



# Putting Community in Collective Impact

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IN COLLABORATION WITH



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The Collective Impact Forum, an initiative of FSG and the Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions, is a resource for people and organizations using the collective impact approach to address large-scale social and environmental problems. We aim to increase the effectiveness and adoption of collective impact by providing practitioners with access to the tools, training opportunities, and peer networks they need to be successful in their work. The Collective Impact Forum includes communities of practice, in-person convenings, and an online community and resource center. It launched in early 2014.

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The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation is a nonpartisan, independent nonprofit that teaches, coaches and inspires people and organizations to solve pressing problems and change how communities work together. The Institute has worked across the U.S. and increasingly around the world and has partnered with some of the world's largest nonprofits, including United Way Worldwide, AARP, the American Library Association, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and others.

The people we teach and coach, called public innovators, are the leaders that move our communities forward. They come from nonprofits, businesses, government, the media, and educational and religious organizations. They are an essential ingredient to solving our most vexing challenges.

That's why the Institute has set a bold goal to develop 5,000 public innovators by 2016.

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# Putting Community in Collective Impact

By Richard C. Harwood

Not long ago, I led a discussion in Battle Creek, MI, with over a hundred leaders – from across all sectors – who were there to kick-off a collective impact effort focused on vulnerable children and families. In that discussion, the leaders repeatedly described the community as “jaded” and “frustrated.” They said that too little trust exists in the community for people to make progress that “sticks,” that endless turf battles inevitably cripple efforts, and that there aren’t enough credible leaders and organizations to help the community move forward. The community, they said, is tired of initiatives and programs that start one day only soon to fade away and further undermine people’s confidence that anything significant can be accomplished. They asserted that the prevailing way of doing business is to do things *to* people rather than *with* people.

While this particular conversation happened in Battle Creek, it could have easily been in any one of hundreds of conversations I’ve had with people in scores of communities across the country. There is a deep hunger within people in communities to make a real dent on the challenges that beset us. But people are wrestling with fundamental questions about how to create these changes, questions that go to the heart of community life – how it functions, how to engage it, how progress can be made. Time and again I hear concerns about what will it take to combat local conditions like those identified in Battle Creek. How can *their* community actually come together, when so many forces seem to continue to split us apart? And even if progress is made, what will it take to sustain it? It is one thing to *want* change; it is quite another to *produce* it.

Just about everywhere I go nowadays – including Battle Creek, where my own Institute’s partnership with the community continues – people are talking about the role that collective impact could have in moving communities forward.

That’s a good thing! I’ve spent the past 25 years arguing that there is a vacuum in communities for groups that span boundaries and bring different sectors to the table (including “everyday people”) to address common challenges *together*. Now an ever-growing number of community leaders, funders and businesspeople, among others, see the “collective impact” route as a compelling way to tackle seemingly intractable challenges that have eluded them.

While past community efforts may have produced isolated success in some communities, now people see a possibility for widespread, systemic change.

And there’s good reason for this optimism. In California, for example, over 55 organizations came together in the Community Partnership for Families of San Joaquin to transform social service delivery in the county<sup>1</sup>. Through the establishment of 18 integrated Family Resource Centers, 25,000 families have been able to get the help they need through a streamlined intake and planning process. Results for these

families include a 10 percent increase in school attendance and lowered rates of child abuse and neglect.

The Community Partnership was one of several high-impact collaborations identified by the White House Council for Community Solutions in 2012. These case studies prove the potential of long-term investment in communities, and of community members as “partners and producers of impact.” Another notable example is the Parramore Kidz Zone, a collaborative led by the City of Orlando, FL<sup>2</sup>. The Zone provides a broad range of programs to children, at sites throughout the neighborhood, from free tutoring to comprehensive health and wellness programs. From 2007 to 2010, grade-level reading scores here increased by 15 percent; and math scores by 21 percent. The juvenile arrest rate fell by 81 percent; and, as in San Joaquin, the city will apply their collective impact approach to other neighborhoods.

## Building on Collective Impact

In their seminal article, *Collective Impact*, which appeared in the *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, John Kania and Mark Kramer have named five key characteristics for successful collective impact efforts, which I excerpt here<sup>3</sup>:

1. *Common agenda*. “All participants share a vision for change that includes a common understanding of the problem and a joint approach to solving the problem through agreed-upon actions.”
2. *Shared measurement*. “All participating organizations agree on the ways success will be measured and reported, with a short list of common indicators identified and used for learning and improvement.”
3. *Mutually reinforcing activities*. “A diverse set

of stakeholders, typically across sectors, coordinate a set of differentiated activities through a mutually reinforcing plan of action.”

4. *Continuous communication*. “All players engage in frequent and structured open communication to build trust, assure mutual objectives, and create common motivation.”
5. *Backbone support*. “An independent, funded staff dedicated to the initiative provides ongoing support by guiding the initiative’s vision and strategy, supporting aligned activities, establishing shared measurement practices, building public will, advancing policy, and mobilizing resources.”

These five characteristics have become an important framework for addressing tough community problems. Of course, as with any framework, putting these five characteristics into practice is neither easy nor automatic. Communities have a life of their own. They are highly organic systems, made up of ever-changing conditions, with their own rhythms, and a cacophony of voices and actors, including everyday people who make the community their home.

This topsy-turvy environment can be bewildering for those trying to bring about change. It is no wonder why many community leaders are tired and worn down as they seek to produce change; the task at times can feel overwhelming and progress can seem slow. So when it comes to implementing collective impact – or any significant community effort – what on paper may seem like a neat, linear process, can in reality require deft hands, engaged communities, and time to evolve. In such an environment – no matter how many leaders and organizations join an effort, or how well thought-out and rigorous their plan is – it is simply not possible to *impose* a

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strategy on a community; nor is it possible for a group to impose its own will. Rather, the truth is that it is necessary to work *with* the community.

Which brings me to the *civic culture* of communities.

Civic culture matters for collective impact. Big time! It's how a community works – how trust and public will form, why and how people engage with one another, what creates the right enabling environment for change to take root and accelerate. It relates to the degree of readiness and appetite for change among leaders, groups *and* everyday people. Civic culture helps to explain why some communities move forward and others remain stuck or treading water; and why some communities that do make progress ultimately slide backward.

I didn't start my work with this conclusion; rather, it emerged only after many efforts – not all successful – in a variety of communities. But it makes sense. Organizational development consultants will tell you that an organization's culture is pivotal to how well an organization performs. Athletic coaches incessantly talk about the “locker room culture.” When visiting a foreign nation, we often reach for a book to learn about its culture.

Each community has its own civic culture that must be understood in order for progress to be made. But notwithstanding differences, there are clear and practical ways to make sense of a local civic culture and develop it. By paying attention to civic culture, it becomes possible to accelerate and deepen collective impact efforts to “move the needle” on an issue – and, crucially, to change how a community works together, both in the short- and long-term. After all, it is this

twin victory that the leaders in Battle Creek were in search of; and it is this same urgent desire that I hear people express in so many other communities. They ask, “How can we make progress on the issues we care about and change the very way our community works together?”

My chief concern here is that robust notions of community can sometimes be left out of collective impact discussions and implementation efforts; indeed, the very nature of community seems at times an afterthought, even sometimes an unwanted nuisance to be minimized. But *collective* impact efforts must be aligned and calibrated to the context of community – the “civic culture” – in which they are taking place. So this article will lay out five key characteristics of civic culture, explore why they matter, and how paying attention to them may be the difference between a collective impact effort getting stuck – even falling flat – or generating the kinds of results we seek. A collective impact approach holds enormous promise for bringing about meaningful change – but only if such action is taken *with* communities, not *apart from* them.

## Ownership by the Larger Community

An implicit assumption in collective impact is that if the right leaders, professionals and experts are at the table, and if enough data is examined, then a “common agenda” can be created that the community will support. Such an approach may indeed be welcomed in some communities and it may even work for some period of time; but in most places, over time, it won't. The success of collective impact depends on genuine ownership by the larger community

that starts with placing a value, not only on expert knowledge, but also on *public knowledge* that comes only from authentically engaging the community.

Many collective impact proponents say that the models they're using already account for such engagement. Indeed, some do. In a June 2013 paper by William Potapchuk, *The Role of Community Schools in Place-Based Initiatives*<sup>4</sup>, the author lays out a series of promising examples where genuine engagement has occurred in collective impact efforts. But, sadly, too often claims by many others are based on thin notions of engagement – sometimes no more than lip service. After a long discussion about the need for authentic engagement at a recent collective impact meeting, a thought leader in the field told me: “Oh yes, we already do that. We ask the community to react to our data and our plans for moving forward.”

At another meeting a group leader once tried to placate my questions about authentic engagement by saying, “Don’t worry, we’ll have a good community marketing plan!” She then quickly turned the group’s attention back to a discussion about data. But engaging a community cannot be satisfied merely by asking people to react to data, or by using community conversations to “test” pre-set strategies, or by equating “engagement” with marketing plans. Rather, the starting point must be to engage people on their *shared aspirations* for the community.

After all, communities are a common enterprise about shared things. Asking about shared aspirations is different from asking people about the “problems” they see, which only creates a deficit approach that inevitably leads to finger-pointing and arguments over pre-set solutions.

And it differs, too, from “visioning exercises” – typically complex processes that instruct people to use “little yellow dots” to make their individual preferences known, and thus too often short-circuiting real discussion and producing ideas wholly un-tethered from the *community’s* reality. It shouldn’t be a mystery why so many visioning reports sit on shelves gathering dust.

We also want to know the challenges people

face in moving toward their aspirations; understanding how people experience those challenges in their daily lives is critical. Only then is it possible to gain a deeper understanding and insights into what actually is the rub for people, what *needs* to be addressed, and *in what ways*. We would also explore who people trust to help create the kind of change they seek: finding the leaders, organizations, and community members that people trust to lead and implement efforts can be the difference between forward movement and plans that gain little traction. And, importantly, we want to uncover the role that individuals themselves, alone and together, wish to play in generating that change. Collective impact should be an opportunity for people to engage as *citizens* with true aspirations and agency, not merely as passive consumers or claimants, making demands on limited resources.

Shared public knowledge will enable a community to make this shift. Take Asylum Hill, a neighborhood in Hartford, CT, where The Harvard Institute worked with The Hartford, a financial services company, and United Way of Central and Northeastern Connecticut. In talking with different groups and leaders in the community, it seemed that the main issues at hand were jobs and education. But when we engaged people there, they told us something quite different: they want a safer, more connected community. Indeed, it was not necessarily more programs and initiatives they were after, but to create a certain *kind* of community. One reason for their aspirations is that Asylum Hill is a transient neighborhood, where residents said there is a lack of trust and sense of connection. Their number one desire is to come out from their homes and get to know, interact, and work with their neighbors to create a safer, more connected community. Here we also found that crime, or the threat of it, drives people back into their homes; and that when police see two or more people gathering, they seem to assume they are loiterers and disperse them. All this undermines the very community residents there seek to build. But with new public knowledge in hand, the community is examining how their collective efforts need to be harnessed so that they can address people’s aspirations and

concerns, taking a path that will foster greater confidence that the neighborhood *is* moving in the right direction.

## Strategies that Fit the Community

Another key characteristic of collective impact is that organizationally aligned strategies will produce measurable progress when based on the use of data, evidence-based decision-making, and best practices, among other key inputs. Used well, these are all important tools. But here it is important not to confuse a commitment to rigorous analysis with developing strategies that actually *fit* a local context. “Fit” involves more than just doing the numbers, collecting the latest information about programs and best practices, and aligning different groups. These steps alone will not necessarily lead to alignment with the community.

So let's suppose for a moment that authentic engagement in a community has occurred. Even then it is often the case that what is learned is not *practically used* in informing and driving the development of strategies. If they happen at all, people tell me that discussions intended to incorporate *public knowledge* in strategies are too often left to the end of meetings, or as I've often noted, relegated to “marketing” and “communications” sessions.

This is a big mistake, and a lost opportunity! Collective impact efforts should be actively using public knowledge to drive the definition of a common agenda *and* to understand what

strategies are relevant to the community. *Fit* also involves knowing that communities go through several stages – and the key is to know which stage a community is in at any given time. Each has its own implications – or do's and don'ts – for creating change.

There are five stages of community life – which we call *Community Rhythms*<sup>5</sup> – that help to explain why some communities move faster and others slower when it comes to change. The same strategies in different communities may work in one but not another; and what it takes to accelerate and deepen change will vary given the stage a community is in. When community actors have public knowledge and know its community rhythm, they can determine and drive strategies that will *fit* the local context.

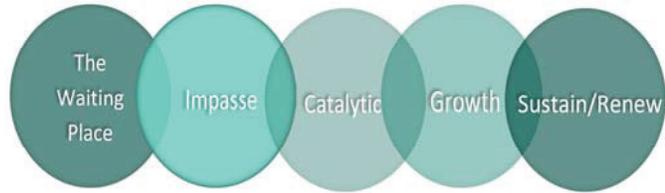
Take a community in the early “catalytic stage.” In that instance, it should be possible to see individual pockets of change emerging in the community. Such pockets might represent new ways of tackling old challenges, experimentation, and innovation. But it is also important to remember is that while these pockets are taking root, while they are being celebrated, the remainder of the community is still stuck in the prevailing conditions that dominate the Catalytic Stage: widespread lack of trust in leaders, divisions and turf battles, limited organizational capacity, and a negative ingrained narrative that goes something like, “We can't get together and get things done.”

This is exactly what was happening in Asylum Hill. In that community, small pockets of change *had* taken root – including a promising community-school partnership at West Middle School, assorted activities at the YWCA and the Boys and Girls Club, the newly-renovated Sigourney Park, and church and neighborhood association efforts. But in our conversations with community residents, relatively few people mentioned these efforts; moreover, most people said that local efforts and their funding were benefitting *organizations*, not people in the community. When asked, there were no leaders or organizations that people *across the neighborhood* said that they trust.

In this stage a sensible strategy is to build upon

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## Community Rhythms



**Table 1:**

Community Rhythms:  
The 5 Stages of  
Community Life<sup>5</sup>

	The Waiting Place	Impasse	Catalytic	Growth	Sustain/Renew
<b>Within</b>	There is inkling that something is off in the community, but people can't name it. There's no agreement on issues, problems, or aspirations. A disconnect exists between leaders and community.	The community is at loggerheads. There's clarity about "What's wrong," but little agreement on what to do. A lack of trust, leaders and organizational capacity block a community's ability to get things done.	There are pockets of change emerging, with new ways of working together. But a lack of trust, leaders and organizational capacity still plague the rest of the community. A new competition between an ingrained negative narrative and new can-do	There is an abundance of community capacity, networks and productive norms for getting things done. Community-wide efforts are making progress.	Clear progress has been made on key issues, but questions about "What's next?" are arising. Often there are underlying tensions on unresolved systemic issues. Tensions between old and new leaders exist.
<b>How this stage feels</b>	Little energy. People feel stuck. Low-grade anxiety.	Pent up emotion and anger. Growing sense that, "Enough is enough!" Impatience for change.	In pockets, new sense of possibility and new people becoming involved. Negative status quo in most of the community.	Sense of common purpose. Wide-spread energy and movement.	How can we protect our quality of life.
<b>Traps to avoid</b>	Starting big initiatives that promise big change. There's not enough sense of urgency and capacity to gain traction.	Confusing people's desire for change with a shared sense of how to move ahead together.	Taking on too much and trying to over-coordinate emerging pockets, potentially killing-off innovation and creativity.	Ignoring tough systemic and regional issues, and concerns over such areas as race and inequities.	Resting on laurels. Ignoring underlying issues. Existing capacity becomes disconnected from community.

## “Whether dealing with the natural world or with communities—without a healthy enabling environment—it’s hard for things to take root.”

what works, but my experience is that this is much easier said than done. It requires a keen discipline to make sure that such efforts are truly making a difference in people's lives, and that people clearly see and experience those benefits. Yet even under the best of circumstances, it is easy to mistake pockets of change, however productive, as a sign of a *community's* readiness and appetite for much larger comprehensive change. Hubris can win the day, leading to large-scale efforts that cannot be supported by the community as a whole. Under the conditions of the Catalytic Stage one must think carefully about what will gain traction and so grow people's confidence that broader change is even possible.

### A Sustainable Enabling Environment

At one of the many “collective impact” meetings that I have attended, a person sitting at my table had asked the group there, “Why are we having the same conversations over and over again?” She told us that she's tired and frustrated by attending meetings and conferences where new initiatives get launched only to find herself and others back at the drawing table over and over again. Ralph Smith, the senior vice president of the Annie E. Casey Foundation and managing director of the Campaign for Early Grade-Level Reading, responded to this frustration in a presentation later that morning: “This is not a know how problem,” he said, referring to making progress on early-grade level reading. “We know what to do. That requires nurturing a sense of possibility and illuminating pathways to success.”

To forge a sense of possibility and pathway, it

is critical to create the right enabling environment in a community. This means focusing on the underlying conditions in a community that need to be present for change to occur – and for the community itself to change how it works together.

Collective impact efforts should look at nine essential factors, which, together, form what I call public capital. These include different layers of leadership in a community, norms for interaction, the presence of multiple groups that span boundaries and bring people together, conscious community conversation, and networks for learning and innovation<sup>6</sup>. We can think of these elements as making up a community's “ecosystem” – an enabling environment. Whether dealing with the natural world or with communities – without a healthy enabling environment –it's hard for things to take root, grow and spread to scale. Years ago I did a study comparing two Mississippi communities that were facing education challenges. One community had made progress, while the other one seemed to remain solidly stuck in the past. Our instinct was to examine their two sets of “education policies” as a way to explain the differences; but when we deeply engaged community leaders and residents, what we discovered was that one community had a strong enabling environment – or public capital – and the other did not.

The good news is that these conditions can be proactively created, but this must be done with *intention*. The trick is to focus on a particular “sweet spot:” develop strategies that move the needle on an issue and – simultaneously – build the underlying conditions for change. Let's return again to Asylum Hill, which can provide a simple and straightforward example. The sweet spot there might have been a combination of actions that work to reduce crime and its threat and bring people back onto the streets. In our discussions, this led people to talk about building stronger ties between the police and neighbors (as opposed to starting new programs), in order to help police pursue drug dealers and prostitutes, while proactively creating more visible social gathering places for

neighbors, thereby sending signals that the streets are safer for people to become more connected to one another. In this way, the community can reduce crime while building the conditions that will create a stronger community, ready to take action on other issues.

Most communities I work with across the country (both large and small) sorely lack conditions that make up a healthy enabling environment, the very same conditions essential to help move a community through different stages of community life. Without these conditions, well-intentioned efforts are held back. Determining where and how to take action in the “sweet spot” requires vigilance and a deep understanding of one’s community. But the payoff is worth it: greater impact on the issue at hand, and a better functioning community on issues to come.

## A Focus on Impact *and* Belief

When all is said and done, the chief calling card of a collective impact approach is that word “impact.” A powerful thing it is – because it taps into the pent-up desire among people in communities to show demonstrated progress on issues they care most about. Yet, surprising though it may be, the intense focus on impact alone is not enough to create that desired goal. Another ingredient is needed: *belief*.

I have traveled across the country for over a year listening, deeply, to Americans talk about their aspirations and concerns for themselves, their communities and the nation<sup>7</sup>. I heard people talk about an array of things troubling them, including a weak economy and too few jobs; seemingly rigged rules for the wealthy and connected; and the negative consequences from people’s obsession with instant gratification. Among all these concerns, one in particular shot to the top: the need to restore our *belief* that we can get things done, *together*.

For those of us interested in producing positive change in communities, we must remember that belief, after all, is that intangible factor that prompts and prods people to step forward and engage; to be willing to join with others; to

# Public Capital: Creating a Community’s Enabling Environment

**An Abundance of Social Gatherings** – that enable people to learn about what is happening in the community and begin to develop a sense of mutual trust.

**Organized Spaces for Interaction** – where people can come together to learn about, discuss, and often act on community challenges. These spaces help a community begin to identify and tap resources to address concerns.

**Boundary Spanning Organizations** – that help engage people in public life, spur discussion on community challenges and marshal a community’s resources to move ahead. These organizations help lay the foundation for community action, but do not act as the driving force.

**Safe Havens for Decision Makers** – where a community’s leaders can deliberate and work through community concerns in “unofficial,” candid discussions.

**Strong, Diverse Leadership** – that extends to all layers of a community, understands the concerns of the community as a whole and serves as a connector among individuals and organizations throughout the community.

**Informal Networks and Links** – that connect various individuals, groups, organizations and institutions together to create a cross-fertilization effect of experiences, knowledge and resources. People carry and spread ideas, messages and community norms from place to place.

**Conscious Community Discussion** – where a community has ample opportunity to think about and sort through its public concerns before taking action. People play an active role in helping decide how the community should act.

**Community Norms for Public Life** – that help guide how people act individually, interact and work together. These norms set the standards and tone for civic engagement.

**A Shared Purpose for the Community** – that sends an explicit message about the community’s aspirations and help reinforce that everyone is headed toward a common goal.

## “Belief arises when people feel they are part of something larger than themselves. Belief is the very basis of any effort at *collective* impact.”

connect their own self-interests with those of others and then transcend them, at times. Belief arises when people feel they are part of something larger than themselves. Belief is the very basis of any effort at *collective* impact.

Impact is of course demonstrated by using data to show proof of progress – things that can be measured, quantified, and presented in charts and graphs. But belief is different. Numbers and facts only go so far in engendering belief. My own experience convinces me that in our collective impact initiatives we must make greater room to address people's search for belief. Amid our commitment to using data, we must be mindful of the basic human desires of people to hold confidence that change is even possible.

I saw this play out strikingly in Las Vegas, which was one of the stops I made in this journey across the country interviewing Americans. There, after a lengthy conversation with about a dozen people, a Las Vegas man suggested that those individuals sitting around the table – or people just like them in his neighborhood – should get together to paint a school. I was incredulous at first: how would painting a school address the systemic education and societal issues that we had discussed? The discussion participants quickly responded: painting the school – or any such effort – could never, alone, bring about the kinds of changes they were seeking; but, they said, painting the school would bring people out from their homes, enable them to set a goal together, work on accomplishing it, figure out how to overcome unexpected obstacles, *and* achieve something together. Moreover, children in that school would see that people care about them. Other individuals in another neighborhood might be triggered to do something with their neighbors.

They argued that by undertaking this effort, their aim was to restore a sense of *trust* in their community, to rebuild meaningful *relationships* at a time when so many people are focused on themselves, and to rekindle a sense of *confidence* that people actually can *achieve* something together.

Now what engenders belief is how we choose to do things in our communities. Consider your own work, for instance, and think about these questions:

- Even amid all the collective impact plans and strategies, is the work structured in ways that literally make room for people (not just leaders) in the community to come together with others – especially those who are different from themselves?
- Are issues and challenges framed in a *public* way or only in terms of expert language, programs, and budgets? In other words, do the issues and challenges reflect a community's *public* knowledge – people's aspirations and concerns and how people experience the issues in their lives?
- To what extent are people engaged as active participants in the work of the community, rather than implying that experts and organizations have all the answers, or that people themselves are mere recipients of others' action?
- Do small actions taken by people count, or are they dismissed as lacking scale and impact – even though action on larger issues may depend upon the trust, relationships and confidence gained through small steps?

People want problems in their communities to be solved, and I do believe they want to see measurable results. But in listening to the drumbeat for impact, we must not miss this other essential note of importance to people: *belief*. As one Las Vegas man said to me<sup>8</sup>:

“Basically, the more people [get out], the more sense of hope they'll get... In their mind, they'll get out, they'll want to help, and when they see that they can get something accomplished together, they're going to be like, ‘Oh, we can get

## “The key *hidden* factor is whether a community moves forward or not is its narrative.”

this accomplished. Let's get more people to work so we get something bigger accomplished. Let's keep on growing from that part on!”

Those concerned with collective impact would be wise to focus on both impact *and* belief. Belief is central to people productively engaging with one another, marshalling resources, and collectively bringing about change. It bears repeating: belief is at the heart of collective impact.

### The Story a Community Tells Itself

One of the five key characteristics of collective impact is ongoing communications. This critical element focuses on the need for good and open communications between and among collaborative partners, and in a broader sense communicating about the challenges a community faces and how to overcome them. These practices are vital. But alone they won't be adequate to address the challenge that *narratives* play in a community.

My own research and observations reveal that the key *hidden* factor in whether a community moves forward or not is its narrative. This is the story the community tells about itself, the story people pass along to their friends, neighbors and colleagues, the very story that insinuates itself into the daily life of a community – and thus drives communities. A community's narrative shapes people's mindsets, attitudes, behaviors, and actions; it affects their sense of possibility. Any effort to bring about community change through a collective impact approach must involve addressing a community's narrative.

Many communities are dogged by an ingrained *negative* narrative. I remember working in Las Vegas, NV where the narrative at the time was,

“I'm for me, and you're for me.” Pursuing a second chance at the American Dream meant people were incessantly focused inward on their own lives, and many leaders and organizations followed a similar path to protect their own turf and success. This narrative made it nearly impossible to bring people and groups together to address common challenges unless, of course, a crisis was at hand; but once the crisis subsided, business as usual returned.

Years ago, when I first started working in Youngstown, OH, the narrative was one of waiting, inaction. People across the community literally said to me and my colleagues in community conversations and in-depth interviews that they were “waiting for a knight on a white horse” or “waiting for a new mayor to come to solve our problems.” That narrative reinforced the sense among people that they must be “saved” by someone or something else – not by their own collective efforts. When I was last in Boise, ID, people from across the state and I talked about how in smaller rural communities, people often say things like, “Oh, this place will never change,” or “We tried that before, it'll never work,” or, “This is just the way it's always going to be.”

When community leaders, funders and others hear about narratives, their instinct is to see them as another public relations or traditional communications challenge. But that is not so! Simply hanging new signs from street lamps about a community's (anticipated or hoped for) comeback, or creating a new community slogan or logo, won't solve this challenge. Nor will simply “telling stories” – as if all that communities must do is increase the number and volume of stories of local heroes, new charity events, or effective programs backed up by impact data on websites, in brochures, and the like. This also is a common misstep among groups and organizations and the army of

“Throughout this article, I’ve been calling for something so basic that in our daily efforts it easily eludes us: collective impact efforts must always have the community in their line of sight.”

consultants they employ.

There’s much I could say about the very nature, tone and structure of what makes a good story regarding a community’s narrative; but here I will limit my comments to say that I think of them as “civic parables.” All parables have a moral or lesson to them, but the moral is embedded in a story. Parables captivate our attention because they are about how people encountered a challenge, how they set out to address it, what happened along the way, how they may have fallen down and figured out how to get back up, and how they moved ahead. Consider for a moment of the civic parable that could be told about the people of Las Vegas painting their local school, and its potential meaning to the larger community to make progress. Indeed, good parables always implicate the reader or listener – much like the example of the Good Samaritan – in that they enable someone to see themselves in the story and see a way to act on its moral or lesson. Through this, they also engender belief about what is possible.

So communities need new “can-do” narratives if they are to move forward. But, as I mentioned earlier about collective impact efforts, these new narratives cannot be imposed on a community. They only *emerge*. They bubble up from within a community as genuine efforts of progress and new ways of working together – true proof points – start to take root and spread. These stories make their way into and through the community by word of mouth and careful communications approaches.

A community narrative takes form only when people can see the connections between and among *different* stories, or civic parables, creating a *believable* track record. What’s more, the narrative must unfold over an arc of time, giving people a sense that a new trajectory is at work.

Indeed, time is a critical dimension here. For people must be able to see where they are, what came before, and the possibilities for the future.

Those interested in giving rise to a new, “can-do” narrative, however, must be prepared for a sharp and long-term competition between the emerging narrative and the community’s ingrained narrative. The latter does not give way easily – but it must.

## Turning Outward to Find a Way Forward

Throughout this article, I’ve been calling for something so basic that in our daily efforts it easily eludes us: collective impact efforts must always have the community in their line of sight. After all, communities are where collective impact takes place. They are where change will unfold. Communities are the context in which impact is sought. They are made up of people with aspirations and concerns and a swirl of underlying conditions, none of which anyone can control or simply impose their will on.

One of the things I’ve learned in working with community leaders, organizations, and funders, is that to pay attention to a community’s civic culture requires making a conscious decision to turn outward toward the community. Even our best intentions don’t always lead us to make this turn. In *The Organization-First Approach: How Programs Crowd Out Community*<sup>9</sup>, my colleague John Creighton and I found that while many leaders and organizations talk about “community,” they are often more focused on their own programs, initiatives and processes. Then, the more concerned they were with their efforts being relevant and significant in the life of a community, the more they turned inward. Our reflex is to do what we already know how

to do: update a strategic plan, better organize partners, adopt a new internal process, even develop a new logo. Each in its own way, and at the appropriate time, these steps can be the right ones to take. But the problem of turning outward toward the community remains. There is no substitute for it.

Taking a collective impact approach has captured the imagination of people who want to bring about positive change in their communities. It resonates deeply with them. It helps people know how to forge successful collaborations. To fulfill the promise of collective impact, we must now turn outward toward our communities and focus on their civic culture. This will help us find the way forward.

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## For more information about this report

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## Join the Collective Impact Forum

The Collective Impact Forum exists to meet the demands of those who are practicing collective impact in the field. While the rewards of collective impact can be great, the work is often demanding. Those who practice it must keep themselves and their teams motivated and moving forward.

The Collective Impact Forum is the place they can find the tools and training that can help them to be successful. It's an expanding network of like-minded individuals coming together from across sectors to share useful experience and knowledge and thereby accelerating the effectiveness, and further adoption, of the collective impact approach as a whole.

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