

FORESIGHT, PARTNERSHIPS, AND CROSS-SECTOR COLLECTIVE IMPACT: STRATEGIES TO BUILD A PARTNERSHIP WORLD

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Abstract

This article discusses the value of connecting foresight leadership with partnership practice to achieve cross-sector collective impacts. The dimensions of future consciousness and foresight literacy are described. Principles and practices to support foresight leadership development are discussed. The nature of partnership theory and practice is explained. The complex nature of different types of impact are described. Examples of organizations that are future focused with collective impact in mind are highlighted. Strategies and tactics to support the development of foresight, data with action, and collective impact efforts to build a partnership world are outlined.

Keywords: Foresight Leadership, Partnership Theory, Cross Sector Collaboration, Futures Thinking, Common Agenda, Sustainable Development Goals, Collective Impact

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Futures Thinking and Foresight Leadership

As described on the web site of the Association of Professional Futurists (APF), “Futures thinking is a transdisciplinary or meta-approach to studying possible, probable, and preferable futures” (APF, 2023). Futures thinking is a rational, creative, reflective, and contemplative process of engaging citizens to be aware of and to question their ways of anticipating the future, to create contingencies, alternatives, and strategies to innovate and transform today. As a process, futures thinking invites knowing that

worldviews and contexts create value. The goal in futures thinking is to make sense of thinking and meaning in questioning and disturbing the way people anticipate the future. The values and the stories, personal or collective, that people create and share with others, create futures” (Association of Professional Futurists, Futures and Futures thinking, 2024). Édes (2021) notes that there are several benefits of futures thinking and foresight. Foresight promotes innovation, enhances agility and resilience. Foresight and futures thinking improve planning, strategizing, and testing critical assumptions. Foresight and futures thinking promote learning, improve competitiveness, facilitate public participation, and empower people and organizations. Gidley (2017) provided an excellent introduction to future studies. Johanssen (2012, 2016) also provided a useful explanation about future literacy skills necessary to support foresight leadership development.

Futures thinking and foresight leadership require a future consciousness. Dimensions of future consciousness are: 1) attention to one’s time perspective that includes understanding of the past, present, and future, and the value of long-term thinking; 2) a sense of agency and a belief that one has the ability to influence future events; 3) openness and critical questioning of established truths to see possibilities of change; 4) a systems-thinking perspective that supports the ability to see interconnectedness between human and natural systems and complex consequences of decisions; and 5) a sensitivity and concern for other’s aspirations for a better world for everyone (Ahvenharju et al., 2018). Ratcliffe and Ratcliffe (2015) note five linked literacies associated with anticipatory/foresight leadership: awareness (understanding, interpreting the broader context, and emerging trends); authenticity (being genuine and transparent in actions and decisions); audacity (having the courage to take bold and innovative steps); adaptability (flexibly responding to changing circumstances); and action (implementing strategies and making decisions proactively).

Practicing foresight helps one anticipate, manage, and respond to disruptive innovations (Pesut, 2012, 2013, 2019; Beaudet et al., 2023; Brown & Wyatt, 2010; University of Minnesota School of Nursing, 2017).

Additional Principles and Practices to Support Development of Foresight

- Identify one's personal and organizational orientation toward time.
- Appreciate the value of innovation and design thinking to support foresight leadership.
- Develop literacy skills.
- Actively monitor industry trends, forecasts, and disruptions.
- Discern logical consequences of trends using futures thinking tools and techniques.
- Appreciate the use of vision-based scenarios.
- Stimulate strategic conversations about espoused visions looking backwards from the future.
- Navigate change efforts with the creative power of appreciation, influence, and control.
- Be clear and intentional about cross-sector collective impact efforts.

Resources to support the development of future fluency and literacy are abundant and include the Future We (n.d.) framework that identifies key concepts, five domains, and more than 20 additional literacies to support the development of futures thinking and foresight. Other resources to support learning and acquisition of foresight and futures thinking skills include Foresight University (2023), the Open Foresight Hub (2023), and the Institute for the Future (2024). The Shaping Tomorrow organization (2024) also supports environmental scanning and documentation of trends and vision-based scenarios. Additional resources to promote futures literacy can be accessed at Teach the Future (2024).

Partnership Theory: Principles and Practices

Creating desired futures requires attention to principles and practices of partnership. Partnerships involve shared aims, strategy, risks, resources, and skills, and the realization of mutual benefit and synergy. Partnership practice requires trust building

across identity differences, creating alliances for independent learning (Center for Partnership Systems, 2024). As Eisler and Garrick (2008) note:

A culture of partnership is one that supports our full humanity and helps us reach our highest human potential. Whether we build this culture depends on the choices we make, from the insignificant to the most exalted. By understanding our options, we can make wise decisions. (Eisler & Garrick, 2008)

In partnership systems, societies value both halves of humanity equally and recognize that humans are social animals with a unique wisdom and capacity to work and live together. Eisler and Garrick (2008) advocate for the development of a wisdom capacity. Such wisdom requires a shift from a dominator system to a partnership systems thinking and doing. Eisler and Potter (2014) emphasize the importance of shifting from a domination system to a partnership system to create a more equitable and sustainable and less violent world. Key aspects and strategies involved in making such a shift require attention to family and childhood relations, gender relations, economic relations, and language and narratives. Promoting nurturing and caring relationships within families and ensuring that children grow up in environments that value empathy and mutual respect is fundamental, as are gender relations that encourage gender equality and value contributions of all genders equally. Developing economic systems that prioritize human well-being and environmental sustainability over profit are fundamental, as is attention to the stories we tell and the language we use to reflect partnership values rather than domination (Center for Partnership Systems, 2024). Strategies useful for supporting the shift from domination to partnership include raising awareness about the benefits of partnership systems and educating people on how to implement these values in their daily lives; advocating for policies that support gender equality, environmental sustainability, and social justice; creating and supporting communities that embody partnership values and provide mutual support; and encouraging individuals to develop skills such as empathy, cooperation, and conflict resolution. Developing partnership thinking and wisdom capacities requires expanding concepts, principles, and practices that support understanding of types of capital and different types of impact.

The Complexity of Impact

The Integral Meta-Impact Framework developed by Esbjorn-Hargens (2006; 2009; 2020) is useful for expanding the thinking and framing of cross-sector impact efforts and supports the evolution and development of partnership through wisdom economies needed into the future. The Meta-Impact Framework identifies ten types of capital (knowledge, psychological, spiritual, health, human, financial, manufactured, natural, cultural, and social). There are three types of data for each of the ten capitals. Together they form Integral Data. When they are all present, we have an integrative mixed-methods approach that combines qualitative and quantitative metrics to evaluate, track, and increase each form of capital. Impacts related to each type of capital can be defined as deep, clear, high, and wide. Each type of impact influences the four bottom lines of purpose, people, planet, and profit. Deep impact relates to a change in stakeholder experience, and can be evaluated through self-evaluations, psychometrics, satisfaction surveys, and/or happiness inventories. Clear impact is about changes in stakeholder performance, and can be evaluated through skills assessments, analytics, observation tools, and/or key performance indicators (KPIs). Wide impact is about a change in stakeholder relationships, and can be assessed through 360-degree assessments, relationship mapping, interviews, and/or social impact assessments. High impact is about changes in stakeholder systems, and can be determined through environmental impact assessments, financial impact assessments, input indicators, and KPIs.

Collective Impact Efforts

Collective Impact (CI) is the commitment of a group of actors from different sectors to a common agenda for solving a specific social problem, using a structured form of collaboration (Collective Impact Forum, 2024). With CI in mind, Monsen et al. (2022) proposed the Data to Action Hourglass Model to visualize cross-sector CI efforts related to the social determinants of health (SDH). The Hourglass Model is a strategy for organizing thinking, realizing that diverse levels of abstraction and scale are needed as

people engage in identifying problems and specifying desired outcomes related to SDH. The model builds principles and practices of CI initiatives (Kania & Kramer, 2011, 2013) and is useful to support understanding of how data influences thinking and planning and supports foresight initiatives (Lopa, 2024) and cross-sector CI efforts. The Data to Action Hourglass Model is organized around the following principles:

- Systems thinking is essential for understanding relationships between and among all dimensions and levels of health.
- Planetary health is the ultimate determinant of health.
- Multiple interacting systems and relationships create and sustain health, including political, moral, social, and environmental determinants of health.
- Data exists at different levels of scale that include planetary, nations, populations, communities, families, individuals.
- Human and artificial intelligence transform data into meaningful information and knowledge leading to new mental models.
- New mental models and foresight thinking guide innovations.
- Social engagement spreads innovations, leading to CI and policy change.
- Policy changes sustain transformation into a desired future. (Monsen et al., 2022)

Successful CI initiatives typically have five conditions that together produce true alignment and lead to powerful results:

- **A Common Agenda:** CI requires all participants to have a shared vision for change, one that includes a common understanding of the problem and a joint approach to solving it through agreed upon actions.
- **Shared Measurement Systems:** Developing a shared measurement system is essential to CI.
- **Mutually Reinforcing Activities:** CI initiatives depend on a diverse group of stakeholders working together, not by requiring that all participants do the same thing, but by encouraging each participant to undertake the specific set of activities at which they excel in a way that supports and is coordinated with the actions of others.

- **Continuous Communication:** Developing ongoing communication among nonprofits, corporations, and government agencies is a monumental challenge.
- **Backbone Support Organizations:** Creating and managing CI requires a separate organization and staff with a specific set of skills to serve as the backbone for the entire initiative. (Kania & Kramer, 2011, 2013)

Essential to the success of CI efforts are the following principles (Kania & Kramer, 2011, 2013):

- Design and implement the initiative, prioritizing equity.
- Include community members in the collaborative.
- Recruit and co-create with cross-sector partners.
- Use data to continuously learn, adapt, and improve.
- Cultivate leaders with unique system leadership skills.
- Focus on program and system strategies.
- Build a culture that fosters relationships, trust, and respect across participants.
- Customize for local context. (Kania & Kramer, 2011, 2013)

As Kania et al. (2014) note, some mind shifts are essential to ensuring the success of cross-sector CI efforts:

Who is Involved. The first mind shift requires attention to getting all the right eyes on the problem. Who is involved in a CI effort matters.

How People Work Together. The authors note that the relational is as important as the rational. Structure is as important as strategy. Sharing credit is as important as taking credit.

How Progress Happens. The authors advise to pay attention to adaptive work and not just technical solutions.

Appreciating the Complexity of System Dynamics. This shift means thinking of the cross-sector CI efforts as part of a larger context and considering how contribution fits into the larger puzzle of activities. Funders and policymakers similarly must shift from investing in individual, single-point interventions toward investing in processes and relationships that enable multiple organizations to work together to achieve desired futures.

Visions for the Future

Bell (2017) suggests that images of the future are the blueprints we use to construct our lives. There are a number of global organizations that sponsor strategic initiatives with images of a desired future in mind. For example, the World Futures Studies Federation (WFSF; n.d.) is an independent global organization dedicated to the field of futures studies that unites academics, researchers, practitioners, students, and futures-focused institutions from more than 60 countries. It provides a platform for the stimulation, exploration, and exchange of ideas, visions, and plans for alternative futures through long-term, big-picture thinking and radical change. The organization promotes the development of futures studies as a transdisciplinary academic and professional field globally. WFSF aims to discover and master complex chains of causes and effects through conceptualization, systemic approaches, and feedback loops, fostering innovation in social and technological fields to create desirable futures.

Another example of global aspiration to create visions of desired futures is the United Nations “Our Common Agenda” initiative (n.d.). This initiative aims to strengthen and accelerate multilateral agreements, particularly the 2030 Agenda, to make a tangible difference in people’s lives. The initiative is designed to address current and future challenges through inclusive, networked, and effective multilateralism and CI. Our Common Agenda intends to secure the future for future generations. The agenda suggests there is a need for new contracts anchored in human rights, better management of critical global resources, and attention to global public goods to ensure equitable and sustainable distribution for all. Individuals and groups contribute to the

Our Common Agenda initiative as they advocate for change and raise awareness about the initiative and its goals within communities, social media platforms, and shared information resources, to promote dialogue and learning about sustainable development. Individuals and CI initiatives can adopt and foster sustainable practices such as reducing waste, conserving energy, and supporting eco-friendly products and companies. On an individual level, people can get involved with local and international organizations that align with the goals of Our Common Agenda, educating themselves and others about the importance of global cooperation and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs; United Nations, n.d.). Additional activities include advocacy for policies that support the goals of Our Common Agenda at local, national, and international levels, public consultations to drive change, and youth engagement with attention to desirable futures.

In September 2024, the United Nations held a Summit of the Future (United Nations, 2024). World leaders adopted a Pact for the Future that includes a Global Digital Compact and a Declaration on Future Generations. The Pact covers a broad range of themes including peace and security, sustainable development, climate change, digital cooperation, human rights, gender, youth and future generations, and the transformation of global governance. The adoption of the Pact demonstrates that countries are committed to an international system with the United Nations at its center. Leaders set out a clear vision of a multilateralism that can deliver on its promises; is more representative of today's world; and draws on the engagement and expertise of governments, civil society, and other key partners. Such an agreement could not have happened without the intentional use of foresight strategies, partnership theory and practice and attention to principles and practice of CI.

To support visions of the future it is imperative to learn about future thinking, keep up with current trends and challenges, and engage in community initiatives with CI in mind. One can also join local organizations or initiatives that align with one's values, beliefs, and future oriented aspirations. Personal and professional action may well include participation in workshops and events on future-oriented topics. Engagement

with professional organizations and networks that focus on shaping a partnership-oriented future is another.

Create the Future with Foresight and Collective Impact in Mind

This article discussed the value of linking and leveraging foresight leadership with partnership practice to achieve cross-sector CI. The dimensions of future consciousness and foresight literacy were described. Principles and practices to support foresight leadership development were outlined. Success of CI efforts depends on adoption and partnership practice. The Meta-Impact Framework which identifies ten types of capital (knowledge, psychological, spiritual, health, human, manufactured, financial, cultural, and social) was introduced along with the Data to Action Hourglass Model to support CI initiatives. Examples of future-oriented initiatives sponsored by the United Nations to realize a common agenda and sustainable development goals were discussed. Finally, principles of personal, professional, and CI efforts were documented with attention to needed mind shifts that support a wisdom economy with attention to multiple impacts that support purpose, people, planet, and profit.

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