Committing to Collective Impact:
From Vision to Implementation

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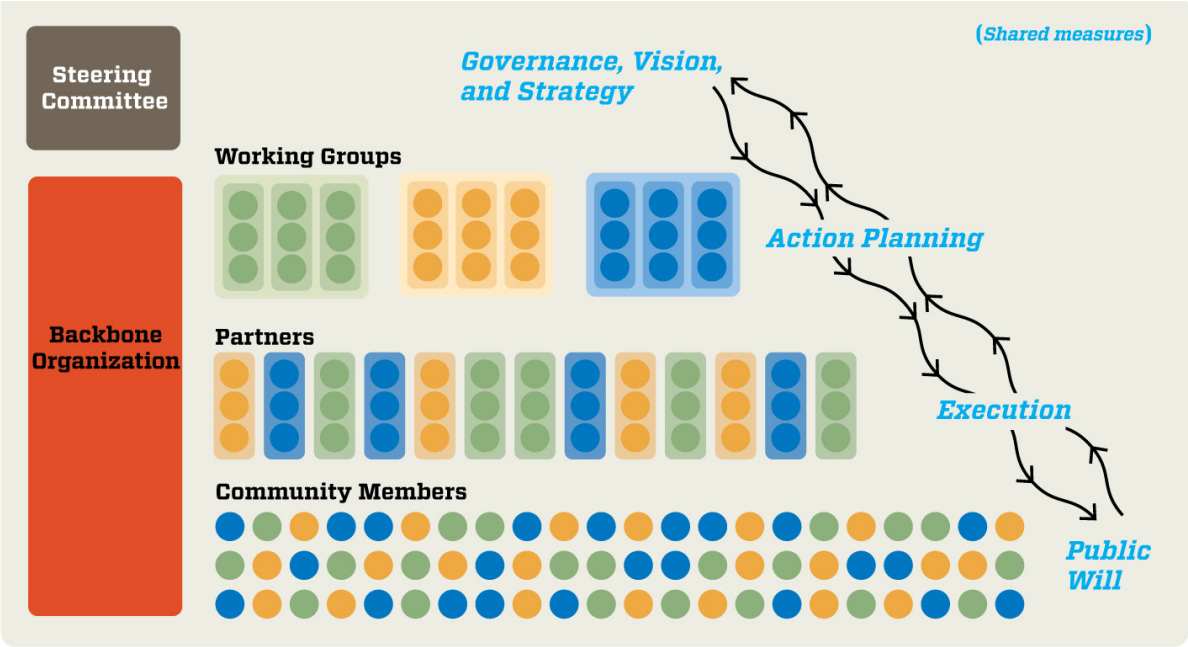
What do you think about first dates? Do they make you nervous? Excited? Unsure? If your days of first dates are over, do you look back on them fondly? Regardless of what you think about first dates, most people would agree that first dates take some courage, but there's not much pressure to commit. You can always say "no thanks" and part ways without much fuss, and at worst you endure an hour of bad conversation about your date's upcoming fantasy football playoffs or the most recent episode of *Dancing with the Stars*.

But what about the fourth or fifth date? That's when it gets interesting. These dates start to mean something. "Does the other person really like me? Do we have a real connection? Can I see myself making it to date 10, 20, or beyond with this person?" It's relatively easy to go on a first date, but as things get more serious, you have to commit and make decisions together.

This dating analogy provides us with a good mental model for the transition that collective impact initiatives make as they evolve from the visioning phase to implementation phase. As with mustering up the courage to go on a first date, bringing cross-sector leaders to the table to agree upon a shared vision and embark on a collective impact initiative is a brave first step that is often very difficult. But moving from visioning to implementation, much like going on a fourth or fifth date, is when leaders must commit to sustained action. FSG frequently fields questions about this transition and in this article, we discuss how collective impact initiatives have effectively transi-

Figure 1. Common Agenda



tioned beyond the initial steps of building a steering committee and establishing a common agenda to creating an infrastructure that can discover and execute strategies that lead to positive, sustained change. In collective impact, that infrastructure involves working groups, which use the initiative's common agenda to further define and execute strategies. We will explain the key considerations when determining which working groups to create, when to launch working groups, how to choose group members best positioned for and suited to the tasks at hand, and how working groups can succeed in their first six months.

It is important to recognize that the context of each collective impact initiative is unique due to the nature of relationships, policies, norms and other factors involved and this context will strongly influence the sequence in which each initiative unfolds. To that end, we encourage readers to view this article as a guide rather than an exact recipe for how collective impact practitioners can transition from vision to implementation.

The Role of Working Groups within the Collective Impact Infrastructure

Working groups are at the heart of how high-level visioning and strategic planning turn into specific strategies and projects (see Figure 1 for a representative collective impact infrastructure). Once the initiative's steering committee has created a common agenda and high-level framework for addressing the specific social problem, a variety of working groups gather around individual key elements of that broader plan. As Fay Hanleybrown, John Kania, and Mark Kramer note, "the real work of the collective impact initiative takes place in these targeted groups through a continuous process of 'planning and doing,' grounded in constant evidence-based feedback around what is or is not working."[1] Working group members meet regularly to review data and discuss their progress with one another. Working groups also share this information with and learn from the steering committee, backbone, and other working groups as needed. Through these discussions, the working groups can adjust strategies and create action plans to bring those strategies to life.

For example, within Communities That Care Coalition, a collective impact initiative in western Massachusetts aiming to reduce youth substance abuse, there are three working groups focused on parent education, youth recognition, and community laws and norms, as well as a school health task force.[2] These working groups meet monthly to review data such as arrest records for controlled substances, hospital visits from substance-related injuries, and an annual teen health survey. Working groups then implement strategies such as conducting alcohol purchase surveys, conducting compliance checks of alcohol vendors, modifying town ordinances to require restaurant server training, creating social marketing campaigns, and promoting youth recognition by parents.

How do collective impact initiatives decide which working groups to create? In our experience, determining the optimal working group structure (i.e., which ones to form, how many to form, the sequence in which they are rolled out, and who to recruit as members) is both a

science and an art. While the working group structure may evolve over time, having a clear structure at the beginning is important for moving from vision to implementation.

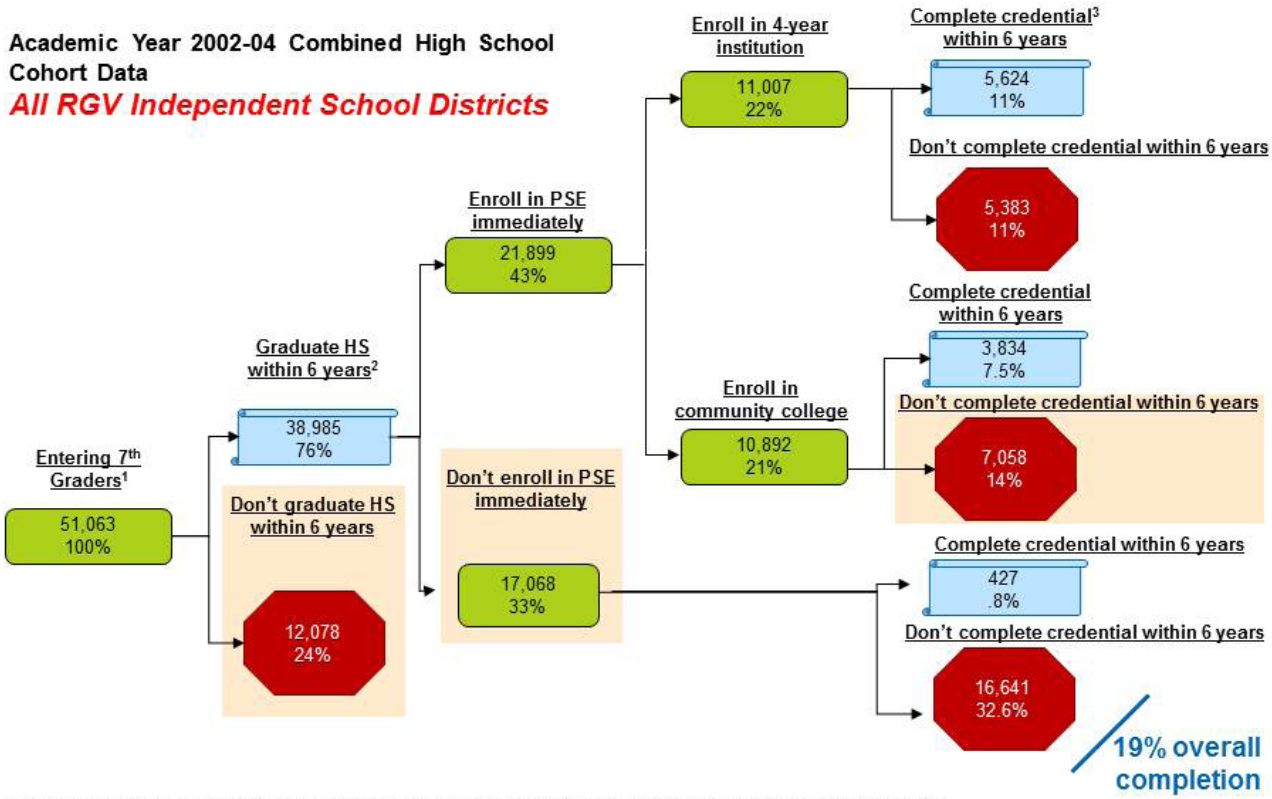
The Science of Determining a Working Group Structure

The problems that collective impact initiatives address are urgent, and it may be tempting to create working groups as quickly as possible. However, a critical precedent to deciding on a working group structure is the creation of a common agenda, which in most cases takes many months to develop. A common agenda includes a shared vision for change, a common understanding of the problem (drawing initial boundaries around what is in/out of scope), clear and measurable goals, and high-level strategies (i.e., a strategic action framework to achieve those goals). Without a thoroughly-discussed and rigorously-researched common agenda, initiative leaders will struggle to determine where to focus working group resources. There are two inputs into the common agenda that are particularly helpful for determining working group structure: defining and scoping the problem, and assessing the existing landscape.

Defining and Scoping the Problem

A common understanding of the problem that the initiative is working to address often requires analysis of existing quantitative data (such as graduation rates or the number of asthma attacks in a geography), and a qualitative assessment of the problem ideally informed by interviews with key community stakeholders, including those affected by the problem as well as those in formal positions of authority. For example, in FSG's work to improve college readiness and success in the Rio Grande Valley (RGV), we aggregated public and privately-held data to analyze the drop-off points in a student's academic journey from high school to career (see Figure 2). This analysis was critical in both understanding the scope of the problem – only 19% of entering 7th graders will obtain an on-time college credential – as well as where in the educational pipeline particular attention was most needed. For example, leaders in the region were well aware of the poor high school dropout rate. Yet through analyzing the data, leaders saw that an even larger number of students graduate from high school but never enroll in college, and that this transition point between high school and post-secondary institutions is comparatively under-resourced

Figure 2. "Drop-Off" Points Along the RGV Educational Pipeline



Notes: (1) Three separate 7th grade cohorts were combined using AEIS data to be able to link to THECB publicly available combined cohort data; (2) Data beginning at the HS graduation level uses publicly available THECB combined cohort date; (3) "Credential" refers to either a one- or two-year Certificate, an Associate, or Baccalaureate degrees; Community college includes both 2 year community colleges and technical schools
Source: FSG Analysis; Academic Excellence Indicator System, Texas Education Agency, 1995-97 combined 7th grade enrollment; THECB; High School Students Who Completed Bachelor's Degrees within Six Years of HS Graduation AY 2002-2004 Combined Cohort

because it falls between traditional systems. As a result, the RGV FOCUS initiative has made the high school-to-college transition one of the principal focal points of its work by dedicating one working group to the goal that "Students Successfully Transition between High School and Postsecondary" (the two other working groups are "Students Graduate High School Ready" and "Students Attain a Degree or Credential with Labor Market Value").

Assessing the Existing Landscape

Analysis of "the problem" should be complemented by an assessment of the existing organizations, collaborations, and structural elements (e.g., other sectors, the public policy landscape) that have the potential to play roles in the effort. Collective impact is fundamentally not about creating a whole new initiative, but rather connecting and strengthening existing efforts and filling gaps. Therefore, deeply understanding the existing landscape is critical in all stages of collective impact, especially before creating a working group structure. The output of this landscape assessment could range from a simple list and description of the above elements, or it could be a more sophisticated "system map" that visually depicts the relationships between the various elements. Regardless of the format, the goal is to identify current work that can be built upon. There are many ways that working groups can build on current efforts: the initiative could "outsource" working groups to existing collaboratives, connect new members or otherwise provide backbone support to the existing collaboratives, or even combine existing collaboratives under one umbrella.

The Art of Determining a Working Group Structure

Using data to understand the problem and identifying existing players helps identify the highest areas of need and most critical leverage points. To complement these analyses, collective impact leaders must also sense the momentum and relationships among key players at the grassroots, grass tops, and political leadership levels.

Sensing Where the Energy Is

We often advise initiatives to create working groups where data suggest there is a critical need, but also in areas that build on existing momentum. However, both of these conditions may not be simultaneously available to collective impact initiatives in the early stages. If it is unclear where to begin, our FSG colleague John Kania is fond of saying, "go where the energy is." This does not mean that efforts should avoid the big, thorny areas. It simply means that collective impact efforts can build their credibility in the early phases by strengthening relationships, demonstrating quick wins through working group activity, and building the muscle memory to tackle thornier issues down the road.

One example of sensing and building on momentum comes from Cincinnati. United Way of Greater Cincinnati's "Success by 6" is an early childhood development collective impact initiative that aims to meet the developmental needs of young children by raising awareness, advocating for resources and funding, and ensuring high-quality programs. Success by 6's work started in 2002, and shortly thereafter the Strive Partnership, the well-known and successful cradle-to-career initiative, came online. Recognizing that each collaborative was tackling complementary parts of the education pipeline, Strive adopted Success by 6's goals for early childhood, and the two collaboratives work closely together to this day in areas such as analyzing data and building the capacity of others to interpret that data.

One can easily imagine different scenarios in which momentum could steer an initiative away from a particular area where conditions might not be ideal for the initiative to take hold. An initiative to reduce obesity could be hampered by a wave of hospital mergers and divestures that was causing uncertainty amongst the entire healthcare community. A workforce development initiative could be derailed by recent legislation causing trust levels between local government and business to fall to an all-time low. Each of these cases presents both opportunities and risks, and whether to create working groups in an area in spite of some negative momentum is a judgment call by leaders who have a deep understanding of the context.

Finding the Right Leaders for Working Groups

A key to having strong working groups, and a strong collective impact initiative, is having the right leaders at the table who are committed to moving the work forward. When we work with initiatives to identify working group members, we often start by mapping out the various sectors that should be represented and the desired seniority of members (e.g., CEO, Director, Project Manager, those with "lived experience"). We also identify champions who can help us recruit those individuals. While this analysis increases the likelihood that working groups represent the right stakeholders, it is perhaps even more important to identify working group members whose "hair is on fire" – individuals who possess a deep passion for the issue, will dedicate the time and energy needed for frequent meetings, and will bring others to the table by sheer determination and perseverance. These leaders would need to be committed not only with their words, but also with their time. They are enablers, champions, advocates, innovators, early adopters, and conveners – those who are undaunted by uncharted, ambitious, and complex collaboration. These

traits are especially important for working group co-chairs; the presence of these co-chairs will contribute to the sustainability of the working group. At FSG, we hear of many initiatives stalling because the people at the table weren't committed to sustaining collaborative work towards a complex problem. Having the right people at the table in each working group, as well as on the steering committee, is especially critical in the early phases of an initiative, when many will be skeptical that "yet another collaborative effort" will produce sustained results. (See Figure 3 for working group member traits and responsibilities.)

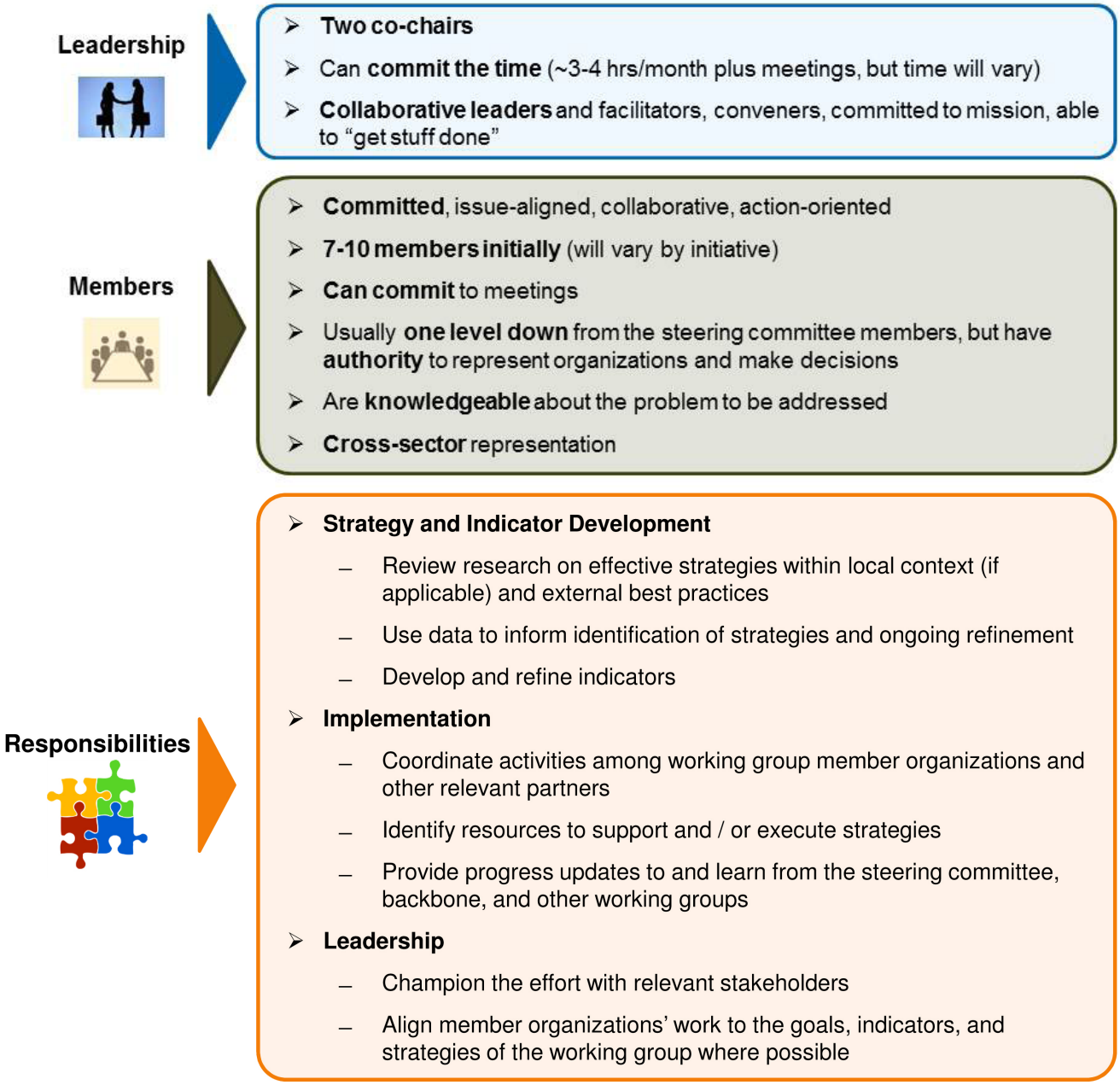
Two Common Questions: Number and Type of Working Groups

Determining the Optimal Number of Working Groups

The ability to recruit the right working group leaders determines, in large part, the number of working groups. Quite simply, strong leaders will be able to start and sustain working groups, and will bring other leaders to the table.

As an initiative evolves, the number of working groups will likely change; this is a positive sign that the initia-

Figure 3. Working Group Member Traits



"Quick wins are important for demonstrating the value of collective work, keeping people engaged, and building support"

tive is learning and adjusting to its context. As discussed earlier, some initiatives choose to start slow with 1-2 working groups, and then expand once sufficient capacity has been built among the backbone organization and initial working groups. We have also seen a number of initiatives begin with many working groups, only to later consolidate. In our experience, 3 to 6 working groups is a manageable number in the first few years of an initiative, but the optimal number depends heavily on the strength of each group's leadership.

Balancing "Strategy" Working Groups with "Functional" Working Groups

Many working groups will be organized around specific strategies. For example, the previously mentioned Communities that Care Coalition established working groups of Parent Education, Youth Recognition, and Community Laws and Norms. RGV FOCUS established the working groups of Students Graduate High School Ready, Students Successfully Transition between High School and Postsecondary, and Students Attain a Degree or Credential with Labor Market Value. Initiatives may also elect to have working groups that are function-based. Common examples include policy advocacy, data capacity building, and community engagement.

Getting Started: Working Groups in the First Six Months

The first six months of a working group are about deep strategic planning and relationship building. The common agenda documents a shared vision, understanding of the problem, specific and measurable goals, and high-level strategies. In their first six months, working groups take the common agenda and go deeper into strategic planning, all the while intentionally strengthening relationships with existing and new partners. Below, we highlight four specific priorities of working groups in the early months.

Use Data to Further Understand the Problem and Develop an Approach to Continuous Learning

Data should be at the heart of setting strategies and adjusting along the way. In working groups' first six months, data is a critical tool for further understanding the problem and identifying potential strategies. Data of all sorts can be used. For example, data can help highlight achievement gaps by neighborhood, identify resources directed toward a particular issue, or map populations that receive services and those that don't.

Data are also at the heart of continuous learning. Working groups will first define primary and secondary success metrics that are linked to the initiative's common agenda. The regular gathering, analysis, and reporting of this data ultimately allows working groups to learn what's working and then point a spotlight on those successful strategies. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the inner workings of data and shared measurement systems, but we cannot overemphasize the importance of data as a tool for continuous learning.[3]

Identify High-Leverage Strategies and Quick Wins

After developing a deep understanding of the problem, working groups should ask themselves, "What are the problems we see, and what are the high-leverage things we can do together that no one organization could do alone?" Many of these strategies will be systemic and long-term, but working groups should also intentionally identify short-term strategies that demonstrate the power of working collectively. Quick wins are important for demonstrating the value of collective work, keeping people engaged while moving through a long term planning process, and for building support among those who are skeptical of this new approach. Quick wins can range from providing evidence of tangible progress such as agreement on goals or a pilot collaboration between organizations, to sharing stories about new relationships that are being formed within the community. One example of a quick win comes from the Road Map Project, a collective impact initiative which aims to double the number of students in South King County and South Seattle who are on track to graduate from college or earn a career credential by 2020. The initiative championed a major success in 2011 with its sign-up campaign for the College Bound Scholarship (a statewide scholarship for low-income students across the state who graduate with a 2.0 or higher and no felonies). With participation from district and school coordinators in each of the seven Road Map districts and leadership from the College Success Foundation and CCER (the initiative's backbone organization, who sent out regular emails to district superintendents showing their progress toward enrolling all eligible students), 93% of eligible students signed up, an increase from 74% in 2010.

In addition to quick wins, initial strategies can also highlight what is currently working so that it can be done on a larger scale. This can be extremely energizing for those engaged in solving the problem, and creates a positive energy instead of just focusing on the challenges.

Build Relationships

Relationships, especially among those who haven't traditionally worked together, can be fragile and take time to develop. Working group co-chairs should aim to build trust by holding meetings in person as much as possible, carving out time during meetings for informal conversation, ensuring members attend meetings themselves (instead of a designee), and properly onboarding new members.

Another key to building relationships and a sense of teamwork is to generate excitement, but also manage expectations. Most community leaders have experienced a failed collaborative effort, and many are wary of yet another one.

Provide Backbone Support, but Build Co-Chairs' Capacity to Lead and Members' Ownership of the Work

Planning agendas, gathering data, coordinating schedules, and conducting follow-up takes work, and the backbone provides the manpower to do many of these behind-the-scenes tasks. However, working group co-chairs should ideally take a strong role in planning and facilitating meetings from the beginning. If the backbone takes an overly heavy hand, working group co-chairs and members will not feel invested in the process, and therefore be less committed. If co-chairs are not quite ready or able to assume full ownership, the backbone can coach them over the course of a few meetings until they take ownership of the working group's progress.

Conclusion: The Payoff of Working Groups

In this article, we have described where working groups sit in the collective impact infrastructure, offered guidance on the science and art of determining an optimal working group structure, and shared lessons on how to successfully facilitate working groups in their first six months. Done in a thoughtful manner, creating working groups and putting them into action is a crucial element in successful collective impact initiatives, and can sustain the engagement of a broad range of community members and lead to impact at scale. Returning to the dating analogy: commitment, whether through a 5th date or through working groups, leads to deeper, more fulfilling, and sustained relationships.

We close with a simple story of collaboration at the working group level. The story is from Jina Bohl of Western Brown Local Schools in Ohio, who is participating in a Success by 6 working group focused on improving school readiness.

"When we started with this goal of improving school readiness, the first thing we did was bring together principals, Head Start teachers, and kindergarten and pre-K teachers to look at the kindergarten readiness scores for incoming students in our district. What we found was that incoming kindergarteners scored low in a number of important areas – rhyming, alliteration, letter identification – but this didn't tell us what we should do about the problem.

"As a group, we decided that we needed more information, so we agreed to begin administering a survey to the parents of incoming kindergarteners, asking where their child had attended a program or received care prior to entering school (e.g., Head Start, district pre-K, daycare center, family, friend or neighbor care). With this information, we could look at the differences in readiness scores for the kids coming from different programs. What we found was that the children who had attended local daycare centers lagged significantly behind their peers in their readiness scores. But the daycare teachers hadn't been invited to the table to help us think about how to improve school readiness. We hadn't considered how important they were to this equation.

"So, we made up for lost time and invited the daycare teachers to join us in our efforts to improve school readiness. We were careful when sharing the readiness data not to be accusatory or to blame anyone for lower scores but to approach our examination of the data with an attitude of curiosity and interest, engaging the daycares as partners. And it was really interesting – the daycare teachers said, "We never thought of ourselves as being all that important to academic success." It boosted their morale to have the district inviting them to this effort as an equal partner and they were receptive to trying to make things better.

"Together, our expanded group determined that we needed training in targeted areas to help us improve students' readiness. With the help of our backbone organization, we identified pro bono training support and arranged a one-day session devoted just to rhyming. After the session, we continued a community of practice among the daycare, Head Start, and pre-K teachers to discuss how they were applying what they had learned.

"That's all we did. And guess what? The following year's readiness scores in the area of rhyming went through the roof.

"So we repeated the process for the area of alliteration and again the following year, the students' alliteration scores came up dramatically. More and more teachers are coming to our meetings and trainings and are empowered to make change. We've got strong partnerships between the schools and the daycares. And most importantly – we're making a difference for the kids in our community. This was my 'a-ha' moment about collective impact." CI