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Who Gets the Credit for Collective Impact?

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How Do Grantmakers Balance Accountability with True Collaboration?

In the past few years, two established practices of philanthropy—competitive funding and rigorous evaluation of individual programs—have been called into question[1]. Typical competitive funding practices tend to undermine collaboration and create an environment where organizations that should be part of the same team instead become bitter rivals, each hoping that their “competitors” will fail. Practices that are sensible in an era of limited resources—sharing data or aligning efforts to reach a targeted population—can seem like a plan for organizational suicide if they reduce the likelihood of winning future grants. A well-intended competitive approach to giving out grants can thus be counter-productive[2]. Similarly, efforts to rigorously evaluate grantees and examine data to establish the impact of isolated programs are increasingly seen to be of limited value when addressing complex, entrenched issues such as poverty and chronic disease that require a robust mix of actions, policies, and environmental changes to achieve sustainable success[3].

Typically, after funds are awarded to a grantee, evaluators and program managers spend long hours scrutinizing grantee reports to determine whether the programs they are funding have an impact and deserve continued or expanded funding. In response, non-profit and government organizers learn to equate survival to proving that THEY get the credit. A dysfunctional community environment is thus created where everyone is competing to deliver “isolated impact” programs for which they can provide solid evidence of their responsibility for improved outcomes. The resulting fragmentation and redundancy wastes resources and produces sub-optimal outcomes.

In the context of that frustration, the social sector has seen a rapid rise in the popularity of Collective Impact—a common sense concept that is also backed by credible research[4]. Complex social problems cannot be solved by “isolated impact” of individual organizations or programs. Regardless of the extent of analysis or rigor of controlled studies, there is no silver bullet to be discovered and scaled up for the “grand challenges” that many funders seek to impact. Success with most complex social issues depends on broad, multi-sector, multi-organization teamwork—starting with three of the five conditions for achieving Collective Impact: a common agenda and shared measurement powered by mutually-reinforcing activities. These three conditions are enabled by two other conditions that define the Collective Impact approach: Continuous Communication and Backbone Support. With improved coordination, a large number of organizations can work as a team, each contributing to a collective effort in ways that leverage the strengths of each organization.

BUT WHO GETS THE CREDIT?

Some would say that if there is true Collective Impact, then no organization can claim the credit or take the blame for the results. Since most current funding models are based on demonstrating who gets credit, how can funders make rational decisions and hold grantees accountable in the world of Collective Impact? Should funders just give money to anyone who claims to take credit for some

good outcome? Will we need mountains of data and super-computers crunching the statistics to try to assign credit?

Recognizing contributions in collective efforts may be a new and daunting challenge in the social sector, but it has been successfully addressed in other sectors. Individuals in all roles in the social sector—funders, evaluators, service providers, and researchers—can learn from how others have addressed these challenges. This article looks at two examples—large corporations and sports teams—to identify some practical lessons.

Example 1: Who Gets the Credit for Outcomes in a Large Business Corporation?

Imagine a large medical device manufacturer that desires to assign resources and bonus compensation in ways that support their desired outcome—growing profits. After a successful quarter, the sales people could claim that THEY get the credit because they closed the sales. The marketing department could claim that the success was due to THEIR research, social media campaigns, and alliance-building. The product development department could claim that THEIR game-changing innovation led to success. The list of contributors who could claim the credit goes on and on.

Who gets the credit? How should resources be allocated and who receives the bonuses? How can there be accountability if the results depend on the coordinated teamwork of so many players? In many respects, the hypothetical company's success is a corporate version of Collective Impact. With a common agenda, shared measurement, and mutually-reinforcing activities, each department contributed to the positive outcome. Success depended on teamwork—or alignment—among the various departments. Consequently, having each department compete for the credit (and funding) by allocating 10% of their budget to evaluation and development of a strong and compelling case for their singularly predominant role in the success would be a management disaster.

Over the past few decades, as the complexity of businesses grew and the problems of organizational silos within these large corporations became an increasing problem, learning how to assign credit, allocate resources and reward success became a big priority. After over 25 years of wrestling with these challenges, many issues that are proving to be a frustrating quagmire for social sector ecosystems have been successfully addressed by the business community. For execution, alignment, performance management, strategic measurement, and getting results, the most popular and evidence-based framework is the work of Harvard Business School's Dr. Robert Kaplan and David Norton. Since their ground-breaking article in 1992's Harvard Business Review on "The Balanced Scorecard,"^[5] these two men have established an enduring approach that has been validated in countless research reports, refined in their five books, and incorporated as an essential part of business leadership training.

In their approach, instead of focusing on which functional departments get credit for the outcome (profit), successful large corporations focus on how well each department contributes to execution of the organization's strategy. The strategy is analogous to a recipe that defines the many ingredients that will lead to a good outcome. A well-defined strategy clarifies the role and most important contributions of each department that contributes to the strategy. In high-performing, strategy-focused organizations, processes for budgeting, bonuses and decision-making are all aligned around strategy maps and processes that promote strategy execution. In their fifth book, *The Execution Premium*[6], Kaplan & Norton provide many examples of the dramatic improvements that organizations of all types experience when they embrace this approach and achieve improved alignment. In this strategy-centered approach, resource allocation and rewards are based on a combination of performance in specific roles and in the overall success of the organization.

Example 2: Who Gets the Credit for the Success of a Sports Team?

Most team sports depend heavily on the type of teamwork that characterizes successful Collective Impact—many players in various positions contribute in differentiated and mutually-reinforcing ways to help the team reach higher levels of success than they would without this alignment. In football, alignment involves a common agenda (a strategy or play) and continuous communication—typically guided by the quarterback who calls the play and who may shout out audible adjustments based on the circumstances. When a team achieves victory, who gets the credit? The quarterback who throws the ball? The receiver who catches it? The coach? Every player—both on and off the field—contributed to the collective success. To align and optimize their efforts, they used a clear, big-picture strategy (influencing choices like the types of players that are drafted and the type of practices the coaches led) and detailed strategies for individual plays that provided guidance for each player on the field. If players were only evaluated and rewarded for the points they scored, then teamwork would break down. While a team may recognize the “Most Valuable Player” for any specific game, those players know they are part of a carefully-crafted team effort. In short, evaluation and rewards for sports team players are based on their success in their specific roles *and* the success of the overall team.

Practical Application for Funders and the Social Sector

In both examples above, evaluating and rewarding the various individuals and functions depends on having a clearly-defined strategy that clarifies specific roles and contributions. This larger unifying strategy is the essential—but often missing—element for optimizing resource allocation, evaluation, accountability and rewards in the social sector. Instead of using a time-consuming and inefficient competitive approach for allocating funding to individual organizations or programs, funders should consider investing in convening a multi-sector coalition to co-create a strategy that maximizes the combined value of many organizations that can contribute to long-term success. Instead of a logic model that is designed to evaluate an individual program, funders should consider funding the

collaborative development and use of strategy maps that help many different organizations work as a team. When the strategy and roles of specific organizations are clearly defined, evaluation can occur at multiple levels. Are specific organizations accomplishing their role in the larger strategy? Is the strategy working, or do adjustments need to be made? Is there the need (or opportunity) to add additional community organizations that may enhance the success of a struggling performer who is in a vital role?

Suppose a program to teach high school students to cook healthy meals with fresh vegetables is not achieving the desired outcome of reducing obesity among youth in a community. Should funding be pulled from that program, or should the larger strategy (or lack of strategy) be examined, adjusted and improved? The training program may be excellent, but perhaps there are weaknesses in outreach to potential participants. Maybe there is an image problem—that the classes aren't cool—or transportation obstacles that prevent interested youth from participating. The most sensible and economical solution may involve collaboration with many other community stakeholders and programs that could enhance the success of this isolated program by making it part of a larger strategy. Only after considering the program in the context of a larger strategy would funders be in a position to make solid evaluation and resource allocation decisions. If an assessment reveals that the design or quality of the program is a primary contributor to the lack of success, it could be replaced with a program that has a better design and that may better integrate with existing community efforts.

Asking a Different Question

In many ways, the question of “Who gets the credit?” is the wrong question. It is based on assumptions that programs and organizations achieve results on their own. For funding and evaluation practices to encourage—rather than hinder—Collective Impact, they should put a greater emphasis on shared strategies and contributions from a larger number of cross-sector stakeholders. Some of the resources that are spent on evaluation should be shifted to improving collaborative strategic planning and on-going strategy management. Then, participants can be evaluated and rewarded based on their performance in their roles in the strategy. In addition, participants should receive funding for active involvement in strategy development and refinement, as well as for being part of a team that achieves the overall desired outcome. Performance and outcomes are still expected and required, but the performance is not based on individual organizations demonstrating that they deserve sole credit for the outcomes.

[1] SSIR article: Strategic Philanthropy for a Complex World, Summer 2014

[2] CommunityCommons.org, Collective Impact Hub white paper on “Shifting away from

Counterproductive Funding Models, October 2012.

[3] SSIR article on Channeling Change: Making Collective Impact Work, January 2012

[4] SSIR articles on Collective Impact (above and Collective Impact, Winter 2011)

[5] The Balanced Scorecard – Measures that Drive Performance, Harvard Business Review, January 1992

[6] The Execution Premium, Robert S. Kaplan and David Norton, 2008 Harvard Business School Publishing Corporation

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