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Measuring Trust Within Your Collaboration

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Collaboration moves at the speed of trust. Without trust, collaborators won't:

- Share data
- Change their behavior
- Align efforts
- Assume responsibility
- Support each other.

Without trust, players in a collaboration will only meet. They use those meetings to protect turf, assign blame and take credit. At best, such collaborations issue reports that sit on shelves. This isn't collaboration, it is **coblaboration**.

When trust is high among collaborators, shifts are made within all six of [FSG's conditions for system change](#). Collaborations built on trust generate new policies, programs and funding flows. Building trust shifts relationships, alters the power dynamic and helps partners adopt the mindset needed to drive system change. *How* we work together matters as much as *what* we work on together.

Trust shapes how we work together. Trust can be built. Trust can be measured. The following addresses ways to measure trust within a collaboration.

Trust can be measured through confidential surveys, as well as by tracking partner commitment and participation.

Partners in a collaboration should be asked regularly (at least twice a year) via an online, confidential survey if they trust the other partners in the collaboration, as well as the principals responsible for coordinating and facilitating the collaboration process (the backbone staff under the collective impact framework). Multiple questions can be asked to assess the level of trust, including:

- Do you trust the other partners to act in ways that advance the collaboration's goals?
- Do you expect partners will do what's best for their organization even if it hurts the collaboration?
- Do partners take the time and effort to understand what is important to you and/or your organization?
- Does the backbone seek my input before making decisions?

- Do you have confidence in the collaboration’s decision-making process?

A third party should conduct the survey, synthesize the results and share them with backbone and the partners.

In addition to asking questions explicitly about the level of trust, surveys can be used to help measure a partner’s commitment to the collaboration. Commitment is an indicator of trust. For example, it is unlikely that an organization will commit funds to support collaboration capacity if they don’t trust their partners. Two ways to measure partner commitment are:

- Resources committed, with dollars invested being the easiest to measure and in-kind services being more difficult, but possible.
- Policy, program or funding changes. We can track what individual partners are doing differently as a result of engaging in the collaboration. For example, a foundation that stops funding a long-term grantee because data developed by the collaboration showed that grantee wasn’t producing positive results is a foundation that trusts the collaboration.

Partners can be asked to identify changes in their own policies, programs and funding through surveys. Also, the backbone staff can track changes that they observe and later vet them with partners. Collaborations with high trust among partners will generate meaningful, measurable changes in partner behavior and practice. Important changes often will occur within the first few months of a collaboration and if the changes aren’t tracked from the beginning they may be forgotten. “What’s different?” is an important question to ask often of partners. By capturing these changes, the collaboration can demonstrate that it is doing more than “just meeting” and build momentum to more substantive changes.

Participation in the collaboration process is another way to measure trust. Many participants in a collaboration will simply stop attending if they don’t trust the process. Or an organization will send a staff member with no authority or influence to simply monitor and report back. Participation is the weakest measure of trust, but it can still be helpful. For example, if a participant begins to actively engage with others it may be a sign of growing trust. Surveys, self-reporting mechanisms and staff observation can track participation by members of a collaboration.

As a collaboration matures, there are more ways to measure its overall health than tracking trust, commitment and participation. [This report](#), which looks at the performance of 25 collaborations using the collective impact framework, provides additional perspective on how to measure and assess the health of a collaboration.

Collaborations should use data to measure both *how* partners work together and *what results* are generated by their working together. Measuring how well partners work together begins with measuring trust.