Featured Story: Partners for a Competitive Workforce

“We think of our role as being the gas and the glue.” With these few words, Ross Meyer, the former executive director of Partners for a Competitive Workforce (PCW), offers all current and future practitioners a fine conceptual model of what a backbone organization *can* be – in order to make a collective impact initiative all that it *should* be.

**The gas:** “we’re here to help accelerate the efforts – to accelerate the collaboration so that we can go farther faster.” PCW provides backbone support and leadership for a collective impact initiative of the same name, which formed in 2008 with the aim of closing the workforce skills gap in Northern Kentucky, Cincinnati and Indiana. As the backbone, PCW helps coordinate the efforts of more than 150 partner organizations in three states, keeping all stakeholders focused on their common agenda while helping to align worker development with employer demand. Since this alignment is constantly changing as gains are made, PCW makes a point of being highly flexible in regards to strategy, allowing it to achieve “quick wins” while simultaneously keeping the entire initiative relevant and vibrant.

**The glue:** “we are the backbone to hold all these efforts together.” Although PCW adheres closely to the five conditions of collective impact, it has found some of its greatest successes through its implementation of a shared measurement system – but these successes did not come easily, or quickly. Indeed, it took years for PCW just to get its partners to agree on outcomes, and to convince them that a continually-updated shared database would work to everyone’s benefit. Today, more than 100,000 client records are stored within that database, and PCW is not only able to look deeply into the data to see what types of services are leading to better outcomes, but also to see which interventions are coming up short, which allows successes to be built upon and roadblocks to be surmounted.

**The gains:** as PCW was beginning its work, fully 50% of area businesses were having difficulty finding high-quality talent in the local market, despite a regional unemployment rate approaching 9%. In the years since, nearly 6,500 workers have received training for in-demand jobs – and many of those workers have seen their annual income rise by as much as $9,000 per year.

“There are a lot of good things happening in our community. Our role is to provide leadership, resources and support” – and in so doing, a backbone organization allows its community to find
its own solutions to its problems. Ross Meyer and PCW have laid the groundwork for future successes, and have proven how collective impact can change lives.