Culture Matters: Using A Culture of Adaptive Learning to Implement Collective Impact

(Adapted from my post on Calibra-tion.ca**, and an article for** Engage! Magazine via Tamarack**)**

"We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time."

- T. S. Eliot

For the past three years I've had the fortune to work as the Network Weaver with the First 2000 Days Network leading strategy development and implementation, with a strong focus on culture development. The First 2000 Days Network is an initiative focused on improving outcomes for children in their first two thousand days of life, before they enter the formal school system. The impact of investing in early childhood development for society is significant: estimates put a minimum of a $1:8 return for early childhood development investments. Healthy child development - especially before the age of five - can have far reaching societal effects on school outcomes, job and workforce readiness, and crime prevention to name a few.

Working on this initiative has been a huge learning curve on so many fronts, especially in how to implement a Collective Impact initiative that supports an adaptive learning culture.

What makes the First 2000 Days Network unique?

When I began with the First 2000 Days Network, I knew very little about early childhood development, and even less about how the non-profit sector in Calgary functioned around this issue. There were so many nuances that signaled early-on that this would be a very different project:

- This was a new initiative, essentially in a 'start-up' phase in terms of its maturity. There was no staff, no strategic plan, and very little formal organizational capacity.
- No centralized organizational capacity or formal authority. The various functional roles of the initiative were widespread amongst many different players, not all working for a single agency or organization.
- No funding. At the beginning of my involvement, the initiative didn't have any project or sustainable funding to support its ongoing development. It was essentially an experiment with no guaranteed future.
- Use of two frameworks to guide implementation which required engaging stakeholders in two new ways of working using 1) network theory and 2) the Collective Impact framework.
- Supporting **how** work was being done, not just **what** was being done: my role was mostly about changing thinking and behaviour patterns, not executing the tactics of a work plan.

All of these factors meant there were high levels - and many types – of uncertainty at play. My role in helping to lead the development of the initiative shifted from trying to 'use' Collective Impact to focus on how to embed and integrate a culture adaptive learning. It was clear that no conventional work plan

was going to be able to match the very fluid, dynamic, complex set of challenges we were facing both internally and externally.
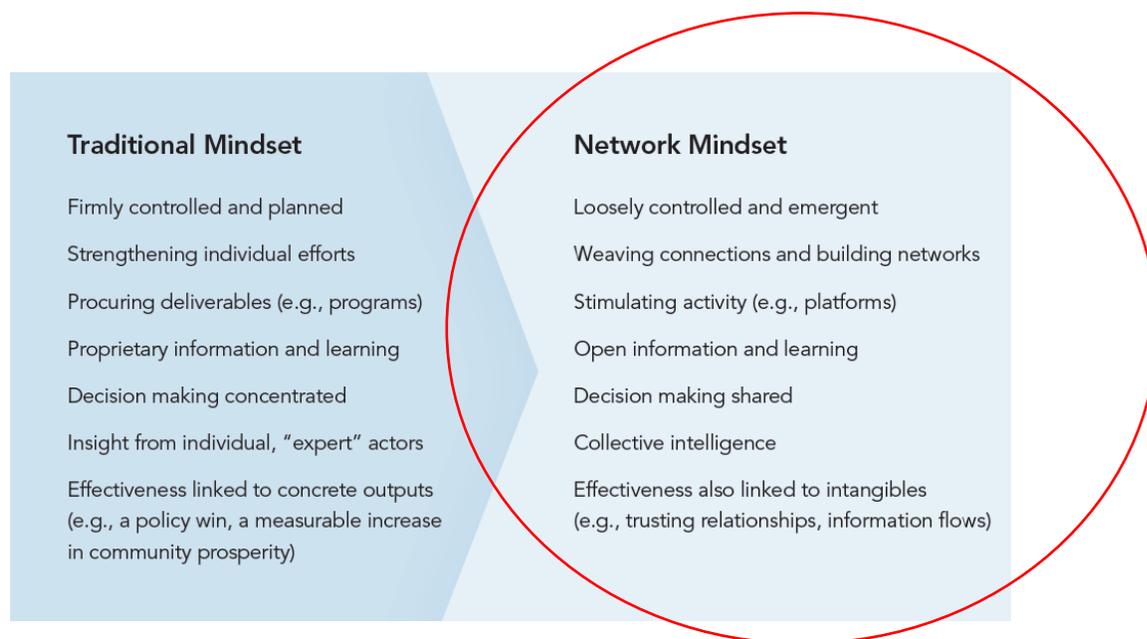
Personality of the First 2000 Days Network

Embedding network theory and the Collective Impact framework in the First 2000 Days Network had implications on our personality and how we functioned.

Essentially there are three features of the network approach used by the First 2000 Days Network that are important to highlight:

1. **The First 2000 Days Network skews strongly toward being an 'organic' network** (vs. a mandated one) This means that stakeholders engage in the First 2000 Days Network at their own will – they are not required to be there and do not 'report' into a formal authority structure.

2. **Networks, especially organic ones, function at the speed of trust[1].** Trust and perceived value amongst network participants is the 'currency' of networks. Therefore, the quality of the Network is indicated by the levels of trust and value amongst Network participants.

3. **The First 2000 Days Network is very focused on HOW network participants work together**, as much as on WHAT they were doing to improve the lives of children in Calgary.

The illustration below[2] lays out the differences between conventional approaches to organizational development, vs the 'network' way and reflects the First 2000 Days Network's culture:

Traditional Mindset

Firmly controlled and planned

Strengthening individual efforts

Procuring deliverables (e.g., programs)

Proprietary information and learning

Decision making concentrated

Insight from individual, "expert" actors

Effectiveness linked to concrete outputs (e.g., a policy win, a measurable increase in community prosperity)

Network Mindset

Loosely controlled and emergent

Weaving connections and building networks

Stimulating activity (e.g., platforms)

Open information and learning

Decision making shared

Collective intelligence

Effectiveness also linked to intangibles (e.g., trusting relationships, information flows)

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[1] The First 2000 Days Network used the PARTNER Tool to assess network strength and inform strategy.
http://www.ucdenver.edu/academics/colleges/spa/researchandoutreach/buechner%20institute%20for%20governance/centers/center%20for%20network%20leadership/tools/Pages/default.aspx
[2] http://www.monitorinstitute.com/downloads/what-we-think/catalyzing-networks/Catalyzing_Networks_for_Social_Change.pdf

Learning to Love Complexity: Collective Impact

If our efforts using Collective Impact to meet the First 2000 Days Network's mission of improving early childhood development outcomes has been successful to any degree, it is directly correlated to our ability to adapt the Collective Impact to our context, understand how it could function to support our work; and make judgements about where it can't. In our work to support social change, we've approached Collective Impact as an adaptive process, not a finished product.

A critical aspect of our approach has been a very strong focus on creating a culture of adaptive learning to support our work – especially within the Backbone team (more on this below). Our approach to adaptive learning and our evaluation methodology informs our strategy, not the other way around. This focus on adaptive learning has led to a greater tolerance and appreciation for ambiguity, and has also improved our collective capacity to assess, adapt, implement and learn from 'real time' feedback loops to inform the next iteration of our work.

Given the role of Network Theory and Collective Impact on the development of The First 2000 Days Network, the structure and functions we developed had a unique design. An illustration of our organizational structure - and essentially our change management approach - is below:

Network Structure: Linking Network & Collective Impact Functions
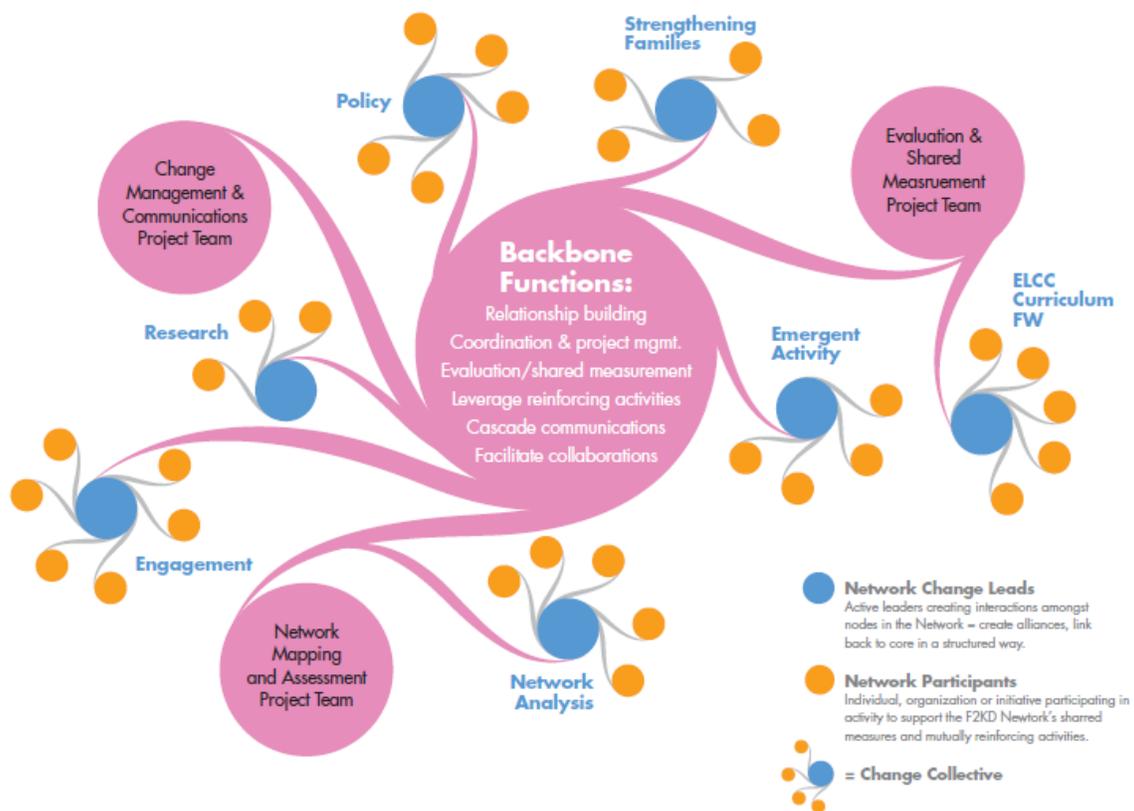
The image above illustrates both our Network's structure and the key functions of the Collective Impact framework. There is a team, called the Backbone, at the center of the Network that takes responsibility for leading key elements of the Collective Impact framework. Sometimes Backbone members are paid and sometimes they are volunteers. A paid role doesn't constitute or imply a different authority or responsibility than a voluntary role. In our case, the membership of that group was primarily made up of individuals who self-selected to the First 2000 Days Network and brought their skills to the table voluntarily.

As a way of linking the efforts of the Backbone team with key stakeholders in the early childhood development sector, we created feedback loops with other initiatives, organizations or individuals as a way of creating connections out into the broader ECD community, and feeding that work back into the Backbone, and back out again. Our 'Change Agents' and their links with the Change Collectives are self-led and self-managed, with learning links (feedback loops) built in to the Backbone activities. Results are fed into the Network's Learning & Evaluation Strategy to ensure coherence and fidelity.

A Culture of Adaptive Learning:

Given the high levels of uncertainty and the unique nature of the First 2000 Days Network, we took a number of approaches to ensure we were matching the change and organizational development efforts to the social change we were trying to achieve, as well as the organizational culture we were trying to create and foster:

1. *Be the Change***: Model the Behaviours You Want to See in Others**

Since Networks are built on trust, the core of our culture needed to be focused on trust. Building trust in an informal, mostly voluntary, immature organization is very time consuming, as it relies heavily on one-on-one relationships, built in different contexts over time. Part of building trust and the type of culture you strive for is to model the kinds of behaviours you want to create in the entity.

> *"(Employees and managers)…must learn how the very way they go about defining and solving problems can be a source of problems in its own right"* – Chris Argyris

Our culture is supported by our Guiding Principles, which guide our development, strategy, decision making and evaluation efforts. They also guide our daily interpersonal interactions with one another:

Guiding Principles

- **Trusting**: a focus on building trusting relationships
- **Collaborative**: shared responsibilities amongst the group to lead and contribute
- **Participatory**: many voices heard & opportunities to engage
- **Authentic**: planning, process and implementation are in-line with vision and purpose
- **Transparent**: access to information is shared, decision-making processes are known, status of actions is visible
- **Adaptive**: revisions are encouraged based on learning, changes in the environment and people involved.
- **Innovative**: demonstration of leadership, perseverance and courage to push against conventional barriers to achieving progress.

2. **SLOW and steady orientation. Repeat. Repeat.**

Creating and supporting a tolerance for very high investments of time. One of the structural components we initialized was a weekly meeting. That sounds like a given – but in an initiative with no formal leadership, no paid positions, voluntary participation and no plan – that is a HUGE ask. We knew enough to know that meeting once a month like many committees do would not be enough to move us forward, especially in terms of building a distinctive culture for the Network. We needed to try to build in characteristics of a highly effective team in the absence of knowing the game we were playing, and they only way we could do that was face-to-face, as often as possible.

We also focused on re-orienting people to the Network multiple times in multiple ways, and try to repeat the story of what we are and how we function as often as possible. The adage that people need to hear a message 9 times before it sinks in has held true in our experience. We do not perceive this as wasted time; on the contrary, we see the repetition as essential for building trust with a diversity of stakeholders.

3. **Invest in Adaptive Learning: (high tolerance for failure)**

A key part of the Network's culture is a focus on adaptive learning. This means being extremely tolerant of failure, supporting the need to test new ideas, creating space and time to integrate learning, supporting innovation and adaptation, and integrating reflective evaluation efforts at every level of the initiative. It also requires 'widesight, deepsight, hindsight and foresight': constantly assessing the changing situation and building the capacity in our team to meet the challenges and opportunities that come our way – even if that puts our very existence into question.

> *"…(because) so many professionals are almost always successful at what they do, they rarely experience failure. And because they have rarely failed, they have never learned how to learn from failure." –* Chris Argyris

4. **Learning & evaluation guide strategy, not the other way around:**

The Network's first formal hire was an evaluator, with the capacity not just to measure outcomes for kids (which would be a conventional success metric for an entity that exists to improve outcomes for kids) but who could also take a critical approach to the ongoing development of the Network, and feed that critical view to the Backbone team in order to inform the Network's strategies and priorities.

In conventional approaches you have a Board, or Steering Committee, who gets reported to on the developments of the project at regular time intervals. In our case, the 'board', steering committee and staff were all the same people: having the evaluator as an external set of eyes to observe and provide feedback loops on our development was key. This allowed us to eventually create a Strategic Development Plan that was informed not only by what kids need to grow up healthy and thriving; but to ensure the Network is healthy and thriving too.

5. **Demonstrate adaptation: (i.e. changing governance model, adapting the function of meetings)**

Because of the high levels of uncertainty, we were very aware of the need to be open to changing decisions quickly if they weren't working. One example is how we had 'inherited' a governance model that everyone initially accepted. Over time it became clear that we had a governance body before we knew what they were governing! For the Network, the existence of a Steering Committee was premature in the early days as the Backbone – or core team actually executing the work – wasn't at a stage where we could clearly articulate what we needed steering for, or when. We disbanded the initial governance structure after the first year and now match our governance more organically to our culture, and to what specific Change Collectives were in play at the time.

6. Linking quality engagement with capacity building:

Because we didn't have a conventional Strategic Plan to follow, our engagement strategy came from a mapping exercise that identified all of the key players in the Early Childhood Development system in Calgary – essentially those individuals or organization that held official positions of power or influence. It was very easy to fall back on thinking we needed to just go out, and 'engage' these players in the Network. On paper, this looked good, but in reality it often did not support the key aspect of a Network: building trust.

We took a step back from conventional stakeholder engagement and used our desired outcomes as our quality standards to guide a more proactive, deliberate (albeit slow!) engagement approach. This allowed us to prioritize our engagement efforts through building capacity in stakeholders to improve their performance against our idea of quality: quality for early childhood development and also for building a quality network and a quality collective impact initiative. Essentially, we used our quality standards to assess capacity building, which in turn informed our engagement approach. This cycle leads to increased capacity at an individual *and* Network level.

7. Shared measurement doesn't mean everyone shares the same measure:

In Collective Impact, one of the main framework elements is to develop a 'shared measurement' approach. One of the common traps of the term 'shared measure' is that people automatically assume that means everyone needs to measure the same thing. In our case, there were many debates about which specific aspects of early childhood development the Network should stand for. Was it literacy? Play? Maternal health? We realized early on that if we pegged the Network against forcing everyone to measure the same thing around Early Childhood Development that we would fail: why would a health agency get on board to measure literacy? They wouldn't. And yet, we knew we needed health at the table. So, instead of using 'shared measurement' as a top-down, single-source approach, we decided instead to focus on building the capacity of all the players around the table using a **shared approach to quality**. In essence, we use five promotive factors for child and family well-being – developed by the Center for the Study of Social Policy[3] - as our quality standard for what capacities should be built with Network participants which will ultimately improve their ability to serve and support children.

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[3] http://www.cssp.org/reform/strengtheningfamilies. See the Network's webinar on "Using Strengthening Families to Guide a Collective Impact Approach: Implications for Shared Measurement"

Lessons for Other Collective Impact Implementers:

As a result of working on the development of the First 2000 Days Network, I suggest there are several principles Collective Impact practitioners can use to improve the likelihood of success of building a strong culture to support sustained change:

- **Understand the nature of the challenge, including the types and sources of uncertainty.** Managing a mandated, top-down Collective Impact effort is going to present very different challenges than an organic, nimble, less-formal organization. Know what those differences are and the implications for your practice.

- **Pay as much attention to how you are supporting the culture of the project, as to what the project is about** (function vs. form). The project may have very specific and pre-determined outcomes but HOW you achieve those, in order to build sustained capacity for the project to succeed over time, is important.

- **True change requires a high level of tolerance for failure, messiness, adapting and learning**. Not all change projects are supported to do this or see this as a key feature of their process. Beware!

- **Don't understand too quickly**: if you are leading a network or change project, the worst thing you can do is assume you know what needs to happen. You might end up being right, but take the time to check your assumptions and engage in real conversation about what's needed for the network to make progress. Match your learning and actions to reality!

To learn more about how The First 2000 Days Network has structured their approach to implementing Collective Impact, you can read their case study "Establishing the pre-conditions for systems-level change in Early Childhood Development", visit their website and view their videos on strategy and capacity building on their YouTube channel.

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