



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

**Merl Waschler, President and Chief Executive Officer
Valley of the Sun United Way**

Merl Waschler leads Valley of the Sun United Way as President and Chief Executive Officer. He guides the strategic direction of the largest non-profit investor in health and human services programs in Maricopa County. Under his leadership, United Way leverages the expertise and passion of 90,000 individual donors, more than 700 business supporters, volunteers, partners and staff.

Valley of the Sun United Way is the backbone organization for Thriving Together, the collective impact partnership established to improve academic and non-academic youth outcomes and prepare students for college and career success. Thriving Together brings together partners in the education, business, faith-based and non-profit sectors and the broader community to set birth-to-career goals and create a civic infrastructure to achieve those goals.

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?

I was introduced to United Way early in my career. With my finance background, I was hired at an accounting firm out of college in the D.C. area and had the opportunity to participate in the Loaned Executive program and remained close to United Way. I knew that blending my financial expertise and desire to help others would play an important role in my career. My professional journey led me back to Phoenix and discovered the local United Way was searching for staff with financial expertise. I joined United Way as Chief Financial Officer in 1992, later served as COO and was appointed to President and CEO in 2007. I was fortunate to inherit strong community trust and acceptance. With that comes huge responsibility and work to create hope and change for underserved communities every day.

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

We must create trust, credibility and accountability within the community. These are the prerequisites for serving in this role. United Way brings a legacy of being a neutral partner in Phoenix and is viewed as a partner of choice. We need to demonstrate outstanding stewardship and governance in all we do. Working with staff, we developed internal capacity to review our programmatic work and evaluate results at scale. This takes looking inside your organization and the external environment to create solutions for long-term change.

Q: How do you define civic infrastructure?

It is the ability to bring the government, non-profit, philanthropic and for-profit sectors together to focus on complex cross-cutting community issues. Equally important, you must engage community leaders who have influence and resources to achieve the shared goals.

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

Building consensus and understanding around the shared goals is a key role for United Way. This includes co-creating a vision, goals and an implementation timeline. At first, we introduced Strive's framework in a broad geography and felt some resistance. Through collaboration and engagement, we focused on an urban school district which created additional opportunities. This took tenacity and time.

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 to be willing to reallocate financial and volunteer resources. I asked our Board Chair to co-chair the Thriving Together Leadership Council and her organization to invest financially in this work. Now, nine of our Board Members also serve on the Leadership Council and we continue to receive support from our base. We also made Thriving Together a significant component of our strategic plan.

Q: To what extent have you been able to get your board to understand and become engaged in the work of the partnership? What lessons can you share?

By integrating the partnership in our strategic plan, it became a formal piece of our work structure. We have an expectation that Board Members engage in our community impact work which creates a shared understanding around the goals. In this instance, the Board was willing to re-direct unrestricted dollars to this work without short-term expectations. We have an organizational goal around children and youth success and Thriving Together aligns with this goal and provides a clear line of sight for our Board. Narrowing geography to the urban core, we focused on the 200,000 young people under the age of 25 who live within our partner high school and elementary school districts area. This helped the partnership move forward yet can be difficult for United Ways to do because we spread our work over the broad service area of the organization.

Q: What business practices have needed to change within the United Way in order to do the StriveTogether work in the community? What policy, roles, procedures, and/or processes have changes? What were the learnings from going through these changes that you would want to share with others?

It causes you to take a closer look at how you oversee and govern your programmatic work. The model requires us to evaluate how it impacts resources from staff, budgets, partner investments and community engagement. It is similar to creating a structure for an “outside” organization within United Way. We provide internal expertise and work with partners to achieve shared outcome goals.

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?

The education ecosystem is complex and difficult to move. We know that one organization cannot do this work alone and make an impact at scale. As a partnership, we will have standing and a point of view about kids’ success. We have to create a college-going culture and a culturally relevant framework for all kids. This collective impact model will change the trajectory of kids – from birth to career – in our Thriving Together catchment area. These are our kids and are the economic future of our city and state.