

# Getting Good at the Unusual

Leading and supporting community collaboratives to achieve enduring, positive change

*“We’re good at launching community collaboratives, but we’re not very good at sustaining them.”* – CEO of a community-based foundation

The good news for that CEO, perhaps, is his community is not alone. Most communities struggle with sustaining collaboratives. Local newspaper archives are full of stories celebrating the launch of a new collective effort to end homelessness, increase educational attainment, lower infant mortality or any number of other civic priorities. Much rarer is the story celebrating a collaboratives long-term success. Our communities struggle to sustain effective collaboratives because they are so different from traditional organizations. We are well trained in how traditional organizations are designed, governed and behave because we were educated by them, and we work for them.

Collaboratives formed to address civic priorities in a community are unusual. They are supported by an unusual entity. They are led by an unusual board. And they demand unusual behaviors. To collaborate well – and to achieve the change we want in our communities – we need to get good at the unusual.

## What makes a community collaborative unusual?

Differences between Organizations and Community Collaboratives		
	Organization	Collaborative
<b>Made up by</b>	Employees	Independent, yet interdependent partners
<b>Decision-making</b>	Hierarchical	Shared
<b>Lines of Authority</b>	Clear	None
<b>Practices &amp; Procedures</b>	Clear and Understood	Evolving
<b>Governance</b>	Board of Directors	Various options

Community collaboratives are collective efforts to address a civic priority, such as education, housing, economic development or public health. They are made up of organizations, institutions and individuals in a community that agree to work together to achieve shared goals. They are different from traditional organizations because they don’t have a hierarchical structure. There is no “chief executive” of a collaborative that has the authority to tell the partners what to do. Instead, the partners make decisions together, coordinate their respective efforts and encourage others to join their effort to achieve shared goals.

Indeed, the unusual nature of collaboratives begins with their formation. When an organization is created, it is generally created by an individual or a small group of individuals who agree that they want to create an entity to achieve a goal. Creating an organization is a voluntary, unilateral act.

In contrast, creating a collaborative is a multilateral act – it requires the agreement and commitment of multiple parties. Many forces may lead to the formation of a collaborative. Common catalysts are public policy and funding.

For example, a state government that funds a wide variety of early childhood programs – ranging from early childhood education centers to maternal home-visits -- may require organizations and agencies that receive state funding to collaborate to achieve shared goals. Or a group of philanthropic funders that support a variety of food-security programs in a community – ranging from food pantries to soup kitchens – may make their funding contingent on the programs forming a collaborative to improve outcomes.

Whether partners arrive at the collaborative “table” because they’re required to, incentivized to or simply desire to work with others to achieve greater outcomes, they need to learn to work well with others.

## Organizing a Collaborative

To collaborate well, the partners need to both organize themselves and they need help to stay organized.

The first step to organizing themselves is to create a way to make decisions together. Most collaboratives start with a few partners and grow over time. While it is possible to have every partner participate in every decision – ranging from what the partners call their collaborative to what are their shared goals – as the number of partners grows it is more common that a small, but diverse group of partners are entrusted with the responsibility of making decisions.

This small group sometimes is referred to as a Steering Committee. If the partners create a separate entity to support their collaborative, it may be called a board of directors. Regardless of its name, the individuals who serve on such a body are well served if they view themselves as a “trustee” of the collaborative because they are acting on behalf of the overall community. They are entrusted with the unusual role of leading a collective effort.

Leading a collective effort is very demanding and trustees generally don’t have the time to perform all the roles and functions needed to support a collective effort. That is why one of the first acts of the trustees is to secure staff that can support the collaborative. This support staff is often called the “backbone.”

## The Unusual Backbone

The backbone facilitates the interactions of diverse partners (*how* they work together) and coordinates the work of the partners (*what* they work on together). To support the collaborative, backbones perform the following functions:

- **Shared Vision & Goals:** Support partners as they create, revise and sustain a shared vision and goals for their collaborative.
- **Partner Engagement:** Engage diverse individuals and organizations to build their commitment to co-creating initiatives that achieve the shared goals.

- **Collective Decision-Making:** Work with partners to develop and manage procedures, practices and structures that enable collective decisions.
- **Shared Measurement & Learning:** Measure, synthesize and share compelling data to help the partners deepen their understanding of the issues they are addressing, as well as data that helps the partners understand the progress of their individual and collective efforts. The staff shares this data in ways that help partners and others to challenge their assumptions, adapt and measure progress toward shared goals.
- **Catalyze, Coordinate and Align Activities:** Facilitate meetings and support partners as they co-create initiatives and coordinate activities to achieve shared goals.
- **Growth:** Advocate for policies, funding and public support that enhance the collective effort, as well as the efforts of individual partners.

As one backbone leader recently shared: “The ‘backbone’ supports the partners, it doesn’t place demands on the partners.”

Backbone staff act as an unusual mix of traffic cop, air traffic controller, cheerleader and counselor as they support partners and interact with other stakeholders. Ideally, the partners all recognize and value the many roles the backbone plays to support their collective efforts.

## The Unusual Board

The ability of the backbone to support and influence the partners is shaped, in large measure, by the commitment and leadership exercised by the trustees overseeing the collaborative.

The trustees guiding the collaborative also oversee the operations of the backbone. This dual role of overseeing the operations of a “backbone” and the collaborative is not always well understood by trustees, in part because most of the people chosen to oversee a collaborative already serve on boards of traditional organizations. Trustees bring with them assumptions that the collaborative board will be like the boards of other entities. Boards of traditional entities are primarily responsible for setting strategy, hiring executive leadership and acting as fiduciaries. While such board roles can be demanding, they are generally limited. In the words of one executive who has served on multiple boards, board members are accustomed to operating on “cruise control.”

Collaboratives led by trustees operating on cruise control end up in the ditch.

Trustees need to use their power, authority and influence if the backbone and the collaborative are to succeed. Trustees of collaboratives have five primary responsibilities:

- **Strategy:** Approve and advance the purpose and goals of the collaborative.
- **Backbone Oversight:** Establish fiscal and operational processes and procedures, including hiring staff leadership, to assure effective, efficient operations of the backbone.
- **Backbone Support:** The trustees are responsible for assuring the backbone has strong community support, including sufficient financial resources. Trustees engage with partners and other stakeholders in the collaborative to assure they understand, appreciate and support its unusual roles.
- **Organizational Alignment:** Each trustee has their own individual or organizational power. To support the backbone and the collaborative, they use that power and influence to align their

own and/or their organization's efforts to both support the work of the backbone and achieve the collaborative's goals. For example, a trustee will assure their organization is sharing data with the backbone to support shared measurement.

- **Systemic Change:** Each trustee has influence within the community and they use that influence to catalyze changes in programs, funding flows, policies, relationships and mental models that advance the goals of the collaborative. For example, trustees can use their individual and collective influence to advocate for public policy and funding changes that will help achieve the collaborative's goals.

It is the final three roles, backbone support, organizational alignment and systemic change, that elevate the responsibilities of trustees to a point where cruise control doesn't work.

## Backbone Support

With a traditional non-profit organization, it is not uncommon for board members to contribute funds to the organization and to help the organization raise funds from others. Trustees of collaboratives may well be asked to do both of those. But they need to do much more. Trustees need to champion the work of the backbone in the community. Again, backbones are unusual entities that are poorly understood in the community. For example, the backbone for a collaborative formed to elevate educational attainment in a community will work to coordinate various education initiatives, but it may not directly work with students. As the former leader of such a collaborative frequently told confused audiences, "We don't work with students, we work with those who work with students." And "those who work with students," can include everyone from educators to after-school-time service providers to social workers to parents.

The backbone cannot force "those who work with students" to align their efforts. But if a diverse group of respected leaders in the community – such as the trustees of the collaborative – encourage them to do so, they will be more likely to engage. Recently a trustee with an education collaborative shared that he wasn't sure why he was a trustee. His sphere of influence was in the business community, not the education community. He was treating the collaborative as a traditional board – one of many he served on. He did not understand that for the collaborative to succeed, it needed to be well understood and supported by the business community. And by publicly expressing and demonstrating his support of the collaborative, he could encourage businesses and others to engage with the backbone in constructive ways.

## Organizational Alignment

Improving outcomes on wicked, persistent community challenges – such as educational attainment, housing security, economic prosperity, public health – requires behavior change. We cannot improve outcomes if we're all doing what we were doing. And those with the most power and authority generally need to change the most.

For example, the government official responsible for overseeing foster children in a community is a trustee of a collaborative addressing homelessness among youth and young adults. Because young adults who age out of foster care often struggle with housing, the official had a deep understanding of the issue and also had influence over relevant policies and practices within her agency. If she were on cruise control, she would have been content to share her wisdom with other trustees. But as an

engaged trustee, she took the information she learned through serving on the board back to her agency and changed its policies and practices to reduce youth homelessness in the community.

Every trustee of a collaborative should be able to articulate how they are altering their individual or their organization's behavior to advance the shared goals of the collaborative.

## Systemic Change

The most ambitious cross-sector collaboratives aspire for community transformation. For example, a food security collaborative doesn't strive to feed more hungry residents, it aspires to change the community's policies, practices, funding flows, relationships, power dynamics and mental models so that there are few hungry people.

That level of change is known as system change. System change disrupts the forces that hold the status quo in place.

Disrupting the status quo requires those with power and authority to change their own behavior (organizational alignment), but also to encourage others to change their behavior. The foster care leader referenced earlier, talked publicly about the changes her agency made in policies and practices. She acknowledged how past policies and practices contributed to the inequitable status quo. Her willingness to both change her agency's own behavior and to talk about it, inspired housing agencies and social service agencies to alter their behavior, as well. In another example, a leader of a foundation known for being unwilling to provide multi-year, general operating support, not only persuaded her foundation to change its funding guidelines to support a collaborative working on literacy, she encouraged other funders to do the same.

That is not cruise control. Trustees need to use their influence with other individuals, organizations and institutions to alter the status quo. That is how transformation occurs. And that is a responsibility of the trustees of a community collaborative.

## Conclusion

The success of community collaboratives is greatly influenced by the leadership exercised by the trustees who oversee both the collaborative and the backbone that supports it. Trustees must exercise a high-level of active, engaged leadership to fulfill their unusual responsibilities and, most importantly, to catalyze the transformation of their community.