Harnessing the Power Source for Collective Impact: Mutually Reinforcing Activities
By Bill Barberg, President of Insightformation, Inc.

The Importance of Mutually Reinforcing Activities

It seems like everyone in the social sector is talking about Collective Impact these days. But achieving the potential is much harder than just talking about it. Coalitions aspiring to achieve Collective Impact can enhance their likelihood of success by recognizing that not all of the five conditions for Collective Impact[i] are equal. A **common agenda**, **shared measurement**, **continuous communications** and **backbone support** are all great. But, unless they lead to harnessing the power of **mutually reinforcing activities**, the desired impact will almost certainly fall short of the aspirations. Kramer and Kania explain this condition by stating that "Participant activities must be differentiated while still being coordinated through a mutually reinforcing plan of action."[ii]

It should come as no surprise that effectively managing mutually reinforcing activities is usually the most challenging part of achieving Collective Impact. This is where the actions happen, where resources are deployed, and where sharing and trust are required. The mutually reinforcing activities are where the proverbial rubber meets the road. Communities can spend countless hours in agreeing on a common agenda, deciding on shared measures and having endless communication meetings organized by a backbone organization and still end up with very little to show in the way of mutually reinforcing activities. Each organization can still work in isolation with fragmentation, redundancy and poor alignment hindering their progress and standing in the way of the teamwork that would lead to breakthrough results.

There is no simple switch to flip to make organizations work together in mutually-reinforcing ways. It is hard work, but the payoffs can be enormous. First, many organizations can experience both savings and enhanced results when they team up and leverage each of their organization's strengths. Consider the following real-world example:

> Two different organizations were providing "bundled services" (meals, shopping, pharmacy and book delivery as well as companionship and light homemaking) to senior citizens in the same geographic area. One organization was very efficient at delivery, but had high

administrative costs related to scheduling. The second organization was great at scheduling but had high delivery costs. By bringing the two organizations together (without merging or eliminating one of them), they were able to support each other with their strengths. The net result was nearly twice as many senior citizens being served by this team. The expanded reach of both organizations working together in a mutually reinforcing way was a great improvement for each organization and for the community.

Second, it is possible to realize significant accomplishments with minimal funding when underutilized community assets are engaged and harnessed to contribute to the success of a larger strategy. Many organizations and individuals do not work toward achieving priority community outcomes because they feel they lack the ability to be successful in a world that emphasizes and funds *isolated impact* interventions. By themselves, they can't deliver measureable improvements in the outcomes, so they can't get funded and don't see a clear role in contributing to the success of others. By intentionally identifying ways that different organization can play a supporting role to a larger strategy, vast amounts of resources that have not previously been involved with advancing a particular issue can become important contributors to success. A faith community may bring close relationships and trusted advisors to help reach a disadvantaged population that needs the services of another organization. A local business may offer an auditorium for an event, or students from a local college can staff an event. These underutilized community assets are typically much more abundant than actual dollars that may be provided to address a particular issue.

In order to increase mutually reinforcing activities regarding a particular issue, backbone organizations should intentionally look for how the efforts and aspirations of existing organizations can be aligned and harnessed to use their unique and differentiated strengths to work as part of a larger team. By blending an Asset-Based Community Development[iii] mindset with the other conditions of Collective Impact, communities may tap into a goldmine of local resources that don't come with all of the typical funding-associated encumbrances.

Our work to break the cycle of poverty and poor health in government-subsidized apartments in Detroit relies heavily on tapping into fragmented or under-utilized resources to accomplish what would not be successful if done independently. The following example illustrates how to engage and weave together various community assets to increase healthy eating among the residents.

The property management firm donated on-going use of a community room for a faith-based mobile farmers' market to bring produce to people living in a food desert. A church then provided volunteers to help coordinate a "pot-luck salad bar" where residents could each contribute one item (some lettuce, a couple tomatoes, etc.) to create an economical and healthy feast. Residents were trained to volunteer at the on-site famers' market and lead the salad bar lunch in order to reduce the cost of the vegetables and improve the sustainability of the weekly pot-luck lunch. An area non-profit also funded a "Double-Up Food Bucks" program so residents were able to purchase an extra $10 worth of fresh, local produce when they spent $10 worth of their SNAP benefits at the on-site farmers' market. Another non-profit organization seeking to provide youth with summer jobs recruited the youth to do outreach to the residents living in the apartment properties to participate in the pot-luck salad lunch and to raise awareness of the Double-Up Food Bucks program at the farmers' market. A food justice alliance that was seeking to engage residents of low-income communities in discussions on food systems and improving healthy eating began holding their discussions at the Friday pot-luck lunches rather than try to assemble people in the community for a separate meeting. Finally, a volunteer call center, staffed by apartment residents, called targeted families to let them know about the pot-luck salad bar, the Double-Up Food Bucks program and about a music class for children that was offered after the lunch (by another volunteer) to attract more families to participate.
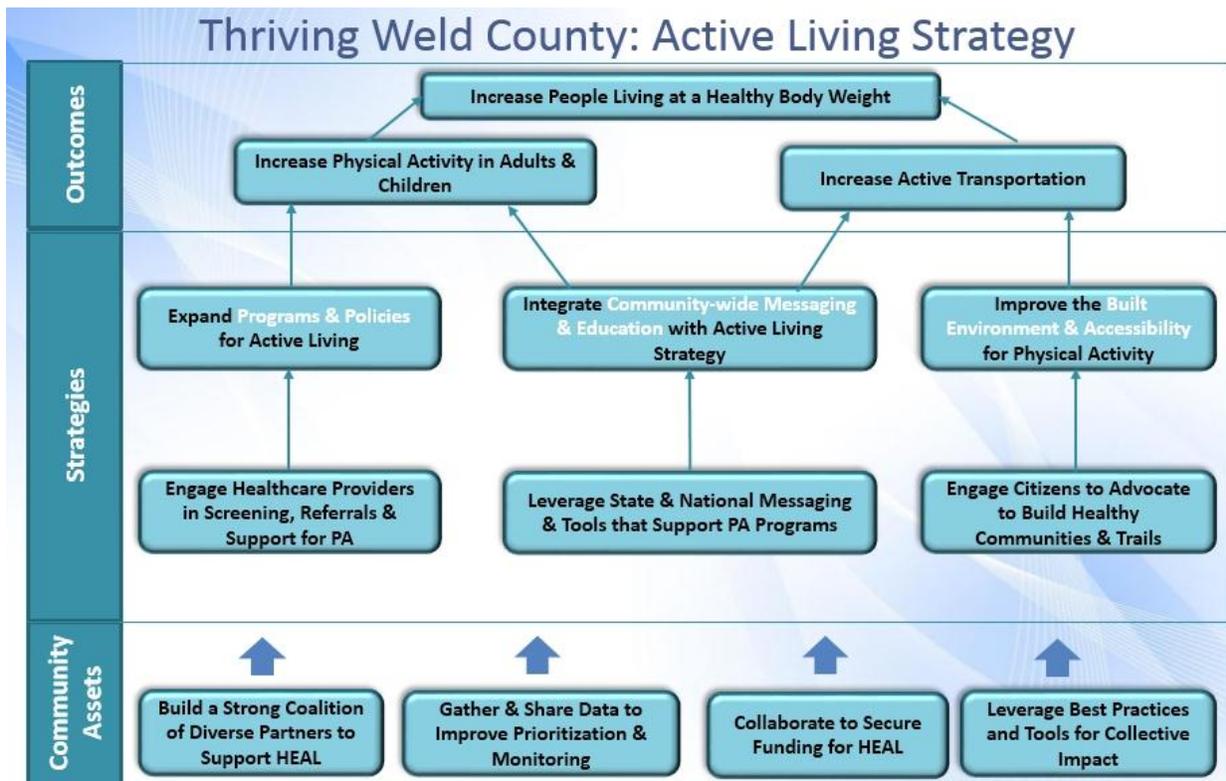
Each of these activities by themselves would not have had much impact. Combining them in mutually reinforcing ways enabled impact and built valuable momentum over the summer of 2014 with minimal funding. Each of the "assets" that became part of this team increased their own success while also increasing the effectiveness and impact of the overall approach. The progress made in 2014 is being built on in 2015 as we continue to tap into more existing community resources and add more mutually reinforcing activities.

Shifting from an Organization-Centric to a Community-Centric Strategic Planning Process
The concept of organizations working as a team makes logical sense to most organization leaders, but few leaders have experience in optimizing their role in a broader community coalition. Even when Collective Impact is the stated goal, the planning processes that are most commonly used by government and community organizations tend to minimize the degree to which mutually reinforcing activities take place. Strategic planning processes for non-profit, government and other

community organizations almost always revolve around the needs and vision of the *individual organization*. Lacking a process to develop innovative multi-organization teamwork, organizations naturally gravitate to an inward-focused process that involves their own budgets and departmental structures and what they can accomplish on their own.

In contrast, the community-focused strategic planning process and alignment techniques provide a systematic way to enable multiple organizations to find their most productive role in a larger, shared strategy. This process starts with community stakeholders coming together to identify priority outcomes that they want to work on as a community and then defining the key strategies for the community (not any one organization) to accomplish those desired outcomes. These outcomes and strategies are ideally displayed in the form of a strategy map for that priority issue.

Thriving Weld County: Active Living Strategy

Outcomes

Increase People Living at a Healthy Body Weight

Increase Physical Activity in Adults & Children

Increase Active Transportation

Strategies

Expand Programs & Policies for Active Living

Integrate Community-wide Messaging & Education with Active Living Strategy

Improve the Built Environment & Accessibility for Physical Activity

Engage Healthcare Providers in Screening, Referrals & Support for PA

Leverage State & National Messaging & Tools that Support PA Programs

Engage Citizens to Advocate to Build Healthy Communities & Trails

Community Assets

Build a Strong Coalition of Diverse Partners to Support HEAL

Gather & Share Data to Improve Prioritization & Monitoring

Collaborate to Secure Funding for HEAL

Leverage Best Practices and Tools for Collective Impact

The strategy map creates a visualization of the strategy, with a general cause and effect logic that flows from the bottom to the top. In the above example, this same strategy map is used by all of the major members of the North Colorado Health Alliance, including the health department, hospitals, United Way, schools and other non-profit organizations. This co-created strategy map is their framework for organizing measures and mutually reinforcing activities.

Getting SMARTer about Defining Objectives

A major step in helping a coalition co-create a strategy that weaves together mutually reinforcing activities is to change the structure of how the strategy is defined. Most organizations are trained in defining their strategy as a series of SMART Objectives that are Specific, Measureable, Actionable, Realistic and Time-Bound. An example SMART Objective is "Increase the percentage of schools participating in Safe Routes to Schools by 5%, by 2018." While it is difficult to argue against any of the concepts that spell out the word SMART, the structure tends to focus organizations on their own efforts rather than on how they can collaborate in mutually-reinforcing ways. A coalition can significantly increase collaboration if they unbundle each of the SMART attributes into a structure that separately defines the Objective, Measure, Target and Initiatives (OMTI). This structure has been refined over the past 25 years in the field of strategy management, and it greatly enhances the journey to improve teamwork and define mutually reinforcing activities. The key elements of OMTI are defined as follows:

> **Objective:** This describes the desired change (but not how it will be measured, nor the work that will be done to accomplish the change). Some may be described as "outcome objectives" or "driver objectives" or have other labels, but they are all objectives that have similar informational characteristics.

> **Measure:** This clearly defines how progress in accomplishing the Objective will be measured and tracked over time, but it is separate from the target, which may be different across geographies or population sub-sets and may require several more discussions to establish.

> **Target:** This is not just a single target, but a time series of targets that allows for measure progress to be continually compared with time-specific targets and thus facilitates making appropriate adjustments in real time.

> **Initiatives** (or projects or activities): This is what people or organizations *do*. These can be measured by % complete. Accountability is often given to specific organizations or people.

There are several reasons it is important to define the strategic objectives, measures, targets and initiatives independently from one another:

> 1. Advantages of defining objectives before defining the measures

a. **Easier consensus building and prioritizing.** A coalition can much more easily reach a consensus on and prioritize objectives if they are not complicated by how they will be measured, what the targets are or what the activities are that will be launched to achieve it. Reaching consensus on objectives is a very important step that will help bring diverse coalition members together to develop mutually reinforcing activities.

b. **Measures can be changed without changing objectives.** There are many ways to measure most strategic objectives, and none of the potential measures are likely to be perfect. For example, some are difficult to get data for or can be easily manipulated or "gamed." It may also be decided at a later date that a different measure is better. For these reasons, it is valuable to clarify the details of the objective before worrying about how to measure it.

c. **Keeps the focus on objectives open and broad.** A premature emphasis on the measure can end up creating blinders that narrow the focus from the real desire of the community (such as improving the quality of clinical care) to only the narrow aspect of that objective that is being measured (such as the % of patients who are prescribed aspirin at discharge). This overly-narrow focus on some specific measureable aspect of the objective can cause potential mutually-reinforcing activities that would support the objective to be ignored.

d. **Allows for long term objectives.** Collaboration on important strategic objectives should involve consistent effort for several years. Efforts toward achieving significant community outcomes like chronic disease reduction or educational success should not be switched from year to year if a community wants to get results. The details of the actions (initiatives) should be frequently reviewed and updated, but the objectives should ideally be part of a stable framework around which to align the efforts of a cross-sector coalition of many organizations. If the SMART objectives include the specific actions that will be completed by certain dates, then the stability of the framework of objectives is compromised and large amounts of time will likely be wasted in redefining the objectives (and measures) when all that usually needs to change are the initiatives that will be done next to help accomplish the objective.

2. Advantage of defining measures and independent from the targets:

   a. Conversations among coalition members are simplified and accelerated if measures are refined and agreed on before shifting the discussion to targets. Discussions on targets involve many different motivations which can dominate the discussions on measures. People are worried about what they will be accountable for, if they can control enough factors to hit the target, if they can make a case for an easier target, and other such issues that complicate the process of selecting and clearly defining the measures.

   b. Separating the definition of the measure from the target allows for different targets for specific sub-geographies or sub-populations (like ethnic groups).

   c. There can be differing opinions on how aggressive a target should be, but that discussion should not interfere with building consensus on the measure.

3. Advantages of agreeing on objectives, measures, and (ideally) target(s) before agreeing on which initiatives to prioritize as mutually reinforcing activities.

   a. Typically, many initiatives will need to be undertaken by many different organizations over many years to make the desired progress on achieving the objectives. Attempting to embed the objective and the activity in the same statement (along with the measure and target) will generally either lead to doing some simple, isolated task that will be insufficient to accomplish the desired objective, or it will be so vague that it won't drive meaningful actions by the relevant organizations and will be impractical to monitor.

   b. Once there is a general consensus on what objectives should be accomplished, *then* it is much easier to align and leverage the potential actions of different organizations. Instead of each organization working to advance their own agendas and interests, they need to make the case for how they support the co-created strategy (which is now described in significant detail).

   c. Defining the objectives, measures and targets establishes a rational foundation on which to prioritize initiatives. This is helpful for sensibly allocating funding. Completing the other steps first is also an ideal way to proactively harness available

community assets in mutually-reinforcing ways to achieve collective impact and do more with less.

By separating the attributes of SMART objectives and replacing the typical SMART objective statement with the OMTI model, the objectives become much SMARTer, and it becomes easier to have more mutually reinforcing activities. Once the high-level strategy is agreed to, the coalition can collectively determine the contribution each individual organization can best make to achieve the objectives on the Strategy Map that they all helped create.

Supporting Mutually Reinforcing Activities though Publicly-visible "Community Compacts"
An important step toward Collective Impact is when multiple organizations can identify differentiated and mutually-reinforcing ways that they can work together. Unfortunately, in many cases, those commitments often are not solidified and made public. Without that added level of clarity and accountability, inward-focused pressures can lead to organizations failing to follow through on the good intentions to collaborate. As informal agreements fade into forgotten promises, it is not surprising that it becomes increasingly difficult to establish more mutually reinforcing activities, and organizations return their focus to efforts that don't depend on the actions of others.

In contrast, some communities have adopted a technique of taking a couple of extra steps to greatly increase the likelihood of the good ideas for collaboration turning into the successes that lead to increased trust and expanded collaboration. When multiple organizations work out a plan to work together in mutually-reinforcing ways, those expectations can be clarified in simple documents called a "Community Compacts Agreements" or "Handshake Agreements" that can be made easily available to the community via a Website or on-line Strategy Management platform. This added step of improving clarity, commitment and transparency greatly increases the likelihood of real action taking place.

Mutually reinforcing activities are a critical component of the Collective Impact process that lead to better use of funding and enhanced results. Using a framework that focuses on mutually agreed upon objectives first, before developing the measures, targets and initiatives, allows for a better real time process for identifying and prioritizing mutually reinforcing activities. Making the mutually reinforcing activities visible to stakeholders further augments successful Collective Impact.

About the Author

Bill Barberg, president of Insightformation, Inc., is a globally-recognized expert on Collective Impact, collaborative strategy execution and strategic measurement systems. He has recently presented on best practices for achieving Collective Impact at multiple national conferences and has consulted with a wide variety of organizations and coalitions on collaborative efforts to improve health, environmental, and other community issues. Scorecard and performance expert, James Creelman, author of the recent book, "More with Less: Maximizing Value in the Public Sector" described Mr. Barberg as a "global thought leader" on the topic and stated that "his knowledge of the do's and don'ts of building scorecards is as good as anyone in the world, and some of his innovations (especially around creating space for partner collaborations) are simply unrivalled." LinkedIn 3/30/12   Bill can be reached at bill.barberg@insightformation.com

[i] Kramer & Kania, Stanford Social Innovation Review http://www.ssireview.org/articles/entry/collective_impact

[ii] Kramer & Kania http://www.ssireview.org/articles/entry/collective_impact

[iii] See ABCD Institute http://www.abcdinstitute.org/