

Building the Backbone

Thank You...

A special thanks to all of the communities who shared their stories and examples in this toolkit:

- Big Goal Collaborative
- The Commit! Partnership
- Every Hand Joined
- Learn to Earn
- Mission: Graduate
- Raise DC
- Spartanburg Academic Movement
- Summit Education Initiative
- The Road Map Project

We are working collectively to build the knowledge and expertise in this field and we couldn't do this without you!

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Robert Wood Johnson Foundation



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Context for Building Your Backbone

StriveTogether is redefining the way it fundamentally thinks about partnership structures. As the diversity of partnerships within the Network began to expand, it became clear that a single anchor is not the only way to fulfill the backbone functions of a cradle to career partnership. StriveTogether now thinks of the backbone of a partnership not as one single entity, but as a function, in which various partners, organizations, or committees can play a role in fulfilling. Viewing the 'backbone' as a function rather than an entity, allows more flexibility in the way a specific community supports the operational work of a partnership.

Regardless of how a partnership is structured, it is important to understand that authority and power cannot solely lie within one organization or partner; decision-making within the partnership must incorporate the multiple people or organizations that have a say in the decision making process and grant veto power to many. This style of leadership is much more conducive to building a sustainable partnership.

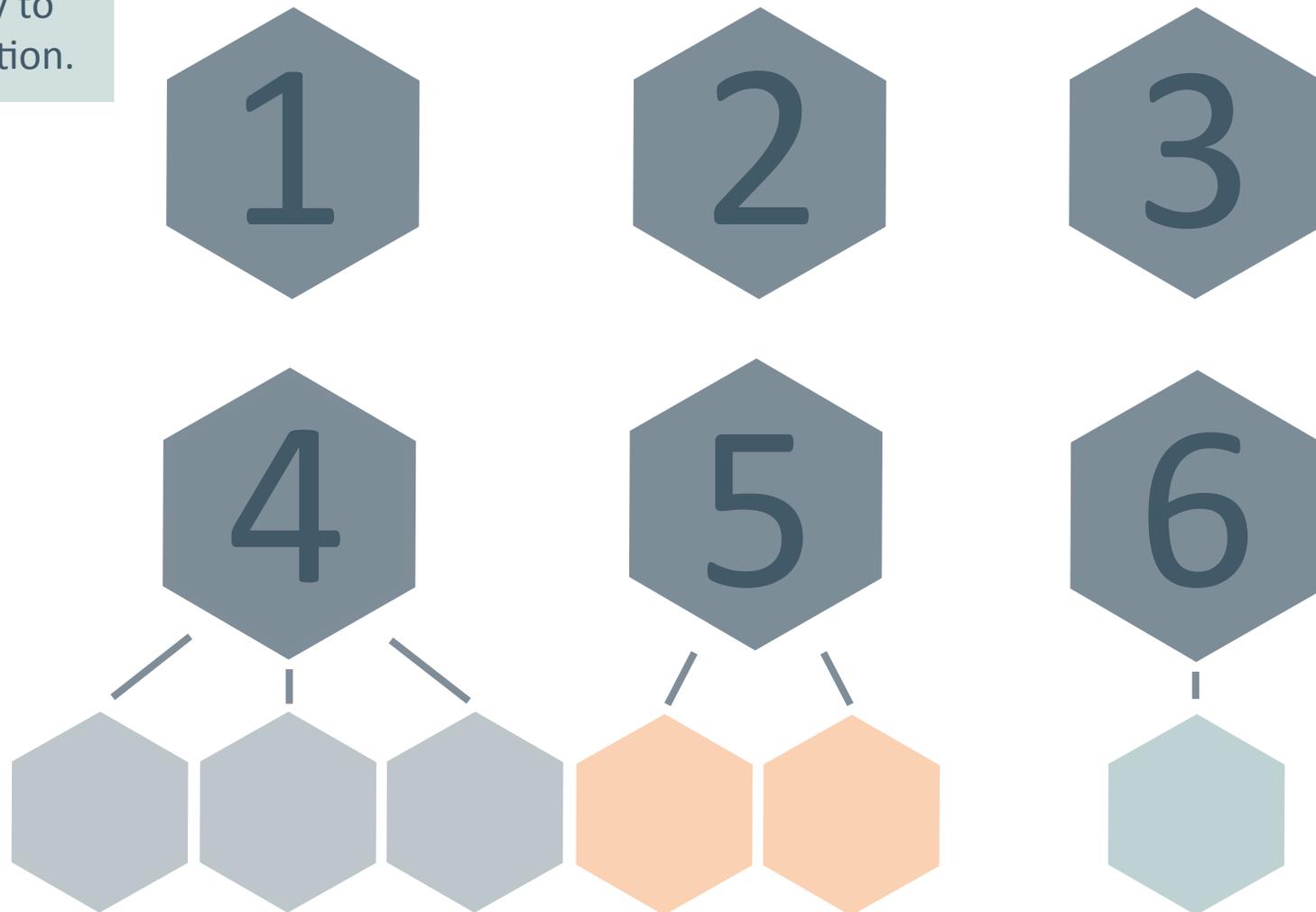


Building the Backbone

What's in the Toolkit?



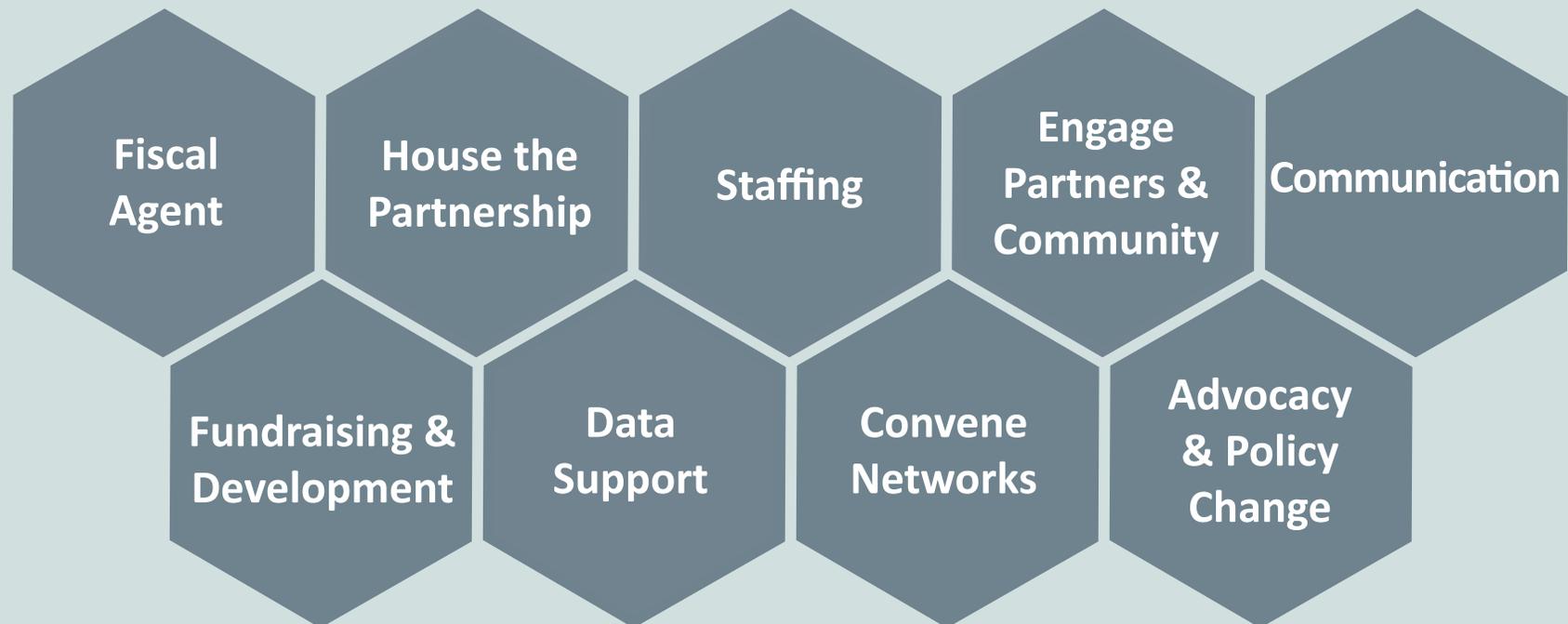
Click on a topic area to navigate directly to that section.



What is a Backbone?

The backbone of a partnership is not one single entity, but a set of functions that one or more entities can play a role in fulfilling. These functions are the essential on-going roles related to sustaining the infrastructure of a cradle to career partnership. Backbone functions are necessary to support the data-driven action of the partnership and continue to move the work forward. While the way a partnership fulfills these roles will look different depending on local context and assets, the set of backbone functions remain rather consistent across cradle to career partnerships. These common backbone functions are outlined below and explained in more detail in the following pages.

Backbone Functions



Backbone Function Roles



Click on a the highlighted text for links to examples & resources

Fiscal Agent

Provide limited financial and legal oversight like overseeing grants and budgeting for the partnership. The fiscal agent typically needs to be a 501(c)3 organization to receive tax-free donations, including grants.

Example [Budget & Business Plan](#)

House the Partnership

Provide office and meeting space as well as technology needs for partnership staff. This is typically the mailing address of the partnership and recognized as the partnership's main location.

Staffing

Support the salaries of new employees or loan existing employees to staff the partnership. Employees of the partnership, whose time is not donated as in-kind support, are often supported by the fiscal agent.

The key partnership staff positions are:

- [Partnership Director](#)- A full-time dedicated staff person that provides leadership and management to ensure the mission and values of the partnership are put into practice
- [Facilitator](#)- Supports continuous improvement action planning
- [Data Manager](#)- Supports analysis, management, integration, and reporting of data
- [Communication/Community Engagement Manager](#)- Supports internal and external communications and engagement of the broader community

Backbone Function Roles

Engage Partners & Community

Bring together the necessary community partners to support the work, including engagement of the broader community as well as executive-level individuals for the leadership table.

Building the Leadership Table

Communications

Develop a set of key messages about the partnership and communicate them regularly to internal partners and the broad community. Establish the necessary mechanisms for communicating about the partnership (newsletter, website, etc.). Release an annual report card to the community that effectively communicates the importance and meaning of the data for each of the partnership's community-level outcomes. Enable the flow of information between the different groups within the partnership.

Building the Case

Fundraising & Development

Develop and implement a plan for securing funding and resources to advance the partnership's work. Tap into existing relationships to build financial support for the partnership.

Data Support

Enable the access, analysis, and utilization of data to support the partnership.

- Data Access- enables necessary data that is crucial to advancing the work of the partnership to be accessed and used for data-driven decision making.
- Data Analysis- analyzes data according to the partnership's needs.
- Data Coaching- trains and supports partnership and network members in the process of using data for continuous improvement.

Backbone Function Roles

Convene Networks

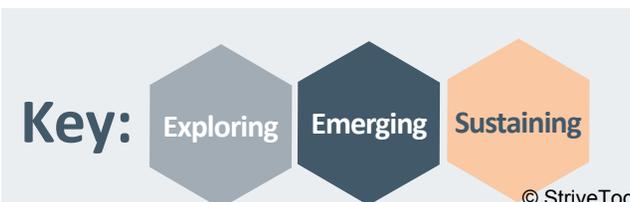
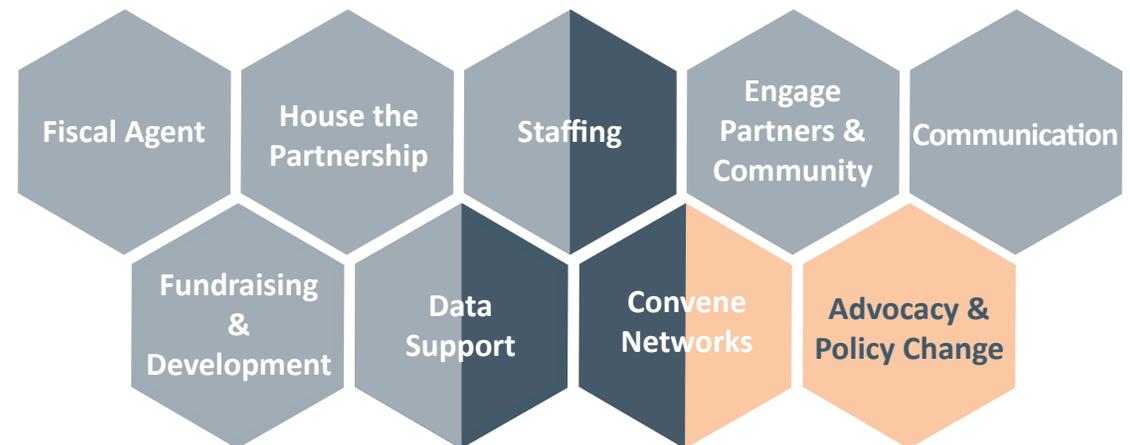
Convene collaborative action networks around a community level indicator to use a continuous improvement process to improve that indicator. This could also include managing the logistics of a collaborative action network such as documenting notes, scheduling meetings, creating agendas, etc.

Advocacy & Policy Change

Actively work to eliminate identified political barriers that inhibit the advancement of the partnership's work. Advocate at the institutional, local, state or national level in order to enable the improvement of outcomes. This includes the creation and implementation of a collective advocacy agenda for the partnership.

Backbone Functions in the Theory of Action

Not all of the backbone functions need to be fulfilled when a partnership is forming; as the work of the partnership evolves and matures, the functions of the backbone will also evolve. Some functions are not necessary to have in place until partnerships enter the Emerging or Sustaining Gateways of the StriveTogether Theory of Action. The diagram to the right maps the backbone functions according to what Gateway they need to be in place by.



How are These Roles Filled?

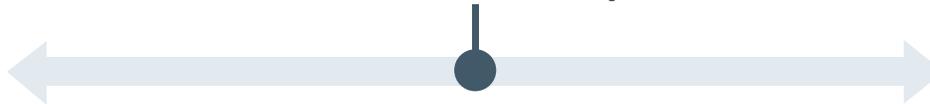
The way a partnership fulfills all the backbone functions depends on the context of the community. Generally, there is a spectrum of structures starting on one end with a single organization playing all or most of the roles (**centralized backbone**) to the opposing end where the backbone functions are dispersed across multiple organizations (**blended backbone**). Most backbone structures of cradle to career partnerships fall somewhere in the middle of this spectrum, and tend to move towards one end or the other as a partnership evolves. This toolkit will detail out the two ends of the spectrum to adequately illustrate the differences.

Centralized Backbone



A partnership with a centralized backbone structure will find the anchor entity (fiscal agent) fulfills most, and in a few cases all, of the backbone functions.

Most Partnerships



Blended Backbone



A partnership with a blended backbone will have multiple partners, in addition to the anchor entity, filling the backbone functions.



What is an anchor entity?

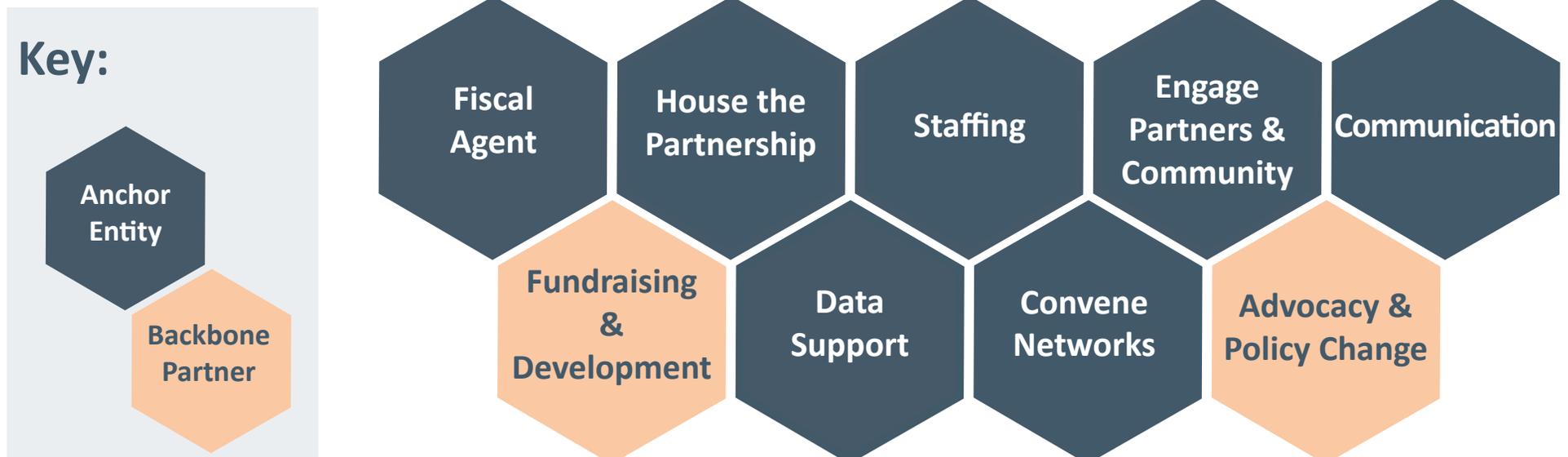
An anchor entity is an organization or entity that commits to acting as the fiscal agent and ensures the partnership's long term sustainability. As the fiscal agent, the anchor entity provides limited financial and legal oversight such as overseeing grants and budgeting for the partnership.

Centralized Backbones

A centralized backbone structure occurs when a single organization plays most of the backbone functions. The benefits to this structure include a consistent identity, clarity around the focus of the organization, and ease of coordination among the various backbone functions. A major challenge of this structure is a perceived lack of community ownership of the partnership. When a single organization fulfills the majority of the backbone functions, it can be challenging to distinguish the partnership as a separate entity rather than an initiative of the that organization. It may also be difficult to find a single organization within a community that is skilled at playing all of the functions.

Two types of centralized backbone structures exist: the **independent anchor** and the **nested anchor**.

Example Centralized Backbone Structure



Independent Anchor

The independent anchor is played by a **stand-alone 501(c)3** organization whose sole purpose is to fill the backbone functions and support the partnership.

A challenge with this type of structure is the inability of the 501(c)3 to take advantage of the operational support, such as a finance department, communications team, and tech support, that a partnership which is hosted by another organization often able to access at minimal cost. An independent 501(c)3 would likely need to build that capacity within the organization, and thus fundraise for this support. Fundraising can also be a challenge with this type of structure because of perceived competition with other non-profits and a lack of understanding from the philanthropic community about the role of the 501(c)3 in supporting the partnership. However, the independent structure also allows the backbone to be truly driven by the mission and not by another organization's values.

The organizations that make up the independent anchor can be newly formed, or may be an existing entity whose mission changes to reflect the cradle to career approach.

Independent Anchor Example

Spartanburg Academic Movement (click [here](#) for more information)

The Spartanburg Academic Movement is an independent 501(c)3 that evolved into a cradle to career partnership from a college access organization and serves as the anchor entity in the partnership's centralized backbone.

Nested Anchor

A nested anchor occurs when the partnership is **housed within another organization**. In this structure, the staff and office space are often provided by the anchor entity. In many cases, funding is, at least in part, provided by the anchor and the partnership can leverage the anchor entity's investment to secure additional funding if needed. The anchor can also use its weight and reputation in the community to bring influential partners to the table.

One challenge faced by a nested anchor is partnerships who are housed within another organization may have trouble getting the community to recognize them as a separate entity and instead, might be perceived to be controlled or owned by the anchor entity.

A wide range of organizations can play host to the partnership including, but not limited to: community foundations, the United Way, economic development organizations, community-based organizations, and family foundations.

Nested Anchor Example

Every Hand Joined (click [here](#) for more information)

Every Hand Joined is the cradle to career partnership in Red Wing, Minnesota, a rural community with the Jones Family Foundation serving as the anchor entity in the partnership's centralized backbone.

Anchor Entity Types

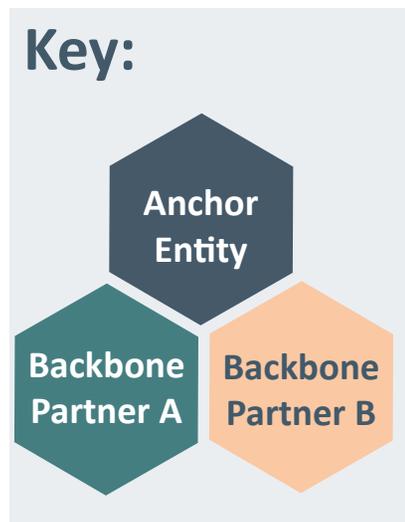
The table below shows examples of types of organizations that commonly play the anchor role within a centralized backbone and the potential pros and cons to each type.

Anchor Entity	Pros	Cons
Universities	Strong convening and research capabilities	Challenging bureaucracy; can be high cost
United Ways	Existing community building and fundraising capabilities	Partners may expect funding
Community Foundations	Strong fundraising and convening capabilities	Partners may expect funding; some less willing to share negative information with a funder
Government	Strongest convening capabilities; ability to leverage public funds	Challenging bureaucracy; political transitions can stall the effort
Existing Nonprofit	Closest to the on-the-ground work; potentially more rooted in the community; credibility	Can be perceived as non-neutral; may be more limited in their scope of influence
New Nonprofit	Perceived neutrality as a new organization; less community baggage	Potential to compete or be perceived as competing with other non-profits for funding; initially resource intensive; potential lack of long-term funding

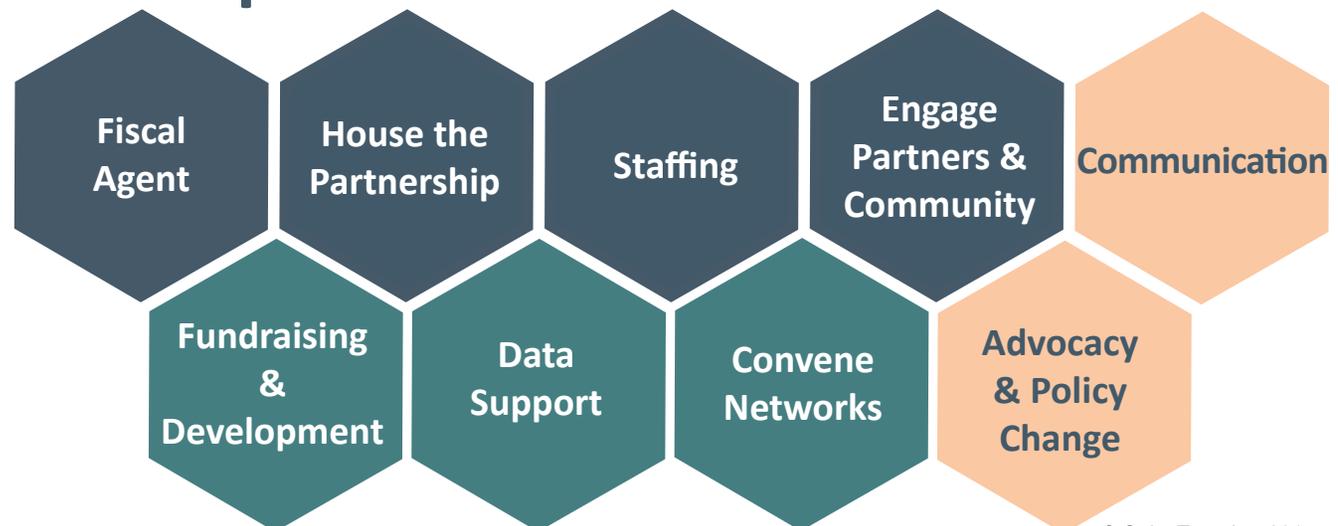
Adapted from 'Channeling Change: Making Collective Impact Work'
by Fay Hanleybrown, John Kania, & Mark Kramer

Blended Backbones

A blended backbone structure occurs when multiple organizations take on the various backbone roles, creating a comprehensive backbone to fulfill the needs of the partnership when they all work together. Within a blended backbone structure, it is not unusual to have a lead organization, but the backbone functions are much more widely distributed than in a centralized backbone structure. The benefits of this approach include wider community ownership for the work, the ability to match the skills of an organization with a specific backbone function, and relief from having to find a single entity that can play many of the backbone functions alone. Finding multiple partners to fulfill the necessary backbone roles also increases engagement from these partners; partners feel more invested and accountable for the work of the partnership when they have provided in-kind support. Having multiple partners fulfill backbone roles through in-kind support also decreases the amount of money that an organization must fundraise for. Quantifying in-kind support is important to appropriately recognize the contributions of partners and to leverage additional support. Challenges to this approach include a need for increased communication and coordination between all of the different organizations playing a backbone role. Additionally, there is a potential for lack of clarity in roles and responsibilities.



Example Blended Backbone Structure



Different Backbone Partners

Based on the assets within an individual community, the mosaic of backbone partners will look differently. It is important to identify backbone partners according to existing community assets that need to be engaged, backbone functions that need to be filled, and partner assets that can be leveraged to best execute backbone functions.

Backbone Partner: A backbone partner is an organization, entity, committee or initiative that commits to fulfilling one or more of the backbone functions. This could be an existing partner in the community (local university fulfills data support needs) or a committee within the partnership accountability structure (communications committee fulfills communications needs).

Backbone Partners can have a particular strength in one of the backbone functions, such as:

- Communication (PR/Marketing Firms, Business Partners with Marketing Departments)
- Continuous Improvement (Manufacturing/Business, Healthcare)
- Data Support (Universities, Local Evaluators, Healthcare)
- Fundraising (the United Way, Local Community Foundations)

Backbone Partners can be existing initiatives in the community that are essential to the success of local youth:

- Place-based initiatives (Promise Neighborhoods, Communities in Schools)
- Initiatives focused on specific sub-populations
- Initiatives focused on a particular outcome (College Access Network, Early Childhood Network)

Role of the Anchor Entity

While all of the backbone partners are crucial to building the necessary capacity and support for the partnership, the anchor entity is called out specifically for its role as the fiscal agent for the partnership. Often, the anchor entity plays a lead role in the backbone, fulfilling more than just the fiscal agent role.

Anchor Entity: An anchor entity is an organization or entity that commits to acting as the fiscal agent and ensuring the partnership's long term sustainability. A fiscal agent provides limited financial and legal oversight such as overseeing pass-through funds and budgeting for the partnership.

The anchor entity typically provides additional backbone roles, however the main differentiator between an anchor entity and a backbone partner is the fiscal agent role. Since the partnership will require financial support for both its operations and data-driven action, selecting an anchor to play this fiscal agent role is extremely important.



While every community accommodates their backbone functions differently, some best practices have emerged around anchor entities playing specific roles. Along with the essential role of a fiscal agent, successful anchors have often also supported the partnership by providing staffing (especially the executive director) and housing the partnership. When staff are co-located and funded by the same organization, coordination of operations can be much more efficient than if partnership staff reported to many different organization and were not centrally located.

Becoming a Blended Backbone

Blended backbones evolve out of a multitude of contextual community situations but the following three examples illustrate typical origins or evolutions of a blended backbone.

In some communities, **there is not a single organization** that has the capacity to effectively fulfill all of the backbone functions on its own. In these instances, multiple community organizations come together in a patchwork to fill all of the backbone functions of the partnership. This situation becomes especially true as the backbone functions evolve with the maturation of the partnership.

Blended backbones may also arise out the **desire for multiple organizations to play a strong role** in the partnership's backbone. The blended backbone approach helps communities navigate ownership issues by identifying roles for multiple organizations to support the partnership in a backbone role and demonstrate their commitment to the partnership.

Finally, blended backbones may form intentionally from the beginning stages of building a partnership, from **communities seeking cooperation** and the desire to give the partnership credibility and durability. Here, multiple strong community organizations come together and commit to building a partnership by intentionally having multiple organizations fill different backbone functions thereby committing to helping the partnership succeed long term.

Blended Backbone Example

Mission:Graduate (click [here](#) for more information)

Mission:Graduate is a cradle to career partnership in Central New Mexico that took an intentional approach to building out a blended backbone.

Lessons Learned



Differentiating the Partnership from the Backbone

Based on the work of cradle to career partnerships across the country, a few lessons have been identified on how to differentiate the partnership from the backbone. These lessons are especially important in a nested backbone structure where differentiation between the partnership and anchor entity is less clear; however these lessons are still relevant for other backbone structures as well.

- 1.) **The staff and general inquiry email addresses should match the name of the partnership and not that of the anchor entity or other backbone partner.**

For example, if ABC partnership has staff that is provided for and housed out of Local Town Community Foundation, their email address should be along the lines of `jsmith@abcpartnership.org` rather than `jsmith@localtownfoundation.org`. This practice helps establish the partnership as a separate entity within the community.

- 2.) **The partnership should have a website URL that is reflective of the partnership name and separate from the anchor entity or other backbone partners.**

Much like the email addresses, this practice will help the partnership establish itself as a separate entity and it help lends to community ownership rather than being affiliated with one organization.

- 3.) **Members of the anchor entity or other strong backbone partners should not chair or co-chair the leadership table/executive committee of the partnership.**

This practice helps ensure the autonomy of the partnership and helps to assure community leaders that it is a community owned partnership and not an initiative of an organization.

Evolution of the Backbone

As the work of a cradle to career partnership progresses and evolves, so should the infrastructure that is in place to support this work. Often in the early stages of building a partnership, one or two partners will step up to drive the work forward, assuming many of the operational functions of the partnership and essentially acting as a 'centralized backbone' structure. Having one or two organizations play a strong backbone role in the early stages of a partnership is easier since most of the work involved is not specialized, including convening partners, housing the partnership, providing staff, and acting as the fiscal agent.

As the partnership's work expands to include the convening of collaborative action networks, advocating for policy change, deeply analyzing data, and releasing report cards and other communications, the functions of the backbone also expand, and become more specialized. A partner that was well-positioned to play the anchor in a centralized backbone structure in the early stages may no longer be as appropriate to fulfill all the new backbone function roles. In this way, we often see an evolution of the backbone structure to include additional partners who may have specific expertise in the new backbone function areas like data analysis, communications, facilitation, policy, or content knowledge in one of the outcome areas. This evolution allows the once centralized backbone to distribute the new responsibilities with partners better positioned to lead them.

