

Collaboration

Bringing Soul to the Work of Collective Impact

Leaders must be steadfast in their efforts to achieve results that advance equity—just and fair inclusion into a society in which all can participate, prosper, and reach their full potential.

By [Michael McAfee](#) | Oct. 13, 2015

Something special is happening in America. Community leaders are not only talking about equity, but also redefining the frontiers of work that we must do to achieve it. These leaders play an important role in social change, because they can authentically reflect the wisdom, voice, and experience of communities experiencing poverty, especially communities of color. And through their actions, they can demonstrate their steadfast commitment to dismantle barriers to opportunity and advance racial inclusion. Equity is not an abstract concept; it is something that leaders and communities live, breathe, and feel to their core. This passion, knowledge, sense of urgency, and commitment to advance racial inclusion infuses soul into the work of **collective impact—broad, cross-sector coordination**. Like many others, I am on a journey to infuse this soul into my own collective impact work.

Leadership Matters

I joined [PolicyLink](#)—a national research and action institute that advances economic and social equity through the idea of “Lifting Up What Works,”—as the director of the [Promise Neighborhoods Institute at PolicyLink](#) (PNI) in 2011. My aim was to put the collective impact framework into action by supporting local leaders who were working in multi-sector community collaborations to improve the educational and developmental outcomes of children. I struggled with implementing the framework because, while the “**five conditions**” of the approach—common agenda, shared measurement systems, continuous communication, mutually reinforcing activities, and backbone support organizations—were the right conditions, they were insufficient for the work at hand. As I assembled the PNI **backbone functions** to support more than 60 communities in the United States and abroad, I had several demoralizing realizations. First, even if we did good programmatic work, we might see only small-scale impact. Second, structural racism—systems in which public policies, institutional practices, cultural

representations, and other norms reinforce and perpetuate racial inequity—might end up trumping any progress we made. This meant I could not “hold neutral,” as the framework directs backbones to do, and simply build capacity that ensured compliance with the terms of the federal Promise Neighborhoods grants. I had to use my role to do more than good small-scale work. I had the power to express a point of view about being of service to the 14.7 million children experiencing poverty—and I had the agency to take action!

I decided that I had to honor what residents living in divested communities have been demanding for years—that we craft sustainable solutions commensurate with the scale of the problems they face—**population-level impact**. And I had to share accountability for the same **10 results and 15 indicators** as my colleagues on the ground. With that decision, my path became clear. I abandoned myself to the strength of the PNI partners, PolicyLink, the **Harlem Children’s Zone**, and the **Center for the Study of Social Policy**. In partnership with leaders from across the country, the PNI partners articulated a point of view about how PNI would step up our ambition, performance, and leadership as a national backbone organization by infusing equity through all aspects of our collective impact work. For us, operationalizing the collective impact framework while infusing equity throughout included:

- **Results:** Achieving population-level impact
- **Moving from talk to action:** Using an evidence-based, disciplined approach for getting results
- **Data:** Using data for learning, continuous improvement, and shared accountability
- **Scope, scale, and sustainability:** Building local, comprehensive, and integrated systems of support from cradle-to-career (scope); implementing solutions that transform the lives of least 65 percent of the children within the Promise Neighborhood (scale); and implementing the right mix of solutions that include families contributing to a solution, consistently high-quality programs and services, and systems and policy changes—all of which must continue beyond any one grant cycle (sustainability).



Equity and Collective Impact

This series shares perspectives on the importance of embedding an explicit focus on equity throughout any collective impact effort.



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When I reimagined how to take up my role in this way, my spirit awakened. And today, I remain energized, because in choosing to achieve population-level impact by taking on the toughest adaptive work of our time—making systems and policy changes that substantially improve the quality of life for entire communities of people experiencing poverty, especially people of color—I’m functioning at the edge of my competence and comfort zone. The answers to achieving collective impact are complex and in many cases unknown. I am constantly learning and discovering things I don’t know. I’m uncomfortable because I’m leading in a way that challenges the dominant logic of how to advance large-scale social change, and I’m demanding that we do right by the people we serve. This has me leading from a position of vulnerability, and it turns out that it’s exhilarating. I’m joining leaders across the United States who are also willing to operate in a space of vulnerability. We have found one another. We are on an amazing journey to lead with soul, by infusing equity into our collective impact efforts, working to dismantle the toxic structures that sustain racial group inequity, and replacing those structures with systems of support that ensure all children live in communities where they can learn, grow, and succeed from cradle to career.

Leaders implementing the Promise Neighborhoods strategy are achieving impressive results in rural and urban America: Kindergarten readiness, standardized test scores, and parent engagement are increasing; absenteeism, student mobility rates, and expulsion rates are decreasing; summer learning loss is reversing; and communities are rallying to implement alternative solutions to using law enforcement strategies to solve social problems. We’re making progress, but to build on this success, we must strengthen the effectiveness of our leadership.

Personal Mastery and Results-Based Action Are Essential

Personal mastery, one of the five learning disciplines in Peter Senge’s book *The Fifth Discipline*, is essential to success as a results-based leader. It requires that leaders commit to doing the internal work necessary to improve. It also requires that we see and understand what [Bill Cropper](#) describes as the impact our patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaving have on the people and situations around us and the results we get from these encounters. Bringing soul to the work of collective impact starts by mastering certain competencies, including the following, which I gleaned from the PNI leadership development partnership with the [Annie E. Casey Foundation](#):

- **A point of view linked to action.** Develop a sophisticated, yet practical point of view about crafting solutions commensurate with the complexity and scale of the social and economic challenges at hand. Achieving results at a population level is no longer optional for results-based leaders. It is the work of our time.

- **Skill at achieving equity.** Master an evidenced-based and disciplined approach for moving from talk to action. **Results-based accountability** (RBA) is a smart approach to change and decision-making. Using RBA, leaders define results and disaggregate data to craft equity-focused strategies that eliminate disparities and eradicate their root causes; engage partners to achieve the results; and use data for learning, continuous improvement, and shared accountability.
- **Using yourself as an instrument of change.** Leaders must hold themselves accountable for population-level results regardless of their position and be a catalyst for partnering with others to implement the right mix of solutions.
- **Addressing race, class, and culture.** Recognize that race, class, and culture impact life options for people experiencing poverty. Leaders must master the ability to talk about these issues. They must work in partnership with others to dismantle systems and policies that restrict access to opportunity, and thus social and economic mobility.
- **Adaptive leadership.** Understand that deep system and policy reform happen only when leaders employ skills to impact stakeholders' attitudes, values, beliefs, and habits.

I'm working to become more proficient in these competencies, and encourage others to infuse soul into their work by integrating them into their own repertoire.



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