



Can “collective impact” help your nonprofit accomplish more?

Not-for-profits increasingly are taking on big issues, such as global warming and economic development. Some are turning to a relatively new approach known as “collective impact.” Such cross-sector coordination may help nonprofits achieve greater change than isolated interventions by individual groups.

More than collaboration

Collective impact is more than just collaboration. Its originators describe it as the commitment of important players from different sectors to a common agenda for solving a specific social problem. Players include nonprofits, government, businesses and communities.

For example, a few years ago, the Hampton Roads Community Foundation in Southeast Virginia initiated a regionwide process to improve early care and education programs. Almost 100 stakeholders planned a program that would unite previously disparate efforts and participants. Since then, the “Minus 9 to 5” initiative has been able to align actions across five cities in Virginia.

5 conditions

Collective impact adherents typically cite five prerequisites necessary to produce successful initiatives:

1. **Common agenda.** All participants must have a shared vision for change based on a common understanding of the problem. Everyone doesn’t need to agree on every facet of the problem. But differences of opinion about the problem — and goals for addressing it — must be resolved to prevent division.

2. **Shared measurement systems.** A shared agenda will be of little value unless participants agree on how success will be measured and reported. All participants must take the same approach to data collection and metrics to foster accountability and facilitate information sharing.
3. **Mutually reinforcing activities.** Although collective impact depends on stakeholders working together, that doesn't mean they all must do the same thing. Each participant should be encouraged to harness its strengths in a way that supports and coordinates with other participants.
4. **Continuous communication.** Perhaps *the* biggest challenge to collective impact is the need for trust among stakeholders. Trust generally develops over time and across interactions. So, the most effective initiatives keep the lines of communication open and encourage stakeholders to meet in person regularly.
5. **Backbone support organizations.** Collective impact requires a separate organization with its own infrastructure to provide the project's "backbone." This includes a dedicated staff to plan, manage and support the organization.

Commitment required

Collective impact projects can succeed in ways that simply aren't available to individual organizations — or even joint ventures. But the process is complicated and time-consuming. Make sure you know what you're getting into before signing on to such an initiative.