

# Six Questions to Sharpen a Philanthropic Collaborative's Value Proposition: A Toolkit for Leaders and Funders

# Toolkit: Context and instructions

## Context

In working with dozens of philanthropic collaboratives, The Bridgespan Group has developed a series of iterative questions we believe can help collaborative leaders—along with the donors and partners that support them—sharpen their value propositions and paths to impact. We often walk our clients through these deceptively simple yet profound questions as they navigate choices before formal launch and at critical points in their organizational journeys.

We had the chance to workshop these questions with over 300 collaborative leaders and donors at the [2025 Global Summit of Collaborative Funds](#), co-hosted by the Gates Foundation and Philanthropy Together. We have incorporated this group's input into this revised and expanded toolkit.

This toolkit is designed to support collaborative leaders and funders alike, and while the questions are numbered (given that we believe organizational form typically follows strategic function), it may be helpful to home in on the questions that are harder to answer. You may also need to go back to previous questions as the responses to others become clear. We also acknowledge that the illustrative examples on the following pages don't represent the full set of options available to collaborative leaders and funders. Please use them as starting points for your respective journeys.

## Instructions

Review the following pages and consider how you might answer the questions for your collaborative or for one that you support. Use the check boxes to select the options with your organization in mind (or create new ones in the spaces provided). Also, for each question, consider whether relevant stakeholders (e.g., leaders and staff of collaboratives, other grantees, and fund leaders) agree with your responses.

After filling out the worksheet, reflect on:


- What questions or additional thoughts did this exercise bring up for you?
- How do these answers fit together? Are there any that, taken as a whole, create strategic or operations tensions or challenges?

# Six questions for collaborative leaders to consider

Often requires  
an iterative approach

<b>1</b> Is there a <b>clear and compelling rationale</b> for launching or maintaining the collaborative?	What social impact does the collaborative seek to have? Is the collaborative bringing in new dollars or aligning existing dollars? What is the specific rationale and value proposition it brings to donors, recipients, and the issue area? Will it bring something new to the field?	<b>Investment thesis</b>
<b>2</b> How does the collaborative <b>work with donors</b> ?	How are decisions made, and what decision rights do funders retain regarding strategy and grantmaking? How much are funders expected to contribute? What types of donor networking, education, and engagement does the collaborative offer?	<b>Funding structure</b>
<b>3</b> How will the collaborative <b>deploy financial and nonfinancial resources</b> to achieve its aims?	How will the collaborative source giving opportunities? What criteria and process will be used to decide whether to invest? How will it structure grants? What does the collaborative offer grantees and the field beyond money?	<b>Fund distribution strategy</b>
<b>4</b> How will the collaborative <b>measure, evaluate, and learn (MEL)</b> ?	What will the collaborative measure (e.g., grantee portfolio impact, field/movement impact, donor impact)? How does the collaborative report impact to its stakeholders?	<b>MEL strategy</b>
<b>5</b> How will the collaborative <b>operate</b> ?	How will the collaborative's operations be funded and what will be the collaborative's budget breakdown? What processes, systems, and staff does the collaborative need to support its strategy?	<b>Operating model</b>
<b>6</b> How will the collaborative <b>evolve over the years, and what might be its end game</b> ?	Will this effort be ongoing or a fixed-term initiative, or something else? How will the collaborative know whether/when to sunset?	<b>End game</b>

# 1 Is there a **clear and compelling rationale** for launching or maintaining the collaborative?

<p><b>1a</b></p> <p>What social impact does the collaborative seek?</p>	<div style="text-align: center;">  </div> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around; margin-top: 10px;"> <div style="text-align: center;"> <p>Broad (no one issue/field)</p> </div> <div style="text-align: center;"> <p>Broader, with possible sub-fields (e.g., gender equity, racial equity)</p> </div> <div style="text-align: center;"> <p>Specific population or issue (e.g., K-12 education, deforestation)</p> </div> </div> <p>In one sentence, write the impact you imagine the collaborative will have.</p> <div style="background-color: #f0f0f0; height: 60px; margin-top: 10px;"></div> <div style="background-color: #f0f0f0; height: 80px; margin-top: 10px; padding: 5px;"> <p><i>Type additional notes here</i></p> </div>	<p>Are the relevant stakeholders aligned?</p> <p>YES</p> <p>MAYBE</p> <p>NO</p>
<p><b>1b</b></p> <p>Will this collaborative bring something new to the field?</p>	<p>What funding vehicles or organizations currently work in this area?</p> <div style="background-color: #f0f0f0; height: 60px; margin-top: 10px;"></div> <p>How will this collaborative add distinct value for donors, recipients, and the issue area?</p> <div style="background-color: #f0f0f0; height: 60px; margin-top: 10px;"></div>	<p>Are the relevant stakeholders aligned?</p> <p>YES</p> <p>MAYBE</p> <p>NO</p>

1c

Is the collaborative bringing new dollars or aligning existing?

Unlocking net new dollars is primary focus

Aligning existing and unlocking net new dollars

Aligning existing dollars

Type additional notes here

Are the relevant stakeholders aligned?

YES

MAYBE

NO

1d

What is the collaborative's primary investment thesis?

While you may ascribe to multiple investment theses, we encourage you to select your "primary" here:

Supporting individual organizations to advance their missions

Supporting a range of efforts and organizations working on a shared goal (e.g., resourcing community-driven change, cross-sector coalitions, fields, and/or movements)

Supporting place-based change to further progress in a specific geography

In one sentence, write what you envision the value proposition of the collaborative to be:


Are the relevant stakeholders aligned?

YES

MAYBE

NO

## 2 How does the collaborative **work with donors**?

<p><b>2a</b></p> <p>How would you describe the majority of the collaborative's donor base?</p>	Institutional private philanthropy	Government, bilateral, and/or multilateral funders	Individual donors/funders	Mix of institutional, government/bilateral/multilateral/individual funders	<p>Are the relevant stakeholders aligned?</p> <p>YES</p> <p>MAYBE</p> <p>NO</p>
<p><b>2b</b></p> <p>Is the collaborative exclusive or open to all?</p>	<div style="text-align: center;">  </div> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around; margin-top: 20px;"> <div> <p>The fund is exclusive and has significant requirements (often minimum giving commitment) to join</p> </div> <div> <p>The collaborative has a minimum requirement to join; there may be tiers (i.e., differential decision rights or benefits for donors joining at different levels)</p> </div> <div> <p>The fund is open to all and there are no requirements to join</p> </div> </div> <div style="background-color: #f0f0f0; padding: 10px; margin-top: 10px;"> <p>Type additional notes here</p> </div>				<p>Are the relevant stakeholders aligned?</p> <p>YES</p> <p>MAYBE</p> <p>NO</p>

2c

How much are funders expected to contribute?

How much are funders expected to contribute financially?



Significant lift expected of donors to contribute financially

Minimum giving levels required

No minimum giving levels

Type  
additional  
notes here

Are the relevant stakeholders aligned?

YES

MAYBE

NO

How much time and additional resources are funders expected to contribute?



Significant lift expected of donors to contribute, with time and/or other resources

There are significant optional enrichment activities

There are optional governance/leadership opportunities or an opportunity to provide only financial support

Limited engagement required ("easy button")

Type  
additional  
notes here

2d

How will the collaborative make decisions?

1. What is the formal and informal governance of the collaborative (e.g., steering committee, management committee, etc.)?

2. Do donor decision-making rights change based on the amount of funding committed?

3. Are there specific points in time where decision making is reassessed, or is it set once?

2e

What types of donor networking, education, and engagement does the collaborative offer?



2f

What (if any)  
decision rights  
do donors retain?

Donors retain  
control/make  
independent  
grant  
decisions

Mix (some donors align  
giving, others pool  
giving; pooled giving  
generally approved by  
donor governance)

Pooled funding;  
donors retain  
governance  
over funding  
allocation

Fully pooled  
funding;  
donors give  
control to fund  
management

Fully pooled funding;  
collaborative employs  
participatory funding  
and shifts at least some  
grantmaking control to  
community members

Type  
additional  
notes here

Are the  
relevant  
stakeholders  
aligned?

YES

MAYBE

NO

### 3 How will the collaborative **deploy financial and nonfinancial resources** to achieve its aims?

3a

**Sourcing grantees:** Is this collaborative open to applications from all or is the process closed?



Open source

Mix of closed and proactive outreach

Proactive outreach

Type  
additional  
notes here

Are the relevant stakeholders aligned?

YES

MAYBE

NO

3b

**Selecting grantees:** How does the collaborative decide on grantees (may select multiple)?

Donors select

Donors advise on portfolio (collaborative leaders propose potential grantees)

Internal management committee

Participatory mechanisms (including those with proximate experience)

Panel of external experts/advisors

Other (please explain)

Type  
additional  
notes here

Are the relevant stakeholders aligned?

YES

MAYBE

NO

3c

**Structuring grants:**  
What is the typical grant size?

Small (\$K)

Large (\$10Mn+)

Type  
additional  
notes here

Are the relevant  
stakeholders  
aligned?

YES

MAYBE

NO

3d

**Structuring grants:**  
How project-  
oriented versus  
general support are  
the grants offered?

Totally  
unrestrictedPartially restricted/  
partially unrestrictedUnrestricted but funding  
a strategic plan

Project-based

Type  
additional  
notes here

Are the relevant  
stakeholders  
aligned?

YES

MAYBE

NO

<b>3e</b> What does the collaborative offer its grantees beyond money? (may select multiple)	Coaching/ leadership development	Technical assistance Donor introductions	Financial planning Strategic planning	DEI-related support Other	Are the relevant stakeholders aligned?  YES  MAYBE  NO
Type additional notes here					

<b>3f</b> What does the collaborative offer the field beyond money? (may select multiple)	Networking/ convening/ relationship building	Research/ publications/ thought leadership	Engaging and building knowledge of donors	Resource mobilization for sector	Other	Are the relevant stakeholders aligned?  YES  MAYBE  NO
Type additional notes here						

## 4 How will the collaborative **measure, evaluate, and learn?**

4a

What will the collaborative measure and how will it view its impact?

Individual grantee level:

Grantee portfolio level:

Long-term impact, such as on a field, population, or system:

Donor level, including members of your fund/vehicle/platform or the broader philanthropic ecosystem:

For more context on each of these levels see our 2024 article, "[How Philanthropic Collaboratives Measure, Evaluate, and Learn.](#)"

Are the relevant stakeholders aligned?

YES

MAYBE

NO

4b

How does the collaborative report impact to its stakeholders?

We report individually to funders

We have an annual report but provide individual measurement to funders

We only have one annual report all funders receive

Type additional notes here

Are the relevant stakeholders aligned?

YES

MAYBE

NO

## 5 How will the collaborative **operate**?

5a

How will the collaborative's operations be funded? (may select multiple)

How do you cover operating costs?

Philanthropy

Board pays

Endowment

Program services

Fee/allocation of gift amount

Other

How can this scale over time?

Are the relevant stakeholders aligned?

YES

MAYBE

NO

5b

What will be the collaborative's budget breakdown?

What percentage of the total budget...

Is directed to external recipients?

%

Supports other programmatic activities (e.g., convenings, knowledge production, trainings)?

%

Supports core operations (e.g., finance, administration, HR, executive leadership/management)?

%

Are the relevant stakeholders aligned?

YES

MAYBE

NO

5c

How will the collaborative be structured?

Fiscally sponsored

Public charity

LLC

Private foundation

Informal organization

Other

Type  
additional  
notes here

Are the relevant stakeholders aligned?

YES

MAYBE

NO

5d

What are the processes, systems, and staff the collaborative needs to deliver its strategy with excellence?

Strategy

Grantee sourcing/diligence support

Fundraising/donor partnerships

Stakeholder/field engagement

Other

Type  
additional  
notes here

Are the relevant stakeholders aligned?

YES

MAYBE

NO



## 6 How will the collaborative **evolve over the years**, and what might be its **end game**?

<p><b>6a</b></p> <p>Has the collaborative discussed its time horizon?</p>	<p>Yes      Somewhat      No</p> <p><i>Type additional notes here</i></p>	<p>Are the relevant stakeholders aligned?</p> <p>YES</p> <p>MAYBE</p> <p>NO</p>
<p><b>6b</b></p> <p>(If answered yes to 6a.) What has the collaborative decided for its time horizon?</p>	<p>←————→</p> <p>One time initiative (time-limited)      Possibility for multiple time-limited funds      Ongoing</p> <p><i>Type additional notes here</i></p>	<p>Are the relevant stakeholders aligned?</p> <p>YES</p> <p>MAYBE</p> <p>NO</p>
<p><b>6c</b></p> <p>What would make the collaborative rethink this decision?</p>	<p><i>Type additional notes here</i></p>	<p>Are the relevant stakeholders aligned?</p> <p>YES</p> <p>MAYBE</p> <p>NO</p>