The Important Role of Intermediaries in Collective Impact Work

Sam Piha, a veteran of the afterschool field and founder of Temescal Associates, recently developed a paper on the role of intermediary organizations, which often provide backbone supports in collective impact efforts. For that paper he interviewed Karen Pittman, CEO of the Forum for Youth Investment, about the important role that intermediaries play in collective impact work. They think it’s a conversation worth sharing.

Piha: Are intermediary organizations important for the implementation of comprehensive community initiatives? If so, why?

Pittman: My general answer is yes. Comprehensive community initiatives are only successful when the community has some capacity to manage and articulate between layers. There are multiple layers, starting with youth and families; the direct service providers (especially small, independent CBOS who are not embedded in systems and may, in fact, have contracts or contact with multiple systems); the systems that fund, manage and run programs; public and private funders; businesses; and top decision makers.

Intermediaries come into being to help achieve more efficient, effective relationships between layers. Mature intermediaries essentially take on many of the functions of systems: standards-setting, quality assurance, training, advocacy, fund development, data collection.

In many communities, these and other established intermediaries are the main candidates to take on the “backbone” functions described in the community impact approach. The question many communities ask is whether they should create a new backbone organization or designate an existing intermediary as the backbone. The answer, we have learned, is [that] it depends. This is why we have developed a backbone support assessment survey to provide community decision makers with an objective way to assess the capacities of any intermediaries that want to throw their hats in the ring.

The goal is to make sure the backbone functions are covered. In communities with multiple intermediaries, there is a likelihood that the best solution is a hybrid one. One intermediary is selected to play core roles, with others playing clearly defined adjunct roles.

Piha: What do you believe are three or four of the most important intermediary functions?

Pittman: FSG identified six core functions (updated in its July 2012 SSIR article): 1) guide vision and strategy, 2) support aligned activities, 3) establish shared measurement practices, 4) build public will, 5) advance policy and 6) mobilize funding. Not only do I think these are the right functions, I think they have them listed in the right order. If the first three functions aren’t done correctly, it’s very difficult to do the second three.

Piha: What do you believe are the most important characteristics that one should look for when doing a search for an intermediary organization?

Pittman: It’s easy to answer the question with a tautology: The most important characteristics are the ability to perform the six functions. The question answered by assessing an existing backbone organization’s ability to execute the functions is How Effective? The question answered by intermediaries’ ability to perform the backbone functions is How Ready?
Based on both a literature review and our extensive field experience, we developed a list of 32 specific capacities. We use factor analysis to identify the clusters for each community. In the most recent use [in one community that we work with], the analysis extracted five clusters of capacities:

- staff skills (e.g., experienced staff who can facilitate, plan, advocate, use data, communicate)
- connecting (e.g., with influential leaders at different levels, with similar work happening at different levels)
- capacity (e.g., organizational capacity to be accountable, convene, be a fiscal home, ensure dedicated staffing, be trusted with the work)
- funding (e.g., help acquire funding for the infrastructure and the action plan)
- teamwork (e.g., help establish guidelines for governing, align efforts, broker competing priorities)

The respondents in this survey provided information that rated individual intermediaries on these strengths. That information also allowed us to calculate the importance of each of the strengths. Capacity, connecting and staff skills were the top three, with teamwork coming in fourth. I would agree with this ordering.

Piha: What, in your experience are the greatest challenges that an intermediary organization will face? What, if any, are solutions to avoiding these challenges?

Pittman: When the decision is made to select an existing intermediary to play this role, the challenge is not just about the capacity. For a mature intermediary, the hidden challenges are often negotiating the fit (for example, if the geographic footprint or the target population of the initiative is slightly different than that of the intermediary) and demonstrating neutrality. The solution is to be transparent about these tensions up front and to develop mechanisms that help the governing group and the partners check for signs of stress.

Piha: What do you believe are the most common reasons that intermediary organizations fail? Succeed?

Pittman: When we’ve seen failure or stagnation, it’s usually because the key staff position was badly filled. There may have been other staff who were competent, but when the leadership position was given to the wrong person. This position, when filled correctly, is the main reason why the intermediary succeeds, assuming that there is adequate funding and a respectful governing board.

Some people think nonprofit boards are too slow to take corrective action to remove an ineffective CEO. Initiative governing boards are easily twice as slow. There are three reasons for this: a) it often is not clear that they have the authority to do so, since they hired the backbone organization, not the staff director; b) it often is not clear what success looks like. This is such new work, there are not clear benchmarks; c) it is often politically awkward to do so. We strongly recommend that three-month, six-month, one-year performance criteria be developed for both the backbone organization and the staff director.

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