

Backbone Organization or Backbone Function?

 strivetogether.org/blog/2013/12/backbone-organization-or-backbone-function/

Jeff Edmondson

As communities across the country engage in collective impact generally and the work of building cradle to career civic infrastructure specifically, one of the first issues that always comes up is stress and tension around the selection of a “backbone organization.” This is a core component of the work that Kania and Kramer lifted up in the original [Stanford Social Innovation Review article](#). While we could not agree more that there is a need for the concept that is described, the power struggles that often occur among the various entities that want to play this role often get in the way of progress and can derail an effort early on as historical issues of turf quickly emerge.

We are learning that the concept of a single backbone organization may very well be flawed. This has become clear as we worked with an array of different communities looking to navigate the often contentious discussions around where the organization should land. Most of time, the different organizations engaged in these discussions locally bring very different skills, interests, and competencies to the table. Sometimes they have a unique leader who could play the central executive director or “cat herder” role effectively. Others, they have the capacity to do the critical data analytics. Still other times they may really be interested in moving one or two outcomes, say early childhood and early grade reading alone, not the entire continuum of outcomes.

This has led us to the conclusion that what is likely needed is a “backbone function” not a “backbone organization.” This may simply sound like semantics, but it leads to a completely different way to approaching the staffing of collective impact work. This shift helps us to see that this work is not about a central power center that gets created in a traditional hierarchical paradigm, but instead is about a set of shared roles that need to be played as we look to connect the dots instead of recreate the wheel. These roles, which simply have to be played by a host of organizations since no one new organization can lead collective impact work alone, include:

- Ensuring there is a person who wakes up thinking about how best to act as a servant leader to a broad partnership to achieve a collective goal and move specific outcomes every day.
- A core data analytics role that includes the development of an annual dashboard on critical community level outcomes and comprehensive data management systems, but even more importantly the building of local capacity to use data on a regular basis.
- Facilitation of practitioners looking to take what they are learning from the analysis of local data to change how they serve their target population each and every day, building comprehensive action plans around what works to move a specific outcomes
- Community mobilization work to get a diverse array of voices engaged in this work, building shared ownership for improvement and supporting practices that get results.
- Convening investors so they begin to communicate about how to put resources behind what works and consider ways to incent the use of data for continuous improvement.

There are certainly other roles that emerge over time and need to be played, but this is a start. And if we see that a host of organizations working in concert all can contribute to the overall backbone function any community needs to have played, it can and should reduce some of the power struggles that have emerged around this important piece of the work.

We have learned one additional lesson that deserves to be mentioned. It is helpful, especially early in this work, to have all the key staff located in the same place even if they come from different organizations. The importance of these staff sharing what they are learning on a daily basis, helps them practice the type of continuous improvement they are looking to promote across community partners. The simple reality is there will be a need a fiscal agent and

they have to sit somewhere. We recommend communities not create a new 501c3 to house the staff since this work is primarily about leverage existing resources. We term wherever they land as the “anchor entity”, but whatever it is called it need not cause conflict since it should become clear very quickly that there is joint ownership for the backbone function as a whole.

At our recent convening we had an outstanding plenary session with stories on how sites have “[failed forward](#)”. This feels like an important example of us failing forward, learning and adapting at the national level, just as local leaders do this every day on-the-ground to achieve better results for children and families. What do you think?

About [Jeff Edmondson](#)

Jeff Edmondson is the Managing Director of StriveTogether, a subsidiary of KnowledgeWorks. StriveTogether is a national cradle-to-career initiative that brings together leaders in Pre-K-12 schools, higher education, business and industry, community organizations, government leaders, parents and other stakeholders who are committed to helping children succeed from birth through careers.



[Facebook](#) • [Twitter](#) • [Google](#) • [Youtube](#) •