

Collaboration

# The Equity Imperative in Collective Impact

The five conditions of collective impact, implemented without attention to equity, are not enough to create lasting change.

By [John Kania & Mark Kramer](#) | Oct. 6, 2015

We've learned a lot since we first wrote in 2011 about [collective impact](#) as an approach to large scale social change. The collective impact framework can empower people to make a real difference in communities around the world, but the five conditions (a common agenda, shared measurement systems, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication, and backbone support organizations) are missing a critical dimension: equity. The five conditions of collective impact, implemented without attention to equity, *are not enough* to create lasting change.

With input from thoughtful partners, clients, and community members, we've come to understand that most efforts to achieve collective impact inevitably take place within a context of structural inequity that keeps people of different backgrounds and races from achieving equitable outcomes. If participants in collective impact initiatives are to make the lasting change they seek, they must pay explicit attention to policies, practices, and culture that are reinforcing patterns of inequity in the community. They must develop targeted strategies that specifically and differentially take into account any underlying advantages that some people have, as well as the disadvantages that other groups face. And throughout every aspect of the collective impact process, they must bring to the table those whose lives are affected by the results of the work. Without vigilant attention to equity, efforts to align and coordinate resources can inadvertently reinforce institutional patterns that promote disparities and constrain progress for our most vulnerable community members.

Simple and straightforward, even intuitive, but not inevitable



### 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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At a convening of collective impact practitioners in May of 2015, Angela Glover Blackwell, founder and CEO of PolicyLink, delivered a powerful keynote entitled, “**Equity Matters in Collective Impact**,” which described how critical an equity focus is within a collective impact effort. In her words, the work of equity is to create the conditions that enable “just and fair inclusion into a society in which all can participate, prosper, and reach their full potential.”

As simple, straightforward, and intuitive as that sounds, we are learning that just and fair inclusion for all— regardless of race, gender, ability, religion, ethnicity, or sexual orientation —doesn’t just “happen” most of the time when people engage in collective impact efforts. Even with the best of intentions, it is not inevitable. Without purposefully bringing an equity lens to bear on every aspect of the collective impact process, practitioners inevitably miss opportunities to seek out, recognize, and purposefully resolve inequities in their local context that can block the change they seek to achieve.

And adding “equity” to the collective impact agenda isn’t enough. Organizations engaged in collective impact initiatives should first consider and take action on *how they need to change from within by applying an equity lens to their own people and practices*. As we’re finding at FSG through our own organizational and personal journeys with equity, this is not an easy challenge to meet.

## The change “out there” begins “in here”

The process of building equity into FSG’s organization, culture, and work, in fact, has been an iterative journey of discovery through which we are continuing to learn. On this journey, we have been greatly assisted by experts, including consultants from the [National Equity Project](#) and [Robin DiAngelo](#), who have helped us understand and question our assumptions of how racial inequity and white privilege affects our consulting work, our internal processes, and the management of our organization. And as a result, we are examining and changing our hiring practices, our leadership and governance structures, and the ways in which we work together. We are broadening our personal awareness and understanding of equity issues.

Our internal efforts to deepen engagement with equity have been enlightening but also uncomfortable at times. As organizational leaders devoted to social change, it is difficult and disconcerting to see how our positions as white males of power and privilege create blind spots regarding other individuals’ experiences and context that can actually perpetuate the very inequities we work so hard to address. It is hard to accept the fact that those blind spots, however unintentional, have been embedded in unexamined structures, policies, and practices.

We’re not “done” and never will be. We must continue to take actions that move beyond good intentions to truly create a more inclusive and equitable organization and consulting practice. While still early in our journey, we are hopeful that changes in our understanding and actions related to equity practices and policies “in here” will help us become better social change agents “out there.”

## Effective equity practice in collective impact

We are not equity experts. But we do believe that we have a responsibility to put equity in the spotlight as we continue to highlight effective practices for collective impact. To do this, we are increasing our efforts to learn from and share the practices of those placing equity at the center of their work. Anel Mercado and [Richard Crews](#) are two such practitioners, and their experience in Phoenix, Arizona, offers a good example of the difference an equity lens makes:

Mercado, Crews, and their team at **Thriving Together** (members of the **Strive Together** national network) brought equity to the table in a “cradle-to-career” education collective impact effort. They did it when it was uncertain that the community wanted to “go there.” And they did it by navigating through discomfort, developing common language, and deeply disaggregating student data.

*Navigating through discomfort:* Thriving Together is an initiative designed to better prepare a quarter-million young people who live within the greater Phoenix metropolitan area for success from birth to career. Community leaders (including senior leadership from public education, higher education, business, philanthropy and community based organizations) wanted to improve education in the urban core, but were initially reluctant to confront the impact of racial barriers to educational achievement. “[P]eople automatically wanted to go socioeconomic; it’s much easier to digest that it must be poverty,” noted Mercado in a recent report published by Lumina Foundation.

Crews, Thriving Together’s Collaborative Action team manager, adds to this, explaining that, “Historically in Arizona, institutions have been reluctant to talk about educational disparities through a racial equity lens. The first time we tried to have the equity conversation, it fell flat. There seemed to be a general hesitation [to focus] on race or ethnicity explicitly.”

Some of this hesitation, Mercado and Crews understood, was due to the specific political context in Phoenix, where conversations on immigration and ethnicity can be emotionally charged. But the Thriving Together team committed to moving the conversation forward despite the discomfort and brought in **Calvin Terrell**, an equity content expert, as a facilitator.

*Developing common language:* At Terrell’s first meeting with the steering committee for the effort, he asked, “What does equity mean to us in this work?” The room fell silent. The group didn’t yet have common language with which to explore the ways in which some students were being left behind. Terrell then shared an image comparing equality (treating everyone the same) and equity (treating everyone fairly according to their needs), and facilitated a dialogue during which the group agreed that not all students start from the same place. They also agreed to view equity as a precursor to equality—to acknowledge students’ varying

starting points and provide differentiated resources that would allow students truly equal access to the same educational opportunities.

*Disaggregating student data:* The common language and resulting commitment enabled partnership members to dig more deeply into student data. “We said, ‘We’re not saying it’s not poverty, but there is something with race/ethnicity here, and sometimes [there’s something] with gender,’” explained Mercado.

“We had to go deeper in the data to see where disparities were truly manifesting,” said Crews. “For example, graduation rates for Latino students looked pretty good. But when we further disaggregated our data, we saw that many Latino graduates were not college ready. It wasn’t a socioeconomic issue; the data showed us otherwise. But it was systemic—our state standards meant students could finish high school, but ACT scores were demonstrating that many students of color were not being prepared for postsecondary education.”

“Having that data lens allowed us to take a lot of personal bias out of it,” said Crews. “This time, it was not ‘the equity guy coming to have *that* conversation.’ It was about ‘what do you see in the data?’ We didn’t say what *we* were seeing. We allowed them to look at the data unencumbered by anyone else’s opinion. They saw [that the] system was graduating students but inadequately preparing them to move on, and this created space for deeper conversations about what to do.”

As a result of those deeper conversations, Thriving Together action teams are now developing interventions that are more tailored to the unique needs of different students (such as Latino males in remediation programs within community colleges). The equity conversations also helped create a shift in perspective among local leaders, from seeing students as “problems” to viewing them as assets worthy of investment. That shift led to greater engagement and increased commitment, particularly from philanthropy and business stakeholders. For example, Arizona Public Service, the local electricity company, has now provided 10 continuous improvement coaches (with a pledge for more as needed) from within the company to work directly with selected schools, district leaders and community partners.

“Once they saw the data on student outcomes,” says Crews, “they said, ‘We get it. This population is our greatest asset—they’re our future customers and employees.’” Crews points to continuous improvement as *how* equity will happen in the partnership. He concludes, “Breaking things down into micro processes will allow us to identify and address systemic and process problems, and make a real difference for our students.”

## Starting is more important than feeling ready

Some CI practitioners may wonder whether their organizations or collaboratives are ready to tackle issues of systemic disparity. Within FSG, we have found that it is more important to get started than to feel ready. Certainly, the guidance and support we have received from those with experience in bringing an equity lens to the work has greatly helped. We encourage collective impact efforts that are newly engaging with race and equity to seek assistance from the field of equity experts.

Thriving Together’s experience demonstrates that it is possible to foster a greater focus on equity even in situations where doing so seems daunting. And Thriving Together is not alone: grassroots organizations, public/nonprofit leaders, and other advocates who have been working in community for decades are building a robust movement highlighting the importance of equity in collaborative efforts. These are voices we need to learn from, notably those who are weighing in on collective impact. For example, we’ve benefited recently from a piece by Junious Williams and Sarah Marxer of Urban Strategies Council, that shares their [thoughts on how to bring an equity lens to collective impact](#). We’ve also learned from a recent blog by Juan Sebastian Arias of Living Cities and Sheri Brady of the Aspen Forum for Community Solutions who offer [suggestions for three steps that can help in advancing equity through collective impact](#).

As we and our FSG colleagues continue to highlight quality collective impact practice, we are committed to shining a much brighter spotlight on the importance of placing equity at the center of collective impact efforts. We will leverage the [Collective Impact Forum](#) (in conjunction with our partner, [Aspen Forum for Community Solutions](#), one of our guides on the equity journey) and other partnerships, such as a new partnership with [PolicyLink](#), to highlight the resources and wisdom of the many organizations with deep equity expertise. We

will also do more to include those living in the communities we strive to serve as partners in our work. We hope you will join in these efforts. Bringing greater attention to equity in collective impact will lead to more meaningful progress for all.

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