
05

THE COLLABORATION DIVIDEND

Why Partnerships Create Greater Impact

The future belongs to organizations that connect people,
not organizations that compete for attention.

TYLER J. BUTLER

COLLABORATION *for* GOOD

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Why Partnerships Create Greater Impact

By Tyler J. Butler

COLLABORATION *for* **GOOD**

68%

Of corporate respondents, in a mostly UK sample, say nonprofit partnerships have improved their business practices¹

12,052

Companies with validated science-based climate targets, as of September 2026²

20 of 25

Collective impact sites studied showed evidence of population-level change³

01

THE QUESTION ON THE BUDGET SLIDE

Your budget review is on Thursday. The CFO has sent back one slide with a single question circled: what does the company get from these partnerships? You fund a food bank's logistics program, sit on a regional workforce coalition, and signed a climate pledge two years ago. Each started for good reasons, under different leaders. They report on different measures, and two of the partners have never met. You know the work matters. By Thursday, you need to show how it adds up.

Housing, workforce readiness, public health, education, and climate resilience all cross the boundaries of any single company, agency, or nonprofit. Your business depends on

all of them, and no one sector can fix them alone. That is the case for partnership. The harder part is designing partnerships whose results you can report and defend.

 FROM THE RESEARCH

Bryson, Crosby, and Stone, Public Administration Review, 2006. Review of the research literature, stated as propositions.⁴

The authors define 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 by organizations in one sector separately."

Why it matters. The test is in the last clause. Save partnerships for results your company could not reach alone, and write down what that result is before you sign.

This guide covers what companies gain from partnership, the forms it takes, when to join a coalition or a pooled fund, and how to structure and govern the work so it holds up in front of your executives and your partners.

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WHAT YOUR COMPANY GAINS

When your CFO asks what the company gets, you now have data to point to. C&E Advisory's 2025 partnerships barometer surveyed 130 corporate and nonprofit partnership professionals, most of them based in the UK. Nearly all corporate respondents, 97 percent, agreed that partnerships improve their understanding of social and environmental issues. Two in three said partnerships had improved their business practices. And 92 percent cited reputation and credibility as a reason to partner, while 88 percent of nonprofits cited access to funding.¹

WHAT EACH SIDE SAYS PARTNERSHIPS DELIVER

Share of respondents agreeing, corporate and nonprofit, 2025

Partnerships improve our understanding of social and environmental issues



Reputation and credibility are a reason to partner



Access to funding is a reason to partner



Partnerships have improved our business practices



■ Corporate respondents ■ Nonprofit respondents

Figure 1. Bars are drawn to scale, 0 to 100 percent. Sample of 130 respondents, 49 percent corporate, mostly UK-based, fieldwork July 2025. Source: C&E Advisory, Corporate-Non-profit Partnerships Barometer 2025.¹

Commitment is holding up. In the same survey, 51 percent of corporates reported no change in their ESG commitment, meaning their environmental, social, and governance goals, 43 percent had strengthened it, and 6 percent had reduced it. Three in four had kept their cross-sector partnership engagement steady.¹

The pressure to prove value is rising too. In the Association of Corporate Citizenship Professionals' 2026 CSR Insights Report, 83 percent of practitioners reported more visibility inside their companies. Sixty-six percent face more demand to measure impact

and 63 percent more demand to make the formal business case, yet only 13 percent feel very confident they can do it.⁵

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR YOU Name the business value of each partnership next to its social value: insight, better practices, trust, talent, or risk reduction. Your executives will ask for both.

03

THE PARTNERSHIP SPECTRUM

Partnership is a range. At one end, your company writes a check. At the other, your company and a nonprofit plan and deliver work as one, and aim to change a whole system. Each step brings more shared capacity and asks more of both sides, especially in staff time and executive attention.

FOUR STAGES OF PARTNERSHIP

How the relationship between a company and a nonprofit changes along the way

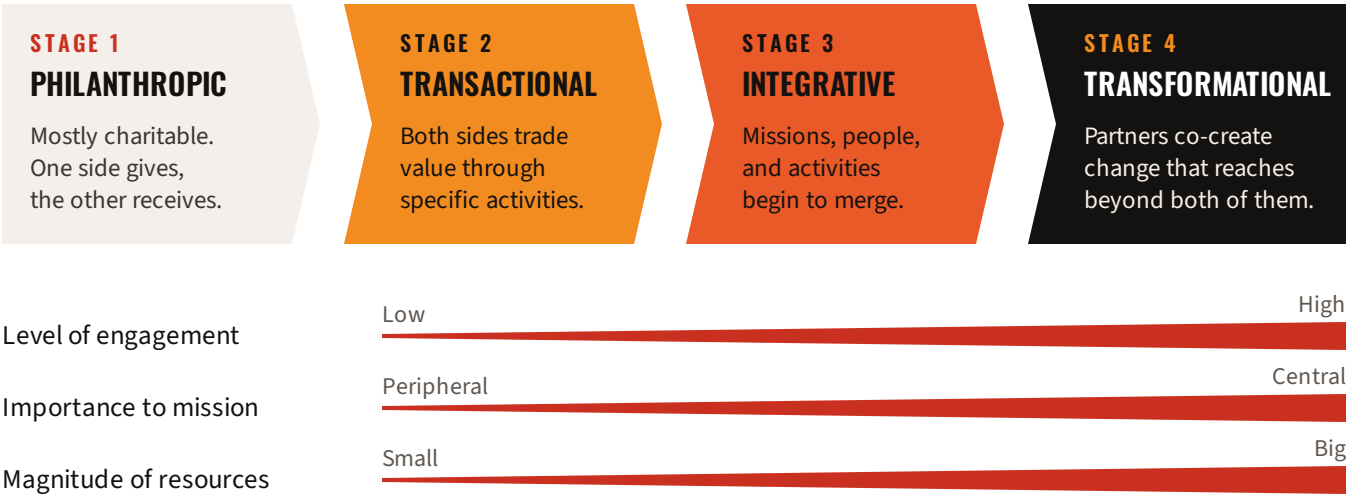


Figure 2. Adapted from James E. Austin's collaboration continuum (2000), which named the first three stages, and Austin and Seitanidi (2012), which added the transformational stage. Stage descriptions are our summaries, and three of Austin's seven relationship dimensions are shown.^{6,7}

FROM THE RESEARCH

Austin and Seitanidi, Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly, 2012. Review of research on partnering between nonprofits and businesses.⁷

The review asks: "How can collaboration between nonprofits and businesses most effectively cocreate significant economic, social, and environmental value for society, organizations, and individuals?" It builds on Austin's three stages and adds a fourth, transformational.

Why it matters. Judge each partnership on the value it creates for society, for your partner, and for your company. Then decide on purpose whether it should stay where it is or go deeper.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR YOU Most portfolios need a mix. A philanthropic grant can be exactly right. Problems start when a partnership is expected to deliver integrative results on a philanthropic level of commitment.

04

THE COLLECTIVE IMPACT MODEL

When your company joins a community-wide effort, it helps to know the most widely cited framework for one. In their 2011 Stanford Social Innovation Review article "Collective Impact," John Kania and Mark Kramer described collective impact as the commitment of a group of important actors from different sectors to a common agenda for solving a specific social problem. They wrote that successful initiatives "typically have five conditions that together produce true alignment and lead to powerful results."⁸ Use them as a checklist before you commit dollars or a seat.

CONDITION	WHAT TO ASK BEFORE YOUR COMPANY JOINS
Common Agenda	Do partners share a vision for change and a joint approach to reaching it?
Shared Measurement Systems	Have partners agreed how success will be measured and reported, in terms you can use in your own disclosures?

CONDITION	WHAT TO ASK BEFORE YOUR COMPANY JOINS
Mutually Reinforcing Activities	Is each partner doing what it does best, coordinated through a common plan? What is your company's piece?
Continuous Communication	Is there a regular, open rhythm that builds trust and keeps efforts aligned?
Backbone Support Organizations	Is dedicated staff coordinating the work, and who pays for it?

Conditions as named in Kania and Kramer, 2011. Questions are our summaries.⁸

The article's central example was Strive in Cincinnati, where more than 300 leaders agreed to take part, including foundation heads, city officials, school district representatives, the presidents of eight universities and community colleges, and the executive directors of hundreds of education-related nonprofit and advocacy groups.⁸ That effort grew into StriveTogether, which as of October 2025 reported a network of 70 communities in 28 states reaching 13 million people.⁹ StriveTogether describes its Cradle to Career Network as the country's largest network of place-based partnerships.¹⁰

DOES IT MOVE THE NEEDLE?

A cross-site study of 25 collective impact initiatives looked for changes at the population level, the kind of results that show up across a whole community.

20 OF 25 SITES SHOWED POPULATION CHANGE

Each dot is one collective impact initiative in the study



Figure 3. Source: ORS Impact and Spark Policy Institute, 2018.³

FROM THE RESEARCH

ORS Impact and Spark Policy Institute, 2018. Cross-site evaluation of 25 initiatives, drawing largely on self-reported data. Not peer reviewed, with no comparison group.³

"Overall, 20 of the 25 study sites showed evidence of population changes, based on reliable and valid data." Those changes generally came through changes in services, practices, and policies.

Why it matters. Community-wide results take years, longer than most corporate reporting cycles. Ask partners to report shifts in services, practices, and policies as early signs of progress. Without a comparison group, treat this as encouraging evidence, not proof.

THE 2022 UPDATE CENTERS EQUITY

In 2022, Kania and colleagues published "Centering Equity in Collective Impact," which added five strategies: ground the work in data and context and target solutions; focus on systems change in addition to programs and services; shift power within the collaborative; listen to and act with community; and build equity leadership and accountability.¹¹ For a corporate partner, the practical point is simple: the people most affected by a problem need a real role in shaping the solution, including the parts your company funds.

The future belongs to organizations that connect people, not organizations that compete for attention.

JOINING A COALITION

A sustainability coalition is the most public partnership your company can choose. Membership signals a commitment to investors, employees, and customers, and it usually comes with targets and reporting. Three of the best known show the scale.

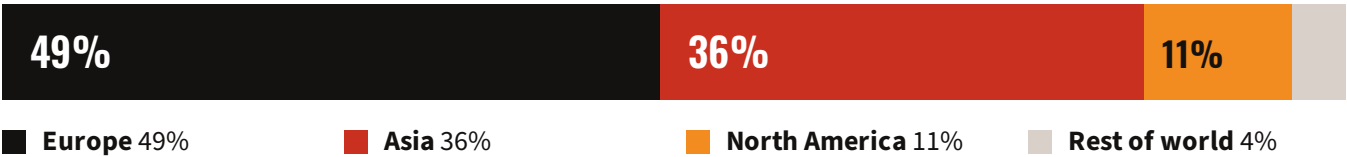
COALITION	WHAT YOUR COMPANY COMMITS TO	SCALE
UN Global Compact	Joining what the UN calls the world's largest voluntary corporate sustainability initiative. ¹²	More than 23,000 companies across 160+ countries, nearly double five years earlier (December 2025). ¹³
Science Based Targets initiative (SBTi)	Setting climate targets that the initiative validates, including net-zero targets for some companies.	12,052 companies with validated targets and 2,818 with net-zero targets, as of September 2026. ²
RE100	Reaching 100 percent renewable electricity by 2050 at the latest. Led by Climate Group.	Over 400 businesses across more than 150 markets, using about 550 terawatt-hours (TWh) of electricity a year. ¹⁴

Counts come from each initiative's own pages. The UN Global Compact's participant database, which also includes nonprofits, labor groups, and business associations, listed about 25,500 participants as of September 2026.¹⁵

Climate targets are growing fastest. By the end of 2025, 9,764 companies had validated science-based targets, a 40 percent increase in one year, and companies with validated net-zero targets grew 61 percent. SBTi passed 10,000 companies with validated targets in January 2026.¹⁶ The growth is not even around the world.

WHERE SCIENCE-BASED TARGETS ARE SET

Share of all targets by region, and companies with targets in the three leading countries



Companies with targets, leading countries

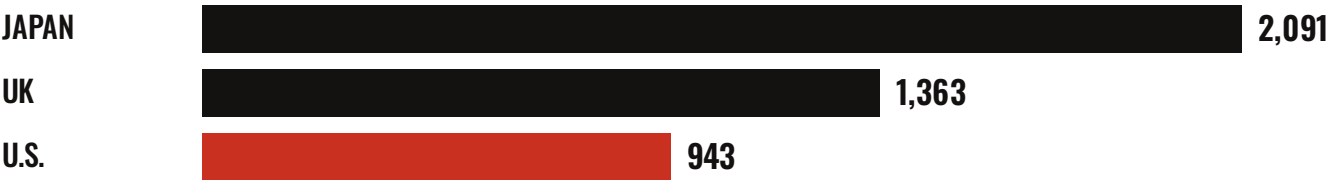


Figure 4. Bars are drawn to scale. Regional shares and country counts as reported by SBTi in April 2026, from its 2025 Trend Tracker. The rest-of-world share is calculated as the remainder.¹⁶

BEFORE YOU SIGN

- **Know what you are promising.** A pledge is a public commitment with a date on it. Confirm with finance, operations, and legal that the company can meet it.
- **Budget the reporting.** Coalitions ask for progress data. Decide who owns it, and whether it lines up with the disclosures your company already makes.
- **Plan for a miss.** Agree internally on how you will explain a delay before one happens.
- **Show up.** The value of a coalition comes from peer learning and joint work, and that takes someone's time.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR YOU A coalition logo on your report is a promise to stakeholders. Join the ones your operations can keep pace with, and staff them like a real partnership.

POOLED FUNDS AND COLLABORATIVES

Not every partnership needs to be one company and one nonprofit. Philanthropic collaboratives pool money from several funders behind a shared strategy, and a corporate foundation can join one to back work larger than its own grant budget and to share the cost of due diligence.

In 2025, the Bridgespan Group surveyed 310 of these collaboratives. Together, respondents deploy \$4 billion to \$7 billion a year globally. They said they could deploy nearly three to five times that, as much as \$20 billion in the coming year, if fundraising were not a constraint. Money is concentrated: the 33 collaboratives that each deployed more than \$25 million a year accounted for 68 percent of overall funding.¹⁷ An earlier Bridgespan survey, in 2021, found that 97 collaboratives had directed more than \$10 billion to social change, and three out of four had formed since 2010.¹⁸

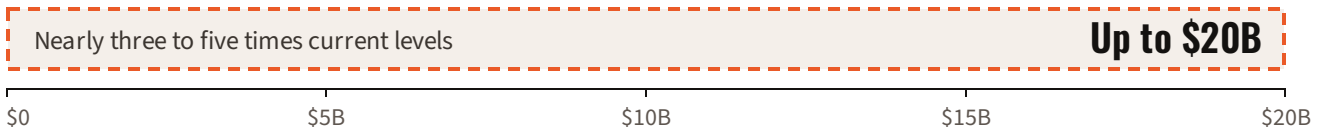
POOLED FUNDING: NOW VERSUS CAPACITY

Philanthropic collaboratives surveyed, in billions of dollars per year

Deploying now, per year



Could deploy in the coming year if fundraising were not a constraint



■ Low end of range, \$4B ■ Range up to \$7B □ Self-reported capacity

Figure 5. Global figures from survey respondents. The \$20 billion is what collaboratives said they could deploy, a self-reported capacity estimate, not a forecast of actual giving. Source: The Bridgespan Group, 2025.¹⁷

Your peers in philanthropy already work this way. In the 2025 National Study of Philanthropic Practice by Grantmakers for Effective Organizations, 57 percent of grantmakers said they often work with other funders, and 55 percent said they work with public or private sector partners to advance a shared vision.¹⁹

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR YOU If your issue is bigger than your budget, a pooled fund can be the most efficient way in. Ask how it makes decisions, what it reports, and what voice a corporate member gets.

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STRUCTURE AND GOVERN THE PARTNERSHIP

START WITH THE PROBLEM

Pick a specific problem that neither your company nor your partner can solve alone. Then get explicit about what each side brings, what each expects to gain, and what each will give up. Put roles, decision rights, data sharing, brand use, and an exit plan in writing early, before the first disagreement forces the issue.

AGREE ON WHAT YOU MEASURE

Choose a small set of outcomes everyone will track, and set them together with your partner. Shared measures keep both sides honest and give your executives one credible picture of progress instead of several competing reports.

GIVE IT A GOVERNANCE RHYTHM

Name an executive sponsor and a day-to-day lead on each side. Set a regular review, at least quarterly, with a written record of decisions. Put residents and people with direct experience of the issue in governance, not only in listening sessions. Their knowledge makes the work better, and their involvement builds public trust.

WIN SOMETHING EARLY

Choose a first goal that matters and that you can actually reach, then build on it. Close every meeting with a name next to each next step.

FROM THE RESEARCH

Ansell and Gash, *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 2008. Meta-analysis of 137 cases of collaborative governance across policy sectors.²⁰

Success hinged on a few critical variables: the partners' prior history of conflict or cooperation, their incentives to participate, power and resource imbalances, leadership, and institutional design. The process depended on "face-to-face dialogue, trust building, and the development of commitment and shared understanding," and the authors found that a virtuous cycle of collaboration tends to develop when forums focus on "small wins."

Why it matters. Meet in person, build trust before you ask for big commitments, and bank a small win early. The review draws on published case studies, so read it as strong patterns, not guarantees.

RESPECT DIFFERENT CLOCKS

Your company runs on quarters and fiscal years. Government runs on legislative and budget cycles. Nonprofits run on grant periods and program seasons. Name those differences out loud, then build a calendar the partnership can actually keep.

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WHAT TRIPS PARTNERSHIPS UP

The most common problems are unclear decision rights, uneven contributions, and the cost of coordination itself. The Ansell and Gash review adds two to watch from the start: power and resource imbalances, and any prior history of conflict.²⁰ In a corporate partnership, the imbalance is usually money. A partner who depends on your grant may not tell you when your plan will not work. Ask directly, and make it safe to answer.

Capacity on your own side matters too. ACCP found that burnout among corporate citizenship practitioners jumped from 39 to 64 percent, the highest in the history of its survey.⁵ A partnership that depends on one overstretched manager is fragile.

- **Mission drift.** A partnership built around a marketing moment can stall once the campaign ends.

- **Measurement mismatch.** Your reporting needs and your partner's data systems may not line up. Settle it in the agreement.
- **Unfunded coordination.** Meetings, data, and backbone staff take real time. Budget for them.
- **Leadership turnover.** Document the why and the agreements so the partnership survives a new executive on either side.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR YOU Coordination is real work. If your company asks for a partnership, pay for the staff time it requires, on your side and on your partner's.

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FOR YOUR COMMUNITY PARTNERS

Your nonprofit partners are under strain and are partnering more to cope. In a 2025 BDO survey of 250 nonprofit leaders, 64 percent said they are partnering with similar organizations, and 64 percent of grantmakers surveyed were exploring for-profit collaborations.²¹ Half of nonprofit CEOs in a 2026 Center for Effective Philanthropy survey said they have started new partnerships or collaborations, not counting funders, in response to current conditions.²² Deep integration is hard: among grantees of the SeaChange-Lodestar Fund for Nonprofit Collaboration, most of them pursuing mergers, respondents named cultural integration as the biggest challenge.²³

What they need from you:

- Multi-year commitments, so they can plan staff and programs.
- Funding for coordination, data, and reporting, not only program costs.
- Outcome measures set together, with reporting that fits their systems.
- A real voice in governance, and a clear, early heads-up if your priorities change.

What they can do to be ready: know their own outcomes and costs, name the one or two things a corporate partner adds that other funders do not, and have a point person who can meet your company's calendar.

WHAT TO WATCH NEXT

Both sides expect partnerships to matter more over the next three years. Fewer expect a big jump in money behind them.

EXPECTATIONS FOR THE NEXT THREE YEARS

Share of respondents expecting each change, corporate and nonprofit, surveyed 2025

Partnerships will become more or much more important



Investment in partnerships will rise



Investment will rise significantly



■ Corporate respondents ■ Nonprofit respondents

Figure 6. Expectations reported by survey respondents, not a forecast of actual spending. Bars are drawn to scale, 0 to 100 percent. Mostly UK-based sample of 130. Source: C&E Advisory, 2025.¹



CLIMATE COALITIONS

Targets up 40% in 2025

Companies with validated science-based targets grew 40 percent in 2025, and Asia grew fastest, up 53 percent. A dated trend, not a forecast.¹⁶



POOLED FUNDS

Room to grow

Collaboratives say they could deploy as much as \$20 billion in the coming year if fundraising were not a constraint, several times what they deploy now.¹⁷

→ CSR BUDGETS

Mostly holding

For 2026, 62 percent of corporate social impact leaders expected budgets to stay the same, 17 percent expected an increase, and 21 percent a decrease.²⁴

✓ NONPROFIT NUMBERS

Closings may outpace mergers

BDO predicts more nonprofit closings than mergers, and more shared services, fiscal sponsorships, and networked partnerships. One firm's forecast.²⁵

COLLABORATION FOR GOOD OUTLOOK

Expect partnerships to carry more weight in corporate strategy without a matching rise in budgets. In one mostly UK survey, most corporate respondents expect partnerships to matter more, yet few expect a significant increase in investment, and most corporate social impact leaders in another survey expected flat budgets for 2026. That points toward fewer, deeper partnerships with clearer business and social cases. Climate coalitions are likely to keep growing, which raises the bar on the reporting behind each pledge. And if more nonprofits close or combine, companies may need to check the stability of key partners and support shared services where it makes sense.

Our analysis, based on the sources cited in this section. Not a prediction from any single source.

TALK IT THROUGH

1. For each partnership in our portfolio, can we state its social value and its business value in one sentence each?
2. Is each partnership philanthropic, transactional, integrative, or transformational today, and is that where it belongs?
3. Which coalition commitments have we made, who owns the reporting, and are we on track?
4. Would our partners define success the same way we do? Have we asked them?
5. Who most affected by the issue has a real vote in the partnerships we fund?

6. What small win could we deliver with a partner before the next budget cycle?

START THIS WEEK

- ☐ List every partnership and coalition membership, with its cost, owner, stage on the spectrum, and business rationale.
- ☐ Bring your CFO a one-page view of what the top three partnerships deliver, in social and business terms.
- ☐ Draft a one-page agreement template covering roles, decisions, data, brand use, and exit.
- ☐ Agree on three shared outcome measures with your closest partner.
- ☐ Check each coalition pledge against its deadline and your latest data.
- ☐ Put coordination costs in next year's budget, for your team and your partners.
- ☐ Schedule an in-person working session with one key partner, with a first small win on the agenda.

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This guide provides general information and is not legal, tax, or financial advice. Figures reflect sources available as of September 2026.

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