



The Edmonton Chamber of Voluntary Organizations gratefully recognizes the contributions of individuals in Edmonton's nonprofit community who participated in discussions about

Accelerating Impact

ECVO has compiled highlights from these discussions into a series of five resources.

Back Bone Supports

A separate organization dedicated to coordinating the collaborators and activities of an initiative.

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Edmonton Chamber of Voluntary Organizations

Moving to Action



Introduction

This resource is the result of a community conversation about the fifth condition of Collective Impact, Backbone Supports.

Members of the Edmonton nonprofit community participated in this conversation in September 2014. Separate conversations on each of the other four conditions have been ongoing since December 2013.

Each conversation explored a local Edmonton case study followed by discussion questions. The responses to questions from each case study are summarized in a resource similar to this document. If you are interested in collecting the series of resources, please visit the ECVO website and look under programs/*Moving to Action*.

Further Reading

[Champions for Change: Leading a Backbone Organization for Collective Impact](#): A Conversation With Workshop Faculty. FSG.

[Do You Have a Digital Backbone?](#) Insight Information. Kristin Garland.

[Defining Quality Collective Impact](#) by Jeff Edmondson & Ben Hecht. Stanford Social Innovation Review.

[Searching for the Right Backbone Structure](#) by Robert Albright. FSG Knowledge Exchange.

Back Bone Support: “Creating and managing collective impact requires a separate organization(s) with staff and a specific set of skills to serve as the back bone for the entire initiative and coordinate organizations and agencies.”

“Do you agree with this definition? Do all initiatives require a back bone organization? Do they need to be a separate organization? What are the benefits and risks associated with having a back bone organization?”

Benefits of Separate Organizations

- Participants identified objectivity as a key benefit of having an external organization in the back bone support role.
- A central point of control can move an initiative forward and leverage the people and resources that are required.
- It was also felt that a separate organization may be in a better position to independently promote the initiative rather than the nonprofit’s mandate.

Risks of a Separate Organization:

- If the back bone organization is not trusted or loses trust, then the whole initiative can collapse. The same is true if the back bone loses funding.
- Organizations can stay in their silos.
- The back bone organization may lose sight of the community interest.



Further reading

[Evolving our Understanding of Backbone Organizations](#). Ellen Martin. Knowledge Exchange. FSG.

[6 Important Activities of Backbone Support Organizations](#). The BIG PICTURE Approach.

[Tools for Backbones](#). Collective Impact Forum.

[Collective Impact & The Role of the Backbone Organization](#). S. Turner, K. Merchant, J. Kania, E. Martin.

[Leading in Complexity](#). Slide Deck. FSG Social Impact Consultants.

“How critical is a back bone support in a collaborative; in a collective impact initiative? What role does an effective back bone organization play? In what ways can they enhance collaboration? Can you do without one?”

- Getting the right people in the room and continually reminding partners of the change they are working toward is a key role for a back bone organization. Helping the group to re-focus on the bigger agenda without getting mired in the details or entering into power struggles is also central to the role.
- Back bone support organizations should be able to ask questions that build trust and keep people connected to the outcomes they want to see.
- A back bone must be able to see things from both the bird's eye view and the worm's eye view. This is easier when the back bone is not involved in direct service delivery.
- There are costs associated with both formal and informal collaboration. Back bone supports should be, but are not always funded to carry out their role.
- There are infinite ways of carrying out collective impact ... so you do what works.

“How does a collaborative group identify or develop back bone supports?”

- A consultant or other expert may see indicators that a collaborative could benefit from back bone support.
- An internal or external audit of a project may identify a need for backbone supports.
- It can be mandated as part of the terms of reference of a collaborative project or initiative.
- The need for back bone supports may emerge from a need for members to share or obtain resources.
- The collaborative may identify the need for additional supports in order to move forward or respond to change.

Further reading

[Backbone Support Assessments](#). Collective Impact Forum.

[The Difference between Backbones and Conveners in Collective Impact](#). Strive Together.

“At what stage of a collaborative initiative does a group require back bone supports?”

The question of when back bone supports are required can vary from situation to situation. Some examples...

- At the conception of an idea (realizing that more than collaboration is required) a back bone can help access the expertise, resources, etc. that are needed.
- Right in the middle of an initiative – when the collaborative is feeling overwhelmed (or even stuck) and is in need of guidance to make a “course correction.”
- Back bone supports can be time sensitive and may only be needed for a limited amount of time.

[Exerting Influence Without Formal Authority](#). Stanford Social Innovation Review.

[Aligning Collective Impact Initiatives](#). Stanford Social Innovation Review.

“Does support in a collaborative go both ways? What supports do you think an effective back bone provides? What support do they need ... from funders, the collaborative or other stakeholders?”

Backbone Supports for the Collaborative

Participants identified several types of supports a back bone organization can provide depending on the need(s) of the collaborative. The following list includes roles that a backbone organization may play:

- Facilitator
- Provocateur
- Cheerleader
- Conscience for the group
- Logistics Coordinator
- Organizer
- Policy Developer
- Bridge Builder
- Thought Leader

Supports Needed by a Back Bone

An effective back bone organization needs the trust and investment of the collaborative. Collaboration members can facilitate back bone success by;

- Providing accurate and timely feedback to the back bone
- Being responsive to the back bone when called upon
- Upholding a commitment to common goals

A final critical support for the back bone is appropriate buy in from funder(s).

Further Reading:

[Funding for the Backbone Organizations in Collective Impact Efforts](#). Strive Together.

[Backbone Organization Roles](#). Tamarack

[Backbone Effectiveness: 27 Indicators](#). FSG.

[Three Keys to a Healthy Backbone](#). FSG Collective Impact Blog.

ECVO Accelerating Impact Publications:

[Common Agenda](#)

[Shared Measurement](#)

[Mutually Reinforcing Activities](#)

[Continuous Communications](#)



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