CATALYST COLLECTIVE GROUP

CASE STUDY

Building Partnerships That Scale

Lessons from Successful Cross-Sector Collaboration

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Catalyzing Growth. Building Influence. Creating Legacy.

Executive Summary

Every sector that touches complex, systemic problems: health, education, housing, workforce development, economic mobility, has arrived at the same conclusion: no single organization can solve these problems alone. Government agencies bring authority and scale but move slowly. Nonprofits bring trust and community proximity but often lack capital. Businesses bring resources and infrastructure but rarely have a mandate for public good. Philanthropy bring risk capital but rarely delivers services directly. The organizations that make measurable, durable progress are the ones that learn to combine these strengths deliberately, through partnership structures built to last and built to grow.

This case study examines what the peer-reviewed research says about why some cross-sector partnerships scale into lasting, high-impact collaborations while others stall as well-intentioned pilots that never outgrow their founding grant. Drawing on empirical studies from public administration, nonprofit management, and social innovation literature, we identify the structural and relational conditions that separate partnerships built to last from partnerships built to expire, and we translate those conditions into a practical framework that Catalyst Collective Group (CCG) applies with our clients through the Catalyst Growth Journey™.

The research is consistent on one point above all others: scale is not a function of good intentions or even good funding. It is a function of design. Partnerships that scale are architected with the same intentionality as any other strategic asset, with shared governance, shared measurement, distributed leadership, and a deliberate plan for what happens after the ribbon-cutting. This case study lays out that architecture and shows how mission-driven organizations can apply it.

The Cross-Sector Imperative

Cross-sector collaboration is now one of the most active areas of management and public administration research, and for good reason. Bryson, Crosby, and Stone, whose 2015 update to their influential framework in Public Administration Review remains one of the most cited works in the field, describe cross-sector collaboration as the linking or sharing of information, resources, activities, and capabilities by organizations in two or more sectors to achieve jointly an outcome that could not be achieved separately. Their research places true collaboration in the middle of a continuum: more integrated than simple coordination or cooperation, but short of a full organizational merger.

That middle ground is precisely where most cross-sector work lives, and it is also where most cross-sector work struggles. Bryson, Crosby, and Stone's synthesis of a decade of empirical study found that collaboration is genuinely difficult: partners often carry different institutional logics, different definitions of success, and different tolerances for risk, and those differences do not resolve themselves simply because everyone signed a memorandum of understanding.

For organizations like the ones CCG serves: nonprofits, government agencies, educational institutions, healthcare systems, foundations, coalitions, and mission-driven businesses, this creates a real strategic tension. Funders and boards increasingly expect partnership as a condition of investment, yet the research is clear that partnership without deliberate design produces fragile, short-lived collaborations rather than durable, scalable ones. The organizations that get this right do not treat partnership as a soft relationship-building exercise. They treat it as an engineering problem with a body of evidence behind it.

What the Research Tells Us

CCG's approach to partnership design is grounded in the empirical literature on cross-sector and multi-stakeholder collaboration. Five findings, drawn from peer-reviewed and rigorously reviewed research, recur across studies conducted in very different fields, from public health to international development to community-based social services.

1. A Common Agenda Is the Foundation, Not the Formality

In their foundational 2011 Stanford Social Innovation Review article, John Kania and Mark Kramer coined the term "collective impact" to describe cross-sector efforts capable of producing population-level results, in contrast to the isolated impact of any single organization acting alone. Their analysis, and the extensive body of research it has since generated, identifies a genuinely shared agenda, a common understanding of the problem and a jointly developed approach to solving it, as the precondition for everything else. Partnerships that skip this step and move straight to program design tend to discover, months or years later, that partners were never actually aligned on what success looks like.

A related and equally consistent finding is the role of shared measurement. Partners who agree on a short list of common indicators, collected and reported consistently across organizations, are far better positioned to make course corrections together and to demonstrate the kind of population-level results that justify continued and expanded investment.

2. Trust Functions as Infrastructure, Not Sentiment

A study published in Business and Society Review examined 39 semi-structured interviews with public, private, academic, and faith-based partners working across food insecurity, education, health, and public safety collaborations. Its central finding was that trust operates as a hybrid institutional logic that shapes collaboration outcomes at multiple levels simultaneously, it is not a soft precondition for partnership but a structural variable that determines whether partners are willing to share resources, cede control, and stay at the table when the work gets difficult. The study's authors linked trust deficits directly to gaps in what they termed structural embeddedness: how deeply a partnership's relationships are woven into a community's existing networks.

A 2024 multiple case study of cross-sector collaboration in home visiting programs, published in Frontiers in Public Health, reached a strikingly consistent conclusion using a different method and a different field entirely. Analyzing 76 qualitative interviews across five exemplary collaborations, the researchers found that leadership from all levels, cross-sector champions, and shared goals among providers were the relational factors most consistently associated with successful collaboration, and that these relational factors were, in turn, only sustainable when paired with structural supports such as shared data systems, written agreements, and co-location.

3. Leadership Style and Personal Investment Are Measurable Success Factors

A comprehensive review of the cross-sector collaboration literature examining how these partnerships foster social innovation found that partners' prior collaborative experience and the personal investment style of the leaders convening the work are consistently identified as determinants of success. Early studies on cross-sector collaborations found that effective conveners invested heavily and devoted significant personal attention to the collaboration's success; more recent research has refined this into a focus on the specific relational and facilitative skills those leaders bring, rather than their formal authority or title.

This has a direct implication for how mission-driven organizations staff their partnership work. The convener role is not administrative overhead to be delegated downward, it is a leadership function that determines whether a partnership survives its first difficult budget cycle or leadership transition.

4. Governance and Institutional Differences Are the Real Barrier to Scale

Not every study is optimistic about how easily these lessons translate into practice. A 2022 review in the International Journal of Management Reviews, which combined bibliometric analysis with qualitative review of the cross-sector partnership literature, cautioned that research has been biased toward documenting success factors while underinvesting in understanding the barriers, particularly the friction created when partners from business, government, and the nonprofit sector operate under fundamentally different institutional logics and accountability structures. The review argued for treating governance design itself as the central challenge of cross-sector work, rather than treating good governance as something that naturally follows from goodwill.

This finding matters enormously for scale specifically. A partnership can achieve a common agenda and strong relational trust at a small, founding scale and still fail to scale precisely because its governance structure was never built to absorb new partners, new funding streams, or new institutional logics as the work grows.

5. Transformation Requires Power-Sharing, Not Just Coordination

A survey of 41 multistakeholder partnerships aligned to the UN Sustainable Development Goals, conducted by the World Resources Institute, identified four conditions with the highest potential to produce transformative, rather than merely incremental results: joint agreement on vision and goals; a clear, shared understanding of what policies and relationships need to change; the ability to leverage existing power structures rather than working around them; and mechanisms that allow partners to share accountability, risk, leadership, and benefit rather than concentrating them in a single lead organization. Partnerships that scale, in other words, are partnerships that deliberately redistribute power and risk as they grow, they do not simply add participants to a structure that was designed for one dominant partner.

Summary: Five Evidence-Based Conditions for Scale

Research Finding	Source	Implication for Scale
A common agenda and shared measurement precede program design	Kania & Kramer, Stanford Social Innovation Review (2011)	Alignment work must happen before, not alongside, program build-out
Trust functions as structural infrastructure, not sentiment	Business and Society Review; Frontiers in Public Health (2024)	Invest in relationship and data infrastructure with equal seriousness
Convener leadership style is a measurable success factor	Cross-sector social innovation literature review	Staff the convener role as a leadership function, not overhead
Governance design, not goodwill, determines whether differences in institutional logic are absorbed	Vogel, International Journal of Management Reviews (2022)	Design governance to flex as new partners and funders join
Transformation requires shared power, risk, and accountability	World Resources Institute, SDG Partnership Study (2020)	Build mechanisms for redistributing — not just adding — participation

Table 1. Synthesized from peer-reviewed and empirically grounded research on cross-sector and multistakeholder collaboration.

Applying the Lessons: The Catalyst Growth Journey™ for Partnerships

Research findings only create value when they are translated into a repeatable practice. CCG applies its seven-phase Catalyst Growth Journey™: Discover, Design, Develop, Deploy, Demonstrate, Deliver, and Distinguish, specifically to the work of building cross-sector partnerships that are designed for scale from day one, rather than retrofitted for scale after they succeed.

Discover: Map the Ecosystem Before Mapping the Agenda

Before any partnership document is drafted, CCG works with clients to map the full landscape of potential cross-sector partners, their institutional logics, their existing relationships, and their sources of risk tolerance. Consistent with the governance research, we treat differences in institutional logic as data to be planned around, not obstacles to be smoothed over in a kickoff meeting.

Design: Architect Shared Governance and Shared Measurement Together

Reflecting the evidence on common agenda and shared measurement, CCG never designs a partnership's mission statement separately from its measurement plan. Governance structures, decision rights, and the short list of indicators partners will track together are built as a single package, with explicit provisions for how new partners are onboarded into that governance as the partnership grows.

Develop: Build Trust Infrastructure Alongside Program Infrastructure

CCG treats relationship infrastructure, regular convening cadence, shared data systems, co-location or shared staff where feasible, and written agreements that clarify roles rather than merely formalizing intent with the same rigor applied to program design. This reflects the finding that trust operates structurally: it must be built into the operating model, not left to develop informally over time.

Deploy, Demonstrate, and Deliver: Distribute Leadership as the Partnership Grows

As partnerships move from pilot to scaled operation, CCG helps clients formally distribute convening leadership across multiple partner organizations rather than concentrating it in the founding organization. This directly addresses the research finding that transformation requires redistributing power, risk, and accountability, not simply adding new logos to a shared press release.

Distinguish: Position the Partnership as a Durable Asset

In the final phase, CCG works with clients to document and communicate the partnership's model, results, and governance structure so that it becomes a distinguishing, fundable asset in its own right, one that can attract new partners and new capital because its architecture, not just its mission, has been proven to hold up under growth.

Common Pitfalls That Prevent Partnerships from Scaling

Across the research reviewed for this case study, and consistent with CCG's own advisory work, several recurring failure patterns explain why well-intentioned partnerships plateau or dissolve rather than scale:

- Agenda without alignment: Partners agree to a mission statement without doing the harder work of reaching a shared understanding of the problem itself, leaving early disagreements to resurface later as governance conflicts.
- Measurement as an afterthought: Evaluation metrics are added after program design is complete, making it difficult to demonstrate the population-level results that attract scale-up funding.
- Concentrated conveningship: A single founding organization holds all convening authority, which works at pilot scale but becomes a bottleneck — and a single point of failure — as the partnership grows.
- Governance frozen at founding scale: Decision-making structures designed for three founding partners are never redesigned to accommodate the tenth or twentieth partner, so growth stalls rather than accelerates.
- Underinvestment in relational infrastructure: Trust-building activities are treated as a one-time kickoff exercise rather than an ongoing structural investment requiring dedicated time, staff, and shared systems.

CCG's Recommendations for Building Partnerships That Scale

Based on the evidence reviewed above and CCG's own field experience advising cross-sector coalitions, we offer the following recommendations to leaders who are building or rebuilding to partnerships intended to scale:

- Treat governance design as a strategic investment, not a legal formality. Budget real time and expertise for it, and revisit it at defined growth milestones.
- Build your shared measurement framework in the same conversation as your shared mission, not after program design is finalized.

- Staff the convener role deliberately, selecting for facilitative and relational skill, and plan for that role to be distributed across partners as the collaboration matures.
- Fund relationship infrastructure: convening time, shared data systems, co-location with the same seriousness as program delivery infrastructure.
- Design decision rights and onboarding processes that can accommodate new partners and new funders without renegotiating the entire partnership from scratch.
- Document your partnership's model and results as a distinguishable asset that can be communicated to funders, policymakers, and future partners, not only as a program outcome, but as a proof of collaborative infrastructure that works.

Conclusion

The research is unambiguous: partnerships that scale are built, not discovered. The organizations that move from isolated pilots to lasting, cross-sector infrastructure share a common discipline, they invest as much intentionality in how they collaborate as in what they are trying to achieve. For nonprofits, government agencies, educational institutions, healthcare organizations, foundations, and mission-driven businesses navigating an environment where funders increasingly expect partnership, this discipline is no longer optional. It is the difference between a project that ends when the grant does and a collaborative infrastructure that compounds in value over time.

This is the work CCG does alongside our clients every day: helping organizations transform ideas into investment, partnerships into progress, and vision into measurable, sustainable impact.

References

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About Catalyst Collective Group

Catalyst Collective Group (CCG) is a strategic growth and business development advisory firm that helps organizations build the partnerships, positioning, and operational capacity required to scale outcomes. We support nonprofits, government agencies, educational institutions, healthcare organizations, foundations, and mission-driven businesses with solutions that include executive strategy, partnership development, operational excellence, revenue diversification, and community impact planning—ensuring growth is aligned, measurable, and sustainable.

Our mission is to transform ideas into investment, partnerships into progress, and vision into measurable, sustainable impact.

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