

COLLECTIVE IMPACT

Resolved: That Collective Impact is simply a re-branded and codified model of longstanding collaborative approaches that is too rigid to encourage genuine innovation and social change.

SUMMARY

PAUL BORN, PRESIDENT OF TAMARACK: AN INSTITUTE FOR COMMUNITY Engagement, and Don Bourgeois, Barrister & Solicitor and former editor of *The Philanthropist*, face off on the question of whether Collective Impact is a new and innovative approach to create effective social change or just a re-packaging of old ideas about collaboration.

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POINT : DON BOURGEOIS

THERE IS AT LEAST ONE ADVANTAGE TO BEING CLOSER TO THE END OF A CAREER than at the beginning, and that is that one has seen “it” before. Whatever that “it” is, if you have lived through and survived a few cycles of the economy, “it” has come across your desk two, three, or more times.

A couple of decades ago, the “it” in governance for not-for-profit and charitable organizations was the “Carver Policy Governance Model.” This was aimed at enhancing accountability and aligning strategic plans with resources and decision-making. More recently, the “culture of collaboration” has been identified as the way forward for the sector. And we all know how “social enterprise” will result in a well-funded sector.

These are examples of “its” that are purportedly unique to the charitable and not-for-profit sector. There have also been “its” that more directly focus on the business sector but which are also touted for use in the “third sector” to help the sector become more business-like – but, of course, always remaining true to its mandate. Business-like is presumed to be more efficient and effective than an organization otherwise would be.

In my distant youth as an academic, the “its” of the day included “management by objective” and “zero-based budgeting”; thereafter, “Six Sigma” and its many variants became the process to success. It would be easy to take an electronic walk through the archives of the RAND Corporation, the Brookings Institution, the Harvard Business School, or their Canadian equivalents such as the Conference Board of Canada or the Fraser Institute, to find many other techniques or methodologies that were or will be “it.”

The latest “it” is Collective Impact. What is wrong with “CI”? Nothing – and everything. I am sure CI will work in some situations. Some organization or group of organizations will use it and achieve success, however success is defined. I am always a bit concerned

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when success is intended to include social change toward social progress and when there may not be a consensus on what that means. The “social progress” that CI is intended to achieve is usually identified as a specific goal, such as reduced teenage pregnancy. Who can argue with that outcome? But what does this mean in terms of the underlying and fundamental changes that appear to be necessary for success?

That, however, is not my immediate concern. Rather, it’s that this new “it” allows the sector to use a new miracle process to hide behind rhetoric. It is the shiny new bauble that is being and will be used by some (certainly not all but, alas, too many) to mask inefficiency, incompetence, poor quality, and self-absorbed navel-gazing.

Why does this matter? Let’s look at what CI is supposed to be. One proponent commented:

... and I do believe that collective impact, when skillfully managed under the right circumstances, has great potential to achieve greater social progress at scale. (Gorin Malenfant, 2012)

An overweight, middle-aged male, whose skating abilities have always been suspect, could play goal for the Montréal Canadiens. All it would take is (a) an extensive and expensive training regime, (b) more appropriate nutrition, (c) significant investment in various healthcare treatments, and (d) the disappearance of many other goalies. And I can assure you that there are many, many overweight, middle-aged males who would agree that this outcome would be an important achievement and constitute undeniable social progress.

Perhaps the preceding paragraph is unfair. The same CI proponent quoted above continued that “for this reason, collective impact merits attention as an important model for achieving social and environmental change.” I don’t disagree that CI merits attention. I am even willing to use the initials “CI” rather than writing out “Collective Impact” in recognition that “it” has become a methodology in the sector. You know “it” has arrived when everyone knows what you are discussing when you use only “its” initials. I even see potential for “it” to achieve success in very specific circumstances where there is a long-term investor (or investors) who can draw on or impose strong management for the strategic vision implementation.

The proponents for CI speak of five conditions:

- a common agenda,
- shared measurements,
- mutually reinforcing activities,
- continuous communication, and
- backbone support.

Who can disagree that these conditions are necessary for success? I don’t, and in the right circumstances with skilful management, I agree there is a chance of success.

The problem with CI is not aspirational; it is reality. The preconditions set out for success are such that “it” will be successful in too few circumstances. What are those circumstances? They are not readily apparent. But in the meantime, the rush to CI will result in “it” being the latest bauble. It leaves me to believe that the dream of the unnamed overweight, middle-aged male playing goal for the Canadiens in the 2015 Stanley Cup playoffs remains possible (as if it ever were).

I leave for others the broader issue of whether my – okay, I admit, it is me, not just some unnamed overweight, middle-aged male – playing goal for the Canadiens is actually social progress.

COUNTERPOINT : PAUL BORN

If this were a game of tag – I guess I would be “it.”

Don Bourgeois makes an important point. I can especially identify with the story of the “overweight, middle-aged male wanting to play for the Montréal Canadiens” – though for me the team is the Vancouver Canucks. Essentially Don’s argument is that Collective Impact is like adding a new iron to a set of golf clubs or a unique paintbrush to the many we already have. The “tool” may help us cut a few strokes off our game or paint better, but fundamentally it’s just a tool. It is up to the user to make that tool effective and ensure it has impact. And you still need a lot of skill to make it work.

The fact we are even having this debate makes me believe that Collective Impact is more than a better tool. In general, people have recognized it as a fundamental rethinking of the way we go about making positive change in our communities. It may be that this “rethinking” will be for community development what the flop was for high jumping. When Dick Fosbury soared over the high-jump bar on his back, he forever changed how high jumpers would jump. In the same way, Collective Impact invites the community sector to do more than rethink how to work; it is actually asking the community sector to play a new “game,” one that reflects a fundamentally new way to approach social change. Let me explain.

In 1998, the Community Opportunity Development Association (CODA) – a community development agency I co-founded and for which I served as executive director – was recognized with a United Nations Habitat best practices award as one of the 40 top urban development initiatives worldwide. Our community held a huge celebration for us and there, in front of hundreds, I admitted that I was a bit shy about accepting this award because in the 10-year period for which CODA was being recognized (a criteria for the award was our outcomes over 10 years) poverty had actually increased by 5% in our community. I suggested that day that if I was heading a public company, such an outcome would get me fired, not honoured.

Later, CODA was instrumental in founding Opportunities 2000, an initiative grounded in a commitment to fundamentally rethink how we would reduce poverty and set a goal of the Waterloo Region, achieving the lowest level of poverty in Canada by the new Millennium.

Though we were never sure if we reached our ultimate goal (it is very hard to get definitive stats in Canada on such a complex goal), we did explore together a new approach, which focused on engaging the entire system that cared about ending poverty and working together as equals. It brought together the assets of the business community, all levels of government, the voluntary sector, and people with lived experience of poverty to work together to address this shared challenge.

Our outcomes were remarkable. We reduced the impact of poverty for more than 1,600 families and sparked a whole new range of social innovations in doing so. These outcomes were possible because they were grounded in our recognition that no one sector, working alone, can achieve meaningful and lasting impact on a complex community issue like poverty.

Achieving real, lasting impact on complex community issues requires the engagement of resources and stakeholders across a multitude of sectors, taking into consideration a wide range of perspectives. Ultimately it also relies on the creation of a common and shared agenda across diverse sectors and organizations so that individual efforts and programs are aligned and mutually reinforcing.

The desire to further refine this new approach to achieving better outcomes on complex community issues caused a small group of us – led by the Maytree Foundation, the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation, the Caledon Institute of Social Policy, and the newly formed Tamarack Institute – to consider a formidable goal: How might we fundamentally rethink the way that communities work together and, in turn, make the process of working together for social change easier and more effective? Our response led to the formation of Vibrant Communities as an action learning lab. The role of the Tamarack Institute was that of a think tank that would experiment, learn, and refine a “new technology” or a better way of working together for social change and to end poverty in Canada.

After a decade, a formal evaluation of Vibrant Communities (Gamble, 2010) confirmed the success of this new, comprehensive approach. Today, more than a decade later, more than 50 cities across Canada have joined this network and are working together as Vibrant Communities – Cities Reducing Poverty (Vibrant Communities, 2012). Embracing a collective impact approach, this national network is achieving measureable results in reducing poverty across Canada.

When John Kania and Mark Kramer of FSG published “Collective Impact” in the *Stanford Social Innovation Review* in the winter of 2011, Tamarack was immediately engaged. The Collective Impact framework was a better articulation of the process we had discovered and were promoting in our own work. This was not a just a meeting of the minds. We were not two think tanks suddenly realizing we were working on the same thing. It was rather a recognition that the “new way” of working that many of us were struggling to define had, at last, been succinctly described by John and Mark in a way that was easy to understand.

Collective Impact resonates so deeply for people because it articulates what so many of us have been looking for and have discovered, often with desperation, as a way to

achieve deep impacts on complex community issues. As a sector, we were tired of running programs that we knew made the lives of the poor just a little bit better. We wanted fewer people living in poverty. “Collective Impact” articulated the framework that affirmed what some of us, working on the front-line, had come to know. The only way to have impact was to work together, across sectors. This gave us the hope that there might indeed be a path forward toward large-scale social change.

Collective Impact is not an idea that suddenly arose in the minds of a few people, a technique that could easily be adopted, or a new “it,” to borrow Don’s phrase. It builds on what we have all learned from the work that Anne Kubisch led for many years with the Aspen Institute’s Roundtable on Community Change, it builds on the work of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, and in many ways it has incorporated the Asset Based Community Development principles promoted by John McKnight as well as the Collaborative Leadership ideas of David Chrislip and Jay Connor, to name but a few.

Collective Impact is emerging as a new paradigm, more than a technique that organizations should follow. As a new paradigm, Collective Impact asks that we think about the work of social change as the transformation of human systems. So, if we hope to reduce high school dropout rates, we begin by gathering together all those who care about dropout rates and deeply engage with them and all those who would benefit from reduced dropout rates (the system that desires change). Together, we embark on a journey to understand the issue of dropout rates deeply, often by looking at data, identifying root causes, and engaging in iterative conversations. This leads to a common agenda and a system of shared measurement, not as goals to be achieved but rather as an articulation of shared commitments we make to one another as we work toward realizing the shared outcome we desire: a reduction in high school dropout rates. This commitment to one another is what motivates us to work together (mutually reinforcing activities) and to connect often (continuous communication), so we can learn from each other and continuously adapt our strategy within the dynamic reality of our context. We rely on a jointly created backbone organization or structure to help coordinate and facilitate us in working better together.

Collective Impact builds on the promise that communities can work together for large scale change. Simply adding more programs or developing better techniques will not transform a social issue – at best those activities will provide temporary relief or enhance the current system. Enhancing the current system most often gives us more of what we already have. As Einstein said, “The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.” For 30 years now our approach to reducing poverty has not resulted in reduced poverty in Canada. It has only been stabilized, at best.

In this context, Collective Impact is a new theory of change rather than a technique for change. It proposes that more money, smarter approaches, or even working harder will not fundamentally change things unless we convince the whole system that desires change – government at all levels, business, the voluntary sector, and the people who will most benefit from our work – to work together as equal partners, bringing many techniques (new and old) and all the knowledge and resources of a community into a unified effort to collectively address an issue from multiple angles. It proposes that the

path forward is comprehensive change that builds on local assets and evolves as we learn and change together.

I welcome the debate about Collective Impact, not in order for us to get it right as a technique but rather for us to fundamentally rethink how to approach change in our communities. I believe that our current systems for social impact are already highly effective, that our leaders are deeply talented, and that the money we spend on creating a more equitable society is used remarkably well. But what is now needed is a shared commitment: to be willing to do things differently, to rethink how we engage a diversity of perspectives in our social change efforts and, as a result, embrace the many untapped assets that lie dormant or under-utilized in our communities and focus all of these on the same goals.

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