Making Network-Based Strategy Work:

A Field Guide

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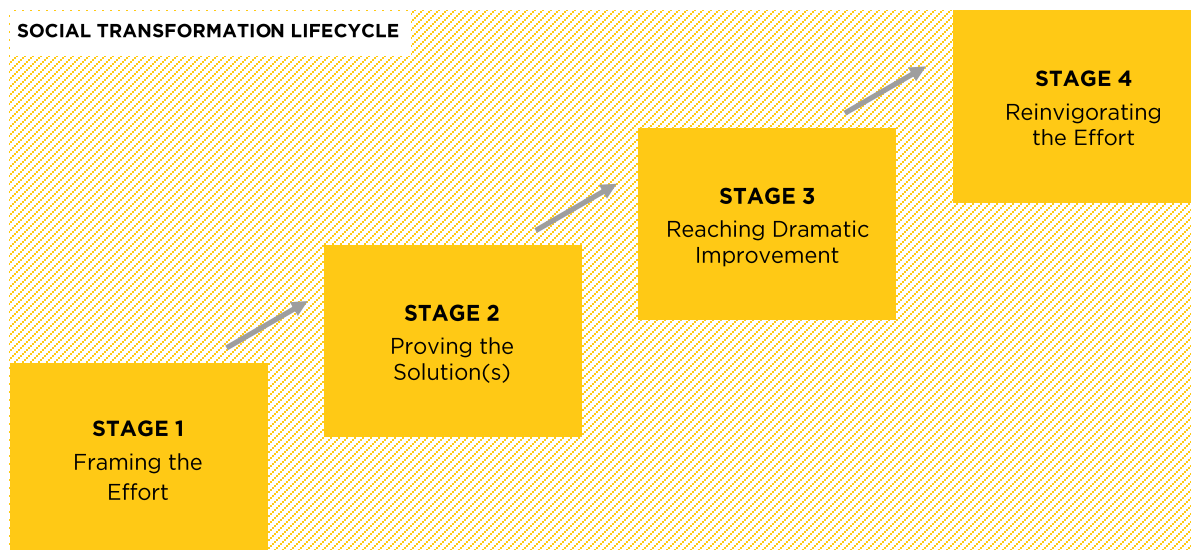TWITTER @WeDreamForward
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Introduction

In an era of movement-building and collective impact models, many nonprofits continue to rely on networks of chapters, affiliates or partners to achieve transformational results at scale.

While networks have served as an essential tool to scale social change for years, the shape, size and complexity of networks have continued to evolve. Today's network leaders face a complex set of challenges when developing and implementing new strategies. How do you set goals and build a shared commitment to achieve them? How do you drive performance without undermining innovation? How do you cultivate shared learning across a network?

At Community Wealth Partners we are focused on one powerful question: Why do some social change efforts achieve transformational results while others only make incremental progress? To answer this question, our client work and in-depth research led us to identify four key stages in driving transformational change—each accompanied by a set of strategic questions for leaders to consider (see Social Transformation Lifecycle below and more in-depth on page 8).

Building a network, which can take different forms, is one of many approaches for catalyzing transformational change in part because it can facilitate the proving and scaling of concepts. Through our work with network-based organizations such as Communities In Schools, NeighborWorks America, AARP Foundation Experience Corps, City Year and the Annie E. Casey Foundation's KIDS COUNT network, we have learned that network leaders often face similar challenges regardless of how any individual network is structured. This field guide highlights five actions leaders can take to achieve results through networks, then walks through four common pitfalls network-based leaders often encounter when developing and implementing new strategies. Alongside each pitfall are case studies and ideas for ways network leaders can increase the likelihood of new strategies achieving desired results.

SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION LIFECYCLE

STAGE 1
Framing the Effort

STAGE 2
Proving the Solution(s)

STAGE 3
Reaching Dramatic Improvement

**STAGE 4**
Reinvigorating the Effort

dream
forward

Five Actions for Achieving Results Through Networks

Network-based strategy is by no means new. Government, social sector organizations and commercial enterprises have long relied on network structures to achieve results at scale.

Drawing on our experience working with a diverse array of network-based organizations and network leaders, we adapted a framework first described in Stephen Goldsmith and William D. Eggers' book "Governing by Network: The New Shape of the Public Sector." The adapted framework, shown below, highlights five broad but essential actions network leaders can take to increase the success of network -based endeavors.

This framework offers a practical summary of intricate, interrelated actions. In practice, these actions are often not linear or simple. Many networks tackle portions of multiple actions at one time, and each action represents a complex set of incremental decisions and actions. These layers of actions are critical for leaders looking to successfully design and implement new strategies for achieving impact at scale. While there is some overlap between this framework and the five conditions of collective impact,* there are also important differences related to the decisions network leaders frequently face and the tools and resources at their disposal to support overall network success.
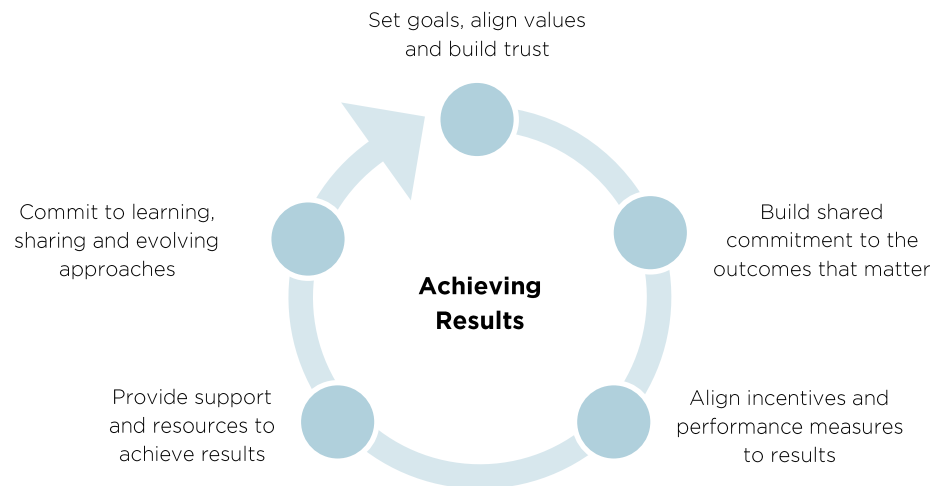
Four Common Pitfalls

As you work through the five actions for achieving results through networks, you may encounter these pitfalls. See how other organizations navigated them on Pages 4-7.

Trust

Measurement & Accountability

One-Size-Fits-All

Hub-and-Spoke

Five Actions for Achieving Results Through Networks

Set goals, align values and build trust

Commit to learning, sharing and evolving approaches

Achieving Results

Build shared commitment to the outcomes that matter

Provide support and resources to achieve results

Align incentives and performance measures to results

*Read more about collective impact in FSG's literature. 3

Four Common Pitfalls of Implementing Network-Based Strategy

Trust

When a network's central coordinating body unveils a new strategy or changes to its operating model, decisions can sometimes feel top-down—even if the central coordinating body or leadership team spent time gathering input from leaders across the network. Without intentional efforts to build trust and shared goals and values, the relationships between network members and the central coordinating body can become more transactional or even tense, diminishing the ability to effectively collaborate on solutions.

Three Steps for Overcoming this Pitfall

1 Create meaningful opportunities for leaders across the network to engage in the strategy design process.

2 Test new strategies with a small cross-section of network members before rolling changes out to the full network.

3 Create opportunities for quick wins to demonstrate success and form an early coalition of champions within the network to build buy-in among peers.

CASE STUDY

FoodCorps

For the five-year-old organization FoodCorps, building trust within its network of organizations—all working to connect kids to healthy food in schools—has been a journey of experimentation and learning centered around two important concepts: intentional partner selection and meaningful partner engagement. As FoodCorps grew and evolved, its approach to partner selection evolved from wide-open engagement with a broad array of organizations to a thoughtful, disciplined approach reliant upon relationship building and partner selection criteria. FoodCorps uses its own learnings on what it takes to be a successful part of the FoodCorps network in developing selection criteria. In its current process, potential partners submit applications to FoodCorps at the local and state levels and, if selected, the partnership is formalized through a detailed memorandum of understanding. This process of mutual commitment has been an essential ingredient in building trust. FoodCorps found a baseline level of trust is established when both organizations deliberately choose to partner with and commit to each other, since mutual success in the relationship and the outcomes of the program require significant investment from both organizations.

Once partnerships have been established, FoodCorps works hard to engage the network in order to better inform its ongoing learning and strategic direction. One way it does so is by creating structures to facilitate dialogue and feedback with partners every year: It hosts in-person gatherings designed to enable FoodCorps and partners to share feedback and insights with each other, and all partners take place in annual, bidirectional partnership reviews in which both parties can reconsider the partnership. As FoodCorps goes through strategic planning, it creates open forums to solicit partner input with an approach of humility and focus, recognizing partners hold critical insights and knowledge while also acknowledging the organization will identify priorities that its network may not inform. This combination of humility and candid communication has helped FoodCorps build and sustain a strong culture of trust as its network continues to grow.

Four Common Pitfalls of Implementing Network-Based Strategy *(cont.)*

Measurement & Accountability

When setting targets for success, organizations sometimes fall into the trap of prioritizing metrics that are easy to collect and analyze across the network. This often unintentional bias toward easy-to-implement measurement systems can inadvertently shift focus away from the outcomes that really matter and can deter network affiliates from customizing their approach to meet unique local needs. On the other hand, creating an overly-burdensome system of reporting that requires extensive data collection can have the unintended consequence of discouraging use by pulling time away from day-to-day programming that local affiliates often care most about. Ultimately network leaders must strike a balance between insightful data collection and easily managed collection systems.

Three Steps for Overcoming this Pitfall

1 Prioritize outcomes over outputs and narrow down the most important metrics for the network to track.

2 Incentivize data collection and reporting rather than penalizing those who fail to do it.

3 Develop reporting tools and processes that are fairly quick and easy to complete to increase likelihood of adoption.

CASE STUDY

College Possible

During the first fifteen years of its history, College Possible grew from one location to a network of six sites operating a program that helps promising low-income students become college graduates. This network grew slowly as the organization's leadership focused on ensuring each site maintained a high degree of fidelity to its well-tested and well-refined program model. To help manage consistent implementation, the College Possible team developed a standard "performance dashboard" to routinely monitor each site's fundraising, operations and—most importantly—achievement of key program outcomes. The data in the dashboard helped build a shared understanding of expectations between central headquarters and each site, better enabling accountability.

While maintaining a high degree of fidelity to this program model helped College Possible ensure consistent high-quality outcomes, it also limited College Possible's ability to rapidly scale its impact. To reach the vast number of low-income students working to attend and graduate from college, College Possible launched a new strategy in 2016 to expand its network beyond the branches of its single 501(c)(3) enterprise by training colleges and universities to run their own College Possible programs. This new model will support exponential growth but it will also require College Possible to develop new tools—such as a certification or accreditation process—for measuring results and holding network members accountable to shared commitments.

Four Common Pitfalls of Implementing Network-Based Strategy (cont.)

One-Size-Fits-All

It can be easy for a central coordinating body to approach network members as one homogeneous group and expect similar performance among them. In reality, most networks are comprised of a diverse array of members that need different types of support and resources, and even vary widely in their ability to achieve common goals. This is true even of the most tightly-controlled networks. Differences in resident demographics, organizational structure, capacity, geographic location, budget and other areas can all impact the type and amount of support a network member needs from the coordinating body to succeed. Our experience suggests that many networks can more effectively maximize impact when they take a portfolio approach to network management – adapting expectations, distributing risk under the assumption not all network members will achieve their goals, segmenting the network by relevant differences, such as those listed above, and providing different levels of support for distinct segments of the network.

Three Steps for Overcoming this Pitfall

1 Segment your network based on criteria relevant to your organization (such as geographic location, size or capacity) and set customized expectations for each segment to ensure goals are realistic.

2 Tailor your support to meet the unique needs of each major network segment.

3 Reevaluate and restructure segments as affiliates and partners change.

CASE STUDY

Communities In Schools

Nearly 40 years after its founding, Communities In Schools (CIS) was connecting 1.5 million students across the U.S. with needed supports, such as food, school supplies, health care, counseling and more. Despite tremendous overall success, performance varied greatly across its network of more than 170 affiliates. After carefully designing and implementing a process to assess the performance of all organizations, CIS decided to adopt a new, refined network structure with four key levels: the national office, the broader network of state and local affiliates, Growth Communities and Impact Communities.

CIS tailors its support to the network within this new structure. As it is a cornerstone of CIS's overall strategy to increase impact, the national office will continue to implement Total Quality System Standards—an accreditation process that promotes organizational health and student impact—for its entire network. To aid the network at large, CIS established a National Resource Center that offers high-quality supports, services and tools to all state and local affiliates. In addition to continuing to provide support to every organization in its network, CIS selected seven affiliates to be Growth Communities. These seven affiliates will receive targeted strategic investments and additional technical assistance from the national office to dramatically expand the number of schools they serve within a local region. Finally, CIS selected three affiliates to be Impact Communities, each already working with a majority of schools in their respective district and demonstrating substantial success in achieving student outcomes. These Impact Communities will receive unique capacity building support and will be highlighted as "beacons of quality"—national examples of CIS's model at its best—that demonstrate its potential and provide a testing ground for research and innovation. For CIS, investing more heavily in Growth and Impact Communities will help raise the tide and elevate the success of every organization in the CIS network.

Four Common Pitfalls of Implementing Network-Based Strategy *(cont.)*

Hub-and-Spoke

Networks often form around a central coordinating body, where flow of information and support goes from the hub to the spokes. This can often create a missed opportunity for peer-to-peer sharing as well as bottom-up feedback from network members to the central coordinating body. It also fails to facilitate the spreading of ideas and learnings from innovations piloted by network members. Increasingly, organizations collect data on a regular basis to assess their work and adjust their strategies accordingly, making it critical to open dynamic communication channels across the network. Peers must be enabled to learn from and share with each other without the central coordinating body serving as a translator or mediator.

Three Steps for Overcoming this Pitfall

1 Take time to understand the network's learning needs and expectations, then develop and resource learning structures accordingly.

2 Create a culture of learning and information-sharing, developing an expectation that network members are equally responsible for facilitating this shared ethos.

3 Build and resource peer learning groups, coaching relationships or other intentional structures for network members to learn from one another.

CASE STUDY

Campaign for Grade-Level Reading

To drive toward its goal of increasing reading proficiency among children from low-income families, the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading (GLR) launched the Grade-Level Reading Communities Network in 2012. To date, more than 285 communities have joined the network, agreeing to create comprehensive, locally-owned plans to improve school readiness, reduce chronic absence and promote summer learning.

In launching the network, the GLR Campaign faced a complex challenge: It wanted to effectively and consistently promote leading practices from its headquarters while simultaneously creating space for communities to design customized solutions and collaborate with each other. The GLR Campaign employs two powerful tools to do this. First, the GLR Campaign's network support center provides communities with technical assistance along with identifying and publicizing Bright Spots—communities within the network that are using particularly innovative strategies to improve grade-level reading. GLR Campaign staff research these local initiatives, share in-depth stories on them and encourage members of the network to identify other Bright Spots. Second, the GLR Campaign created The Huddle, an online social networking platform that organizes research and leading practices into a blog and provides a digital forum for member communities to serve as resources for one another. This platform not only keeps members up-to-date on key topics but also allows communities to connect based on common geographies or characteristics.

Social Transformation Lifecycle

To achieve social transformation through a network, you need to ask the right questions at the right time. Identify which stage(s) of transformation your effort is in and then consider each question with a lens on avoiding the four common pitfalls of implementing network-based strategy.

A tool to help you ask the powerful questions necessary for gauging and advancing your progress toward transformational change.

At Community Wealth Partners we are focused on one powerful question: Why do some social change efforts achieve transformational results while others only make incremental progress? Drawing on lessons from our client work and in-depth research on efforts that have tackled social problems at the magnitude they exist, we've identified four broad stages along which transformational efforts generally evolve.

Acknowledging that all such efforts are unique and none progress in a linear fashion, we would encourage you to ask the following questions:

1 Into which stage(s) does your effort seem to fit?

2 Around which questions have you established clear answers?

3 What questions are holding you back?

4 What questions do you need to address before progressing to the next stage?

	STAGE 1: Framing the Effort	STAGE 2: Proving the Solution(s)	STAGE 3: Reaching Dramatic Improvement	STAGE 4: Reinvigorating the Effort
BOLD GOAL & STRATEGY	What is our bold goal? What is our role in achieving this goal?	What is our approach to realizing our bold goal?	How will we scale our approach to reach our bold goal?	How do we need to change our approach, if at all, to realize our bold goal?
SHARED LEADERSHIP	Who are the founding leaders of this effort? How do we organize ourselves to be most effective?	What does it mean to lead? How will this leadership structure be sustained over time?	What changes, if any, do we need to make to the leadership structure as we scale?	How must our leadership structure adapt to sustain the effort needed to realize our bold goal?
STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT	Who should be engaged? (*key influencers, shared leaders, early adopters, people affected)	How do we engage early adopters?	What key stakeholders are necessary to achieving scale? How do we convert the "maybes"?	How do we sustain interest? Are there stakeholders critical to realizing our bold goal who we have failed to engage so far?
ENVIRONMENTAL CONTEXT	What is the micro and macro context?	How will certain environmental factors affect our effort? What factors might help propel the effort forward?	What new micro or macro factors must we consider as we scale? Do we have an opportunity to influence the environment?	How has the micro and macro context changed? What are the implications?
DISCIPLINED EXECUTION	Where do we start? What early wins should we target?	What actions do we need to take to prove the concept? Can we get closer to our goal by narrowing our focus?	What actions must we take to scale? What must we stop doing in order to scale?	What new actions must we take to realize our bold goal?
FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY	How do we envision financially supporting the work in the long term?	How will our efforts be financially sustained?	How do we maintain financial sustainability at scale?	How will we adapt our funding/revenue streams to reflect internal and external changes?
ADVOCACY/ PUBLIC POLICY	What is the regulatory or legislative environment surrounding this issue?	What are the short-term opportunities to influence policy and systems?	What is the long-term systems change necessary to make dramatic improvement?	How do we achieve the long-term systems change given the current political and cultural environment?
COMMUNICATION	What messages and channels will help build awareness among key stakeholders?	What messages and channels will build engagement, inspire action, and contribute to behavior change?	How do we create contagious ideas and equip others to "own" the message(s) and the solution(s)?	How should we adapt our communication strategy, messages, and actions?
CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT & LEARNING	What does success look like?	How do we know if our approach is working? What changes need to be made if we're not achieving the desired results?	How do we know if our approach continues to work as we scale? What changes need to be made if we're not achieving the desired results?	How close are we to our bold goal and what do we need to learn to get closer?
CULTURE (VALUES, NORMS, BEHAVIORS)	How do we establish an intentional culture across the effort? (*roles, ground rules, expectations, decision-making)	How do we ensure that we are living what we believe?	How do we maintain our culture as we grow?	How must we adapt our culture to the new context?