

Collaborative Leadership Mindset & Skills

Supporting a community-based collaborative is an unusual, difficult role that requires a distinct mindset and specific skills.

The role is unusual because we've all been well trained in organizational behavior. We have much less experience working within collective environments. Our training in how organizations work begins in elementary school and continues into our work life. Organizations, in general, have a clear decision-making process determined by those in control of the organization. In contrast, decisions within a collaborative are made by diverse, independent members and no one "controls" the collaborative.

The absence of control is one of the reasons why supporting a collaborative is so difficult. A collaborative's success is shaped by both what the members work on together **and** how they work together.

How members work together is a primary responsibility of the team of people devoted to supporting the collaborative. In the [collective impact framework](#), this team is called the "backbone." The design, structure, staffing and governance of backbones vary widely, but they all have a similar mission – to help the members of the collaborative move forward together. And they all are dependent on members of the collaborative championing the backbone's efforts to perform that role.

Backbone leaders (those that either staff the backbone or champion its operations) benefit from a specific mindset and skills that help them exercise a distinct type of leadership, collaborative leadership. Collaborative leadership inspires members of the collaborative to change their own behaviors and to act collectively to disrupt the inequitable status quo. Command and control leadership does not work in a collaborative environment because the members are independent of each other. Collaborative leadership can be exercised by anyone within the collaborative, but it is essential that such leadership is exercised by the champions and staff that supports the collaborative.

Collaborative Leadership Mindset

Mindsets are deep, assumed patterns of thinking that shape how we make sense of the world and what we do. Our mindset shapes our beliefs, assumptions and behaviors. Our mindset evolves over time and is influenced by our community's culture, our experiences and what we learn.

Our patterns of thinking are shaped over time and since most of our time is spent in organizational settings, it's not a surprise that many of what might be called an "organizational mindset." Common beliefs of such a mindset are dramatically different from a collaborative mindset.



COLLABORATIVE MINDSET

- We're interconnected
- We can accomplish more together than we can alone
- We need to change our own behavior to achieve our shared goals

The following table may over-generalize the distinctions between these distinct mindsets. However, what is unquestionable is that bringing only an organizational mindset to collective work is a recipe for failure.

| Organizational Mindset | Collaborative Mindset |
|--|---------------------------------------|
| - Decisions made by those with authority | - We make decisions together |
| - Information is shared as needed | - Transparency works |
| - Solutions come from experts | - Solutions emerge from the community |
| - Goals are set by those with power | - We collectively agree on goals |

Some of the beliefs and attitudes of those who excel at exercising collaborative leadership:

- My behaviors and practices contribute to the status quo; change starts with me and/or my organization.
- We have the resources to improve our outcomes.
- Shared power is collaboration.
- Contribution will be recognized; don't take credit.
- Embrace uncertainty and strive for clarity.
- Tensions are inherent; we work to balance and leverage them, not solve them.
- Learning and adapting are continuous.

A collaborative mindset is often referred to as a [system mindset](#) or a [network mindset](#), because it allows us to better see and understand the interconnections among diverse players and helps us focus on how our connectedness shapes outcomes in our community.

Collaborative Leadership Skills

This mindset makes it easier to strengthen five critical skills regularly used in the exercise of collaborative leadership:

- **Build Trust:** Collaboration moves at the speed of trust so the backbone team and champions act and communicate in ways that strengthen trust with and among the members.
- **Facilitation:** Helping diverse players move forward together.
- **Understand Context:** Understanding and helping the members adapt to outside forces, as well as the diverse priorities, motivations and constraints of the members.
- **Inquiry:** Asking new compelling questions and listening deeply to the answers that emerge.
- **Evaluation:** Assessing and responding to how well the diverse players are interacting with the backbone and each other.



Build Trust

Collaborations move at the speed of trust. Trust is critical to a collaborative in part because other currencies that shape our behavior – such as authority or financial incentives – in organizational settings have much less influence in a collaborative. Rare is the individual willing to volunteer to go on a long, arduous journey with those they don't trust.

A colleague observed that trust is like the air we breathe. We don't notice it until it's polluted. As Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "Our distrust is very expensive." In the [Speed of Trust](#), author Stephen M.R. Covey, highlights the dividends of operating in a high-trust environment and the tax imposed by operating in a low-trust environment.

Trust has no memory. It must be built every day. Broken trust, in contrast, can last forever unless we work to rebuild trust.

To build trust, we need to think deeply about the elements of trust and what we can do to be more trustworthy.

The Trust Equation, developed by the authors of [The Trusted Advisor](#), helps us to better understand the elements of trust.

THE TRUST EQUATION

$$\begin{array}{c} \leftarrow (\text{CREDIBILITY}) + (\text{RELIABILITY}) + (\text{INTIMACY}) \\ \hline (\text{SELF-ORIENTATION}) \rightarrow \\ \hline = \text{TRUSTWORTHINESS} \end{array}$$

- **Credibility:** Relates to our words and is revealed in our credentials and our presence.
- **Reliability:** Relates to our actions and is revealed by keeping our promises.
- **Intimacy:** Relates to our emotions and is revealed by how comfortable others are working with us.
- **Self-Orientation:** Relates to our caring and is revealed in whether our focus is on ourselves or on the needs of others.

All four elements of the trust equation are important. Yet, most of us value one element more than another, particularly early in our relationships. If we want to build trust with another, we need to be in tune with what elements are most valued by the person with whom we want to build trust. For example, I worked with a leader in a collaborative who was desperate to build trust with the head of a foundation that needed to be more deeply engaged in the collaborative for it to be successful. The leader knew that addressing poverty was a key priority of the foundation head. The leader most valued credibility, so he began to regularly share new reports on poverty with the foundation executive. He wanted to show that he knew a lot about poverty. However, the foundation leader valued self-

Build Trust



orientation more than credibility. She wanted to know that my colleague cared about the poor, not that he knew more about them than anyone else.

Until he showed he cared (or had a low self-orientation), she wouldn't fully trust him and his ideas related to poverty.

Large group meetings are common in a collaborative, but such meetings aren't where trust is built. Trust is built one-to-one. Backbone staff and champions of a collaborative take the time to meet one-to-one with members to understand their current level of trust and to assess what it will take to build more trust. Strong bonds of trust can spread quickly through a group, but they need to start at the one-to-one level. Being honest about our own trustworthiness is an important step in building our trust building skills.

Facilitation

The origin of the work "facilitate" is the Latin adjective, "facilis," meaning easy. Skilled facilitation makes it easier for diverse members of a community collaborative to make decisions and move forward together.

[Facilitating Breakthrough](#), by Adam Kahane, is an outstanding primer on how facilitation helps diverse groups move forward together.

Facilitation



Kahane highlights how backbone leaders continuously help the members of a collaborative to answer the following five questions:

1. How do we see our situation?
2. How do we define success?
3. How do we get from here to there?
4. How do we decide who does what?
5. How do we understand our role?

These questions should be asked of the backbone, individual members of the collaborative and the entire collaborative. They need to be asked often and the answers need to be well shared and understood.

Backbone staff often struggle with how to lead members because they have no authority over them. Priya Parker, in her wonderful book [The Art of Gathering](#), introduces the concept of generous authority and describes it as the power granted by those convened to the convener. "A gathering run on generous authority is run with a strong, confident hand, but it is run selflessly, for the sake of the others," she writes. This encapsulates the role and the approach that should be taken by a backbone leader. By purposefully asking the facilitators five questions, the backbone leader reinforces that they are serving the members of the collaborative and continue to be granted generous authority.

Meetings are an essential part of the collaboration journey. Each meeting should have a clear purpose and objectives, and an agenda that helps the participants achieve that objective. Backbone leaders use their facilitation skills to prepare members for a meeting, guide them through the meeting and then follow up with them to assure they fulfill the commitments made at the meeting.

Understand Context

Context is defined as the “interrelated conditions in which something exists” and in a cross-sector collaborative the “interrelated conditions” are numerous and complex. They include the relationships among members and stakeholders, conditions within the civic system that hold the status quo in place and external forces that shape outcomes (such as global economic forces). Members within a collaborative are often focused on the context within their own organization. Staff that supports the collaborative needs to understand as much of the context as possible and then help the members understand and adapt based on the context.

Perhaps the most important mathematical equation in collaborative work is:

Mechanism X Context = Outcome

The term “mechanism” refers to the strategy, initiative or program that is implemented. It is all too common that we try to apply a mechanism that worked in another community within our own. This approach often fails because the context differs from one community to the next.

The priorities, motivations and constraints (PMC for short) of the individual members of a collaborative make up part of the context that needs to be understood. While the members share a commitment to collaborative’s goal, their individual rationale for making that commitment can vary greatly. For example, a company may be motivated to participate in a workforce collaborative to make their business more profitable by increasing the quality of the talent pool. A neighborhood activist may be motivated by the desire to see residents lifted out of poverty. A thriving business is the priority of the business owner. A thriving neighborhood is the priority of the activist. They business owner may be constrained by the need to focus on new product development or other business issues. The neighborhood activist may be constrained by the lack of capacity to support residents.

Backbone staff and other champions of the collaborative are well served if they use a mix of observation and inquiry to identify and verify the PMC of each partner. Key questions to explore with members include:

Priorities: What is important to the partner? What priority needs to be met to increase their engagement?

Motivation: What factors motivate the partner to participate?

Constraints: What forces – real and perceived – limit a partner’s ability to engage more and assume more responsibility with the collaborative?

In addition to understanding the individual perspectives of each member, the backbone staff needs to develop a good understanding of the context shaping the overall civic system(s) in which they are working. This element of the skill is often known as “systems thinking,” and collaborative work is often referred to as “system change.”

Understand Context



The term “system” has multiple, conflicting meanings that can cause confusion. We often associate a “system” with an organized plan or procedure, such as: “The coach uses a system to teach the team how to play defense.” However, “system” also means “a combination of things or parts forming a complex whole.” A “civic system” is a combination of organizations, institutions, individuals and programs that share the purpose of addressing a community priority. Examples of “civic systems” include education, economic development, public health and public safety.

Characteristics of civic systems include:

- None of the players in the system operate in isolation
- The players have no or limited authority over each other, yet there are power dynamics that influence their individual and collective behaviors
- Systems don’t have goals; they do have outcomes
- Their boundaries are porous and flexible
- No single entity, or small group of entities, controls the system’s outcomes
- Outcomes are shaped by the conditions within the system.

Essential questions that can help backbone leaders understand the context of the systems they are working within include:

- What are the outcomes of the system?
- What are the conditions that generate those outcomes?

The international consulting firm [FSG identified six types of conditions](#) that shape the outcomes of a system:

1. Policies: Government, institutional and organizational rules, regulations, and priorities that guide an entity’s own and others’ actions.

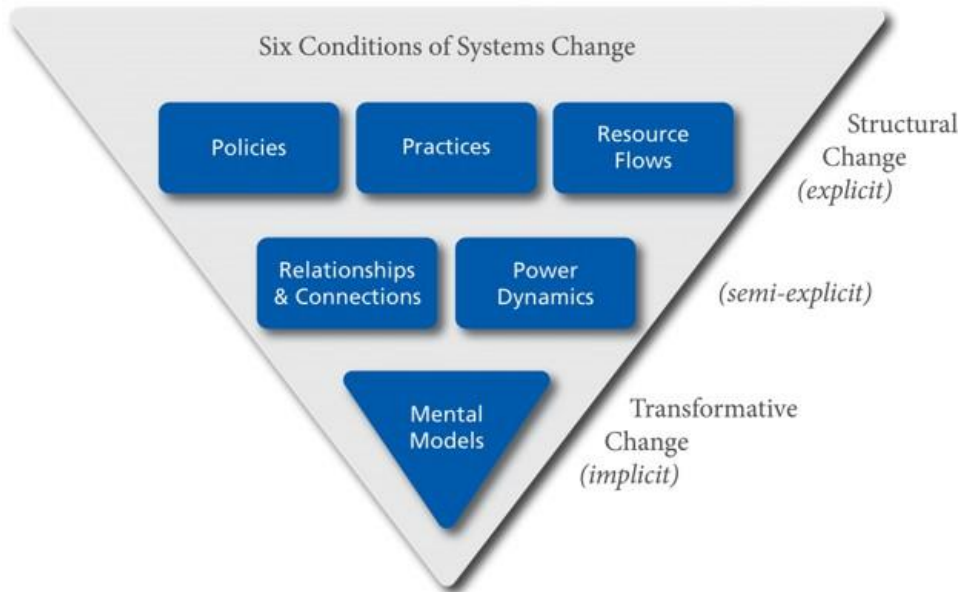
2. Practices: Activities of organizations, institutions and programs working to improve outcomes within the civic system. Includes the procedures, guidelines, or informal shared habits that comprise the work of each entity within the system.

3. Resource Flows: How money, people, knowledge, information, and other assets such as infrastructure are allocated and distributed.

4. Relationships & Connections: Quality of the connections and communication occurring among players in the system, especially among those with different roles, priorities, motivations, constraints and experiences.

5. Power Dynamics: The distribution of decision-making power, authority, and both formal and informal influence among the players.

6. Mental Models: Habits of thought—deeply held beliefs, assumptions and taken-for-granted ways of operating that influence how we think, what we do, and how we communicate.



Source: FSG

Developing a shared understanding of the context that is shaping the system’s performance is a critical step toward co-creating strategies and initiatives to improve that performance.

Inquiry

Civic collaboratives often start when a small group of individuals begin to ask new questions, such as:

- What would it take for all residents to have access to affordable broadband services?
- How would we feel if all our residents were prepared for high-demand careers?
- What if all parents had the support needed to prepare their children to succeed in kindergarten?

Inquiry



Inquiry – asking new, compelling questions and listening deeply to the answers generated – helps us to understand how we and others see the world, why we see it that way and how we might transform it. New, compelling questions and the answers they generate allow us to challenge our assumptions, deepen our understanding, explore new possibilities, and imagine a different future.

New, compelling questions stand in contrast to old, rotten questions that fuel too many conversations and efforts. Old questions reinforce the status quo, assign blame and affirm our assumptions. Every community is home to a host of such questions. Backbone staff and champions of collaboratives help members in collaboratives to recognize and reject old questions and help them see how the power of new, compelling questions can propel them through the collaboration cycle and toward desired outcomes.

One way to help the members to ask new, compelling questions is to help them surface and then edit the old rotten questions. For example, two old questions that fueled debate around entrepreneurship in one community were:

“Why aren’t there any entrepreneurs in our community with an idea worthy of my venture investment?” was a question raised repeatedly by would-be venture capitalists.

“Why aren’t there more investors in our community willing to risk their capital on my great new idea?” was the question asked by would-be entrepreneurs confident their business was on the verge of being the next Google.

Those questions fueled unhealthy debate for years. The community shifted from debate to dialogue when champions of a collaborative effort to transform the entrepreneurial environment started to ask, “What would it take to attract more proven venture capitalists to our community? And what would it take to support our most promising entrepreneurs?” The answers to those questions helped transform the community’s entrepreneurial environment.

Even within communities eager for change, asking such questions is risky business. Within every system are those that benefit from the status quo. They will fight against transformation, no matter the level of inequity or despair being generated by the system. Others will simply reject new questions because the uncertainty of transformation is less desirable than the familiar, yet disappointing status quo. Be aware of the risks, but have faith in the power of inquiry.

[David Peter Stroh](#), in his vital book [Systems Thinking for Social Change](#), provides us with a critical, foundational question that can help collaboratives deepen their understanding of the status quo: “Why, despite all of our best efforts, have we been unable to generate the results we desire from this system?”

When members explore this question, they should start with examining their own role in the system. “How do my actions and/or my organization’s actions contribute to the inequitable/undesirable results of the system?” Too often champions of community change assume that others need to change their behavior. To transform systems, everyone in the system needs to change.

The second half of inquiry is listening deeply to the answers that emerge from asking compelling questions. Ernest Hemingway had a wonderful observation about listening. He said:

“When people talk, listen completely. Most people never listen.”

Indeed, in today’s polarized environment it can seem that everyone is so eager to be heard that no one is listening. In a collaborative environment we need to listen deeply. To listen deeply is to listen for content (what are the ideas, facts and concepts that are being expressed) and to listen with empathy. Listening with empathy means we listen to understand rather than to judge or fix.

Empathetic listening builds trust and it opens space for creativity and exploration of a future distinct from the present.

We can assess how well we are listening – and helping others to listen – during our meetings by observing how others are speaking. People that feel the need to repeat themselves do not feel heard. People that feel heard, in general, become less agitated, calmer and even more willing to share their feelings and perspectives. When we listen, we are more likely embed what we hear into the solutions

that are developed. And when people see that their perspectives shaped the solution, they are more likely to support and advance that solution. As Margaret Wheatley observed: “People support what they create.”

Evaluation

How members work together is just as important as *what* they work on together, so it is important that we have the skills and tools to evaluate the *how* and the *what*. [Results based accountability](#) and other frameworks helps collaboratives evaluate the outcomes, or the *what*, of a collaborative. It may take months (or longer) for collaboratives to produce meaningful outcomes, but shifts in how the members of the collaborative work together happen very quickly. And those changes – such as members sharing and leveraging resources – can help build momentum and support for more work on the *what*.

Tracking behavior and practice changes in partner requires backbone staff to closely observe members and, often, help members recognize how they’ve changed and attribute that change to what they are learning and doing within the collaborative.

Three key changes should be tracked within a collaborative:

- **Participation:** This is lowest value change, but the most easily tracked. Staff can create and maintain a basic spreadsheet to track partner attendance and participation at different meetings convened by the collaborative. There are many ways that a members participation can be tracked, including counting how many times each partner speaks, asks a question of others, proposes a topic for exploration, offers a solution. Staff can include qualitative assessments of whether the members participation is focused more on the shared goals of the collaborative or on the partner’s parochial interests.
- **Commitment:** Plenty of members can participate in a collaborative without committing to its work. Commitment is reflected in how a partner has aligned its own work to advance the collaborative’s shared goals. This alignment can include allocation of resources to support the work of the collaborative, incorporating the collaborative’s goals or metrics into its own strategic plan, and publicly advocating for or supporting the work of the collaborative.
- **Trust:** Collaborations move at the speed of trust. To move more quickly through the collaboration cycle, trust needs to continuously build among the members. There is overlap between measuring commitment and trust. For example, a members commitment of resources to the work of a collaborative can also be viewed of an expression of trust. A deeper expression of trust would be when the partner continues to commit resources even after the collaborative failed to achieve a goal. Collaboratives often have a “honeymoon” period where members are willing to commit to the work, but the true level of trust members have in each other is how they persist when the going gets tough. Trust can also be assessed through interviews and surveys of members. While asking members to self-report has its own set of challenges, it can provide support staff with information on how a partner’s trust levels with the members, the collaborative and the backbone have shifted over time.

Evaluation

