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Roundtable on Community Engagement and Collective Impact.

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Roundtable on Community Engagement and Collective Impact

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Collective impact efforts are often discussed in terms of organizations or sectors, such as business, nonprofit, government, and philanthropy. What is often left out of the discussion is the community itself, even though it is a critical factor in the long-term success of collective impact initiatives. The community includes the individuals, families, networks, and organizations who will be affected by the initiative and who participate in it, but who are not usually considered to have active leadership roles in creating community solutions. It includes, for example, people directly affected by the problem, as well as social service organizations that may not be initially represented on steering committees or working groups.

To advance the conversation about how to engage the community in collective impact, the Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions gathered scholars and practitioners for an honest discussion. In this roundtable, the participants discuss why it is important to involve the community actively, how it can be done within a collective impact initiative, and the challenges and pitfalls of engaging the community.

Melody Barnes: I want to start out by asking what community engagement is. It's one of those things you think you know when you see it, but let's get specific. How do you define community engagement?

Steve Savner: From our perspective, community engagement needs to include people in the community—the people who are trying to be helped by the various services. They should be involved in a very genuine way in identifying community needs, developing ideas about solutions, and then helping to oversee and continuously improve the program. It's all about the constituency having a real role and an actual seat at the table.

Martin Zanghi: It's a method, a strategy, a way of creating relationships for people who have been affected by poverty, social and economic

injustice, and racism. It's about providing people who haven't had a voice the opportunity to share leadership and develop their skills to get practitioners and policymakers to actually listen. The most powerful voices that I've experienced over the last 20 years are youths who have changed policy, changed practices, and changed our belief systems so that we're actually doing better by the people that we're trying to serve.

Richard Harwood: Community engagement is an orientation. It's about who you believe is part of the community and whom you're willing to see. It means engaging people who have things that only they know and only they can teach us. For instance, only community citizens can tell us their shared aspirations and the challenges to reaching those aspirations. Only they can tell us about their lived

experiences with certain challenges, and what kinds of tradeoffs they're willing to make in their lives. This helps us develop the public will to move forward.

Stacey Stewart: For United Way, it's a continuous process of listening, understanding, hearing, and acting on reaching those aspirations. I think the tendency is often to do engagement through town halls or meetings at the rec center and then say, "Well, we've engaged the community, so now we can go off and do our work for the next three years and never listen to anyone again." That's not the kind of engagement that will produce any kind of community-level change.

Barnes: How do you think community engagement fits inside the collective impact approach, which brings together so many different sectors across the community?

Paul Born: On a practical level, community engagement in collective impact is particularly relevant when putting together a common agenda. It starts by identifying the system that we want to engage. For example, if we're working on poverty issues, we may bring together government leaders, people from civil society organizations, and corporate leaders who care about the issue. In addition, there is a fourth sector—people who will most benefit from the success of our initiative. We bring them together for a series of experiences that

allow them to enter into the issue deeply.

In the process of working and talking across sectors, new ideas are shaped and old ideas are let go. The common agenda is not just a strategic plan. It's also a commitment to the work moving forward. Community engagement is the process of building a common vision that binds us together.

Zanghi: It's also about emergent learning—about providing the time and space for the relationships and the processes to develop. It allows learning to come from the people who aren't normally part of the conversation, by listening to people with rich life experiences. It's not an easy practice to let people have that space. People have practiced elements of collective impact over the years, but the piece that's not clear to everyone is the process—the time, the trust, and the relationships that go into creating the five conditions of collective impact.

Savner: One of the issues that we need to pay attention to is the difficulties that communities experience with the engagement process. It's important to think about what organizations are in the community that are run by low-income people and to be sure to have those organizations at the table. It is

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important that there is an organization whose mission is to work with low-income folks and that really represents their views. It's also important because it helps empower low-income people and develop them into leaders.

Stewart: The nonprofit sector has always tried to solve challenges in a community by looking at the services that could be provided. When things don't seem to work, nonprofit leaders wonder what happened and realize that they don't have the perfect solution. Nonprofits have a lot of data and perspective, but other perspectives are just as valuable. We have found that, when we do the kind of listening and engaging with people that is required to drive systemic change, people step up to lead the change with us.

Harwood: Stacey raises an interesting point. What is the basic frame we're using to do

collective impact? Is it serving people or is it building something? What Americans want more than anything else right now is to return to being builders. It's part of our DNA, part of the founding of the country, and part of how we built communities over the years.

Many people feel that we've gotten away from that by being served all the time, by taking on a mindset that we're consumers and that we can make unlimited demands on limited resources. What I hear from folks in communities more than anything is: "Let's build something that has meaning and purpose, and let's demonstrate that we can come together and do things." We don't want to revert to the old paradigm that said: "What's your problem? I have a program for that and you don't have to do anything, even though you want to help create your own future."

Stewart: If you look back at history, things have changed at large scale in this country and around the world when some critical mass of organizations comes together and agrees that there is something important to work on. But this happens only when everyday people believe the issue is really important and are willing to change their own behavior. Not because someone tells them to, but because they want to.

They see it as a priority for themselves, their communities, and their lives.

Then there is the issue of creating real change in the community so that things actu-

ally get better. That's where this whole idea of engaging people and making them feel a part of the process comes in. Even if they didn't come to the community conversation to share their voice, they see their aspirations echoed by others around them and they feel a part of it. They feel like it's something they want to adopt in their whole life. This is an interesting cultural shift in the community that changes behavior.

Barnes: What are some of the biggest pitfalls when trying to take a collective impact approach that is in harmony with the community?

Born: I find our biggest pitfall is being able to listen to each other. We create environments where we are thinking about the solution we want to implement rather than listening to what is going on. Collective impact is very action oriented. But Peter Senge has this lovely saying: "Sometimes we have to go slow to go

fast." If we don't go slowly in this work, we can very quickly come to solutions that don't engage people.

Harwood: The biggest obstacle that I see is when we are overrun by the very process we created. Suddenly the goal is to implement timelines to meet deliverables and funding requirements. We lose sight of the community because the project is so heavy that we spend all our time feeding it. Despite our best intentions, we are oriented inward toward our own organization and process. We have to make a commitment to turn outward toward the community and shift our orientation, individually as well as collectively.

A danger with collective impact is that it becomes like a social erector set. We think that if we just put the right pieces together and get the right nuts and bolts in the correct order, then somehow this organic system we call community will go along our nice linear path. We need the humility to confront the actual conditions in communities and begin where the community is, not with our erector set. If we don't get this right, all the stuff that follows will not matter.

Barnes: I've heard from people around the country about perceived challenges when we engage communities and try to ensure that the community voice is a part of our work. But are there also real challenges that we need to address?

Born: I'm going to go to the one that is named almost 100 percent of the time by backbone leaders: There is not enough time. The perception of time is in an old frame. We have gotten so busy that it is a challenge to convince people to slow down. We somehow have to put the clutter away, which means that boards have to tell their leaders, "We need you to spend time on this."

So we're approaching people who don't necessarily want to lead a collective impact approach but want to be part of one, and we throw out the challenge: "You've got to set aside a minimum of 10 percent of your time to work in this process." That might mean four hours a week, but more important, it sets up a thinking pattern. We're in so many meetings and we move from thing to thing, so we've stopped looking at the larger reason we exist. I think that's by far the biggest challenge in collective impact work: to get people to rethink and slow down.

Savner: Whether it's collective impact or any other kind of work that requires building relationships and trust, the biggest barrier is frequently the risk to people in the organizations. And that's real: Your organization and your people have certain needs, and there is always a risk that the process will not come out to your greatest benefit.

People have legitimate concerns and interests. If you're running an agency, or if you're an elected official or a community resident, the thing you can do is build trust and relationships. But it seems to me that risks and a lack of trust in the process are the biggest barrier.

Stewart: Whenever there's a collective impact exercise, it's always in the context of what's happened before. There is baggage in communities. There are things that have happened that didn't work and relationships that are not going well. It takes patience and understanding to realize how to deal with that context.

From a backbone organization's perspective, it's important to understand that being the backbone doesn't mean you are in control. At some level, if you want to have the community engaged in a process, it has to be the community's process, not the backbone's. That is often difficult for people to accept because they might assume they can take control and move the process according to their timetable, and that's not the case.

Last, a piece of this engagement puzzle is both an opportunity and a challenge for some folks. There is a whole new world of engagement that we haven't fully adopted or seen the full potential of—digital and mobile space, and online engagement. So we may think about engagement in the classic, in-person sense, but in reality there are huge numbers of people in society right now for whom engaging online is perfectly comfortable. They feel completely engaged on an issue even if they haven't met everyone physically. There's an exciting opportunity to think about how virtual engagement can lead to collective change.

Harwood: We say we want to put community in collective impact, but we don't do it. That may be because we are afraid, we don't want to lose control, or we don't want to create certain risks, but there are two results. One is that we increase the likelihood that our collective impact will not succeed because there won't be true community ownership and we won't

be able to mobilize the energies and the public will of our large communities. The other is that we will miss an opportunity. People are looking to be part of something larger than themselves. They want to come back into public life to build something together. Collective impact initiatives are the golden opportunity for that to happen.

Barnes: Picking up on that idea, do you think that the fear that sometimes leads us not to include community creates a perception that collective impact is really for the grasstops and not for the grassroots?

Stewart: I think that's really what we're talking about. As we begin to understand collective impact, it feels very much like a grasstops effort. And I think that we all agree that it is both grasstops and grassroots. It involves everybody—everyday people, involved leaders. The more people you have engaged, the better. And the sooner we understand that collective action must include collective involvement, the sooner we will be able to solidify some real examples of moving the needle and involving people in something bigger than themselves.

Zanghi: My concern about the pitfall question is not related to any particular method, whether it's collective impact or another. It is that we still fall back on some of our old models of power, authority, and perceived expertise. That affects the ability to bring different people to the table and shapes the process and the outcomes for a likely change. It can get in the way of the kind of change that we are all fighting for.

Harwood: I think the danger of grasstop power is that, for a lot of folks, the efforts that come out of collective impact can look nice but not necessary. People see a group of professionals in their community who have dreamed something up, put a nice label on it, and created a four-color brochure and maybe a jingle. Then they promote it as though it's the new sliced bread.

This does not address the things that I'm concerned about and it doesn't give me the sense of possibility that we're building something together and changing the way our community operates. Instead, it feels like we're just creating another program.

Born: In the early days of a collective impact

approach, we often find that one of two mistakes is made. One is that we gather only the grasstops. That is, we think somehow it's about shifting power. So we bring the powerful players into the room. The other mistake, almost as common, is that we don't engage any of the power players because we're afraid that it will be perceived as a grasstops initiative.

So people are overcorrecting. They are either going grassroots or going grasstops. We're encouraging people to trust their instincts and bring the grasstops together with the grassroots. The actual process of bringing the power and the grassroots together is what changes the conversation.

Barnes: What is the one piece of advice that you would give to a person who comes to you and says, "I'm in community X and we are using a collective impact approach. We really want to work with the community. How should we go about doing our work?"

Zanghi: A theme I've heard in our conversation is the power of storytelling. Train and support people to tell their stories and to listen better.

Savner: Look for organizations that are actually led by the people in the community who are supposed to be the beneficiaries of whatever changes you're trying to achieve.

Stewart: I would say be patient, listen, and involve broadly.

Born: We often say that the change that is required is really change within ourselves. And so we're fond of saying First, it's very important to know your heart; second, open your heart; and third, trust your heart. Know, open, and trust. Because by becoming fully human together, we become deeply honest with one another. If we can bring the right people into the room and have that deep, honest conversation, we're going to find a new way.

Harwood: Get clear on your urge to do good, because you're going to need that as you face adversity. But in order to create change, you need to turn outward and make the community—not your conference room—your reference point. ●

To read an extended version of this conversation, visit www.collectiveimpactforum.org.

Special thanks to Sheri Brady for orchestrating the roundtable.

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