Leading Collective Impact: Conversations with United Way staff leaders on the cutting edge

Michele Brown, President
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Prior to joining the United Way of Anchorage in 2003, Michele Brown served as the Commissioner of the Department of Environmental Conservation under former Alaska Governor Tony Knowles. During her eight years on the job, she was credited with forging positive alliances among diverse interests to promote environmentally responsible economic development and to ensure safe and healthy communities. Brown also spent two and a half years with the U.S. Agency for International Development in Moscow, Russia developing community health, environmentally sound economic development initiatives, and democracy building programs in Russia.

The United Way of Anchorage provides backbone support to the 90% by 2020 collective impact partnership, which seeks to increase the community’s high school graduation rate to 90 percent in the next six years. The partnership works to align the efforts, resources and support of non-profit organizations, service providers, businesses, public schools, families, children, youth and community members around a shared mission, goals, and target outcomes. 90% by 2020 has set priority outcomes ensuring that children are ready for Kindergarten, proficient in math at 8th grade, and graduating from high school on time. Data scoping teams have been carefully reviewing data to determine how and where we can make the most impact in these target areas and Collaborative Action Networks will be launching soon to develop action plans.

Q: Tell us about your personal and professional career path that led you to this work. What makes you passionate about this work for kids, families and the community?

My career has always been about finding important issues, and helping to solve them. It’s all about results! When I came here [to the United Way] the Board said it was doing impact work, but when I analyzed the systems I saw they were using that more as an aspiration than as a business model. So we had a series of retreats and laid out the type of United Way we could be. We focused on our aspiration and what it would take to realize it. When we made that choice, we had to think about the pace of change, as well as our tolerance for risk. And from there, we built a plan to become change agents in the community for population level results. That changed every single thing we do. We did a three-year and a five-year plan, and then we went back to the Board and said to them ‘if we want to keep moving in this direction, buckle up because it will get bumpier.’ And they have stayed with us. The way our board looks at it is that we are at time when government is backing out of quality of life management issues — in terms of leadership and funding. So somebody needs to step up in a positive way — not in a yelling at each other way — and who but United Way is better suited to step up?

Q: How do you see your role as CEO of a United Way in building civic infrastructure?

We decided a long time ago that we want to be the change agent for rallying the community to behave differently to get to better outcomes. Community change takes coordinated efforts to:

- Build community will to care and act
- Create a common agenda – a plan for focus and action
- Mobilize organizations and individuals across sectors
- Generate resources
- Invest wisely in what it takes to make impact
- Measure progress at every level

Behaving “differently” for us meant doing all of these elements with many partners. I like to call those elements equal
part joy and rigor. Joy is community will building, getting folks behind the effort, to volunteer, to get engaged and to be part of a movement. Rigor is the approach to program work with schools and non-profit providers that is data and results focused.

United Way is good at the movement side but we were not particularly great in the rigor side in our history, so we had to look for some help and we started with RBA [Results Based Accountability.] Then StriveTogether and collective impact came along and we saw it as the best blending of prior models (like RBA and Six Sigma) to get to the rigor side. So we were poised on the joy side and we needed help with rigor.

In short, the backbone role for building civic infrastructure is for us a natural role. But the backbone can’t only be the rigor side of house. Part of the reason the Strive partnership developed the way it did is because in Cincinnati they had strong institutional partners who wanted to change the rigor side. In our community, we did not have that. We needed to generate the will to lean on those partners to come to the table and change. We started at the other end -- creating a movement -- but we needed help on the rigor side, and that is what the StriveTogether framework did for us.

As CEO, my role was to ready our organization to serve as the backbone or anchor for a civic infrastructure partnership. We view that role as series of principles and functions that can be done by individuals or organizations. In our case, the whole organization is filling the backbone role — the softer joy side and the rigor side — volunteers, communications, raising resources for the enterprise, serving the leadership team, etc. The challenge for us is for [StriveTogether] to accept us in broader way and not remake us in a more narrow way.

Q: What do you see as United Way’s role in mobilizing the community-at-large to support the partnership’s outcomes and strategies?

In my mind, United Way excels at that. Although we have a history of ‘tell and sell,’ we are converting that to be more community engagement — where we do more listening and more brainstorming with the community. So in those conversations, we get a lot of the fodder we need to inform the rigor side — what best practices might be — and it has people getting involved in the movement, volunteering for it, advocating for it. We have been morphing into that for years. United Ways are naturals for that. We are cheerleaders. Now we are just using that cheering role for a different purpose.

We did polling [in 2009-10] and surveyed people on whether they knew what the current graduation rate was in Anchorage. Then we asked ‘whose responsibility is it for kids to graduate from high school on time — is the child and family, the school district, or the whole community?’ In the first poll, 40 percent said ‘the whole community.’ And then we set out to do a lot of conversations and marketing and events, saying that everyone has role to play to make sure kids graduate. We wanted to build community spirit and responsibility for improving graduation.

We then followed up with 10 simple things that everyone can do to improve the graduation rate. Not everyone has to be a mentor — sometimes it is just expecting the best of kids, asking them their opinion. That resonated throughout the community. It got people jazzed up. And in the latest poll [conducted in early 2014] we just topped 60 percent of people surveyed saying it is the whole community’s responsibility to make sure kids graduate.

Then, once the community had the sense that someone was on this issue, we knew we had to step up the rigor side. We needed a process and a plan to improve outcomes for all kids at all points in the cradle to career continuum.

Q: How have you drawn the line / achieved a balance between the needs of the partnership and of United Way?

We see them as blended goals in most cases. Drawing a black and white line causes programmatic, siloed thinking which is counter-productive to adaptive system management thinking. We knew early on that if we wanted this level of impact in the community, we could not do it alone, so we needed to build a broader partnership. We have been happy to be
quieter in the background and let the partnership be elevated. But we do want people to know we are proud of our part in it. Once we brought together the partnership, we follow its direction on major issues. However, we don’t treat it like a Board of Directors with a “segregated” staff, like an executive director who “reports” to the partnership for every move. We are creating networked, continuous improvement system so we do not want to replicate the traditional non-profit governance structure. We are still navigating where the lines are of what the partnership does on decision-making. We sometimes have the theoretical discussion on how this ‘cannot just be the United Way, it has to be the whole community’. It does, but that is not incompatible with United Way serving the anchor role with some discretion.

Q: Once you took on this role as the anchor for the partnership, what needed to change within your organization to support the work effectively (e.g. financial, leadership, organizational structure, staffing, board, etc.)?

We had already begun shifts internally to integrate programmatic, engagement, communications, and resource development activities around our community goals, including how to honor and elevate a partnership leadership team rather than solely our brand. A challenge we had was to not take too literally the StriveTogether framework sequence or roles definition. So becoming an “organization backbone” to the partnership leadership team was natural.

We had a prior leadership team for the education effort but we did not feel that we and they were putting enough juice on the outcomes work. We wanted to beef it up and StriveTogether was the best framework but we didn’t want to start from scratch. When we reinvigorated our leadership team, and StriveTogether came up here to help when we had the first meeting, people on the leadership team said ‘we’ve been there and done that. Do not go back to ground zero. We do not want to take steps back … we need you to help us move forward’. And StriveTogether did.

Q: Describe the role you, as the United Way CEO, have played in supporting the alignment of your organization with the partnership’s activities and goals. What would your recommendations be to other United Ways?

Our team is totally into it but, again, we see this as our core work and the means to get much of that core work done is with the partners in the partnership leadership team. We didn’t see it as new or wholly “separate” work.

It’s still a struggle to explain our role — what is the United Way’s really unique role? We explain that we play the backbone role in highest sense of word. We say we are like the general contractor … someone who sees it all come together. At a building site, the general contractor makes sure that all systems function well together. We also talk about the oil industry (in which several board members and donors are involved). We say when the Trans-Alaska Pipeline System was set up, there was an overall context and plan and they had to delineate how each and every piece fit together. And we asked them, ‘why then in social sector do you think you can just spray and pray money and progress and get results?’

I believe we are at the stage now when we can stop trying to have abstract discussions about the role but show it or do it through stories. Cheerlead, cajole, convene and coordinate — that to me is what a backbone does. It is not just shoring up or staffing the partnership leadership team. It is making sure all the parts that are needed for community change are attended to. That does not mean we do it all, but it is attended to. And, to have the degree of change we want, we cannot just do the program rigor side. We can make vast improvements through program work, but we need to make it a movement.

Q: Have there been benefits internally and in the broader community from having taken on this work?

Our stake in the ground is to do community change, both the joy and the rigor side. And the way to do that work is through coalitions and partnerships. So this is our M.O. and we apply it to every issue we work on. Now that the education work is well-launched, and we have a great team, I am developing this approach in affordable housing. It is a different twist because it is more policy-based than practitioner-based. So you take these operating principles and put
them into practice based on context.

We have to be a cross-functional, integrated backbone, meaning we bring all the United Way assets to the role deployment. With a program-only focus, it is hard to integrate volunteers in broad scale way that aligns with the work. Resource development is very thorny, not only for branding, but also because we believe it is necessary to take the work to scale. We are happy to see that StriveTogether is now tackling this issue as well. We want to make [United Way] investment products that are tied to the partnership’s outcomes. We hope to move investors out of the mode of siloed programs and organizations funding. So we are trying to raise money for the whole enterprise ... the work of community partners around key indicators we want to move. Not just investing money to the backbone but to kids starting school ready. So we are not just raising money for the backbone but for partners doing the work.

Q: What, in your mind, makes the role you and the United Way are playing so critical to change the education ecosystem so that your community can help every child succeed from cradle to career?

We are helping integrate the people, best practices, passion and resources to make these changes. No one was looking at all parts of that, at how to unite all those things together around a common goal, to come together around best practices and do the measurement and continuous improvement. People were working on various parts of those, but no one was looking at the whole thing. We are neutral in the community and we are not entrenched in any political party or institution, so well positioned to bring people together in this new way. We have unique capacity to occupy the positive space and bring a sense of the opportunities — that if we change how we collectively behave, how we deploy people, practices, and resources, and if we continuously improve, we could shape how the community works together for better education outcomes. And if we could master that, we could help change any issue.