

Adaptive Learning Skills: An Essential Competency for Collective Impact

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Communities and complex social systems are facing an increase in wicked, messy problems. There is a rising tide of violence overwhelming many communities, with some neighborhoods experiencing multiple gun deaths in a weekend. Obesity and its impacts (hypertension, diabetes, cancer, and other metabolic syndrome related diseases) is a spreading cancer through the country, often exploding in those areas that can least afford its presence: the poorest, most disadvantaged neighborhoods. The effects of climate change are now hitting many cities' water systems; cities like Detroit now receive up to 4" of rain in an hour, well beyond their capacity – the result is unprecedented sewer overflows.

These problems are best framed as *adaptive challenges*. As a society we have made such problems intractable because we have mistakenly approached adaptive challenges as if they were routine problems. Routine problems have a ready-made solution and an expert to implement them. Someone, or some group of experts, knows what to do. And if they just start doing it, they'll fix it. As Nike says, the experts should "Just do it" and all will be well. However, adaptive challenges require collaborative problem-solving because *no one has the answer*. Worse, in most situations, no one even knows how to clearly identify the problem. So the answer must come from those with the problem...not an external to the community expert. Such problems are messy, wicked, and often immobilizing, leading to fetal position syndrome.

The truth is that most problems are a mix of adaptive challenges and routine problems and can be considered as falling along a continuum from mostly routine to mostly adaptive. The 1960s had two clear examples of these extremes. It was mostly a routine problem to put a man on the moon in a decade, the engineers just had to resolve all the complex scientific hurdles. The Civil Rights Movement was perhaps the quintessential adaptive challenge, and occurred because the leaders of the movement were able to learn and guide learning across society. No one had the answer; they learned together.

Communities must orchestrate a process of learning if they are to effectively engage and resolve adaptive challenges. Because different perspectives must be shared, integrated, and run through a forge of refinement to improve and apply, communities need to guide or steer "messy" processes with a diverse set of interest groups: local leaders, public and academic institutions, as well as private sector organizations.

After stating that many challenges are adaptive, Kania and Kramer in *Collective Impact* write, "Reforming public education, restoring wetland environments, and improving community health are all adaptive problems. In these cases, reaching an effective solution requires *learning by the stakeholders* involved in the problem, who must then change their own behavior in order to create a solution."¹

¹ Kania, J. & Kramer, M., *Collective Impact*, Social Innovation Review (2011)
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Collective impact is a process that has been developed in response to guiding communities and networks through such “messy”, adaptive learning processes. If facilitated well, it appears to orchestrate an agile process of learning. In many cases, however, the process bogs down, failing to maintain the initial momentum of its passionate leaders, who eventually become disillusioned and “drop out of” the process. Many efforts wane or even die. Why?

Because collective impact requires new mindsets and skills to be effective. It’s not an out-of-the-box, just add people solution. We tend to believe that once leaders *know* to “go engage stakeholders” and “generate a collective vision” that everything will just work out. But experts on collective impact know this is insufficient.

“Shifting from isolated impact to collective impact is not merely a matter of encouraging more collaboration or public-private partnerships. It requires a systemic approach to social impact that focuses on the relationships between organizations and the progress toward shared objectives. And it requires the creation of a new set of nonprofit management organizations that have the *skills* and resources to assemble and coordinate the specific elements necessary for collective action to succeed.”²

Running a collective impact process can be likened to running a complex play in a professional sport. For example, it is wasted effort to describe all the steps in running the triangle offense (basketball) to players who don’t have deep proficiency in dribbling, passing and shooting. Just like there are fundamental skills required to run complex plays in basketball, collective impact requires a set of adaptive leadership skills.

“No collective impact effort can survive unless the backbone organization is [...led by an executive...] possessing strong *adaptive leadership skills*; the ability to mobilize people without imposing a predetermined agenda or taking credit for success. Backbone organizations must maintain a delicate balance between the strong leadership needed to keep all parties together and the invisible “behind the scenes” role that lets the other stakeholders own the initiative’s success.”³

The authors of the Channeling Change article indicate the need for adaptive leadership skills. But what are these skills? How do you know if the backbone organization and its leadership possess them? And how can you build a sufficient amount to facilitate the collective impact process?

There are (at least) three essential skills of adaptive leadership. These skills are: systems THINKING, Conversational Capacity, and Improvisational Learning. They help you find the *leverage* needed for fundamental improvement, by *accelerating* a process of *learning*, where community members engage in rigorous and balanced conversations about highly emotional topics – things they care about.

In other words, the skills of adaptive learning help communities learn *faster*, *smarter*, and *together*. These skills are often just assumed to be there, lingering in the background to be awakened once the collective impact process starts. Without

² Kania, J. & Kramer, M., *Collective Impact*, Social Innovation Review (2011)

³ Hanleybrown et al, Channeling Change: Making Collective Impact Work, Stanford Social Innovation Review (2012)

consciously building and applying these skills – transforming the leadership culture⁴ in the community and network of organizations – the likelihood of achieving desired results with collective impact is greatly diminished. It's easy to understand why they are so important – yet often deficient and anemic – by describing the skills (and the mind sets behind them) in more detail. Here they are:

1. Learning Smarter = systems THINKING

What does it mean to learn smarter? Learning *smarter* is the ability to identify *high leverage* points. Low leverage occurs when you fight the “physics” of the system, when the more you push it to change, the more it pushes back. Low leverage occurs when today's problems come from yesterday's solutions, when you fall victim to unintended consequences. Low leverage even occurs when you do improve performance – but the improvement is anemic relative to the (wasted) Herculean amount of effort you applied to the problem.

You find leverage when you fundamentally improve the way the system behaves, generating the optimal behavior you desire. High leverage solutions don't just reduce waste in the system, they eliminate it. They don't slow down the rate obesity is rising. They dramatically reverse the trend.

This *high leverage* competency is referred to as *systems THINKING*. Thinking is capitalized because this type of systems thinking emphasizes *how we think about systemic issues* instead of adopting the overly simplistic (and mostly unhelpful) perspective that “it's all connected.” At its core, systems THINKING is based on a foundational principle: *Behavior* is generated by *structure*. How we've “structured” our resources, organizations, and communities is generating the behaviors we like and those we don't. If we are to create the future we want, we'll need to understand how we've structured things...and how we'll have to change that to get the behavior we want.

The mind set required for systems THINKING is an unwavering commitment to understanding the whole set of relationships (structure) driving important “real world” behaviors. We assume we've been using boundaries that are too narrow to understand the problem, focusing on our little part of the system as if it's the most important. It also assumes we've not been thinking hard enough about the world “really works”, by overlooking time delays, vicious cycles (and other feedback loop behavior), and unintended consequences.

The skills of systems THINKING include a rigorous framework for defining issues and mapping out your assumptions about cause and effect. You “picture” the system so you can “see” it. This is absolutely critical for finding leverage. In the process you apply a skill to help you move from the typical narrow

⁴ McGuire, J. and Rhodes, G., *Transforming Your Leadership Culture*, Jossey-Bass; 1 edition (March 30, 2009)

perspective to an “up and out” perspective, where your boundaries of awareness are expanded to see more clearly, to see broader and farther in time and space. You use – where appropriate – computer simulation tools to trace out the implications of assumptions...and improve THINKING. When you apply the skills of systems THINKING, you move from being a reactive, “woe is me” victim of forces outside your control to having the wisdom and potency to intervene in ways that will make a profound difference.

2. Learning Together = Conversational Capacity

Learning *together* is the ability to hold balanced productive multiple perspective conversations in ways that generate learning. We’ve all endured meetings where the participants are brilliant – admired experts – where the expectation was to make good decisions. Yet that expectation was dashed by hidden agendas, gamesmanship, defensiveness, bickering, and polarization – where you leave the meeting feeling further apart than before you attended it!

The competency of learning together is *Conversational Capacity*. Using Conversational Capacity, teams and groups create an environment where tough, vexing, seemingly intractable issues can be wrestled with by those holding diverse – often opposing and seemingly incongruent – views. Using this capacity, you see meetings become open (non defensive) and filled with learning, where the group reaches a “sweet spot” between candor and curiosity. The group analyzes the information needed to make better decisions, making it shared and visible. They combine and integrate multiple ideas. The final idea (outcome) is bigger than any individual idea any one person brought to the meeting.

Conversational Capacity is based on a mind set centering on *informed choice* as the goal of the process, asserting that high leverage solutions will only occur if individuals *pool perspectives* in ways that get the group’s best thinking on the table. It suggests that the result will be an *internal commitment* to the recommendations, so that implementation runs (as) smoothly and effectively (as possible).

The skills of Conversational Capacity are designed to pull groups into a “sweet spot” where rigorous, balanced and non-defensive conversations occur. These skills are *candid advocacy* combined with *curious inquiry*. Those engaged in the process learn to identify when these skills are insufficient and how to build as they learn together.

3. Learning Faster = Agile Learning

Agile learning is based on principles from agile software development, but can most easily be understood as the skill of *improvisation*. Think of great improvisational jazz musicians – or even comedians – and you’ll better understand this competency. Improvisational (agile) learning is based on an

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affirmative mindset. Such a mindset suggests that we *can create* a future we all want. That we can “say yes to the mess”, and working with whoever shows up – those in the room – we can substantially increase the wellbeing in our communities.

“Managers frequently find themselves in the middle of messes not of their own making, in over their heads, having to take action even though there is no guarantee of a good outcome, and relying on imperfect information. Jazz players face the same issues, but what makes it possible to improvise, to adjust and fall upon a working strategy is an affirmative move, an implicit ‘yes’ that allows them to move forward even in the midst of uncertainty. Problem solving by itself will not generate novel solutions. What’s needed is an affirmative belief that a solution exists and that something positive will emerge.”⁵

The improvisational mindset assumes that no matter how messy, how dreadful the current reality is, there is *always* a creative path forward that will improve the situation, helping us apply and increase our potential. We can achieve goals that seem impossible by *leaning* into the challenge, by *learning* together, and by *creating* new ways of being and acting. At its core, the improvisational process stems from an affirmative mindset.

Perhaps the essential skill of improvisation is *rapid experimentation and embracing errors*, “learn as you go” approach to performance. By applying *provocation*, collective impact processes that improvise embody the observation of Kurt Lewin, who noted that the best way to learn about a system is to try and change it. They don’t wait for all the research to come in – for 100% certainty (which is impossible if you understand statistics) – before acting. Instead, they jump in to the performance and learn as they go. Other skills include applying *yes/and* thinking (as opposed to no/but thinking), *minimal structure*, and *distributed task* making.

These competencies combine to form an über competence, a meta skill set that turbocharges a group’s effectiveness. In fact, an argument can be made that without combining the competencies, a group will be less effective than their potential. A group that is skilled in Conversational Capacity and Agile Learning will be a fun group, with fewer tensions and group members feeling engaged in a process of learning together. But without systems THINKING, they may be learning about the **wrong** [low leverage solutions, or counterproductive solutions] things, or generating solutions that will fall prey to unintended consequences. A group that is skilled in systems THINKING and Conversational Capacity, might explore systemic ideas in productive ways, but without Agile Learning may become bogged down in analysis paralysis and learn at a snail’s pace – much slower than the rate needed to

⁵ Barrett, F., *Yes to the Mess: Surprising Leadership Lessons from Jazz*, Harvard Business Press Books, 2012

adapt/evolve in the rapidly changing world. And a group proficient in Agile Learning and systems THINKING may be able to identify leverage and espouse risk-taking and learning, but may dissolve without Conversational Capacity as the group dynamics destroy the potential collaborations of the group. But together, these competencies become the basis for tackling the issues we most care about.

In the beginning of this article, I referred to these skills as analogous to the skills needed to play music, or a sport, or many other similar endeavors. In fact, they are the skills needed to *excel* at such endeavors. What distinguishes players like Larry Bird and Magic Johnson wasn't their skills at dribbling, passing and shooting – it was their über skills of seeing the full court and imagining how things were playing out, their ability to selflessly pass the ball and to work with all players on the team, and their ability to turn a broken play into a basket. The same happens in most other sports (e.g. football, soccer). There are similar skills in jazz – seeing all of the music as a tableau and the potentialities of it unfolding, to collaborate in ways that pool multiple perspectives, and to improvise and trade off soloing and supporting.

To excel at collective impact requires integrating the adaptive leadership skills just described. Putting these skills together can and will transform the community's leadership culture. Their application creates the head room described by McGuire and Rhodes, where reflection and learning occurs – for individuals, organizations, and the community. These skills are not only learnable, but must be an explicit part of any process to engage adaptive challenges. When beginning a collective impact process, pay as much attention to building and applying these skills of adaptive leadership as you do to any other part of the collective impact process. This will increase the likelihood of seeing the change you want...of creating the community you desire.

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