

A dark red background featuring a white line-art map of Buffalo, NY, showing a dense grid of streets and some larger, irregular shapes representing parks or water bodies.

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Solving Problems Block by Block

Clean Sweeps and Neighborhood Improvement in Buffalo, NY

Learning Objectives

- Reflect on the types of efforts required to deliver on **an ambitious key mayoral priority**.
- Recognize the **barriers to collaborative problem-solving**.
- Identify **leadership levers** to transform local government.

Key Questions

1. What **problem(s)** were the Clean Sweeps meant to solve?
2. What **value** were the Clean Sweeps, in fact, producing? How would you know?
3. If you were Director Mestre, would you have **expanded** the number of Clean Sweeps, **reduced** them, or **held steady**? Why?

The Clean Sweeps in Buffalo, NY

Click below to
play clip on the
Clean Sweeps
initiative in
Buffalo, NY



Source: City of Buffalo

The background of the entire slide is a dark red color with a white line-art map of a city grid. The grid consists of numerous rectangular blocks of varying sizes, some with internal street patterns, and larger irregular shapes representing parks or water bodies. The lines are thin and white, creating a high-contrast pattern against the red background.

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Exploration

Consider...



*What **problem** was Buffalo trying to solve with Clean Sweeps?*



*Asked another way, what **value** did Buffalo seek to produce through Clean Sweeps?*

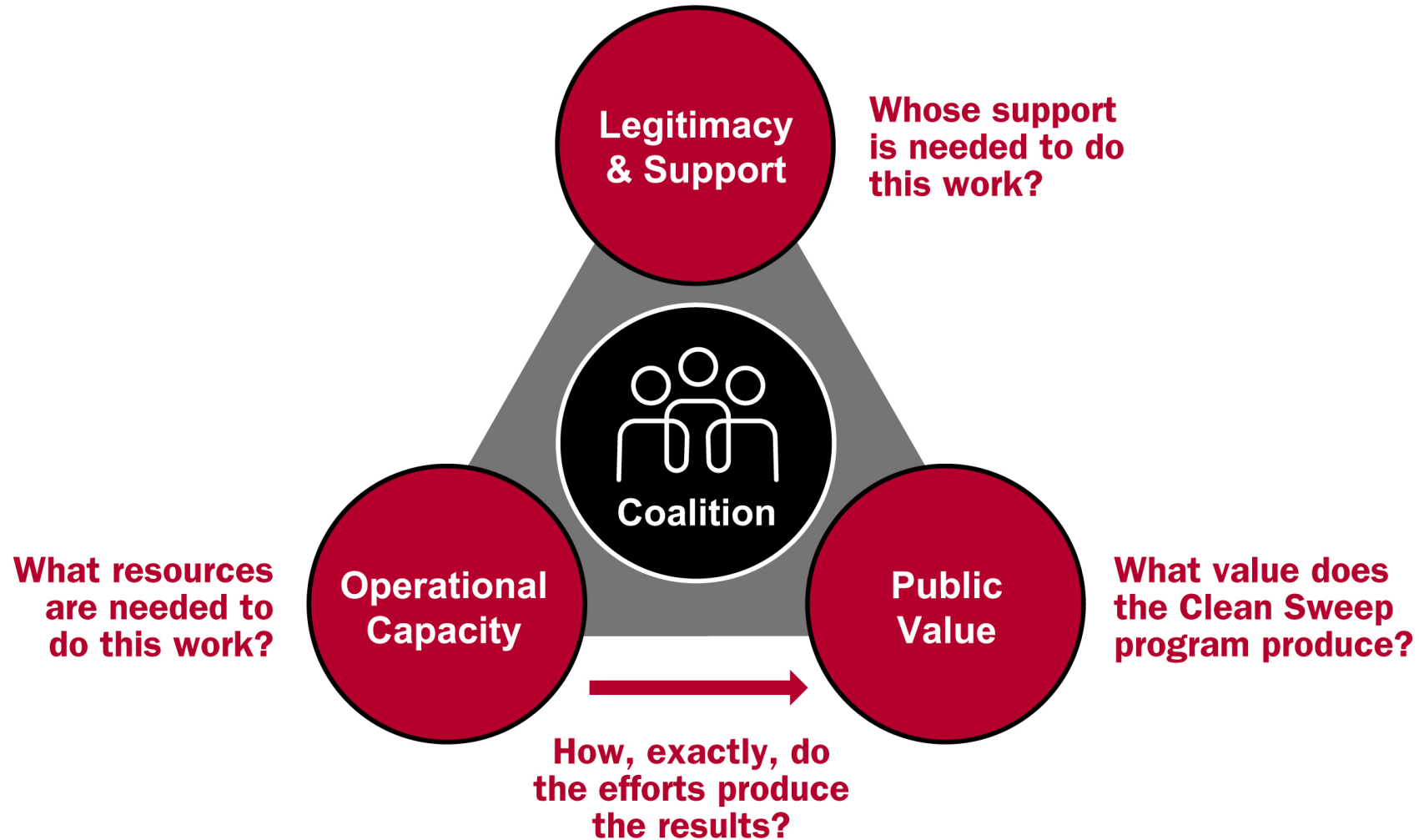
The background of the entire slide is a dark red color with a white line-art map of a city grid. The grid consists of numerous rectangular blocks of varying sizes, with some larger, irregular shapes interspersed, representing parks or waterfront areas. The lines are thin and white, creating a high-contrast pattern against the red background.

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Diagnosis

The Strategic Triangle for Collaborative Solutions



Source: Jorrit de Jong, Amy Edmondson, Mark Moore, Hannah Riley Bowles, Jan Rivkin, Eva Flavia Martínez Orbegozo, and Santiago Pulido-Gomez, "Building Cities' Collaborative Muscle," *Stanford Social Innovation Review* 19, no. 2 (Spring 2021): 50-56, <https://doi.org/10.48558/HVYD-JW35>.



*Whose support was needed to deliver value to neighborhoods through Clean Sweeps?
How did the city endeavor to cultivate trust and legitimacy with respect to the program?*

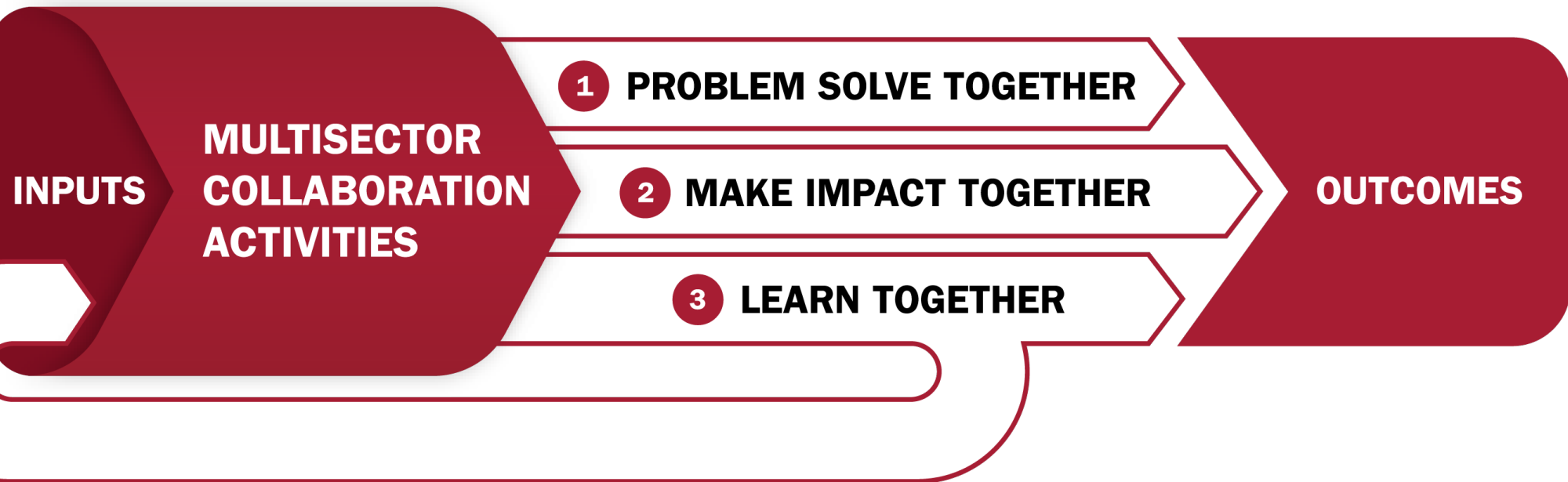
Source: City of Buffalo



What operational capacity and resources did the city need to carry out the Clean Sweeps?

Source: City of Buffalo

Social Outcome Generation Through Collaborative Innovation



Source: Katharine Robb, Ashley Marcoux, and Jorrit de Jong, "Tackling Persistent, Boundary-Spanning Problems Through Collaborative Innovation: Lessons From the Clean Sweep Initiative in Buffalo, NY," *Administration & Society* 56, no. 5 (March 2024): 628-652, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00953997241241045>.

Consider...

How did the city know it was doing a good job with Clean Sweeps?

How did the city's use of data evolve over time?

Were there blind spots in the city's use of data? Did the city try to get around the blind spots? Could they have done more? If so, what?

The Streetlight Effect



Source: Warren Dent. "Cartoon Image of The Streetlight Effect." Created with the assistance of DALL-E and edited in Adobe Photoshop. March 11, 2025.

Consider...

What were the costs and benefits of Clean Sweeps?

Were the city's efforts more—or less—than the sum of their parts?

Was the collaboration worth the effort and tradeoffs?

The Problem-Oriented Governance Approach to Public Policy

Data-Analytic Capability

“the ability to generate the right data and information and put them to use”

Collaborative Capability

“the ability to find the right partners and work well together”

Reflective-Improvement Capability

“the ability to ask the right questions at the right time and take the answers to heart”

Source: “Tackling Big, Thorny Problems: Building the Capabilities Your Organization Needs,” Jorrit de Jong, Quinton Mayne, and Fernando Fernandez-Monge, Bloomberg Harvard City Leadership Initiative, Action Insight, January 22, 2024, <https://cityleadership.harvard.edu/resources/tackling-big-thorny-problems-by-building-the-capabilities-your-organization-needs/>, accessed January 2025.

Consider...

What else, if anything, could Buffalo have done to develop these capabilities further?

In what area did the city register the most improvement between the program's inception and 2023?

Where should it have focused as it looked ahead?

Focusing on the collaboration and innovation capabilities...

To what extent do you think Clean Sweeps have changed the mindsets of those who work with or within city hall?

What about the mindsets of those who stand to benefit from the program?

What else could the city do in this regard?



Source: City of Buffalo

*How did the city define success with respect to the Clean Sweeps?
Should it have defined it differently?*

How should it have measured the program's impact?

Should city hall have considered additional data, and if so, what data?

Impact: In the six months after a Clean Sweep, households were...



42% more likely to report drug-related crimes (911)

9% more likely to report service needs related to the disrepair of physical space (311)

Eleanor Dickens, Noah Greifer, Katharine Robb, Ashley Marcoux, Jessica Creighton, Charles Allegar, and Jorrit de Jong, "The effects of a place-based intervention on resident reporting of crime and service needs: A frontier matching approach," *HKS Faculty Research Working Paper Series* RWP23-033 (December 2023): <https://www.hks.harvard.edu/publications/effects-place-based-intervention-resident-reporting-crime-and-service-needs-frontier#citation>.

If you were Mestre, would you have increased or reduced the number of Clean Sweeps or kept the number the same? Why?



Think About Your Key Priority...

Data What do you need to know more about?

Collaboration Who are (or are not yet) working on the problem?

Innovation Which practices may need to be reinvented?

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Epilogue

Click below to
play Epilogue.



OSWALDO MESTRE, JR.
Director of Citizen Services, Buffalo, NY

Source: Bloomberg Harvard City Leadership Initiative

Takeaways

- Leadership levers to transform local government include **data, collaboration, and innovation**.
- Delivering on a key mayoral priority may require developing core capabilities of government.
 - **Data:** *What do you need to know more about?*
 - **Collaboration:** *Who are (or are not yet) working on the problem?*
 - **Innovation:** *Which practices may need to be reinvented?*

Takeaways (cont.)

- There are tradeoffs in problem-oriented governance.
 - If the problem is too complex to be solved in a siloed way, taking a collaborative innovation approach could lead to more effectiveness, efficiency, and equity than the status quo.
 - Collaborative innovation takes time and effort, and there are opportunity costs. But, if the problem is a priority for the mayor, the community, and others, it may justify the effort.

The background of the slide is a dark red map of Buffalo, New York. The map shows the outlines of various city blocks and streets in a light red color. The text is overlaid on this map.

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