A Framework for the Effective Evaluation of Convenings

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solutions for social impact

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Purpose

This white paper was developed in response to what we viewed as a gap in the philanthropic and nonprofit sector: understanding the value and effectiveness of convenings. Convenings are one of many tactics used to foster collaboration, build awareness and will, and facilitate social change. Many people who go to convenings walk away feeling uplifted, increasingly informed, and having made new connections. But this is not always the case, and even when it is, one might reasonably ask, "So what?" In many instances the position of value for convenings seems to largely be taken as a given. The focus of evaluation practice has been dominated by exploring the successful *implementation* of convenings, while the question of effectiveness has *surprisingly*—given the scale and ubiquity of convenings—been underexamined and underdeveloped.

Our goal for this paper is to encourage thoughtful and critical analysis regarding the use and utility of convenings. We acknowledge the complexity of this topic and that different stakeholders approach the topic of convenings in very different ways and for different purposes. We have resisted an attempt for this paper to be a fully comprehensive evaluation guide, focusing instead on laying a framework for more thoughtful convening planning and evaluation. To this end, we start with a thorough examination of defining convenings, followed by a proposed framework for evaluating various convening components.

As such, this paper is organized into the following sections:

- Introduction
- The Significance of Convenings
- Clarifying the Convening Concept
- A Framework for Evaluating Convenings
- Conclusion

Introduction

We want to start with a short thought experiment. In the last year, how many gatherings or convenings has someone from your organization attended? Now, just for the sake of this thought experiment, let's assume that each of those convenings lasted one day. Multiply the number of convenings someone has attended by eight hours and multiply that by $100.[1] This represents the minimum investment your organization has made in using convenings to achieve your mission. Now the core question: Does that represent a good investment for your organization?

Over the last few years, we have participated in convenings of various formats, sizes, durations, and purposes. Our role has been as participants, presenters, observers, and evaluators. As we observed more closely and contemplated on our experiences, we began to recognize a pattern. Convening organizations were often imprecise about their purpose and anticipated outcomes. According to data from some of these convenings, there was not a lot to show for the amount invested in the convening.

In response to various stakeholders' requests, opportunities, and needs, evaluations have been primarily used to collect information on particular sessions or speakers or on what participants *think* they will do in the future. Some of this information is interesting; much of it is not actionable; and the projection part—what they think they will do—is not reliable. Open-ended responses often provide little additional information. There are often a lot of comments on the temperature in the room; quality of the food; or the shortcomings of particular speakers.

We found ourselves dissatisfied with what we knew and increasingly concerned that convenings were not living up to expectations. Who was benefitting and how? In what ways could the resources have been spent differently? Were the convenings worth it and how could we actually know?

This seeded a desire to explore this topic in greater detail. We reviewed the literature, talked to convening implementers, and analyzed previous anticipated and actual outcomes of convenings. This paper presents our findings and conclusions, with an attempt to advance the level of thinking on this topic. We acknowledge, up front, that there is still much to learn, and we are delighted to be partnering with organizations such as conveners.org and the Skoll Foundation in further examination of this topic.

Use of the Word "Convening"

If you are reading this and find yourself appalled at the use of convening as a noun, we understand you! We discuss this below, but wanted to acknowledge the discomfort up front. For the purpose of ease and clarity, we have opted to use it as a noun throughout the paper. This is aligned with the way that many people in the philanthropic sector use the term—"our convening" or "the convening."

"The Power of Speaking in Union"

In 1995, UNISON, a UK-based public service union, aired an animated commercial featuring a very large bear who is asked by a much smaller ant to move out of its path (the video can be seen here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iewSJ6nTEv4). The bear fails to notice the ant and, accordingly, does not budge. Eventually, the ant is joined by several hundred more ants who join their voices together to call for the bear to move out of their way. The bear quickly jumps out of their way and the commercial ends with a line about the power of speaking in union. Putting aside the original politics of the television ad, colloquially known as the "Unison Bear ad," it is an amusing metaphor for the general concept of convenings: bringing people together to amplify connections, increase learning, deepen thinking, and raise voices that they couldn't do on their own. Indeed, in their guidebook entitled, *Gather: The Art & Science of Effective Convening*, Monitor Institute explains that "[convenings] draw on all participants to generate insight and action beyond what any single actor could achieve on his or her own."[2]

This perspective captures the generally accepted belief that the purpose of convenings is to bring people together (presumably to catalyze change) and that because said people are then brought together

[1] This is meant to represent a general salary plus benefits number that is also easy math and is for illustration purposes only. It is not based on an actual research-based hourly cost for the philanthropic sector.
[2] https://www.rockefellerfoundation.org/report/gather-the-art-and-science-of-effective-convening/

(to presumably catalyze that change) the convening is thus deemed a valuable endeavor.[3, 4, 5] The *value* of and *justification* for convenings has largely been treated as self-evident. We don't dispute the underlying "sum is greater than its parts" gestalt of convenings. We even believe that there is an inherent value in serendipity—that part of the value proposition may be in an element of unpredictable outcomes. However, we believe that treating convenings as generally self-evident opens up potential for wasted resources and reduced effectiveness.

The Unison ad demonstrates some important principles of effective convening. First, **there was a well-defined issue** that needed to be addressed - the ant had a need to get to the other side of the path but was impeded by the bear. Second, the ant was much smaller in stature than the bear and as such its voice alone could not catalyze the action that needed to take place - the ant would **benefit from addressing this issue with others**. Third, one thing we know about ants is, where there is one, there are many. If nothing were done about the bear in the road, there would be others facing this same problem down the line – they just might not know it or know each other. In essence, **getting to know each other and their mutual interests** and **taking action on this issue would impact many**. Fourth, the **outcome sought was obvious** – an unobstructed path from point A to point B needed to be established for the ants to be able to pass. Finally, these ants knew they were not coming together for the sake of coming together, it was **clear why and how their coming together was necessary** for the outcome sought.

We hope that this paper will challenge you to think about convenings in a similar way – Is there a clear need for a convening? Is this an issue that would benefit from collective action? What is the right role for you and your organization in a convening? Are there individuals interested in convening on this issue? And finally, are you and those you've convened clear about your desired outcomes?

The Significance of Convenings

There are several things driving the significance of examining convenings at this time. First, convenings are considered very important in the social change arena. Second, as a result of the importance afforded them, a great deal is invested in hosting convenings with dozens and dozens of convenings being held annually. Yet, third, what exactly convenings are, especially as a concept distinct from other forms of gathering, and thus what they're intended to do remains unsettled. In this section, we provide some context for the importance and scale of convenings. Then we proffer our own definition of convening and attempt to position it as a construct with a purpose unique and separate from other forms of meeting.

The Importance of Convenings in Philanthropy

Dr. Rosabeth Moss Kanter, professor of business at the Harvard Business School and director of their Advanced Leadership Institute, said of convenings,"As leadership shifts away from hierarchical decisions-at-the-top-slowly-cascading-downward, to social networks and self-organizing, knowing how to use convening power becomes critical."[6] Sarah Zak Borgman, Director, Community and Convenings at the Skoll Foundation, wrote that, "Face-to-face convenings provide an emotional and intellectual safe space that allow delegates to recognize what may be holding them back—or what may help accelerate their effectiveness."[7] Lucas Held, Director of Communications at the Wallace Foundation, captured four distinct benefits of convenings, including: the opportunity for foundations to build clarity about their objectives and priorities; for the foundation to learn from grantees what challenges and opportunities they are facing; to share knowledge; and to enable grantees to make informal contacts with their peers that they could later draw on for advice.[8] There even exists an organization, Conveners.org, dedicated to helping social impact conveners execute convenings more effectively.

[3] https://www.rockefellerfoundation.org/report/gather-the-art-and-science-of-effective-convening/
[4] http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/683341531759847595/pdf/128439-WP-P165487-PUBLIC.pdf
[5] https://access.conveners.org/conveners/
[6] https://hbr.org/2011/11/how-great-companies-think-differently
[7] https://ssir.org/articles/entry/the_power_of_convening_for_social_impact
[8] http://www.ncdd.org/files/Convenings-WKKF.pdf

The Scale of Convenings in Definition

Convenings are no small undertaking, with costs easily running six and even seven figures for large convenings in financial outlay.[9] This doesn't include the large scale of opportunity costs, such as the cost of organization staff putting together and managing a convening and the cost for participants to take time away from their jobs and programs to spend anywhere from a day to a week at the convening.[10] Consider the following example. Imagine a modest budget for a large convening. Add to that the cost associated with a couple hundred attendees taking one or two days away from their other work. Now multiply that amount by several dozen convenings per year – it quickly becomes obvious that convenings are using an incredible amount of social sector resources and their frequency is not likely going to be slowing down.[11, 12, 13]

Clarifying the Convening Concept

As previously mentioned, the literature on evaluating convenings is thin. While there are many "how-to" guides for designing convenings, evaluation of the effectiveness of convenings was rarely discussed in any depth, if at all.[14] Many organizations that do convenings are certainly being thoughtful in their design and commitment to effectiveness, but the practice is disjointed and it all starts with understanding what we are talking about.

An Imprecise Term for a Shared Concept

At a recent gathering we attended on the topic of evaluating convenings, participants were invited to define the convening concept. We were struck by the range of definitions. Even among this small group of participants who were all experienced with and keenly interested in convenings, there was a great deal of variability in how participants conceptualized the convening concept. For example, from one person we heard that the definition of a convening was "coming together to share different perspectives, learn from each other, and find common ground," while another saw it more broadly as "an intentional gathering of people."

What are we actually talking about when we call a kind of gathering a "Convening?"

Definitions are important in evaluation because they set the parameters of inquiry. As we began to wrestle with this idea of better evaluating convenings, we started by asking ourselves, "What are we actually talking about?" The convening concept is often talked about as an "instrument for creating space."[15] However, this explanation lacks specificity in that there are many ways in which one might create space for people to talk and engage, including panel discussions, town halls, mentor relationships, joint project implementation, data walks, etc.

Other definitions for convening are broader and generally describe ways to bring people together. The seminal *Gather* guidebook underscores this variability noting that "the term 'convening' can refer to meetings, conferences, workshops, symposia, and many other events." However, the authors do make a distinction between convenings and these other forms of gathering. They go on to explain: "We use it to mean a gathering that is different from these common formats in one important way; for the duration, the attendees are participants in a collective effort that serves a specific shared purpose."

9 https://www.pcma.org/convene-28th-annual-meetings-market-survey-slower-growth-ahead/
10 https://access.conveners.org/2017-state-of-the-convening-ecosystem-report/
11 https://hbr.org/2011/09/bill-clinton-and-how-to-use-co
12 https://access.conveners.org/conveners/
13 https://www.rockefellerfoundation.org/report/gather-the-art-and-science-of-effective-convening/
14 There were a small number of articles on the importance of convenings in the social sector and one notable concept note for evaluating convening power done by the World Bank Independent Evaluation Group (available at: http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/683341531759847595/pdf/128439-WP-P165487-PUBLIC.pdf). The Monitor report, referenced earlier, dedicated two pages in the guide to some assessment ideas, including suggestion of some indicators for the short and long term. However, the treatment of the subject was fairly surface level.
15 https://www.coursera.org/lecture/international-organizations-management/un-leadership-through-setting-goals-DjLHA

Towards A More Precise Definition

While many of the concepts share similarities, assessment would be enhanced by distinguishing a convening from the other meeting types, if indeed, there is such a distinction to make. For example, a trade show on waste management technology and a world forum on social entrepreneurship tend to conjure up different images. In short, people in our sector are using convening as a noun (rather than its official designation as a verb—to bring people together). We sought out to see if it holds up as a noun, and to gain clarity on its most commonly held meaning.

To position the convening definition, we looked at what seemed to undergird the various gathering types and distilled it to two core concepts: first, that they are some type of group and second, that they are meant to have a purpose. We positioned the group type on the vertical axis and labeled this axis, "Group Composition"—that is, how diverse are the participants in terms of professional backgrounds, roles, and fields. The horizontal axis we labeled "Purpose"—that is, the purpose for bringing people together. While the concepts are not mutually exclusive nor totally encompassing of potential ideas, the concepts were precise enough to explore if there was a distinction in terms. To position a concept along the Purpose axis, we needed to determine the extent to which the purpose of the gathering was to *inform* participants versus the extent to which the purpose was to move participants to *act* (with something akin to gaining shared understanding and alignment somewhere in the middle). To position a concept on the Group Composition axis, we needed to determine the extent to which the group makeup was predominantly homogeneous in nature versus the extent to which it was heterogeneous in nature. Though this was a rudimentary classification system, clear delineations did begin to emerge.

We non-scientifically "pressure-tested" these dimensions and the hypothesized positionings of various terms with field colleagues that included evaluators, funders, and convening implementers. While acknowledging it isn't a perfect taxonomy, there was a fair amount of consistency regarding where different meeting types sit. For example, there was general acceptance that the purpose of a *workshop* was generally to inform and build up the skills of a group of people. In addition, workshops were likely to have a mix of group compositions with some workshops leaning more homogenous and others leaning more heterogenous. Similarly, there was broad agreement that a *conference* was usually not a setting in which participants were looking to be galvanized to act. Most

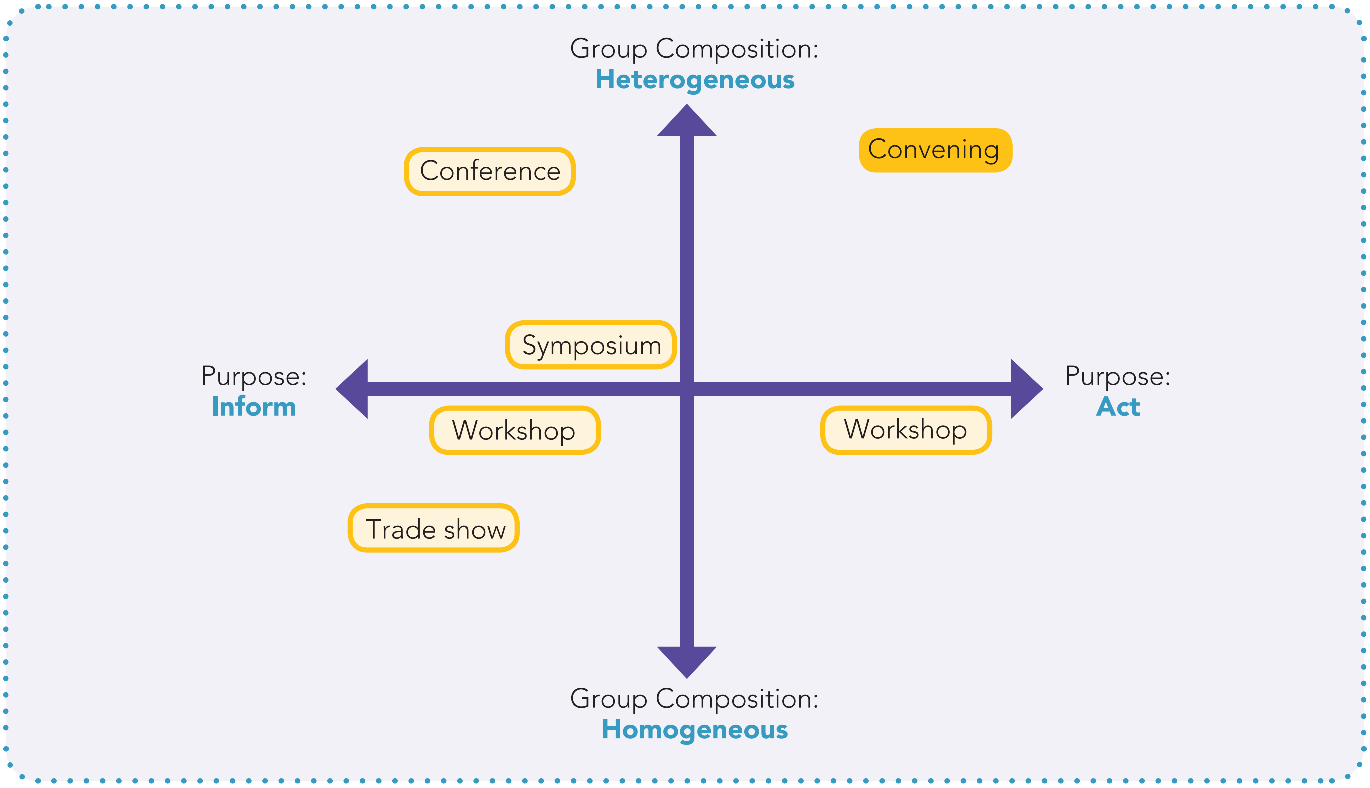

Figure 1. Positioning different gathering types

likely, one would attend a conference to learn and get information. Furthermore, the group composition for a conference was generally heterogeneous. Finally, there was agreement that the purpose of a *workgroup* was typically to accomplish some goal. Beyond that, the members of a workgroup generally had to have enough in common to be able to act together but be different enough to justify the value of their coming together.

Some of our colleagues quibbled with where certain terms would sit on a given axis and others suggested more dimensions, such as an additional axis focused on depth of engagement. This was all insightful feedback. Our goal, however, was not to get to the perfect taxonomy (dissertation anyone?), but to see if there were meaningful differences between these terms. The answer there was "Yes!"

After consideration of various definitions and descriptions of convenings, we positioned convening in the top right quadrant of the plane—a tendency toward involving a more heterogeneous group with a bias toward action. Based on these various components, we developed a definition of convenings that would account for a unique type of intervention or action:

A convening is a "space" created for varied stakeholder groups with the intent to influence the future collective and individual solution-oriented action on a particular topic.

A Framework for Evaluating Convenings

Armed with this definition, we began to develop a framework for evaluating convenings. We divided the framework into three parts (see Figure 2): What happens before a convening (**pre-conditions**); What happens during a convening (**execution**); and, What happens afterwards (**results or outcomes**). Under each part are nuanced dimensions, which serve as the focus of the evaluation framework (see Appendix for full diagram).

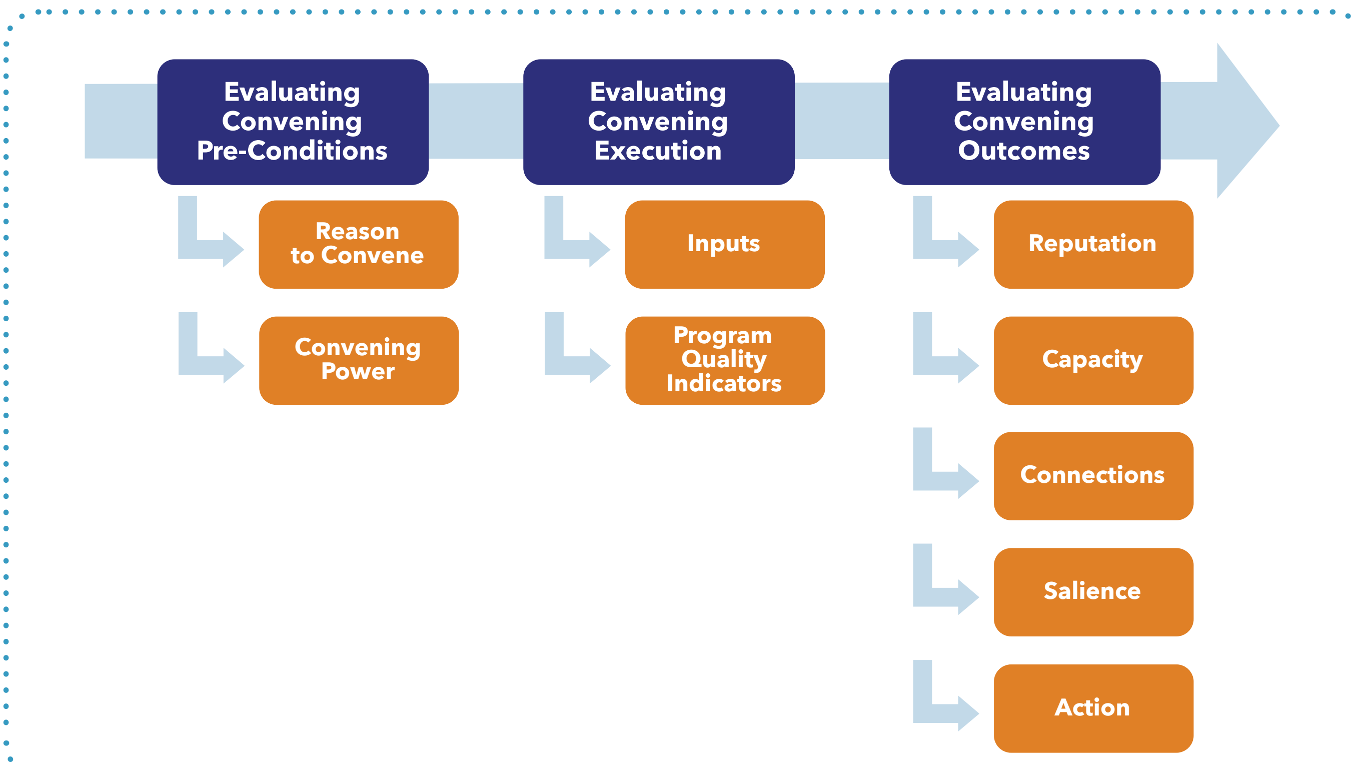

Figure 2. Three organizing elements of evaluating convenings

Evaluating Convening Pre-Conditions

The decision to convene is a strategic one and evaluating pre-conditions as part of the decision-making process will enhance the quality of the decision. What pre-conditions should prospective conveners evaluate before deciding to convene? We propose that there are two driving elements related to the strategic decision to convene. First, how strong is the rationale for having a convening—**the reason to convene**? Second, what is the appropriateness and/or readiness of a given entity to actualize a convening—the **convening power**? Each of these is described in further detail below.

REASONS TO CONVENE

It seems obvious to say: there should be a clear and compelling reason to convene. However, as we noted previously in this paper, many convenings are organized under the premise that convening itself is the end—that bringing people together is its own value proposition—or that a convening's goals are self-evident (but unexpressed). We believe this premise is too loose for making strategic decisions about when and how to convene and that prospective conveners should examine the reasons to convene more systematically. We propose four dimensions that a prospective convener should assess in determining if they have a clear and compelling reason to convene:

- **Clear convening objectives** – What are the anticipated goals of the convening? A core part of the reason to convene is clearly articulating what is hoped to be achieved as a result of the convening. Assessing the clarity of the convening objectives invites conveners to increase their precision of the intent of the convening idea. What exactly do you hope to accomplish with the convening? What do you expect that those convened will take away from the convening? What impact do you hope the convening will have on your topic of interest? What are the expected benefits to your organization as a convener?

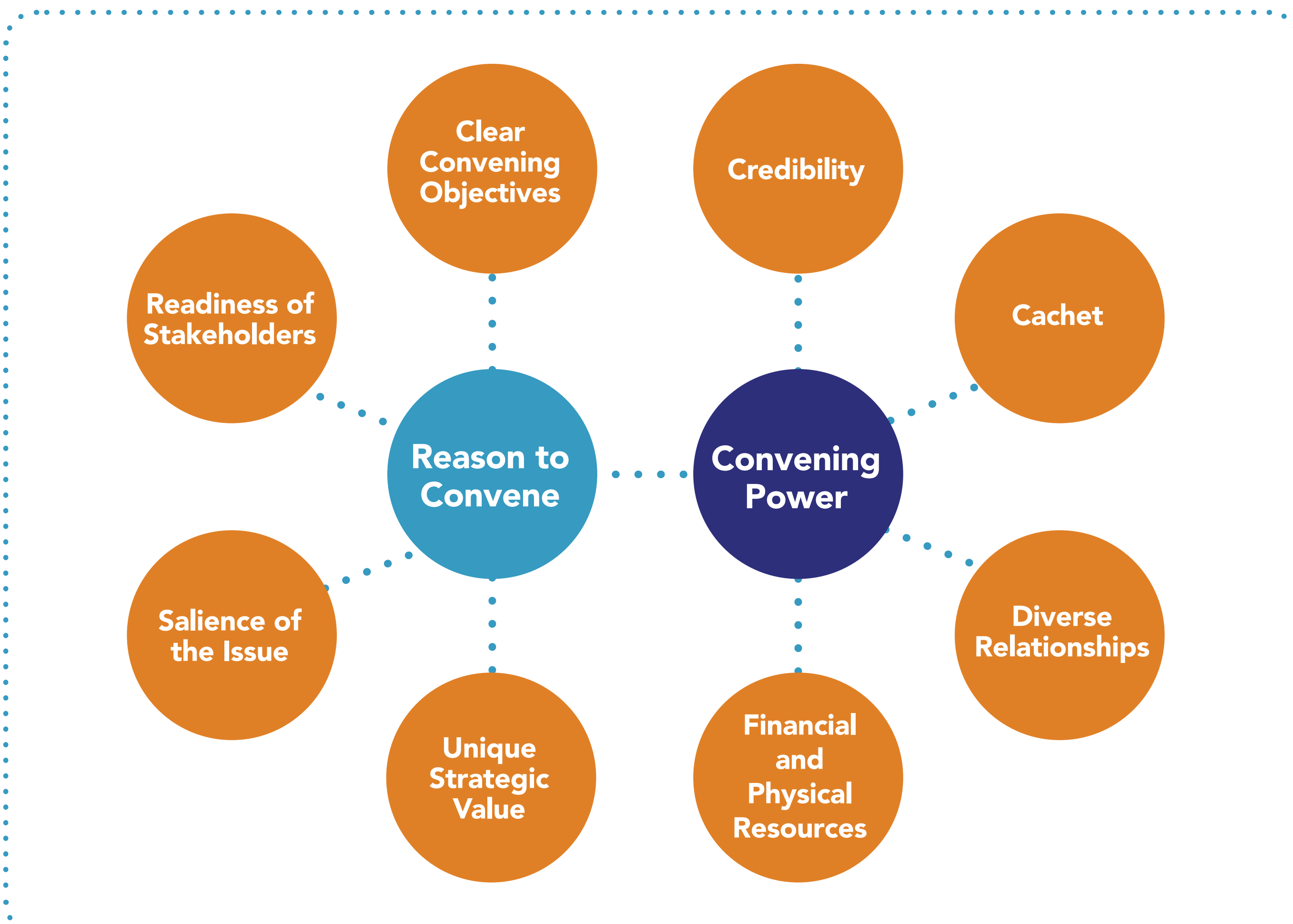

Figure 3. Dimensions of Convening Pre-Conditions

- **Readiness of stakeholders to be convened** – Are stakeholders ready to be convened? Many people in the social sector express a desire to increasingly interact with their peers. An eagerness in the field for people to come together around an issue/theme is certainly one indicator of convening readiness. However, we believe readiness of stakeholders to be convened is more nuanced than an expressed desire by some stakeholders to convene. It may be that a peer network or coalition might be a better interaction mechanism. When considering the readiness of stakeholders to be convened, prospective conveners might think about other factors in addition to expressed interest. To what extent are current stakeholders are already working together? How concentrated or disparate is leadership distributed across stakeholders. What is the breadth and heterogeneity of the pool of relevant stakeholders and how do they currently relate to each other? What is the existing knowledge, interest, and reputation of different stakeholders on the issue and their likely willingness to engage authentically on the topic.

- **Salience of the Issue** – Is the issue compelling, relevant, and significant? Convenings are not just about people being convened, but about people convening in relationship to a particular theme or topic. There is a readiness for an issue that is independent of the readiness of participants to engage on that issue or the convener to convene on that issue. If one does not take into account where the issue currently is in terms of its framing and its salience in the political or social environment, there will be a major gap in their understanding of the success of the convening.

  In that regard, it may be worth anthropomorphizing the issue. What is the relationship that stakeholders currently have with the issue? What is the personality of the issue—is it cagey and hard to pin down or bright and flashy with little substance? Where is the issue in its life-cycle—a just-conceived idea or an aging topic that has lived an exciting life? What has already been done to promote the issue — has someone already convened or written substantively? What are the upcoming milestone moments for the issue? Is there something timely in the environment that makes new work on this issue urgent or ripe for progress?

- **Unique strategic value** – What is the strategic value of convening as a tactic? There are many means to an end and convenings are but one of those means. Whereas clear convening objectives articulate intended value, considering the unique strategic value of the convening calls conveners to consider how this particular strategy is the ideal strategy, amongst the catalogue of tactics and strategies one could potentially employ to achieve their social impact goal(s). What are the other tactics being employed with either these same stakeholders or others on this specific issue? What is the envisioned strategic value of convening vis-à-vis these other tactics? What other tactics could be used to achieve the same desired end as the convening and why is convening a preferable approach? How does the timing of a convening align with windows of opportunity?

  While the previous dimensions require one to understand the current state of the issue and what has been done up to that point to drive progress, this dimension requires one to consider how a convening would be appropriate as part of the strategy and/or theory of change to drive progress on the issue.

CONVENING POWER

The second pre-condition pertains to the potential to effectively execute a convening. We have framed this as "convening power" to underscore the role of the agent of implementation. It is important to note that there is no agreed upon definition for convening power. A couple of definitions have been put forth, with one of the most compelling coming from the World Bank: Convening power refers to "the ability to catalyze collective action by relevant actors to address global and regional development challenges."[16]

We felt this definition could be strengthened in a number of ways, especially given our proposed definition of convening. Our definition of convening power, which is based on our definition of convenings, is:

> **Convening power is exercising expert, referent, or reward authority to create space on a particular topic or between a set of distinct stakeholder groups with the intent to influence the future collective and individual solution-oriented action of those convened.**

[16] http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/683341531759847595/pdf/128439-WP-P165487-PUBLIC.pdf

The definition offered means that convening power is about the ability to create spaces of interest, value, and action for multiple stakeholder groups without having the formal authority[17] to command participation. We propose that there are four dimensions of convening power:

- **Credibility** – Credibility is the quality of being believable or worthy of trust.[18] How is the convener or convening bodies perceived by stakeholders *as a convener*? Things that are likely to increase the perceived credibility for convening include: history of getting things done; not having an organization-centric agenda (i.e., not just for show or just trying to push a preconceived idea); being open to diverse perspectives (i.e., not dogmatic, embracing of diversity, equity, and inclusivity for ideas and identities); possessing relationships with a diversity of relevant actors, including the communities or beneficiaries of the resources; and, having a focus or expertise in a particular area versus jumping from issue to issue.[19] Another aspect of credibility may relate to overall reputation.

- **Cachet** – Cachet refers to the quality of prestige associated with an institution or event. We struggled to come up with the right term but landed on calling it cachet because it encompasses both the whim of celebrity and the substance of identity. What is the level of existing cachet of the convening or convener? Cachet can be inherent in an institution or person from an institution (e.g., the Bellagio Center or Bill and Melinda Gates) or in the events of an institution (e.g., the Skoll World Forum). Cachet is different than credibility in that it about the essence rather than the extrinsic value. This is where the convener, a convener representative, or the convening itself is recognized as a "must see." The cachet factor might give rise to the demand for participation or expressed fears of missing out if one is excluded or not able to attend.

- **Diverse Relationships** – Does the prospective convener have a sufficiently diverse relationship base to draw from? The breadth, depth, and substance of existing relationships sets the initial pool that a prospective convener can engage. It is not that the prospective convener needs to have relationships with all of those likely to be convened—that may be an objective of the convening. Rather, it is a matter of the ability to attract and effectively engage diverse stakeholders. If the prospective convener only has relationships with stakeholders representing a particular perspective, sector, or approach, among other things, the ability to attract a sufficiently heterogeneous group of stakeholders is much more difficult. Further, the relationships that a prospective convener has will inform the lens with which the convening is conceived. If there are key stakeholder groups not represented, the framing, design, and or objectives may be ineffective. This is a particularly problematic issue with historically marginalized and underrepresented groups. Assessing one's existing set of relationships as part of a pre-convening assessment may reveal racial, economic, gender, sector, discipline, and other blind spots that can be thoughtfully addressed. Finally, the nature of the relationships plays a part in the prospective convener's convening power. If the only aspect of the relationships is a financial one, the power differential may undermine some convening goals. (See the sidebar on Funders, Power, and Convenings).

- **Financial and Physical Resources** – Does the prospective convener have access to financial and physical resources necessary to convene? To execute a convening, one must have the resources to create the space. This includes providing or buying physical or virtual space and having the resources necessary to plan and support the convening implementation. For example, we were recently interested in a convening to talk about evaluating convenings (we know—meta!), but we didn't have the resources necessary to do so. The Skoll Foundation was able to step in and provide both a physical space and some resources to bring people together and make sure we were fed.

The convening pre-conditions provide a set of considerations we believe every convener should carefully assess prior to deciding to host a convening. The purpose of the pre-conditions' assessment is not necessarily to get to a bright line yes or no decision, as there are a multitude of reasons that one might ultimately decide that moving forward with a convening is a good decision. We recognize that conveners vary in their capacities, accountabilities, and purposes for their convenings and that convenings can have an important purpose for the issue/theme in varying contexts. However, by explicitly assessing convening pre-conditions, conveners will execute important due diligence that will inform quality decisions and design.

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[17] http://www.communicationcache.com/uploads/1/0/8/8/10887248/the_bases_of_social_power_-_chapter_20_-_1959.pdf
[18] https://www.dictionary.com/browse/credibility
[19] A variant of "jumping around" is what we have described as having excess political capital. If an organization is seen as constantly championing or leading every issue that comes their way, stakeholders may perceive them as not having credibility on any of them.

Funders, Power Dynamics, and Convenings

Many organizations host or co-host convenings. In some instances, there is more distributed power among those organizing and those attending the convenings. In some cases, there are more distinct power differentials. It would be disingenuous not to have an explicit discussion about the power dynamics of convenings, particularly as it relates to funders. Holding the purse strings of actual, expected, or even hoped for resources creates an imbalance in the relationship. This has implications for the level of convening power that a funder may be assessed to have, particularly as it shows up in diversity of relationships, credibility, and cachet. We believe there are three fundamental implications to this as it relates to evaluating convenings.

First, it is particularly incumbent upon funders to be thoughtful, judicious, and considerate in the use of the convening tool. In the drive to utilize "all the tools in the toolbelt," some funders may feel compelled to convene because they see its value as a vehicle for learning and idea exchange among grantees. However, the value funders confer on a convening for grantees may not always mirror the value grantees confer on that convening for themselves. As such, it is worthwhile for a funder to consider how power dynamics in the funder-grantee relationship might obscure grantees' ability to make determinations about participating in a convening that are based on the convening's own merit. For example, a convening may be presented as a great opportunity, implying choice to participate or not, but a grantee might interpret it as a thing their funder is requiring or, at the very least, think that their funder is strongly expecting them to attend as part of being a good partner. Funders are encouraged to consider what they can do to mitigate these manifestations of the power dynamic that come from tendering an invitation by, for example, making it clear that it's okay for grantees not to attend, compensating grantees for their time if they come, and so on.

Second, assessing convening power may be hard for a funder to do without external assistance. Both organizational perception (self-assessment) and stakeholder direct response may exhibit positive response bias—a rating that is inflated beyond what it actually is. Funders should seek to understand their convening power beyond their purse strings. To do this requires a mechanism for anonymous or confidential assessment of convening power and deeper relationship building than might traditionally be expected between a funder and fund recipient. External assistance might come in the form of a consultant who works with a funder to understand from internal and external perspectives how the funder and their power to convene is perceived in the ecosystems within which they operate.

Third, the power dynamic should lead to a deeper commitment to equitable cost distribution. This is true of both direct convening elements (e.g., registration fees, travel costs, and time compensation) and support for post-convening activity. The latter is a check on raising expectations without resourcing those expectations (e.g., an unfunded mandate). Good practices of funders doing this effectively in the space include:

- Thinking about how to make the convening more feasible for grantees to participate in the convening (e.g., giving them stipends to participate, covering their time on site, compensating grantees who are involved in the convening agenda);
- Including grantees and other field actors in the conception, composition, and design of the convening; and
- Helping grantees to leverage the benefits of the convening (e.g., providing assistance or resources to support the development of ideas generated or connections made during the convening).

Finally, we recognize that the following might feel controversial, but we'd like to offer that funders consider taking a "null hypothesis" approach to convenings: consider that the convening will be of limited value until you can make a strong case for its value. This is not to imply that funders should not use convenings as a tool, but that they should set the bar high in terms of preparation. Such an approach would put considerably more weight on the reason to convene pre-conditions and a higher bar for convening power pre-conditions. Starting with the null presents an opportunity for funders to first work with grantees to determine if a convening will provide something of value to grantees that is not already in existence and to develop a forum for the convening that involves grantees and other relevant field actors in the design of the convening, including but not limited to, determining who will be invited to the convening, what the ground rules for the convening will be, and what the objectives of the convening will be.

This is certainly not all that can or should be said on this important topic of funders, power dynamics, and convenings. We raise it in the context of this paper, so it is explicitly on the radar of prospective conveners. Additional resources to continue thinking about the general topic of funders and power include:

- **Power Moves:** National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy (NCRP) provides "a complete self-assessment toolkit to determine how well you are building, sharing and wielding power" – https://www.ncrp.org/initiatives/power-moves-philanthropy
- **The Ultimate Library of Resources for Building, Sharing and Wielding Power:** This is another resource from NCRP that provides a catalog of case studies, articles, reports and other tools for funders to "enrich their Power Moves journey" – https://www.ncrp.org/initiatives/power-moves-philanthropy/additional-resources/reading-list
- **Trust-Based Philanthropy:** The Whitman Institute provides a set of principles for funders to consider in order to "proactively work to alleviate power imbalances in the sector by embedding trust, dialogue, and relationship-building in its practices with grantees" – https://thewhitmaninstitute.org/grantmaking/trust-based-philanthropy/
- **Balancing Power Dynamics in Philanthropy:** A blog post detailing the experience of bringing together social impact leaders and investors to unpack the visible, hidden, and invisible power dynamics at play in philanthropy and co-construct equitable solutions – http://skoll.org/2019/05/01/balancing-power-dynamics-in-philanthropy/
- **Putting Grantees at the Center of Philanthropy:** An article series developed in partnership with Grantmakers for Effective Organizations that invites experts from both the funder and nonprofit perspective to weigh in on how to address barriers, such as power dynamics, that inhibit the development of authentic relationships between grantees and funders in philanthropy – https://ssir.org/putting_grantees_at_the_center_of_philanthropy
- **Understanding the Philanthropy Power Dynamic [Video]:** A short video clip from Exponent Philanthropy and Fund for Shared Insight, which "highlight[s] multiple funders' thoughts on acknowledging and evaluating the power dynamics in philanthropic relationships" – https://givingcompass.org/article/understanding-the-philnathropy-power-dynamic-video/

Note: All links were accessed in February 2020. We cannot guarantee that they will be active links at the time you access this paper.

Evaluating Convening Execution

Once the decision to convene has been made, one moves to the next step of implementing the convening. Evaluation at this point relates to what we would generally think about as the **input** and **program quality indicators**.

INPUTS

Inputs are the resources that go into the convening and contribute to its successful execution. Inputs move from the conceptual pre-condition aspects (e.g., stakeholder readiness) to the actual resources that will be used in executing the convening. Often, only the monetary budgets are considered for inputs, but they include so much more (see side bar on *Calculating True Costs of Convenings*). Some of the inputs include:

- **Invited and Accepting Participants** – Who participates in the convening has important implications for its execution. The concept of readiness of stakeholder groups was captured as a precondition, but those who are invited and those who actually attend represent specific inputs. Acceptance rates and participant profiles are important considerations in evaluating the quality of participants as an input. Through the lens of equity, participant invites and actual participants should also be considered with regards to diversity and inclusion.
- **Convener Resources** – The convener brings various resources to the table, including staff time and skills; budget for logistics such as venue, food, and travel; and marketing, communications, and documentation support for the convening. A convener also brings their reputation/credibility as an input to the convening—i.e., they are expending political and social capital. In essence, the convener resources detailed under the convening power are themselves inputs the convener can bring to the convening. However, when evaluated through the lens of convening power, the evaluative inquiry assesses the *availability* of these resources; when evaluated through the lens of convening inputs, the evaluative inquiry assesses *how* these resources are used.
- **Convening Strategy and Design** – Another input is the design and strategic plan for the convening. This includes the statement of purpose and goals/objectives for the convening and how it is positioned as part of a broader strategic effort. It also includes the design, such as session format, adult learning theory, and physical layout. The convening design should be evaluated through an equity lens (e.g., how different participants may experience various aspects of the design differently) as well as the characteristic programmatic design lens (clarity of convening design in relation to intended results).

PROGRAM QUALITY INDICATORS

Program quality indicators include both subjective and objective elements. Subjective elements include the convening participants' levels of engagement during the convening, the participants' satisfaction or perceptions of the quality of the experience, and participants' perceptions of the alignment between the actual convening experience and their expectations for it. Relatively objective indicators relate to elements that are either observable or grounded in promising or best practice. All these indicators tell a part of the evaluative story. Following is a deeper description for each of these elements.

- **Level of engagement** – This refers to the degree to which participants are actively engaged in convening activities. This might include joining in discussions, attending sessions, and connecting with other participants. Overall, we would expect higher levels of engagement to be an indicator of higher quality. Dissecting level of engagement by different individual characteristics may provide insights to bias in the programming. Finally, in terms of assessing level of engagement, it is important to note that what engagement observably looks like may vary across personality types.
- **Level of satisfaction** – It is important to distinguish between engagement and satisfaction. It might seem that a highly engaged participant is a highly satisfied participant, but this is not necessarily the case. Participants' ratings of satisfaction provide information that is distinct from what evaluations of their engagement will tell you. Satisfaction with the event or experience captures the extent to which one regards the event or experience positively. Participants may consider a number of factors in their ratings of satisfaction and may not always weigh all these factors equally. For example, one participant might reflect on how much they enjoyed the convening when selecting their ratings, while another may consider how much they learned, and yet another participant might think back to the number of connections they made when assigning their rating. Due to the potential for satisfaction ratings

Calculating the True Cost of Convening

Frequently, when thinking about the costs of a convening, people only think about the initial, direct monetary costs. But, we know that convenings take up many more resources than just the dollars overtly spent. It takes an inordinate amount of staff time, which frequently isn't monetized. There are multiple "in-kind" resources, which include the non-compensated time for participants to attend. We feel it is important to examine convenings through a "true cost" lens. As a result, we developed a convening true cost calculator to encourage people to unpack the total convening costs in a systematic way.

A visual of the template is below (the actual spreadsheet is available with embedded excel formulas by request from the authors). We have included examples of common material, staffing, and in-kind expenditures. The user is invited to adapt and expand this true cost calculator to fit their specific context. In the Cost column, the cost of the material, average hourly rate of the staff, volunteer, or participant, and the estimated value of the in-kind assets should be entered. In the *Units* column, the quantity for each material input used, and the number of hours invested by staff, volunteers, and participants should be entered. The *Total Cost* column is a calculation of *Cost* multiplied by the number of *Units*.

Input	Cost	Units	Item cost
Convener monetary outlays			
Venue	[actual]		[actual]
Materials	[actual]		[actual]
Participation stipends	[amount per participant]	[total # of participants receiving stipend]	[cost x units]
Provided travel and lodging	[amount per participant]	[total # of participants receiving stipend]	[cost x units]
Food	[actual]		[actual]
Marketing and promotion	[actual]		[actual]
Contracted services (e.g. facilitator, enterentertainment)	[actual]		[actual]
Sub-total Convener monetary outlay			[sum of all monetary outlays]
Staffing Costs			
Convener staff	[average hourly cost]	[total # of hours contributed]	[cost x units]
Volunteer planning committee staff	[average hourly cost]	[total # of hours contributed]	[cost x units]
Sub-total Convener staffing costs			[sum of all staffing costs]
In-kind Costs			
In-kind provided materials	[total estimated value]		[actual]
Non-compensated time of participants	[average hourly cost]	[total # of hours preparing and participating]	[cost x units]
Sub-total Convener monetary outlay			[sum of all in-kind costs]
Total Convening Cost			**[sum of monetary outlays + staffing cost + in-kind costs]**
Reflective Question: Given the total convening cost, what else could the institution do with the money to contribute to their desired social and environmental outcomes?			

to be treated as an omnibus assessment, it can be valuable to incorporate specificity in assessments of satisfaction that are used in evaluations of convening execution.

- **Perceived alignment with expectations** – Evaluating perceived alignment provides some information about how participants' expectations for the convening compare with their actual experiences of the convening. Expectations may be a more precise way of approximating satisfaction.
- **Adherence to good practice** – Whereas the three preceding dimensions are based on participants' perceptions, not all measures of program quality are "in the eye of the beholder." Depending on the type of activities in the convening, different types of good practice are relevant. For example, there are good practices defined for public speaking, adult learning, networking, debate, product design, etc. To the extent that there exist standards or commonly accepted indicators of good practice for these activities, the specific activities of the convening should be evaluated based on these good practices.

In our experience, program quality is the area of convening that gets the greatest evaluation attention. The reason for this might be because the quality of the convening often is most salient after the convening concludes; conveners want to know, "Did we do a good job? Did people like the convening?" Another reason may be that, in contrast to the convening outcomes that we will explore in the next section, program quality is one area of the convening in which conveners might feel they have the most control and for which they are most comfortable being held accountable. This overreliance on program quality as an indicator of convening success is most likely due to a commonly accepted, but incomplete belief that if the convening is framed as a catalyst for action and if participants rate the convening highly, then the convening must have achieved its goal of propelling participants into action. In our discussion on evaluating convening outcomes, we will explain why this provides only limited insight.

We don't discount the importance of evaluating program quality, but we believe this is an area in which conveners need to more critically consider the merits and limits of what program quality evaluations can tell us about the success of the convening. Further, we strongly encourage disaggregating program quality examination and data to understand whether some participant profiles might be better served than others. Such an examination would consider the range of stakeholders from various groups, formats that ensure safe spaces, and other equity considerations such as language, race, gender, and economic appropriateness.

Evaluating Convening Outcomes

Thinking about evaluating outcomes can present a challenge to some conveners. In countless conversations with conveners, we have heard how, despite declarations that the convenings are intended to animate downstream outcomes, it is difficult to assess how post-convening outcomes can be connected back to the convening. Another frustration we have heard among conveners is the lack of clarity regarding which outcomes to assess. How then might we think about evaluating convening outcomes?

Among the first aspects of evaluating convening outcomes is clarifying intent.[20] Clarifying intent is part of the unique strategic value pre-condition discussed above. A lack of clear outcomes represents under-development of that pre-condition. We propose two ways to think about outcomes: Stakeholder lens and Outcome category lens. They are not mutually exclusive and a focus on one may inform the other. We present them as separate as we have found that they elicit slightly different thought processes.

The **stakeholder lens** traces intention related to convening sub-groups— the convener, the participant, and the issue. We can think about what each of these groups brings to the convening as an input and what they then take away as convening outcomes (see Figure 4).

Another way to think about outcomes for a convening is through the lens of outcome categories. Through an **outcome category lens**, we can think about the distinct types of outcomes that might be of value. We propose that convening outcomes can be broken down into five distinct categories: reputation outcomes, capacity outcomes, connection outcomes, salience outcomes, and action outcomes. To the extent that there is agreement that we don't convene for convening's sake, but that we convene as a mechanism to drive some downstream outcome, the evaluation should include assessment of those potential outcomes.

[20] Some common evaluation tools for clarifying intent are theory of change and logic models.

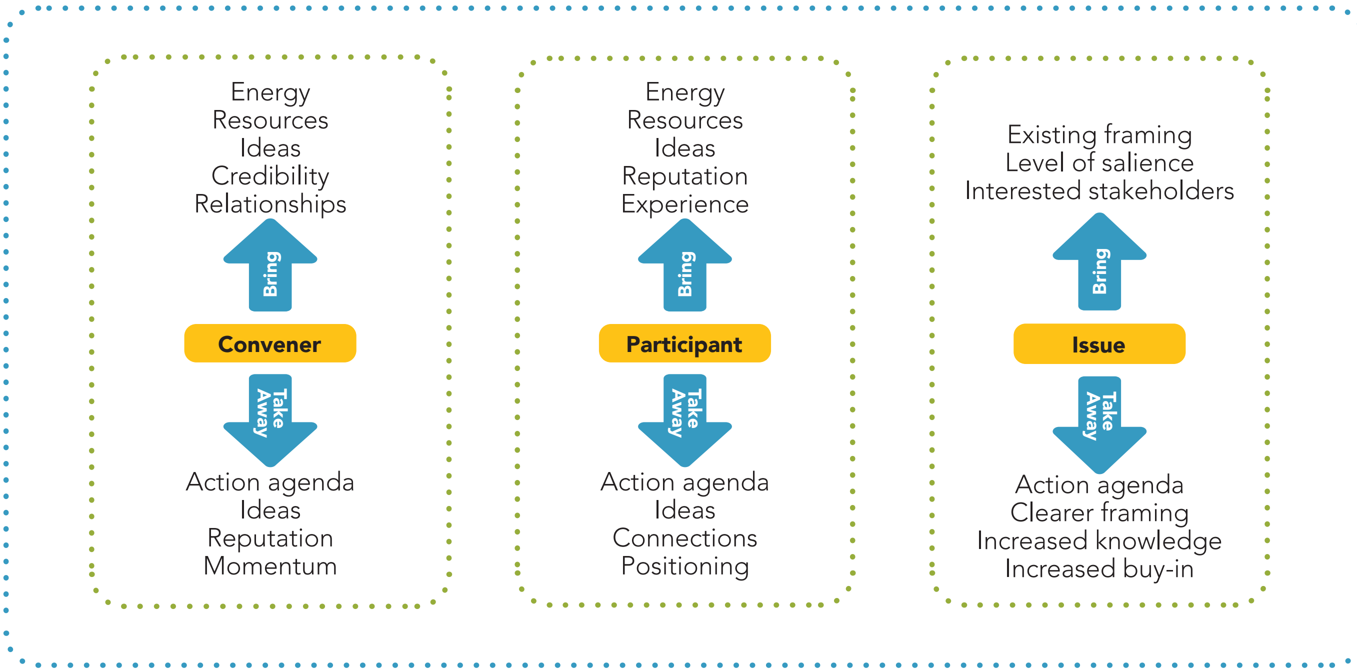

Figure 4. Convening Stakeholder Inputs and Outcomes

Our emphasis here is to encourage the establishment of a norm in how we evaluate convenings that always considers outcomes.

- **Reputation outcomes** – These are outcomes primarily accrued by the convener. Possible outcomes to the convener's reputation include being perceived in the field as a positive contributor to change on the issue and increases in the socio-political capital of the convener.
- **Capacity outcomes** – This refers to changes in participants' and conveners' knowledge, attitudes, and/or skills relevant to their work. This includes relational capacity outcomes such as understanding of disparate positions among stakeholders and how one's own work is situated in a broader ecosystem. Capacity outcomes may occur at the individual, organizational, or field level. It is also possible that increased capacity at the individual level translates into stronger performance for the group or organizations of which those individuals are a part.
- **Connection outcomes** – These outcomes are probably the most intuitive for convenings. These outcomes include such things as new and strengthened ties between individuals and organizations, increases in collaborations between individuals and organizations, increases in group identity, and increases in coordinated collective actions. It may also include facilitating connections across "silos" such as sectors or issue areas.
- **Issue salience outcomes** – Here we are referring to the changes in the prominence or "pull" of the issue. Some outcomes that might result for the issue following a convening include increased awareness and knowledge of the issue across a wider group of relevant actors; increased perceived relevance of the issue to individual and organizational goals; increased energy around and motivation to address the issue; an increase in commitment to engage on the issue; an increase in visibility for the issue in the broader field or public sphere; an increase in consensus around how to move forward on the issue; and an increase in the influence of the issue to sway individual behaviors and public policy.
- **Action outcomes** – These outcomes refer to what is done on behalf of the issue. Action-related outcomes that might directly result from a convening are immediate outputs, such as declarations; an action plan for immediate next steps and field-level outcomes; the generation of new resources (e.g., pledges); the development of new tools and the initiation of new activities to advance progress; and an increase in the efficiency of idea development and joint work.

Along with the indicators presented above, Table 1 presents a more exhaustive list of indicators across the five outcome areas that convenings can serve to increase, improve, and/or catalyze.

In addition to the two outcome lenses offered above, there are two final outcome evaluation points worth mentioning. First, as stated, the above outcomes focus on intentionality. There are many types of things that a convener might not intentionally design for that might happen as a result of convenings. We might call these unanticipated outcomes or serendipitous outcomes. It is important to consider these as part of an outcome evaluation, but caution should be taken in terms of considering such outcomes as representative or replicable.[21]

Second, there is a time element associated with convening outcomes. This paper has taken the primary lens of short- and medium-term outcomes in order to encourage greater intentionality and to strengthen contribution and attribution claims stemming from convening evaluations. Longer-term outcomes certainly stem from convenings and tracing those outcomes is a worthwhile undertaking. However, these longer-term outcomes generally need be viewed more from a contribution perspective (rather than attribution) and in the context of multiple interventions. Such an undertaking generally extends beyond the period and scope of evaluative investment that most conveners are willing to engage.

Table 1: Convening Outcomes by Category

Reputation	Capacity	Connection	Salience	Action
• Perceived contribution of convening to change	• Knowledge retention	• Strengthening interest/ties	• Increasing salience/ relevance to their goals	• Progress made on next steps
• Socio-political capital of convener	• Share Learning	• Build Networks	• Level of energy/ motivation	• Tangibility/utility of outputs
	• Applied knowledge	• Ongoing communications between participants	• Create energy/ momentum	• Concreteness of next steps
	• Develop foresight	• Group identity/ formation (use stages)	• Increased engagement on topic	• Accelerate idea development
	• Stronger performance by orgs and groups within system	• Emergence of new collaborations	• Lend cache to a topic (raise visibility)	• Increase quality of output
	• Increased random idea exchange (novelty)	• Future collaboration	• Increase scale of engagement	• New tools/services developed
		• Increase collective coordinated action	• Foster consensus/ increase alignment	• Participants initiate new projects/activities
			• Shift public discourse	• Accelerate work
			• Influence	• Save time/money
				• Generate resources
				• Progress on field-level outcomes
				• Innovate

[21] Based on conversations we have had with several conveners, it is possible that the entire premise of a convening might be fostering serendipitous outcomes. If a convener considers this their approach, we believe that it should be explicitly stated as such and designed accordingly. However, we assume that this would be more the exception than the rule.

Conclusion

This paper lays out a framework for more thoughtfully, strategically, and systematically evaluating convenings. We have put forth definitions of both convening and convening power in an effort to advance clarity on the parameters for convening evaluation. The framework asks evaluators and convening designers to consider several pre-conditions, the quality of convening execution, and to intensify the focus on clear and distinct outcomes.

So what should you do now? The purpose of this paper was to lay out the framework, but below we have offered several specific action items you might consider. These action items are organized by the phases of preparation, execution, and follow-up of convenings.

There are many opportunities to further build out the convening evaluation work. Some of the things that we are working on with some of partners include:

- What are effective methods for evaluating convenings, with a particular emphasis on getting beyond after-convening surveys?
- What are different theories of convenings related to outcome targets?
- How can we do a pre-convening assessment that provides sufficient rigor and value?
- How do variations in convening design influence quality and different outcomes?

We invite you as a partner on this journey. Through our collective commitment to inquiry we believe we will be able to maximize the value of this strategic lever of change toward a more effective and efficient social sector.

Suggested Action Items for Better Convening Evaluation

Preparation Action Items:

- Develop a theory of change and/or logic model for your convening to articulate intended outcomes and how specific aspects of the convening are expected to lead to those outcomes.
- Set aside 90 minutes for your convening team to discuss each of the eight pre-convening domains. Consider where are your current strengths and gaps in those domains and how will you get to a place where you are more prepared for your convening.
- Establish a convening advisory group made up of potential attendees to reflect on the pre-convening domains.
- Complete the True Cost of Convening workshop and come up with a list of at least two other ways you could spend those resources. Consider how the other ways of spending the resources enhance or detract from your conceived convening value proposition. Further, consider the equity considerations related to the costs that will be borne.
- Consider doing a formal assessment of the pre-convening domains, using an external stakeholder.

Execution Action Items:

- Do your due diligence to understand what the literature suggests are effective implementation practices for the activities you are considering. The practices are likely in the domains of adult-learning or group dynamics. Commit to assessing against those, not just program satisfaction.
- Consider ways to get information in real-time so that adjustments can be made during the event.
- Commit to disaggregate your program quality data by demographic characteristics like race and gender.
- Ask yourself how actionable a piece of program quality data is likely to be. If it has low actionability, consider not collecting it.
- Design a formal feedback loop for how (and by whom) program quality information will be used to review and re-adjust future convenings.

Follow-up Action Items:

- Consider post-convening follow-up incentives that can be used for tracking ongoing engagement. One example might be a $5 coffee gift card to go and get coffee with another participant.
- Commit (e.g., schedule them into your calendar) to reflect on the value of the convening at three specific points: immediately following, 90 days afterwards, and a year after the event.
- Commit to disaggregate participant outcomes by demographic characteristics like race, gender, and organizational type.
- Be deliberate in your outcomes assessment—do not go fishing for any and all possible outcomes stemming from the convening.

Appendix: The Full Framework for Evaluating Convenings

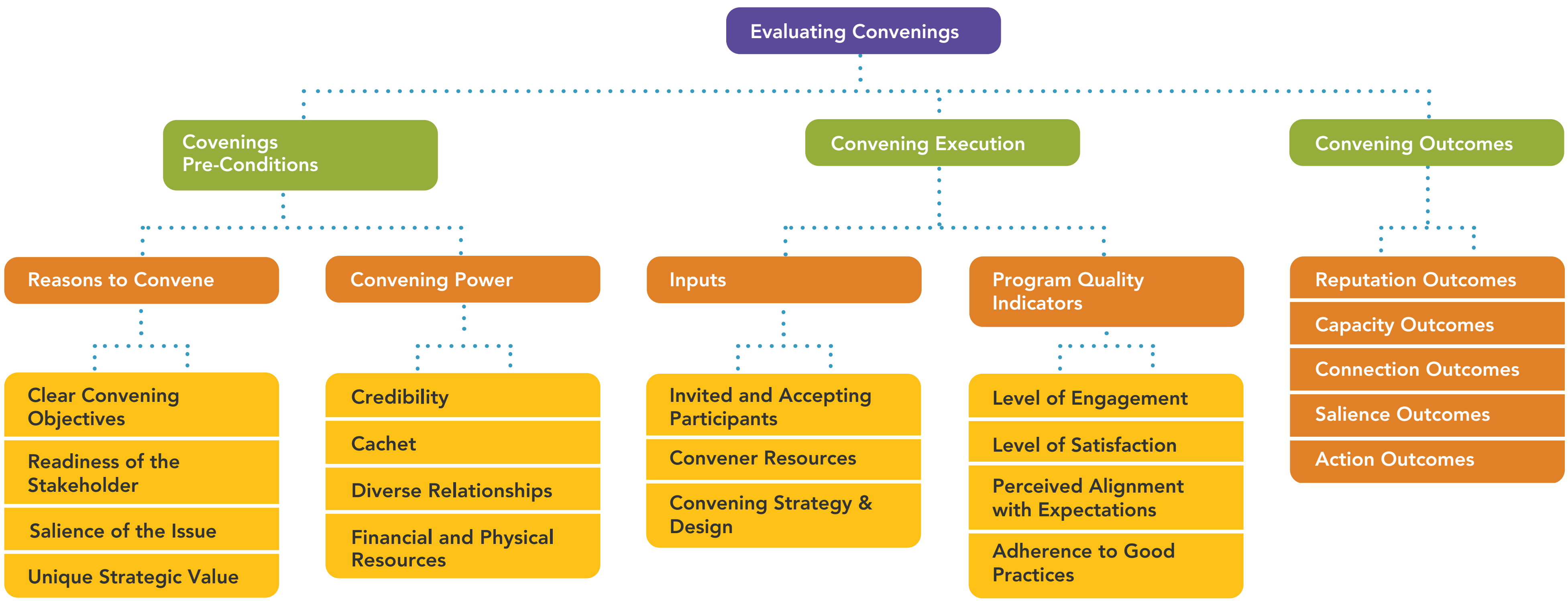

Figure 5. Evaluating Convening Framework (with Convening Outcomes viewed through Outcomes Lens)

About TCC Group

TCC Group collaborates with leaders to solve complex social problems. As a certified B Corporation and with nearly 40 years of experience as a mission-driven consulting firm, TCC Group partners with foundations, nonprofits, and companies to propel positive social change through strategy, capacity building, initiative design, strategic communication, management, and evaluation. We design and implement solutions for social impact by immersing ourselves in interconnected communities and systems, co-creating innovative and effective processes, and applying and sharing our experience with the field.

About the Authors

Jared Raynor, Director of Evaluation and Learning. Jared is a sought-after speaker and leading thinker and an author and contributor to more than a dozen publications. At TCC Group, Jared has overseen social prize convening work with the Rockefeller Foundation and the Knight Foundation. Jared has presented to many audiences on the subject of effective evaluation of convenings and continues to receive requests to advise on organizations' evaluations of their convening activities.

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