

Understanding the forces at play that determine our social, economic and environmental realities may seem like an impossible task. These complexities are neither easily characterized nor simply manipulated toward a more desirable reality. Fully wrapping one's hands around complicated issues like community engagement, healthy food access or leadership succession for example may take a lifetime to accomplish given the multitude of factors influencing them. Let this not dissuade you from intervention, though.

While addressing deeply entrenched, complex social issues may be at the core of your mission, it need not be your banner statement. To put it another way, framing your goal as a broad, far-reaching objective that requires movement of the masses may be an effective means to appeal to a larger audience, but it scarcely describes your role or others' in affecting change. Accept humility in your role. Understand that while the issue may require a sea change in behavior or new policies to realize an improved status, yours is but one part of the work toward that end. It is important to be able to speak to the larger issue at hand, but more important is the ability to completely, succinctly and modestly describe your lesser role in addressing it.

This reductionist approach leads both to clarity of objectives and an increased potential for success. It is about biting off what you can chew, grounding the work on an approachable platform and laying out the path forward with concrete and achievable steps. Furthermore, a framework of discrete, actionable issues ensures your longevity in the work – when you realize success through incremental change your appetite for the work can be maintained while your propensity to burnout decreases. It also requires recognizing that there is much to accomplish and that the efforts of many others are needed on all fronts, including yours.

Community-wide issues deserve the work and attention of the community. The Collective Impact Framework rests on the notion that movement on issues such as these is not accomplished through the efforts of one person or one organization, but one community. Identification of allies – natural, unexpected or tangential as they may be – is the first of many steps toward building trust and rapport, creating a common agenda, strategically developing mutually-reinforcing activities and communicating as a coalition.

As you continue working on issues that matter to you, I encourage you to look for examples of collective impact work that can propel your efforts. Where you don't find those examples, invest yourself in creating that space. Be prepared to ensure that all voices are heard, particularly those whose opinions and perspectives are often overlooked and those that you disagree with. Know that this is messy work and that failure often leads to success. Lastly, know that your K-State Research and Extension Professionals are here to help you. We're firm believers in this work – that partnerships forged through a trustworthy process will lead to greater outcomes for the residents of Douglas County, Kansas.