Understanding The Role of Backbone Support

What will you learn?

Why providing backbone support is an important part of the implementing multi-stakeholder collaboration

How backbone support needs to be tailored to each multi-stakeholder collaboration ecosystem

What will it help you with?

To consider the role of backbone support for your complex multi-stakeholder collaboration

When is this factsheet particularly relevant?

All Phases of the **Dialogic Change Model**

Leading Transformative Change Collectively
A Practitioner Guide to Realizing the SDGs

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Understanding the role of backbone support

Stewarding multi-stakeholder change process requires stakeholders to play different and complimentary leadership roles. The collective leadership approach generates a sense of aliveness, making for a more dynamic and resilient culture of collaboration that spans and leverages the differences between individuals, institutions, and stakeholder perspectives. In this regard, one form of leadership is **providing backbone support for collaboration processes** (Hanleybrown et al. 2012; Kania and Kramer 2011; Kuenkel 2019).

Backbone support refers to funded staff resources that provide ongoing support to the process management of the collaborative change initiative. These are usually experts in designing process architectures and facilitating the co-development of emotionally compelling goals, strategies and implementations plans.

It can be done by individuals, core groups, or funded project secretariats, or even an organization that is mandated to facilitate the process of collaboration.
What is crucially important: People who provide backbone support are highly engaged for the goals, yet impartial towards the different stakeholders, and they are skilled dialogic process facilitators.

Backbone support focuses on process management for the multi-stakeholder collaboration, which includes navigating the connections between the different stakeholder institutions, and ensuring the process architectures are implemented in the best possible way. Its role is relevant in all Phases of the **Dialogic Change Model** (see www.compass-tool.net Methodologies/The **Dialogic Change Model**)
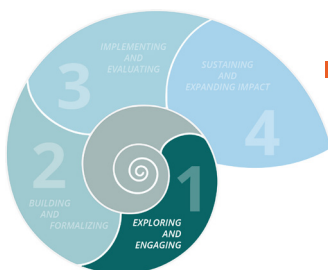
Phase 1: A central role for the **backbone support** is facilitating the co-design of the collaboration's process architecture with a focus on inclusiveness, building ownership of the process, and increasing commitment to delivering results.

Phase 2: The work includes supporting the co-development of emotionally compelling goals and attendant strategies and action plans. **Backbone support** seeks to build and maintain cohesion and aliveness in the emerging collaboration ecosystem by paying attention to the way stakeholder meetings take place and achieve results.
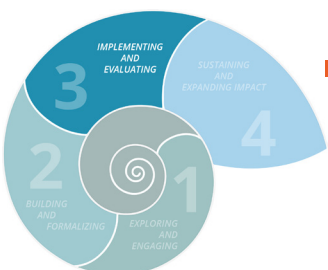
Phase 3: Backbone support focuses on the coordination of activities as well as creating spaces for reflection and mechanisms for learning. This role is crucially important for adapting the collaboration's goals, theory of change, strategy, action plan, and/or structures, as well as ensuring that people stay focused on achieving results.
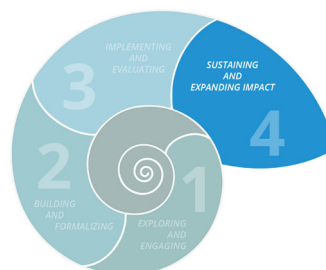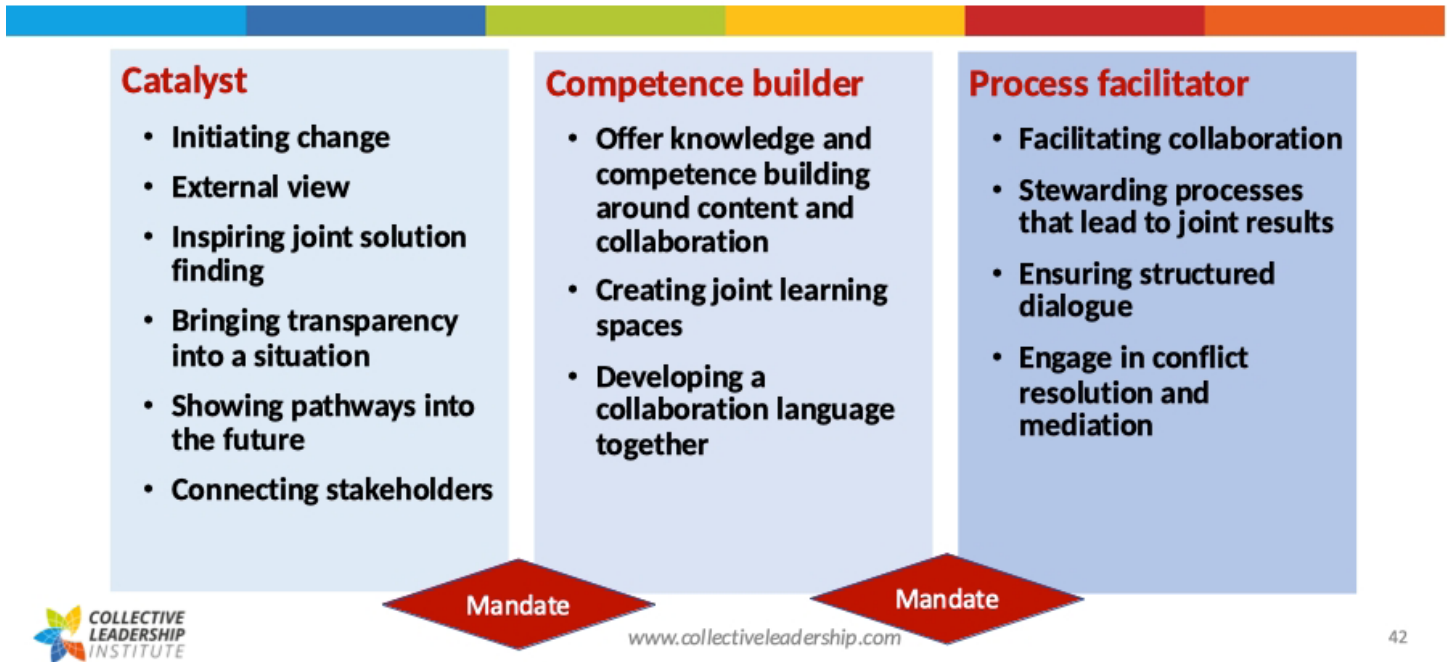
Phase 4: Backbone support navigates the move towards sustaining the results of the multi-stakeholder collaboration and facilitates the setting up of professional management and governance structures.

Backbone support requires a mandate: the stakeholders involved need to acknowledge the work of backbone supports. Such a mandate to support and facilitate the collaboration process is either given by all stakeholder institutions, or a financing funder; or it is gained – once stakeholder institutions experience that back bone supporters work in the interest of all, they appreciate their work and process guidance.

Backbone support needs to be tailored to each multi-stakeholder collaboration, and is generally focused on a combination of the following roles: as a **catalyst** for change, as a **care-taker** of the process, and as **a capacity-builder** for collaboration capacity and expertise.

The Role of Backbone -Organizations

Catalyst

- **Initiating change**
- **External view**
- **Inspiring joint solution finding**
- **Bringing transparency into a situation**
- **Showing pathways into the future**
- **Connecting stakeholders**

Competence builder

- **Offer knowledge and competence building around content and collaboration**
- **Creating joint learning spaces**
- **Developing a collaboration language together**

Process facilitator

- **Facilitating collaboration**
- **Stewarding processes that lead to joint results**
- **Ensuring structured dialogue**
- **Engage in conflict resolution and mediation**

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People who provide backbone support in multi-stakeholder collaboration are the guardians of aliveness in the *collaboration ecosystem*. Their skills to understand the 'patterns that work' and navigate differences towards constructive collaboration paves the way for delivering results. Given the importance of backbone organizations for multi-stakeholder collaborations, it is pertinent to note that most funders who contribute resources to such initiatives underestimate their role (Kuenkel 2017; Pattberg and Widerberg 2014; Turner et al. 2012). Putting backbone support in place requires funding, effort, and time, but is well worth the investment in terms of the quality of process design and implementation, integration of capacity building, collective reflection and adaptation, and for delivering results. Backbone support should not be under-resourced, or else the success of the multi-stakeholder collaboration could be at risk.

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Office Europe
Kurfürstenstrasse 1
14467 Potsdam
Germany
Phone: +49 331 5816 5960
germany@collectiveleadership.com

Office South Africa
11 Abelia Street, Mont Claire
7785 Cape Town
South Africa
Phone: +27 83 772 0958
southafrica@collectiveleadership.com