

The Itasca Project

**INSIGHTS FROM SOLVING PROBLEMS
THROUGH CROSS-SECTOR PARTNERSHIPS
CASE STUDY #3 | DECEMBER 2013**

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Table of Contents

	Introduction	3
A	About The Itasca Project	5
B	A Closer Look: Traits, Factors and Behaviors Influencing The Itasca Project	8
C	Three Key Insights from this Case	24
D	What's Next?	27

Introduction

From the White House to the Harvard Business Review, state governments to local philanthropy, many institutions and individuals have expressed their belief in the power of cross-sector partnerships by funding and participating in them. As a result, these partnerships have multiplied in recent years. However, the collective understanding of what makes a cross-sector partnership successful is limited.

While there have been a number of case studies about cross-sector partnerships working on specific issues, and there is an emerging body of work on collective impact—an approach that has cross-sector partnerships at its core—there has not been extensive inquiry into the structure and behaviors of effective cross-sector partnerships.

At Living Cities, we believe in the power of cross-sector partnerships to address some of the toughest challenges our country faces today. We also believe there is a need for greater understanding of cross-sector partnerships so that practitioners, participants, and funders have a systematic way and shared language to reflect on whether their existing or planned partnerships are structured to achieve their intended goals.

Over the last two years, we have been learning from and with leaders about what it takes to set up and run a cross-sector partnership so that it can have real and measurable impact. Through our grants and research, site visits, and hours of interviews we learned so much that was useful, we knew we had to find a way to organize, define, and describe the ideas that were being

mentioned time and again. In this work, we define a cross-sector partnership as an alliance of organizations, which together have a role in solving a problem and achieving a shared goal.

This case study was developed as a companion to *What Barriers? Insights from Solving Problems through Cross-Sector Partnerships* with the goal of making the concepts explored in that paper concrete. This case study is structured as follows:

A About The Itasca Project

B A Closer Look: Traits, Factors and Behaviors Influencing The Itasca Project

- 1 Building a strong foundation for a cross-sector partnership
- 2 Factors that influence the success of a cross-sector partnership
- 3 Behaviors of high-impact cross-sector partnerships

C Three Insights that Emerge from this Case

D What's Next?

Here are three key themes to look for in this case study:

1 Aligning charge, level of intervention, and results within each body of work

Cross-sector partnerships which have a general result—one that describes the aims of the partnership, but does not communicate what success will look like in a way that can be measured—often undertake multiple bodies of work in order to achieve their intended goal. Across these bodies of work, there can be great variation in terms of the work the partnership is being hired to do and its action strategy to do it. However, within each body of work, it is necessary to align charge, level of intervention and result with one another, and with the partnership's intended result.

2 Is it time to reboot and recruit?

A separate but related idea to theme number one is that when a cross-sector partnership takes on an additional body of work, it often treats it as an extension of their existing work—which may or may not make sense depending on their intended result. Further, many cross-sector partnerships maintain the same set of partners no matter the body of work's intended result. While this can be useful, it can also be problematic, because the partners involved in achieving one result might not be the right actors to achieve another. One way of addressing this challenge is to treat each new body of work as an opportunity to do a mini-reboot and recruit new, more appropriate or strategic partners.

3 What's the problem? Creating a formalized problem-solving process

Many cross-sector partnerships come together and immediately focus on implementing solutions, only to discover that they've mistakenly assumed the source of the problem, or wrongly hypothesized the type of change that needs to take place to achieve a different result. By creating a disciplined approach to problem solving that includes learning, interpretation, testing solutions, and reflection, cross-sector partnerships can actually accelerate the pace at which they identify effective solutions to complex problems.

To read the framing paper and other case studies, provide feedback, or join the community of practitioners and funders seeking to strengthen the effectiveness of cross-sector partnerships, visit: www.LivingCities.org.

A About the Itasca Project

The Itasca Project is an employer-led alliance drawn together by an interest in new and better ways to address regional issues that impact economic competitiveness and quality of life in the Minneapolis-St. Paul, Minnesota region.

The Itasca Project was formed by a small set of leaders who posited that business executives should get more involved in issues of regional importance. In 2001 and 2002, this small group conducted interviews with 70-80 CEOs, and determined there was interest in a cross-sector partnership. They also used these interviews to structure how the partnership should work, and what it should do.

From the beginning, the Itasca Project has maintained a strong, central philosophy about how it approaches its work, which includes the following tenets:

- Facts first—investing the time and money required to get the best common fact base possible prior to working on an issue.
- Limited agenda—participants agree on a limited number of priority issues that will address regional economic vitality and quality of life.
- Unique contribution—identify the unique role for Itasca to play which varies by initiative, but usually fills a leadership gap in order to accelerate change.
- CEO commitment—the work is driven by the participants' personal passions and each initiative is led by a CEO who is dedicated to the cause.

- Collaboration is key—Itasca participants often work in partnership with scores of organizations around the region to accomplish an identified goal. The approach is non-partisan and there is a willingness to engage multiple points of view to make meaningful progress.
- Minimal structure—a small working team, including chairs, meets weekly. Participants meet 4-6 times each year. Initiative task forces, composed of Itasca participants and members of the community, meet as needed according to the initiative work plan.¹

The Itasca Project applies this philosophy to how it works to enhance economic vitality, improve quality of life and address socio-economic disparities. It carries out this work through the serial incubation of cross-sector partnership task forces focused on different projects and goals. Some examples of this work in Itasca's specific areas of focus—education, transportation and job growth—include the following efforts.

¹ Itasca Project website. Online at: <http://www.theitascaproject.com/how.htm> (Accessed 2/4/13)

Education

Currently, the Itasca Project's work on education is focused on a task force which identifies strategies for improved higher education in Minnesota to drive long-term, sustainable economic growth and prosperity. The work is being led by a team of 12 leaders from business, nonprofit, and higher education institutions. An advisory group of 40 business and community leaders provides input and guidance.

Past work on education has included a benchmarking study undertaken with the Minnesota Business Partnership, released in 2009, to understand how Minnesota's education system compares with the best in the world; as well as what can be learned from elsewhere to deliver a better education to the students of Minnesota.²

In 2007, Itasca sponsored the work of the Minneapolis Public Schools to develop a strategic plan to transform the school district.³ The Itasca Project has continued to be involved in the implementation of the five-year plan. Using a team of loaned executives, another Itasca task force worked with the University of Minnesota to create a front door to "the U" that would facilitate stronger cooperation with business, improve the process to commercialize intellectual property, and strengthen "the U" as a talent magnet.

And early in its history, in 2005, Itasca provided Minnesota's Governor the *pro bono* services of a consulting team from McKinsey and Company to examine current programs, develop a common fact base, and identify opportunities for improvement of early childhood education, which provided a basis for his legislative agenda.⁴

Transportation

Another long-standing priority of the Itasca Project has been advancing a comprehensive and aligned transportation system. At the time this case study was developed, The Itasca Project's transportation task force is working to amplify efforts for comprehensive transportation plan for the region. The task force seeks to understand "what is the expected economic return on regional transit investments?"

Job Growth

The Itasca Project has also worked on promoting quality job growth through a task force which focuses on assessing the Twin Cities' job growth position and developing strategies and policies to promote the retention, creation, and attraction of quality jobs in the region. This work led to the creation of GREATER MSP, a regional economic development partnership dedicated to driving a coordinated strategy for the region, including attracting and retaining more quality

² Online at: <http://www.theitascaproject.com/Minnesota%27s%20Future%20-%20World%20Class%20Schools%20World%20Class%20Jobs.pdf> (accessed 2/7/13)

³ Source: http://www.mpls.k12.mn.us/strategic_plan (Accessed 2/13/13)

⁴ [Read the report here.](#)

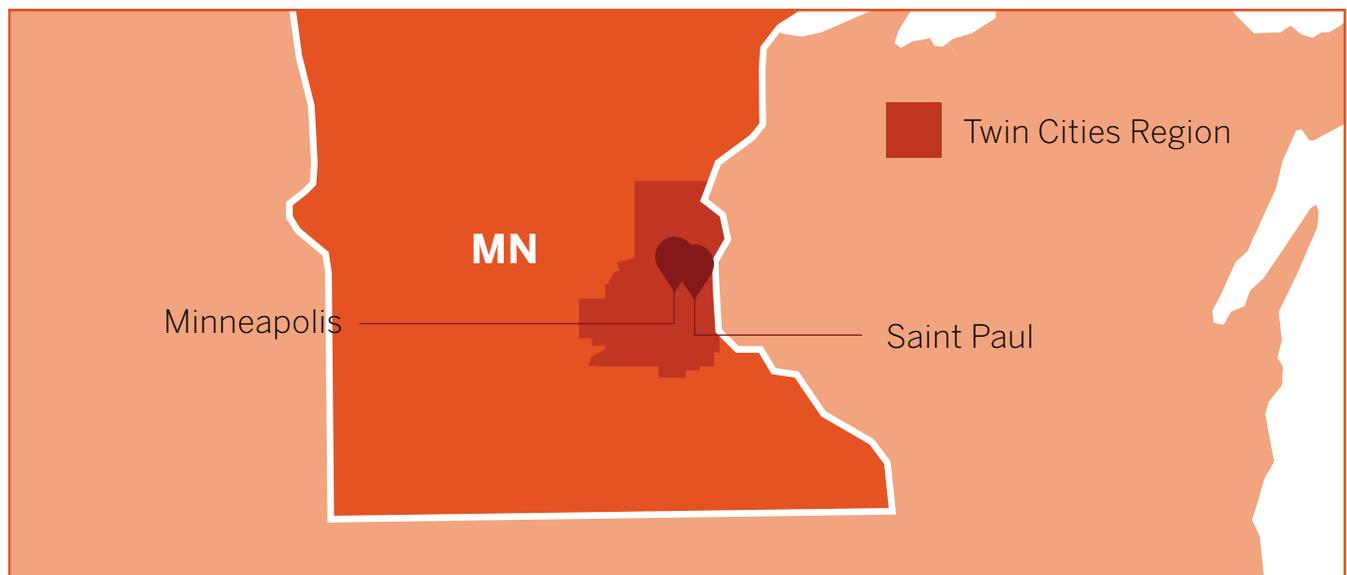
jobs. It also led to the formation of the Business Bridge, an initiative to more efficiently connect proven small companies to large customers and, in doing so, to help grow jobs in Minnesota.

Previous work by an Itasca Project task force on improving the long-term economic stability of the Minneapolis-St. Paul region by increasing the financial fitness of individuals and families also had a strong tie to jobs. Employees, especially minorities, young, and/or lower wage earners were often not getting the full advantage of their benefits and were struggling with financial issues. In response, the task force launched Financially Fit Minnesota, which worked with Minnesota employers to promote practical, focused actions to increase savings and banking among employees and close gaps between employee groups.

An underpinning of much of the work of the Itasca Project is addressing socio-economic disparities in the region. One of Itasca's first task forces took a critical look at the region's socioeconomic disparities through the report called "Mind the Gap". Itasca crafted a business response to this issue. The work led to the

creation of a documentary series aired on local public television.⁵ Also to support this work, in late 2007, the Itasca Project and Wilder Research launched the Twin Cities Compass (www.MNcompass.org), to serve as a central source of data about regional progress toward closing socio-economic disparities and sustaining regional competitiveness and quality of life.

Despite all this work, the Itasca Project describes itself as a "virtual organization" with no standing agenda, staff, or real estate. A loaned employee of McKinsey & Company's Minneapolis office serves as its director and staffs the effort. It is governed by its members which include private sector CEOs, as well as leaders from prominent philanthropies such as the Minneapolis Foundation, St. Paul Foundation, McKnight Foundation, the Bush Foundation and the United Way; government, including the Mayors of Minneapolis and St. Paul, the Chair of the Metropolitan Council (the region's planning agency), Commissioners from Ramsey and Hennepin Counties, and Minnesota's Governor. The Project's membership also includes the president of the University of Minnesota and the chancellor of Minnesota State College and University system.



⁵ Source: <http://www.theitascaproject.com/priorities.htm> (Accessed: 2/4/13)

B A Closer Look: Traits, Factors and Behaviors Influencing The Itasca Project

1 Building a Strong Foundation for a Cross-Sector Partnership

In this section, we will examine how six foundational traits of cross-sector partnerships show up in The Itasca Project.

TRAIT	TYPE	CHARACTERISTICS
1. Results The result the cross-sector partnership sets out to achieve.	General	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intended result is described in general terms • Provides a description of what the cross-sector partnership is trying to achieve • Helpful in communicating the aims of a partnership, but not for measuring progress or ensuring accountability
	Specific	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • States a specific outcome (or set of outcomes) to be achieved • Communicates what success will look like for the partnership • Specified results serve as a foundation for organizing data collection, measuring progress and ensuring accountability

The Itasca Project aims to build a thriving economy and quality of life in the Twin Cities, while reducing socioeconomic disparities. Its intended result is **general**.

TRAIT	TYPE	CHARACTERISTICS
2. Charge The work a cross-sector partnership has been "hired" to do.	Thinking	Recommends solutions to a problem, but isn't responsible for implementing solutions
	Doing	Implements an agreed upon program, strategy, or advocacy agenda developed within or outside of the partnership
	Thinking & Doing	Recognizes that existing solutions aren't sufficient, and works to develop a course of action through learning and experimentation

The Itasca Project carries out its work through the serial incubation of cross-sector task forces focused on different projects and goals. As such, the charge trait varies with the work of each task force, and in different bodies of work has been each of the three types: **thinking, doing, and thinking & doing.**

The Itasca Project carries out its work through the serial incubation of cross-sector task forces focused on different projects and goals. As such, the charge trait varies with the work of each task force, and in different bodies of work has been each of the three types: thinking, doing, and thinking & doing.

A thinking charge is when a cross-sector partnership recommends solutions to a problem, but is not responsible for implementing those solutions. The Itasca Project has exhibited this charge in its work with the Minneapolis Public Schools on developing their 5-year Strategic Plan in 2007-8.

In May 2007, the Minneapolis Public Schools and its Board of Education began a strategic planning process to address a number of big challenges it was facing. As the School District describes on its website:

A team comprised of representatives from the district's many stakeholder groups and members of the board, with the donated support of consultants from McKinsey & Company, gained a thorough understanding of the current situation of K-12 public education in Minneapolis by:

- Collecting input from a wide variety of stakeholders including parents, students, teachers, principals, and the community at large.
- Analyzing the district's financials, student achievement, and student enrollment data and projections.
- Studying reform initiatives undertaken in other districts around the country to learn from their experiences.

Based on the information collected during this phase, the team identified the major issues the district needed to address, and developed options for potential solutions. Input on potential solutions was sought in neighborhood meetings, meetings with teachers, and

other conversations throughout the community. The feedback helped shape a set of recommendations that were developed in conjunction with work on initiatives currently in process such as the magnet school study, school closings and program changes.⁶

Allison Barmann, formerly of McKinsey & Company, who served as the Director of the Itasca Project from 2007-2012, describes the key role that the Itasca Project played in helping the District understand the problems it was facing, recommending solutions, and continued tracking of the District's progress:

The Minneapolis Public Schools came to us and asked for help. The district was struggling with declining student enrollment, a stressed budget, and high turnover of leadership. Itasca determined we would like to support the district, and [then Thrivent Financial for Lutherans CEO] Bruce Nicholson stepped up, and [McKinsey & Company] put a pro bono team toward it, and helped the District put together a strategic plan that highlighted key priorities for the district...[Since then, we've been] working with the Superintendent, the leadership team, and the board to advocate for the priorities in the plan.⁷

In different bodies of its work, the Itasca Project has exhibited different types of charge. For instance, the Itasca Project's Job Growth Task Force seeks to assess the region's job growth position and develop strategies and policies to promote the retention, creation, and attraction of quality jobs in the Twin Cities region. This task force has exhibited a doing charge, which is when a cross-sector partnership implements an agreed upon program, strategy, or advocacy agenda developed within or outside of the partnership.

An example of this is the task force's creation of the Business Bridge, an initiative to more efficiently connect proven small companies to larger customers and, in so doing, help grow jobs in Minnesota. The Business Bridge program was developed based on the "facts first" approach employed by Itasca, which sought to understand the challenges small and large businesses in the Twin Cities faced in building business relationships:

Small business leaders told the Task Force that a significant challenge they face is gaining access to large companies. Securing a large company as a client can have a tremendous impact on the trajectory of a company by establishing a stable revenue stream and credibility for investors and other clients. One of Minnesota's greatest assets is its substantial number of leading companies. However, the Task Force also heard that despite their interest in finding innovative and differentiated solutions from companies based in this market, sourcing departments at large companies face significant challenges in sorting through potential suppliers to find the most innovative, responsive suppliers capable of meeting the needs of leading companies.⁸

The Itasca Project hosted its first Business Bridge Supplier Showcase in May 2011, and its second took place in June 2012.

The Itasca Project has also exhibited a thinking & doing charge in its work. This is when a cross-sector partnership recognizes that existing solutions are not sufficient, and works to develop a course of action through learning and experimentation. An example of this charge in action in the region related to addressing socio-economic disparities. Allison Barmann tells the story as follows:

⁶ Source: Minneapolis Public Schools – Special School District No. 1 website: http://www.mpls.k12.mn.us/strategic_plan (Accessed 2/13/13)

⁷ Author's Interview with Allison Barmann on 11/16/11

⁸ Source: Itasca Project website, <http://www.theitascaproject.com/bridge.htm> (Accessed 2/13/13)

One of the early things Itasca did was our “Mind the Gap: [Disparities and Competitiveness in the Twin Cities]” report.⁹ I think that work changed the conversation, and created a lot of awareness about our socio-economic disparities and had people talking about them who weren't before. Brookings did the research and also recommended several things that we could do to address those socio-economic disparities. One of those was financial literacy.

[This resonated with] Brad Anderson, the former CEO of Best Buy...who had a passion for this issue. He took the lead and formed a task force of public and private folks, assessed the landscape, and figured out the unique thing they could do. This is one of the key things that the Task Forces always do: start with the facts; we always invest up front to get the common fact base. And then we look for the unique role that Itasca and our task forces can play.

So in this particular case, they explored a lot of things in financial literacy including increasing utilization of Earned Income Tax Credits, to focusing on a geographic area, and then they had the realization that when we think about who we are and what we have to offer, we're a group of employers who usually have a lot of employees across the income range who aren't making responsible financial decisions. So, why don't we work with that? We have access to them, we know who they are and we have benefits that can work for them.¹⁰

A group of more than twenty major Minnesota employers joined forces to create Financially Fit Minnesota (FFM) in early 2008. Their goal was to improve their region's overall economic stability by ensuring that their employees took full advantage of the financial benefits offered to them in the workplace, and by helping employers to act on the understanding that direct deposit and retirement plans are beneficial for both employees' lives and the corporate bottom line.¹¹

But, as Barmann describes it, the program took different forms in different businesses, so they continued to learn from one another and experiment with ways to make it more effective:

For the first 18 months, the companies who signed on met monthly to talk about how they were going to move the needle on this. Some of them, Best Buy included, went with opt-out retirement programs. They have a lot of retail workers, so this was a big move for them. Getting them to report the data was important, because we had all these different companies who hadn't really looked at their data by income level, ethnicity, or age group before and really saw how big those gaps were when you looked at direct deposit and retirement savings. Over the course of 2.5 years, we worked together on this issue.¹²

According to an evaluation of Financially Fit Minnesota conducted by the Center for Financial Services Innovation¹³ after the first year of the program, FFM was showing measurable results in encouraging savings for its target populations—minorities, young, and lower income earners.

9 Sohmer, Rebecca (2005). Mind the Gap: Disparities and Competitiveness in the Twin Cities, Brookings Institution. Online at <http://www.brookings.edu/research/reports/2005/10/cities-sohmer> (Accessed 10/30/12)

10 Author's Interview with Allison Barmann on 11/16/11

11 Berke, Sarah (2009) Employer-Based Collaboration: Lessons from Financially Fit Minnesota, Center for Financial Services Innovation. Online at: <http://cfsinnovation.com/node/330661> (Accessed 5/3/12)

12 Author's Interview with Allison Barmann on 11/16/11

13 Berke, Sarah (2009) Employer-Based Collaboration: Lessons from Financially Fit Minnesota, Center for Financial Services Innovation. Online at: <http://cfsinnovation.com/node/330661> (Accessed 5/3/12)

TRAIT	TYPE	CHARACTERISTICS
3. Authority The cross-sector partnership's "right to do work"—either the powers they've been granted or assigned to themselves.	Authorized (Real)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Right to do work granted or delegated by an authoritative body • Work that can be carried out is limited by the authoritative body's parameters
	Empowered (Apparent)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Right to do work is self-actualized • Work that is carried out is only constrained by the limits the partnership sets upon itself

The Itasca Project's authority is **empowered**. As former Director Allison Barmann describes it,

It's really up to the participants. What are they excited about? [No one's] telling the CEOs what they need to go work on, they're telling us what they would be

excited to work on. And that's been a very critical part of the success. We follow their passions. We obviously want it to be a high-impact initiative, so we look for the intersection of what's going to move the needle on [the Itasca Project's] issue areas and what would the CEOs be excited about.¹⁴

TRAIT	TYPE	CHARACTERISTICS
4. Representatives The stature and power of the individuals within their own organizations or communities who are serving as representatives to the partnership.	Designee	An individual who represents the organization or community, but does not have decision-making or implementation powers within their organization or community
	Doer	An individual who may be responsible for implementing changes to behaviors and strategies in their organization or community, but lacks the formal authority to mandate them
	Decision-maker	An individual who has the authority or influence in their organization or community to require that it change its behaviors and strategies

The Itasca Project's representatives are **decision-makers**, individuals who have the authority or influence in their organizations or communities to require that it change its behaviors and strategies. The 50+ participants in the Itasca Project are primarily private sector CEOs. However, Allison Barmann notes that while the effort is:

business-led, it is very intentionally cross-sector. The foundations are at the table and they fund

[the work] as well, in a different manner. And the Mayors of Minneapolis and St. Paul. Governors have been involved, their involvement has waxed and waned, but they're generally involved. The president of the University of Minnesota, Chancellor of Minnesota State University system, Chair of the Metropolitan Council, more recently we added county commissioners from Ramsey and Hennepin Counties.¹⁵

¹⁴ Author's Interview with Allison Barmann on 11/16/11

¹⁵ Author's Interview with Allison Barmann on 11/16/11

TRAIT	TYPE	CHARACTERISTICS
<p>5. Level of Intervention</p> <p>The cross-sector partnership's action strategy.</p>	<p>Project/Program Delivery</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creates and/or delivers an analysis, activity (or activities) to achieve a specific aim • The success of the project/program is the end the partnership hopes to achieve
	<p>Systems Change</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aims to intervene and reorient the set of behaviors, interactions, projects and programs in an existing system (or systems) in order to achieve its goals • This work often includes project/program delivery, but it is not an end in itself, rather a tool for identifying changes that need to occur at the systems level in policy, practice, or funding

The Itasca Project's level of intervention is **project/program delivery** because its work focuses on creating and delivering analyses and activities to achieve its mission. The success of each of these projects or programs is the result the partnership hopes to achieve. This level of intervention aligns with one of the tenets of the Itasca Project philosophy for carrying out its work-unique contribution- which is about identifying a unique role for Itasca to play in each issue that it works on.

TRAIT	TYPE	CHARACTERISTICS
6. Time Frame Period of time during which the cross-sector partnership's work is designed to take place.	Time-Bound	A partnership that is formed for a limited period of time
	Open	A partnership that is formed without an explicit time frame

The Itasca Project is an example of a cross-sector partnership with an **open** timeframe. As former Director Barmann notes, "I don't think anyone intended it to last 8 years. But, people do continue to show up, and work on our issues, and continue to contribute because they see we've had impact."¹⁶

¹⁶ Author's Interview with Allison Barmann on 11/16/11

2 Factors that influence a cross-sector partnership's success

In this section, our focus turns from traits that are core to The Itasca Project, to the five factors that can accelerate or limit its success.

FACTOR	TYPE	CHARACTERISTICS
1. Formation Catalyst The reason or opportunity for creating the cross-sector partnership.	Leadership Interest	When leaders recognize an opportunity, or seek to address a problem out of perceived obligation or altruistic self-interest
	Key Opportunity	When policies, practices, data, innovations or new/redirected funding streams require or catalyze cross-sector partnership to occur
	Crisis	When an emergency event or increased awareness of a persistent problem galvanizes cross-sector players to come together to address the problem

The Itasca Project is an example of a cross-sector partnership, which has a formation catalyst trait of **leadership interest**.

The Itasca Project was formed by a small set of leaders who posited that business executives should get more involved in issues of regional importance. Allison Barmann described its origin story as follows:

[In the early 2000s, the then] president of the McKnight Foundation convened a small group of business and community leaders to explore how to get CEOs re-engaged in the civic agenda in a meaningful way. We've had a long history of civic engagement in the Twin Cities. We've had a lot of great leaders from that perspective—the Daytones and the Pillsburys and the Cargills and all these folks who over time really invested in our community in a significant way. But, as our companies grew more and more globally, and as the CEOs weren't homegrown anymore, that real engagement in the civic agenda had started to wane.

So this group said, we have to find a way to get CEOs re-engaged, thinking about our region, and beyond just what's best for their business, really about what's best for our community, because what's best for our community, in turn is best for business as well.

That group got McKinsey involved and said "can you help us think about this? We don't know what we want it to be, or how it should be structured, or what it really is. We'd love your help thinking through that."

Partners at McKinsey went out and interviewed 80-some CEOs and civic leaders and asked these questions—would you like to be involved? How? What would it look like? And they learned that there was a lot of interest, that the CEOs didn't always know how to get involved, they didn't have the network here to understand what are the issues and the ways they could get involved.

The first meeting of the Itasca Project was in the fall of 2003. At that point, they invited 50 people into the room, and at the first meeting, they said they'd get back together in three months. Others in the room said, "No no no, we need to get back together in a month." That's how it went, they picked their initiatives and got to work.¹⁷

FACTOR	TYPE	CHARACTERISTICS
<p>2. Structure</p> <p>The arrangement of and relations between stakeholders in the cross-sector partnership.</p>	<p>Formal</p>	<p>Reflects an arrangement of and relations between stakeholders that have established procedures, roles, and commitments, which are codified through operating documents, MOUs, contracts, etc.</p>
	<p>Informal</p>	<p>Reflects an arrangement of and relations between stakeholders that possess fluid procedures, roles and commitments</p>

The Itasca Project's structure is **informal**. This structural type is a reflection of their core philosophy which includes the tenet of "minimal structure—a small working team, including chairs, meets weekly. Participants meet 4-6 times each year. Initiative task forces, composed of Itasca participants and members of the community, meet as needed according to the initiative work plan."¹⁸

Barmann expanded on how this philosophy has been carried out in practice:

I've thought about this a lot. It was called the Itasca Project with the intent of being a project. We do it for a while, and every meeting is a referendum on our existence so we didn't want to be just another organization. We didn't want it to be another organization just for the sake of being another organization.¹⁹

¹⁷ Author's Interview with Allison Barmann on 11/16/11

¹⁸ Itasca Project website: <http://www.theitascaproject.com/how.htm> (Accessed: 2/13/13)

FACTOR	TYPE	CHARACTERISTICS
3. Financial Resources How the achievement of the cross-sector partnership's goal is supported financially.	None	The partnership's work is not financially supported
	In-Kind	The partnership is supported through in-kind contributions
	Dues	Members contribute money to participate in the partnership
	Fees	Stakeholders (within or outside partnership) pay fees for the products or services the cross-sector partnership provides
	Sponsorship	Stakeholders (who may or may not participate in the cross-sector partnership's work) fund particular components of the work
	Grants	Private and public grants support the work of the cross-sector partnership
	Redirected/Aligned	Existing public funding streams within stakeholder organizations are formally redirected or aligned to support the work of the partnership

The Itasca Project's financial resources are a combination of **in-kind** support from McKinsey & Company in the form of *pro bono* teams it offers to support particular projects and task forces, **dues** paid by private sector members, and **grants** from philanthropic partners.

¹⁹ Author's Interview with Allison Barmann on 11/16/11

FACTOR	TYPE	CHARACTERISTICS
<p>4. Positioning</p> <p>How the cross-sector partnership positions itself in relation to other individuals, organizations and partnerships working on the same issues and/or in the same geography.</p>	<p>Opposer</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May or may not be recognized in its area of work and/or geography, and does not possess the track record, relationships or membership to ensure that its own agenda can become reality • Positions itself to oppose the work of individuals, organizations and partnerships with which it does not agree. Outside stakeholders often do not work with this partnership, or if they do it is to prevent opposition to their own agendas
	<p>Supporter</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognized as a “player” in its area of work and/or geography, but does not possess the track record, relationships or membership to ensure that its agenda will become reality • Other individuals, organizations and partnerships will work with this partnership because supporters are positioned in a way that adds value and legitimacy, but does not guarantee results
	<p>Leader</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognized as the expert, authority or chief influencer in its area of work and/or geography based on its track record, relationships and/or membership • Positioned in such a way that other individuals, organizations and partnerships believe they need this partnership’s blessing/support to get work done

The Itasca Project is a **supporter** partnership. It is recognized as a “player” in its area of work and/or geography, because of the profile of its membership and relationships and the impact of its past work. But it does not possess the track record to ensure that its agenda will become reality. Other organizations—for instance the Minneapolis School District—will work with this partnership because supporters are positioned in a way that adds value and legitimacy, but does not guarantee results.

FACTOR	TYPE	CHARACTERISTICS
<p>5. Lifespan</p> <p>What happens to the cross-sector partnership when it accomplishes or abdicates its goal.</p>	Sunset	When a cross-sector partnership ends either because it achieved its mission, it has reached its time boundary, or it has ceased to be relevant
	Institutionalization	When the cross-sector partnership continues and its role relating to an issue/in a geography becomes the norm
	Reboot	When the cross-sector partnership winds down or builds upon its existing work, and starts a new or expanded agenda

The Itasca Project’s lifespan type is **reboot**, which is when the cross-sector partnership winds down or builds upon its existing work, and starts a new or expanded agenda. As Allison Barmann describes, “I think Itasca as an organization reboots. We continually take on new issues all under the frame of the economic competitiveness and quality of life and socio-economic disparities. But any one task force sunsets.”²⁰

²⁰ Author’s Interview with Allison Barmann on 8/2/12

3 Behaviors of High-Impact Cross-Sector Partnerships

In the previous two sections, we focused on traits and factors that form the foundation and influence the effectiveness of The Itasca Project. In this section, we will turn our attention to how Itasca exhibits two behaviors that we have observed to be key for all cross-sector partnerships.

BEHAVIOR 1:

Trust Building & Maintenance

The trust building & maintenance cycle is not set up in a way that makes it possible to assign a cross-sector partnership a specific type. Instead, it is a tool for reflecting on how a partnership has or has not built and maintained trust and engaged with the different

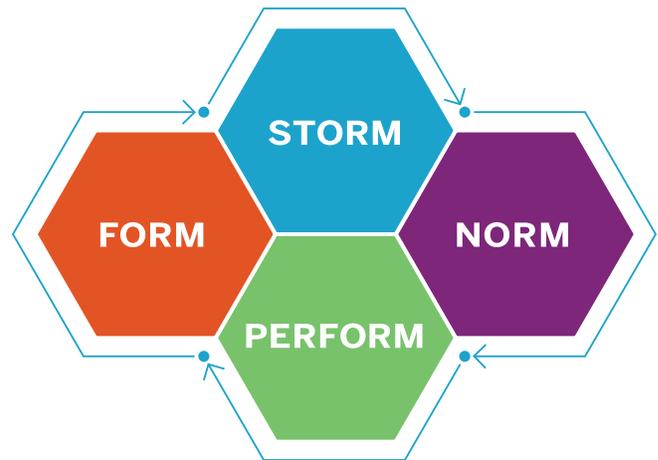
stages—form, storm, norm, perform—that have been identified and explored for decades in the literature on group dynamics. As such, this section will share reflections on the role of trust within The Itasca Project.

Stage	Definition
Form	<i>Forming is the stage when partners first come together. It has been described as the 'honeymoon' period for a partnership because it is when partners are excited about the newness and potential of the effort.</i>
Storm	<i>Storming is when partnership members stop being polite and start getting real. This might involve airing fundamental differences of opinion and approach among partners, struggling to figure out objectives, roles, and leadership in the partnership and also feeling threatened by working with partners who you don't know, don't trust or view as competitors.</i>
Norm	<i>Norming is the stage when roles and partner conflicts are sorted out and the partnership's focus turns towards the work. Objectives and rules of engagement get clearer; a sense of partnership identity forms, and conflict moves from among partners to between the partners as a group and the problems they are trying to solve (ie us vs. us to us vs. them).</i>
Perform	<i>Performing is when the partnership reaches a steady state where it can do the work it needs to do to achieve its intended goals.</i>

When asked how this process plays out in The Itasca Project task forces, Allison Barmann cited work taking place in late 2012 as an example:

In one of our task forces, we're looking at the higher education strategy for the state and we're working with the University of Minnesota, Minnesota State College and Universities, with the private colleges. We spent a good deal of time at our first four task force meetings before we really started to talk about strategies and solutions. And they started to get impatient with us. But it was the absolute right thing to do because I know that, had we gone in there and during the first or second meeting said here are the proposed strategies to advance, we wouldn't have had those norms to react to each other. It's so much better to have trust and to know that you're all coming from the right place in that environment.

We spent a lot of time just focusing on the facts and I think perhaps this is a big part of it. We always agree on the common facts before moving to strategies. That's a way we build trust. But going through that process together I think you do start to storm and norm a little bit. So that then when you get to that point where you have to decide what are the right priorities to go forward with, you know you can work together and you know you've built that trust.²¹



Performing is when a cross-sector partnership reaches a steady state where it can do the work it needs to do to achieve its intended goals. Barmann notes,

I would say our task forces generally don't reach "steady state" in terms of operation. We are a virtual organization so we always have to find others to be the long-term operations. This might require spinning out the work to a new organization or group or turning to a partner to implement.²²

²¹ Author's Interview with Allison Barmann on 8/2/12

²² Email from Allison Barmann to author dated 5/31/13

BEHAVIOR 2:

Problem-Solving

Like Behavior 1, the problem-solving cycle is not set up to assign a cross-sector partnership a specific type. Instead, it is a tool for reflecting on the approaches that a cross-sector partnership has used to address a complex social or economic problem.

The Itasca Project has embedded the stage of the problem-solving cycle focused on problem-defining into their six principles of how they do their work, stating simply, “Facts first. We are willing to invest the time and money required to get the best common fact base possible prior to working on an issue.”²³

For the stage of the cycle that focuses on interpreting what has been observed, and then developing hypotheses about what needs to change in order to yield different results, Barmann notes that The Itasca Project’s unique partnership with McKinsey & Company often comes into play.

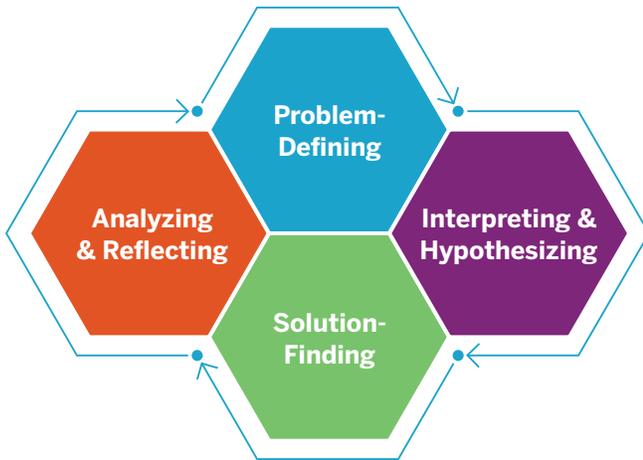
Oftentimes we use the McKinsey team [for interpreting and hypothesizing]. Whenever we have a McKinsey team supporting a task force, I feel really great about the cycle. But, we don’t always and then that’s more challenging and I sometimes feel like we can’t be as rigorous.²⁴

Stage	Definition
Problem-Defining	<i>Observing events and patterns to gain greater insight into the source and nature of challenges</i>
Interpreting & Hypothesizing	<i>Interpreting what has been observed, and then developing hypotheses about what needs to change in order to yield different results.</i>
Solution-Finding	<i>Identifying and testing solutions to a recognized problem.</i>
Analyzing & Reflecting	<i>Determining if the solutions are effective and learning from them to gain a better understanding of the problem and the solutions that are needed to achieve the partnership’s intended result</i>

²³ Itasca Project website: <http://www.theitascaproject.com/how.htm> (accessed 11/5/13).

²⁴ Author’s Interview with Allison Barmann on 8/2/12

²⁵ Author’s Interview with Allison Barmann on 8/2/12



We do a little bit of [analyzing and reflecting] at the task force level. I like to sit down with the task force chairs and do that. And, we have the working team, which is the group that meets every Friday morning. I think they are the ones that drive this in a big way because it sometimes takes some time to do this analyzing and reflecting. This group keeps the task forces on its agenda as time goes on. They continue to ask a set of questions. How are the task forces doing? What's the impact been? Are there connections still need to be made? Are there barriers that need to be removed? I think having the structure of the ongoing Working Team really enables that.²⁵

The Itasca Project undertakes solution-finding in two ways. One way is that a task force will develop a solution and another organization will take it up and test it. The other approach is that Itasca develops and incubates a solution and, once its viability is demonstrated, then spins it off to an existing or new organization. In both these approaches, Itasca works to maintain a connection to the work, even if it is being carried out in other places.

When it comes to analyzing & reflecting- the process of determining if the solutions are effective, and learning from them to gain a better understanding of the problem and the solutions that are needed to achieve results- The Itasca Project employs a couple of processes which Barmann described.

²⁴ Author's Interview with Allison Barmann on 8/2/12

²⁵ Author's Interview with Allison Barmann on 8/2/12

C Three Key Insights from this Case

There is no one right way to structure a cross-sector partnership. Most partnerships possess—for legitimate reasons—a quirky set of traits. However, the case of The Itasca Project reveals some interesting and useful insights into structuring a cross-sector partnership to achieve impact. It's a particularly rich case, because The Itasca Project has serially incubated a really wide range of projects. With that in mind, here are three key insights that emerged from this case for us, though we know that there are many more.

1 Aligning charge, level of intervention, and results in each body of work

Cross-sector partnerships which have a general result—one that describes the aims of the partnership, but does not communicate what success will look like in a way that can be measured—often undertake multiple bodies of work in order to achieve their intended goal. Across these bodies of work, there can be great variation in terms of the work the partnership is being hired to do and its action strategy to do it. However, within each body of work, it is necessary to align charge, level of intervention and result with one another, and with the partnership's intended result.

The case of The Itasca Project is a particularly rich example of this variability, and a cross-sector partnership being strategic in how it aligns the

charge (trait 2), level of intervention (trait 5) and results (trait 1) of each initiative it undertakes with the Itasca Project's overall general result of enhancing economic vitality, improving quality of life and addressing socio-economic disparities in the Minneapolis-St. Paul region.

To see this play out, let's focus on two different bodies of work that The Itasca Project has undertaken: its work on education with the Minneapolis Public Schools (MPS) on developing their strategic plan and its work on addressing socio-economic disparities in the region which led to the formation of Financially Fit Minnesota (FFM).

In the MPS strategic plan example, the intended result of this body of work was general—to help improve public education—because Itasca has identified this as a key strategy for achieving their broader intended results. The Itasca Project employed a thinking charge, because they recommended solutions to a problem, but weren't

responsible for implementing the solutions. Its level of intervention was at the project/program delivery because they delivered an analysis, and the delivery of that analysis was the end they hoped to achieve.

Turning to the other example, Financially Fit Minnesota (FFM) emerged from Itasca's general result around socio-economic disparities. However, FFM identified a specific result: to increase savings and banking among employees and close gaps between employee groups of different ages, incomes, and races. To carry out this work, Financially Fit Minnesota employed a thinking & doing charge, because Itasca's members recognized that existing solutions weren't sufficient, and they needed to develop a course of action through learning and experimentation to identify a different approach. This charge aligned with their level of intervention focused on systems change, because FFM aimed to intervene and reorient a set of behaviors, interactions, projects and programs in an existing system in order to achieve its goals.

While there is significant variability in traits across these bodies of work, in each example, the charge, level of intervention, and results are internally aligned, and show a clear connection to the cross-sector partnership's overall, general result.

While there is significant variability in traits across these bodies of work, in each example, the charge, level of intervention, and results are internally aligned, and show a clear connection to the cross-sector partnership's overall, general result.

2 Is it time to reboot and recruit?

A related, but separate idea from theme number one is that when a cross-sector partnership takes on an additional body of work, it often treats it as an extension of their existing work, which may or may not make sense depending on their intended result. Further, many cross-sector partnerships maintain the same set of partners no matter the body of work's intended result. This can be problematic, because the partners involved in achieving one result might not be the right actors to achieve another. One way of addressing this challenge is treating each new body of work as an opportunity to do a mini-reboot and recruit new partners.

In the interest-based frame²⁶, we posited that the representatives (trait 4) who participate in a cross-sector partnership should align with the intended result (trait 1) of the work. The Itasca Project does this by treating the creation of each new body of work as an opportunity to reboot (factor 5: lifespan), recruiting a new set of partners from its overall membership to be involved in a task force undertaking specific bodies of work.

²⁶ As a reminder, the interest-based frame says that, instead of thinking about cross-sector partnerships as alliances of organizations which require representation from different sectors, cross-sector partnerships should be thought of as alliances of organizations which together have a role in solving a problem and achieving a shared goal.

3 What's the problem? Creating a formalized problem-solving process

Many cross-sector partnerships come together and immediately focus on implementing solutions, only to discover that when working to address complex social and economic problems, they've mistakenly assumed the source of the problem, or wrongly hypothesized the type of change that needs to take place to achieve a different result. By creating a disciplined approach to problem solving that includes learning, interpretation, testing solutions, and reflection, cross-sector partnerships can accelerate the pace at which they identify effective solutions to complex problems.

The Itasca Project has avoided problem-solving pitfalls by formally embedding pieces of the cycle (behavior 2) into their philosophy as well as the structure of how their task forces carry out their work.

One of The Itasca Project's core principles is to get the facts first, and they commit to using their financial resources to establish a common fact base about the problems each task force is working to address. They often use their partnership with McKinsey & Company to conduct the research to establish the fact base, as well as to synthesize and offer interpretations of the facts that have been gathered.

Given the profile of Itasca Project members—top executives, largely from the private sector—it makes sense that this approach focuses membership energy on the place that they can likely provide the most value: proposing and testing possible solutions.

In many cross-sector partnerships, that's where the work would end. But, The Itasca Project has also built in reflecting and analyzing into their structure through a working team that meets every Friday morning and both tracks the impact of the various task forces' interventions, as well as identifies what could be done to make them more successful.

The key insight from The Itasca Project is not how they do problem-solving, but rather that their discipline in embedding the behaviors into the philosophy and structure of how they work has been a powerful strategy for them to achieve impact.

How The Itasca Project has embedded the problem-solving cycle into their work makes sense for them given the profile of their membership and their serial incubation approach. That being said, the key insight from The Itasca Project is not how they do they do problem-solving, but rather that their discipline in embedding the behaviors into the philosophy and structure of how they work has been a powerful strategy for them to achieve impact.

D What's Next?

At Living Cities, we have three goals in sharing this work. We want to:

- 1 Ground theory in the experience of a real partnership, to help other cross-sector partnerships achieve measurable impact.**
- 2 Spur greater openness and learning about what has worked with cross-sector partnerships, and equally importantly, what has not.** We believe that learning and problem-solving are open processes, and that by approaching them this way, the social change field can have better results more quickly.
- 3 “Turn up the heat” on cross-sector partnerships, their members, and funders.** With so many big challenges in the world today, and a limited amount of intellect, time, and money, funders and participants involved with cross-sector partnerships need to be using these resources to achieve measurable impact. And, if a partnership is not going to be able to do that in its current state, we want to activate people to change the way those partnerships are working, even if it means being brave enough to say that a cross-sector partnership is not going to achieve its goals and should come to an end.

Our hope is that this work is just the beginning of the conversation, and the learning that needs to happen to advance cross-sector partnerships that are working to address the toughest challenges our world and its people face today. We recognize that many of these ideas are not new, and a significant number of partnerships have utilized some or all of these traits in structuring their own work. But, we hope that this case study and its companion paper have piqued your interest in joining the conversation, sharing your insights and experiences, as well as providing feedback and ideas. Join us online at livingcities.org or on Twitter [@Living_Cities](https://twitter.com/Living_Cities) using hashtag [#xsector](https://twitter.com/hashtag/xsector).

SPECIAL THANKS

Special thanks to Allison Barmann for her continued willingness to share her work, insights and feedback in the development of the *What Barriers? Insights from Solving Problems through Cross-Sector Partnerships* paper and this case study. And to Julia Silvis for her additional support. To learn more visit The Itasca Project on their website: <http://www.theitascaproject.com/>.

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Join the conversation and find additional resources about cross-sector partnerships at LivingCities.org or on Twitter [@Living_Cities](https://twitter.com/Living_Cities), or by using the hashtag **#xsector**.

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