

Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION Review

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Nonprofit Management

Turning Empathy into Action

How the nature of design thinking complements and strengthens collective impact frameworks.

By [Kate Hanisian & Shiloh Turner](#) | Mar. 31, 2015

Since 2012, the Greater Cincinnati Foundation has been convening and supporting a community of practice (COP)—a group of organizations that are willing to work together to tackle specific regional social challenges. COP members are committed to the concept of **collective impact**, and the foundation enables a forum for shared learning by providing in-depth technical assistance. Nonetheless, in the early days of the foundation's COP efforts, the groups found it difficult to make progress towards their goals as quickly as they wanted to.

Believing that a new tool might help, foundation staff researched a number of possibilities, landing eventually on design thinking—a creative approach to problem solving where the wants, needs, and limitations of the end user remain in constant focus. Practiced historically by businesses such as Procter & Gamble, Apple, and Google to uncover latent consumer needs, design thinking has also been used to discover new approaches and solutions to complex social challenges (for example, see “[Design Thinking for Social Innovation](#)”). The foundation hoped that this approach could help lead to similar breakthroughs in collective impact.

As it turns out, the creative, collaborative, and empathic nature of design thinking complements collective impact frameworks, and gives leaders tools to engage and empower community members as designers of their own solutions.

The results to date have been promising, suggesting that other organizations working on collective impact initiatives might also benefit from this tool. As it turns out, the creative, collaborative, and

empathic nature of design thinking complements collective impact frameworks, and gives leaders tools to engage and empower community members as designers of their own solutions.

Learning the Design Thinking Approach

To bring design thinking to their COP, the foundation partnered with **Design Impact**—a nonprofit social innovation firm. After meeting with COP leaders, the Design Impact team developed a six-month program that considered the specific needs and contexts of collective impact organizations. The program would challenge participants to devote substantial staff time to learn new design tools and move their collective impact projects from problems to prototypes. Through a series of full-day sessions, working on specific assignments, seven COP teams tackled questions such as: “How might we engage arts organizations in community development?” and “How might we engage more men in supporting women’s empowerment programs?”

Design Thinking...

- ...sees new possibilities
- ...builds bridges between organizations
- ...provides a license to fail
- ...builds empathy with stakeholders

Collective Impact...

- ...embraces complexity
- ...develops shared intentions
- ...uses consistent feedback
- ...works through diverse groups

In one case, the challenge was to encourage more people to enter into advanced manufacturing careers. **Partners for a Competitive Workforce** (PCW), a group of

businesses, workforce investment boards, educational institutions, and funders, has been working together since 2011 to grow the skills of the region’s workforce. Yet in Greater Cincinnati/Northern Kentucky, well-paying, salaried jobs in advanced manufacturing remain unfilled, even though there is a willing population that seeks reliable employment.

Through the COP design-thinking program, PCW ignited a deeper investment in engaging their stakeholders, including potential employees, current employees, manufacturing leaders, employment specialists, and educational institutions.

Through this process, the team learned more about negative perceptions of the manufacturing industry and has since improved messaging strategies to break down those views. Since the program’s completion, the team has continued to work with Design Impact to engage end beneficiaries in idea-generation and feedback sessions that uncover new ways to increase the number of people in advanced manufacturing career pathways. Several promising approaches have emerged from this work, including a series of peer support sessions that help women address barriers to their success. PCW has also begun to use design thinking in other areas of its work. According to Executive Director Janice Urbanik, “The design thinking program was hugely sticky—more than sticky, transformative. It has transformed how we think.”

In follow-up surveys and conversations, many participants of the Design Impact program said that they particularly enjoyed learning the skills of empathic interviewing, observation, and persona development. As one participant reported: “We now apply the empathic approach regularly. For example, when pulling together a data-heavy presentation on jobs and gender, we found real local stories to communicate the human story. This really helped get people passionate about what we were presenting. We also now think from our partner’s perspective, and then convey our messages in a way that they will get.”

Another collective impact initiative, [the Health Collaborative](#), launched just a few months before the Design Impact program began. That timing allowed the group to implement the techniques they learned as standard practice from the beginning. They credit the design program as being essential to their ability to articulate their vision and quickly engage a diverse group of healthcare stakeholders in their emerging initiative. As a member of that team explained, “The focus on empathy has resulted in a constant reminder to put ourselves in the shoes of others and think about the impact of our work from their perspective”.

A lot has been written about the need for greater inclusiveness in collective impact work (for example, see “[Roundtable on Community Engagement and Collective Impact](#)” and “[Putting Community in Collective Impact](#)”). As John Kania, Fay Hanleybrown, and Jennifer Splansky Juster explain in their article “[Essential Mindset Shifts for Collective Impact](#)”: “Too often, the people who will ultimately benefit from program or policy changes are excluded from the process of understanding the problems, and then identifying and implementing solutions.”

While design thinking offers collective impact funders and practitioners new approaches to complex social challenges, its focus on empathy and inclusion make it a particularly powerful tool for community engagement and empowerment.



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