



ACTION INSIGHTS

Breaking Down City Hall's Silos

Collaborative Innovation in Practice

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RESEARCH FINDINGS FOR CITY LEADERS

What happens when city leaders collaborate with residents and partners in and out of city hall to solve complex problems? A [study](#) supported by the Bloomberg Harvard City Leadership Initiative finds answers in a long-running community cleanup program in Buffalo, N.Y.

Every city leader knows the adage that city hall must “break down silos” and collaborate more across agencies. The problem is those “silos” exist for a reason. Departmental specialization and division of labor can make the routine daily work of local government—jobs like filling potholes, picking up trash, or enforcing traffic laws—more efficient.

However, cities are complex places. And increasingly, the kinds of problems they’re facing, from homelessness to climate change to opioids, touch many departments, jurisdictions, and service providers at once. In this environment, collaborating across organizational boundaries is more important than ever—as is engaging residents to ensure that solutions have community buy-in and legitimacy.

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But when is collaboration worth the effort? And how does it really work in practice? A [study](#) in the journal *Administration & Society* explores the benefits and tradeoffs that arise from practicing “collaborative innovation.” The findings can help city leaders understand and intentionally design collaborative innovation initiatives to unlock new ways of tackling tough problems.

Learning from Buffalo

For as much as mayors, scholars, and management consultants talk about breaking down silos, few empirical studies have examined how doing so actually works at the operational level. We set out to change that by looking at a long-running city-led collaboration in Buffalo, N.Y.: the [Clean Sweep Initiative](#).



Buffalo Mayor Byron Brown greets a resident during a Clean Sweep.

Clean Sweep began in the late 1990s with the goal of improving quality of life in Buffalo’s poorest neighborhoods. Every Wednesday morning from May through October, dozens of city staff from more than ten departments, along with community partners, flood into a two- or three-block area and close the streets to traffic. They go door-to-door talking with residents about what problems they’re facing and enhance the neighborhood through a range of city services such as tree trimming, brush cleanup, graffiti removal, boarding up vacant houses, and more. Cities across the U.S. and around the globe have replicated Buffalo’s model.

Clean Sweep exemplifies collaborative innovation in action: the effort brings organizations in and out of city hall together at scale—in close coordination with block clubs and community leaders—week after week. While Clean Sweep is targeted specifically at neighborhood development issues, its structure is relevant to other policy contexts, from economic development to housing to crime reduction.

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We interviewed dozens of city staff, community partners, and residents involved in these operations, and held focus group discussions with residents whose blocks had received a Clean Sweep to find out what city leaders can learn from Buffalo.



Buffalo city staff talk with residents while work crews remove trash and make repairs during a Clean Sweep.

Three ways collaborative innovation works

We found three ways that collaborative innovation in the Buffalo program works in practice. Knowing what these are can help city leaders be intentional about how they structure their own collaborative efforts (see figure 1).

Collaborative innovation is problem-solving, making impact, and learning together.

Problem solving together

The Clean Sweep Initiative encourages city employees, community organizations, and residents to work together to define problems and co-create solutions—on the spot and in real time. The facetime matters a lot. It opens new lines of communication, helping all parties to better understand each other's priorities, capabilities, and limitations while developing a shared approach to addressing problems.

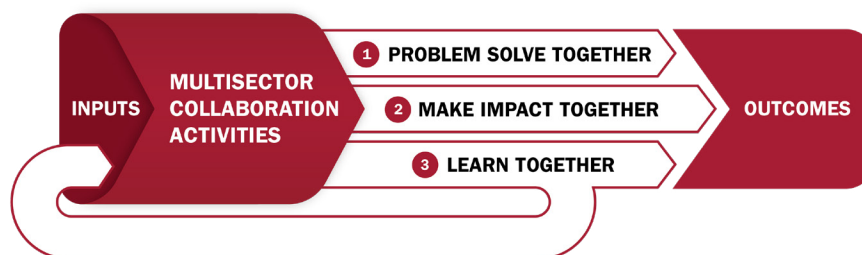
Making impact together

A Clean Sweep operation produces highly visible impacts that residents feel right away. The role of city hall in generating that impact is clear, thanks to the influx of city staff. Residents also describe a catalytic effect: concentrated cleanups boost a sense of community and engagement, spurring residents to keep the momentum going and even join or start block clubs.

Learning together

Clean Sweep acts as a springboard for expanding skills, deepening knowledge, and strengthening relationships across city hall. That not only helps improve the next cleanup and the one after that. It also helps build departments' collaborative muscle in other work outside the initiative.

Figure 1: Social Outcome Generation Through Collaborative Innovation



Takeaways

Buffalo's Clean Sweep is just one example of a city-led collaboration; initiatives in other cities aimed at other issues may look different. However, Clean Sweep does offer a glimpse at conditions under which collaboration is more likely to work. City leaders looking to build on Buffalo's experience in their own collaborative efforts should keep the following in mind:

Begin with a problem

When city leaders and staff hear directly from the people experiencing a problem and use that feedback as the starting point for collective action, it fuels a co-creative dynamic that enables problem solving together.

Seek tangible benefits

Producing change residents can see and feel, in which work by one actor meaningfully enhances the work of another, is possible when collaborators make impact together.

Take time to reflect

A commitment among all parties to take stock of what does and doesn't work, iterate, and make their collective work better over time is key to learning together.

To be sure, none of this is easy. There were plenty of complaints from all sides. Collaborative innovation can be messy. Residents don't always agree with each other on what their biggest priorities are. Distrust between agencies—or between residents and city hall—can get in the way of problem solving. The most common criticism we heard was that the intensive coordination involved in working collaboratively takes more time and effort.

But city staff, partners, and residents also found that the tradeoffs are worth it. "If you do it right, it's slower because you're engaging with the community. You're finding out what they need. You're trying to craft an appropriate response," the city's former chief building inspector told us. "But it's much more effective. Whenever you have a group of people meeting, it can be sloppy, occasionally a little unruly. But the product is so much better."

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Further Reading

[“Tackling Persistent, Boundary-Spanning Problems Through Collaborative Innovation: Lessons From the Clean Sweep Initiative in Buffalo, NY”](#)

Administration & Society

[“Building Cities’ Collaborative Muscle”](#)

Stanford Social Innovation Review

[“Cross-Boundary Collaborations in Cities: Where to Start”](#)

Stanford Social Innovation Review

[“Teaming Up to Tackle Crime: Making Multi-Agency Collaboration Happen in Cities”](#)

Bloomberg Harvard City Leadership Initiative

Action Insights summarize findings from academic research. They offer management and leadership guidance you can put to use in your work, and they link to the underlying studies.

The Bloomberg Harvard City Leadership Initiative, located at the Bloomberg Center for Cities at Harvard University, is a collaboration between Harvard Kennedy School, Harvard Business School, and Bloomberg Philanthropies to equip mayors and senior city officials to tackle complex challenges in their cities and improve the quality of life of their residents.

Launched in 2017, the Initiative has worked with 465 mayors and 2271 senior city officials in 524 cities worldwide. The Initiative advances research and develops new curriculum and teaching tools to help city leaders solve real-world problems. By engaging Harvard graduate students in research and field work, the Initiative supports current city leaders while investing in future generations. The Initiative also advances the field of city leadership through teaching, research, and new curricular materials that help city leaders drive government performance and address pressing social problems.



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