact requires a separate organization and staff with a very specific set of skills to serve as the backbone for the entire initiative. Coordination takes time, and none of the participating organizations has any to spare. The expectation that collaboration can occur without a supporting infrastructure is one of the most frequent reasons why it fails. ... The backbone organization requires a dedicated staff separate from the participating organizations who can plan, manage, and support the initiative through ongoing facilitation, technology and communications support, data collection and reporting, and handling the myriad logistical and administrative details needed for the initiative to function smoothly. ... Collective impact also requires a highly structured process that leads to effective decision-making.