



# How can RBA and Collective Impact play nicely together?

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Last month at the [Collective Impact conference](#) at Lake Morey organized by United Way of Chittenden County, I had the chance to explore the connections between Results-Based Accountability and Collective Impact, two approaches with broad currency in Vermont's mission-driven sector. In our work group, we started with the assumption that both RBA and CI are strong, effective and inherently-collaborative methodologies. We then asked: Where are the points of overlap, and how can these approaches enrich to one another?

## Points of agreement

Collective Impact and RBA start from a similar set of assumptions:

- Both seek to create meaningful big-picture change.
- Both start with ends ("results" or "shared vision") and work backwards to means.
- Both recognize the importance of "measuring what matters" and using data for organizational and systems learning.
- Both emphasize the need to enlist multiple partners to contribute to population-level results.
- Both offer a framework for thinking about the connection between broad systems-level goals and organizational-level programming.

## Unique contributions

When we put these two approaches side-by-side, we build a more powerful toolkit:

- CI gives us the concept of the **backbone organization**, a formally-appointed and well-staffed entity with specific responsibilities to coordinate the efforts of the collective undertaking.
- RBA gives us “**turn the curve thinking**,” an intuitively-appealing conceptual tool to connect data with action and inspire systems-level work for change.
- CI encourages us to build comprehensive **systems maps** that demonstrate the complex interrelationships of population-level systems and help us to identify leverage points for change.
- RBA encourages us to sketch concise **performance grids** that keep the question “Is anyone better off?” at the forefront of our minds.

### **Both/ands**

On several key topics, the two methodologies enrich each other in more subtle ways. Where they differ in emphasis, they expose important questions to ask about the art of community work.

- **TIME:** One of the most memorable lines from the CI training at Lake Morey last month was trainer Greg Hill’s comment that “Collective Impact moves at the speed of trust.” CI encourages us to move slowly and approach collaborations with the long haul in mind, ready to invest many months and even years simply building the relationships that will allow for effective partnerships. RBA provides a nice counterbalance to that gradualist approach by providing effective means to move quickly from talk to action in order to break through conversational impasse and build group momentum by getting things done. ***How can we move fast enough and slow enough in our community work?***
- **BOUNDEDNESS:** One of the insights implicit in the CI model is the value of creating a bounded group of enlisted partners, all of whom publicly sign on to shared goals and a shared work plan; this allows for greater alignment and accountability within the team. On the other hand, RBA encourages us to never stop asking ourselves “who are the partners with a role to play?” and to continually think about who else could/should be at the table. ***When should we limit our circle to a committed core, and when should we think more expansively about potential partners?***
- **COMPLEXITY:** CI leans towards capturing the full complexity of a situation or system, the better to fully understand and influence it, whereas RBA leans towards simplification based on a philosophy that in our noisy world, less is often more. ***When should we embrace complexity, and when should we drive towards simplification?***

### **Spiral of Inspiration**

RBA and Collective Impact share many starting assumptions, and with relative ease they can become mutually-reinforcing methodologies. Used in tandem, they offer an expanded repertoire of effective change-making concepts and tools, and the contrasts between them encourage us to grapple with some subtle questions of community work.

At their best, CI and RBA can work together to create a **spiral of inspiration** whereby a desire to make systems-level change using a CI approach can motivate groups to do thoughtful work to gather mission-centric data in an RBA format, while at the same time RBA-style data trendlines can redouble a group's commitment to work together for positive systems change.

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