



ROARING FORK LEADERSHIP

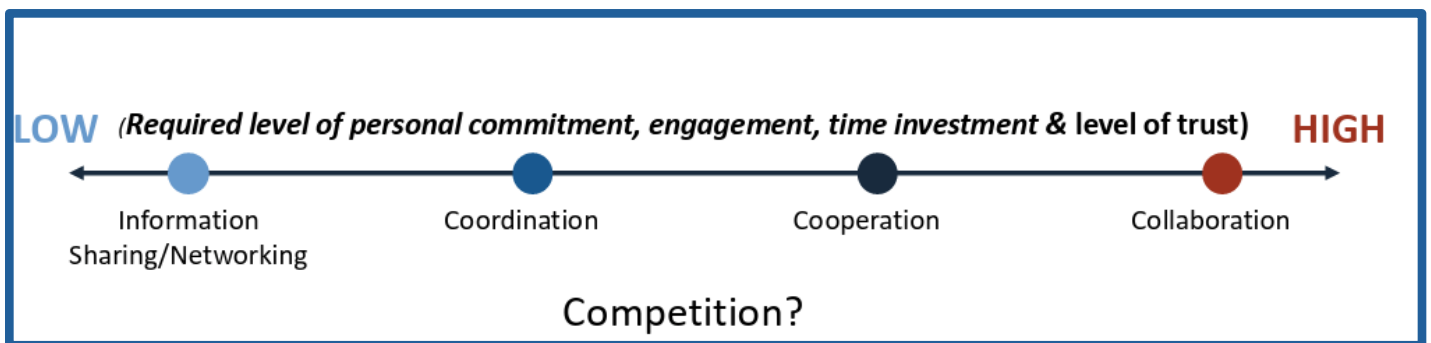
Beyond Silos Nonprofit Collaboration Framework

For micro-sector application, with a pathway to valley-wide, regional, and statewide collaboration

Executive Summary

The Roaring Fork + Colorado River Valleys face complex community challenges that no single nonprofit, funder, public agency, or coalition can solve alone. Food insecurity, housing instability, access to health care, youth well-being, transportation, mental health, arts access, and environmental stewardship all intersect in the same families, communities, and geographies. Yet the systems built to respond to those challenges are often fragmented by mission, funding streams, geography, language, data silos, organizational culture, and limited capacity.

The Roaring Fork Leadership's (RFL) **Beyond Silos Nonprofit Collaboration Framework** is designed to help nonprofits move from **information sharing** to **coordination**, from coordination to **co-creation**, and from co-creation to **ecosystem collaboration**. It is grounded in adaptive leadership, informed by the Boulder Food Rescue Participation Framework, and shaped by the RFL Beyond Silos project's brainstorming, roundtable learning, and STARC presentation structure.



This framework is intentionally built for use at two levels:

Micro-sector use: A specific issue ecosystem such as food insecurity, housing, health, arts, youth, climate, immigrant support, or senior services can use the framework to map stakeholders, diagnose barriers, align around shared purpose, and build practical collaboration.

Macro-system expansion: Once tested within one sector, the framework can scale across the full nonprofit ecosystem in that area, then outward to inter-county, regional, and state-level collaboration.

At its core, this framework starts from one premise:

Collaboration is not a meeting. It is a disciplined process of shared diagnosis, trust-building, alignment, and action across organizations that must adapt together in order to make progress on challenges larger than any one organization can solve.

This framework therefore emphasizes:

- leadership as an activity, not a title
- adaptive challenges, not just technical fixes
- community voice, not just organizational voice
- trust, reciprocity, and transparency
- structured process, not vague goodwill
- measurable learning, not performative collaboration
- shared ownership, not outside control

The framework is especially relevant in rural and mountain communities where organizations often serve overlapping populations across county lines while competing for scarce staff time, volunteers, attention, and funding. The goal is not to erase organizational identity or autonomy. The goal is to make the ecosystem more coherent, more human-centered, and more capable of shared progress.

Glossary

Adaptive challenge: A challenge created by the gap between current reality and shared aspirations that cannot be solved by existing expertise, authority, or procedures alone. Addressing it requires learning, behavior change, and shifts in priorities, relationships, or values.

Adaptive work: The work of changing habits, expectations, loyalties, assumptions, norms, and ways of operating so progress becomes possible.

Backbone function: The coordinating role that convenes stakeholders, supports communication, manages process, tracks learning, and helps move the collaborative forward. This function may be housed in one organization or shared across partners.

Collaboration continuum: A developmental range of relationship levels among organizations: awareness, networking, information sharing, coordination, cooperation, collaboration, and ecosystem co-creation.

Collective impact: A structured form of cross-sector collaboration built around a shared agenda, shared measurement, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication, and a backbone support function.

Community voice: Input, influence, and decision-making power held by community members, service users, residents, and people most affected by the issue.

Co-ownership: Shared ownership of a problem, a process, and a set of solutions, rather than one organization treating the work as its own initiative.

Ecosystem collaboration: A mature stage of collaboration in which organizations understand their interdependence, align around shared outcomes, coordinate action, and adapt together over time.

Micro-sector: A focused nonprofit issue area or service ecosystem, such as food access, affordable housing, behavioral health, arts and culture, early childhood, or workforce development.

Mutually reinforcing activities: Different organizations doing different work in ways that intentionally align toward shared outcomes.

Participation: The many ways community members, program participants, and affected stakeholders can shape, inform, influence, contribute to, and help govern the work intended to serve them.

Shared measurement: A small set of agreed indicators used by partners to track progress, learn together, and adjust strategy.

Stakeholder: Any person, group, institution, or system actor with an interest in, influence on, or lived experience of the issue.

Trust infrastructure: The set of norms, behaviors, agreements, communication practices, and accountability mechanisms that make collaboration credible and sustainable.

I. Understanding Collaboration to Improve Adaptive Challenges

A. Why collaboration matters in our Region (Aspen to Parachute)

The RFL Beyond Silos nonprofit ecosystem operates in a context defined by interdependence. Community needs cross organizational and political boundaries. Families do not experience food insecurity separately from housing pressure, transportation barriers, child care gaps, language access issues, mental health needs, or social isolation. Because the problems are connected, responses must become more connected as well.

This is especially true in a geographically stretched valley where organizations serve people across Garfield, Pitkin, and western Eagle County, often through overlapping service areas, distinct funding structures, and uneven access to public infrastructure. In this setting, duplication, fragmentation, and communication gaps are not simply inefficiencies. They become barriers to human dignity and community belonging.

B. Collaboration through an adaptive leadership lens

Many nonprofit ecosystems treat collaboration as a technical task: create a directory, hold a meeting, share updates, or convene a coalition. Those activities are helpful, but insufficient. The deeper barriers are usually adaptive. ([Technical vs Adaptive: KLC Video](#)).

	TECHNICAL WORK	ADAPTIVE WORK
the solution	...is clear	...requires learning
the problem	...is clear	...requires learning
whose work is it?	experts or authority	stakeholders
type of work	efficient	act experimentally
timeline	asap	longer term
expectations	fix the problem	make progress
attitude	confidence <u>and</u> skill	curiosity

Courtesy of Kansas Leadership Center

Examples of adaptive barriers include:

- scarcity mindset and fear of losing funding or identity
- mistrust rooted in history, competition, or exclusion
- uneven power between large and small organizations
- county-level politics and differing institutional priorities
- language and cultural barriers
- lack of agreement on what success actually means
- habits of talking without deciding
- habits of serving community without sharing power with community

Adaptive challenges require stakeholders themselves to do the work of learning and changing. No outside consultant, sponsor, or convening body can solve this for the sector. A facilitator can support the process, but the work belongs to the ecosystem.

C. What collaboration is not

Collaboration is not:

- simply being listed in the same directory
- attending the same meeting
- exchanging occasional referrals
- making people sit together without shared purpose
- forcing consensus
- one large organization setting the agenda for everyone else
- an unfunded expectation layered onto already over-capacity teams

D. What collaboration is

Collaboration is a structured practice of:

1. seeing the system clearly
2. naming the adaptive challenge honestly
3. centering community and participant voice
4. building trust and legitimacy
5. aligning around shared outcomes
6. clarifying distinct but connected roles
7. creating shared ways to communicate, learn, and act
8. measuring progress and adjusting together

II. What Does Collaboration Look Like?

There is no single ideal form of collaboration. Different sectors, organizations, and communities will need different forms. The point is not to force every group into the same model. The point is to create a range of collaborative opportunities and pathways.

A. Collaboration continuum

1. Awareness: Organizations know who else exists in the ecosystem.

Examples: sector maps, service directories, stakeholder lists, county and regional scans.

2. Information sharing / networking: Organizations exchange updates, contacts, and basic resources.

Examples: shared email lists, newsletters, communication plans, periodic convenings, referral guides.

3. Coordination: Organizations align logistics or timing to reduce confusion and improve access.

Examples: shared calendars, referral pathways, handoff protocols, warm introductions, event sequencing, coordinated outreach.

4. Cooperation: Organizations intentionally support each other's work while retaining separate goals.

Examples: cross-promotion, shared volunteer recruitment, co-hosted trainings, joint awareness campaigns, shared translation resources.

5. Collaboration: Organizations commit to a shared outcome and align work toward it.

Examples: sector roundtables, shared strategies, issue-specific work groups, common indicators, regular action reviews.

6. Co-creation: Organizations and community members jointly design solutions, pilots, and priorities.

Examples: shared grant applications, collaborative pilots, community-informed design workshops, co-created public messaging.

7. Ecosystem collaboration: The network acts as a learning system with shared direction, accountability, and adaptation.

Examples: standing councils, backbone support, annual collaboration summits, shared dashboards, multi-county initiatives, policy alignment efforts.

B. What collaboration looked like in the RFL Beyond Silos learning process

The RFL's Beyond Silos work surfaced a practical sequence that can guide future sectors:

- begin with stakeholder awareness
- move into one-on-one outreach and relationship building
- use interviews to learn how the ecosystem currently functions
- identify how communication already happens and where it breaks down
- convene a facilitated roundtable to surface barriers, assets, and shared aspirations
- identify where the sector sits on the continuum
- build from discussion toward concrete next steps and ownership

C. What mature collaboration should feel like

Healthy collaboration should feel:

- clear rather than vague
- purposeful rather than performative
- inclusive rather than insider-driven
- honest rather than polite-only
- structured rather than chaotic
- action-oriented rather than endlessly conversational
- adaptive rather than rigid
- shared rather than owned by one entity

III. Principles of Effective Collaboration

The following principles draw from Boulder Food Rescue's participation framework, adaptive leadership concepts, and lessons from RFL's Beyond Silos.

1. Start with lived reality

Collaboration should begin with actual community conditions and user experience, not only organizational assumptions. People experiencing the issue are not simply recipients of services; they are essential partners in understanding what the system is and is not doing.

2. Treat leadership as an activity, not a position

Anyone in the ecosystem can exercise leadership by helping the group face reality, ask better questions, and make progress. Formal authority matters, but it is not the same as leadership.

3. Distinguish technical problems from adaptive challenges

Some issues require better tools, clearer forms, or improved logistics. Others require changes in trust, power, norms, incentives, and identity. Effective collaboratives learn to work on both.

4. Build trust as mutual exchange

Trust is not just whether community members or smaller organizations trust institutions. It is also whether institutions show that they trust others with information, voice, responsibility, and influence.

5. Design for accessibility and inclusion

Participation and collaboration fail when they assume everyone has the same language access, transportation, schedule flexibility, digital access, or familiarity with sector norms. Accessibility must be built in from the start.

6. Share power intentionally

A collaboration cannot become meaningful if strategy, funding, language, and decision-making remain concentrated in the same hands. Shared power does not mean leaderless process. It means transparent process, role clarity, and legitimate influence.

7. Value difference without demanding sameness

Organizations do not need identical missions to collaborate effectively. The goal is aligned contribution, not sameness.

8. Move from talk to testable action

Meetings should generate decisions, experiments, owners, and timelines. Progress requires trying small things, learning from them, and adjusting.

9. Measure what matters

The collaborative should not only count activity. It should track whether access improves, duplication decreases, trust deepens, referrals work, and people experience better outcomes.

10. Build for stewardship, not dependency

Outside facilitators can be catalytic, but the collaborative must ultimately be owned by the sector itself. Long-term health depends on shared stewardship and local legitimacy.

11. Honor reciprocity

People participate when they can see that their time, honesty, and contribution matter. Feedback loops and visible follow-through are essential.

12. Expect loss, tension, and resistance

Collaboration asks organizations to give up some control, some certainty, and sometimes some visibility. Resistance is not proof that the effort is failing; often it is evidence that real adaptive work has begun.

IV. The Framework: How to Build Collaboration

This framework is designed as a repeatable cycle for any micro-sector, and as a building block for valley-wide and regional adoption.

Phase 1. Define the Issue Ecosystem

Purpose: Set the boundary of the collaborative.

Key questions

- What issue are we focusing on?
- What geography matters?
- Who experiences the issue most directly?
- What makes this issue adaptive rather than merely technical?

Outputs

- issue statement
- geographic scope
- preliminary stakeholder categories
- initial working definition of success

Examples of micro-sectors

- food access and nutrition
- affordable housing and homelessness prevention
- behavioral health and recovery support
- arts and culture access
- youth opportunity and mentoring
- senior services and aging in place

Phase 2. Map Stakeholders and the Current System

Purpose: Understand who is involved, what they do, where they overlap, and what relationships already exist.

Stakeholder categories

- nonprofits
- public agencies and counties
- municipalities
- funders and philanthropy
- schools and higher education
- health systems
- faith communities
- businesses and employers
- volunteers
- grassroots leaders

- residents and service users

Map at least these dimensions

- mission and services
- populations served
- geography served
- current partnerships
- referral relationships
- funding intersections
- language capacity
- cultural reach
- data and evaluation practices
- convening roles

Outputs

- stakeholder map
- service overlap map
- relationship map
- initial gap analysis

Phase 3. Listen Before Designing

Purpose: Build legitimacy and diagnose the system from multiple perspectives.

Methods

- one-on-one interviews
- small listening sessions
- participant or client interviews
- bilingual outreach
- surveys where useful
- review of existing directories and reports

Ask questions such as

- Where is collaboration already working?
- Where are the handoff failures?
- What feels duplicative?
- What barriers keep people from participating?
- What would make meetings worth attending?
- What outcomes matter most?
- What is the elephant in the room?

Outputs

- themes report

- barriers and assets summary
- trust baseline
- collaboration readiness picture

Phase 4. Identify the Collaboration Continuum Position

Purpose: Help the group assess honestly where it is now.

Diagnostic prompts

- Are we mostly aware of each other, or actually aligned?
- Do we only share updates, or do we make joint decisions?
- Are referrals warm and reliable, or mostly informal?
- Are we solving for the same community outcomes?
- Do we have any shared measurement?
- Who owns follow-through?

Outputs

- current-state continuum assessment
- priority development areas
- collaboration maturity profile

Phase 5. Build Shared Purpose and Shared Outcomes

Purpose: Move beyond vague desire to collaborate toward meaningful alignment.

Shared purpose statement template “We collaborate to improve _____ for _____ across _____ by aligning our efforts around _____.”

Shared outcome examples

- residents can find and access the right services without navigating the system alone
- organizations reduce duplication and close critical service gaps
- bilingual and culturally responsive access improves across the sector
- families experience better outcomes, not just more transactions

Outputs

- shared purpose statement
- 3 to 5 shared outcomes
- definitions of success and failure

Phase 6. Design the Collaboration Infrastructure

Purpose: Create the practical structure that makes collaboration real.

Design components

- convening cadence
- facilitator or backbone role

- communication channels
- decision-making agreements
- participation expectations
- conflict norms
- documentation method
- ownership of action items
- community participation pathways

Recommended minimum structure

- quarterly full-sector convening
- monthly working group or steering team
- shared notes and action tracker
- named coordinator or rotating backbone function
- bilingual access plan
- standing agenda structure: learn, decide, act

Outputs

- collaboration charter
- governance and participation norms
- communication plan
- backbone function description

Phase 7. Launch Small Collaborative Experiments

Purpose: Move quickly from theory to learning.

Possible experiments

- shared referral pilot
- cross-organization intake guide
- joint calendar
- shared volunteer recruitment campaign
- bilingual outreach toolkit
- collaborative grant proposal
- shared transportation or “last mile” pilot
- co-hosted community event
- cross-training among staff

Experiment design questions

- What are we trying?
- What do we expect to learn?
- Who owns it?
- What is the timeline?
- How will we know whether it helped?

Outputs

- experiment briefs
- owners and dates
- learning agenda

Phase 8. Measure, Reflect, and Reassess

Purpose: Build accountability and adaptive learning.

Possible measures

- number and diversity of participating organizations
- number of community members involved in design or feedback
- quality and speed of referrals
- meeting participation and follow-through
- reduction in duplication
- growth in shared initiatives
- changes in trust and perceived value
- improvements in client or resident experience
- progress on shared outcomes

Reflection questions

- What changed?
- What stalled?
- Where are we still avoiding the real work?
- What needs more structure?
- What should scale?
- What should stop?

Outputs

- reassessment memo
- updated maps and priorities
- next-round action plan

Phase 9. Expand from Micro to Macro

Purpose: Scale lessons from one sector to broader collaboration.

Expansion pathways

- replicate the framework in another issue sector
- compare sector maps to identify cross-cutting needs
- convene inter-sector leadership council
- establish valley-wide shared principles and data standards
- connect county and regional initiatives
- create a regional collaboration summit or learning exchange

Macro-level possibilities

- valley-wide nonprofit collaboration council
- shared nonprofit resource map
- inter-county issue councils
- regional backbone partnership
- common nonprofit collaboration scorecard
- shared advocacy priorities where appropriate

V. Roles in the Framework

Community members and people most affected

- define lived reality
- identify barriers and assets
- shape priorities
- test whether collaboration improves actual access and dignity

Nonprofit organizations

- contribute expertise and relationships
- clarify distinct role in the ecosystem
- participate in shared problem-solving
- align activities where possible

Funders and philanthropy

- support backbone capacity
- reduce incentives that unintentionally reward siloed behavior
- encourage learning, trust, and multi-year collaboration

Public agencies and counties

- align policy, data, and service infrastructure
- reduce fragmentation across jurisdictions
- participate as partners, not only regulators or funders

Backbone or facilitation function

- convene
- document
- align
- maintain accountability
- support communication
- help the group stay focused on adaptive work

VI. Key Design Standards for Any Sector Using This Framework

Any micro-sector adaptation of this framework should include:

1. a clear issue definition
2. stakeholder and service mapping
3. community voice strategy
4. interview or listening phase
5. continuum assessment
6. shared purpose and shared outcomes
7. a communication and decision structure
8. at least one collaborative pilot
9. shared measures of learning and impact
10. a reassessment point
11. a sustainability or stewardship plan

VII. Risks and Common Failure Modes

The framework should be used with awareness of common risks:

- convening fatigue without action
- dominant organizations controlling agenda or language
- community voice used symbolically rather than substantively
- data collection without follow-through
- collaboration driven only by grant opportunity
- lack of backbone capacity
- no shared definition of success
- overbuilding structure before trust exists
- underbuilding structure after trust begins
- failing to revisit power, language, and access barriers

VIII. Recommended First-Year Roadmap for a Sector Pilot

Months 1–2: Define and map

- confirm issue sector and geography
- identify 25–60 key stakeholders
- create draft map of services, populations, and geographies

Months 2–4: Listen and diagnose

- conduct interviews and listening sessions
- gather community perspective
- summarize barriers, assets, and opportunities

Months 4–5: Convene and align

- hold a facilitated roundtable
- assess continuum position
- define shared purpose and initial outcomes

Months 5–8: Build infrastructure and pilot

- establish steering group or backbone function
- adopt communication norms
- launch 1–3 collaborative experiments

Months 8–12: Measure and refine

- evaluate pilots
- gather feedback from partners and participants
- publish short findings report
- set year-two priorities

Appendix A. Sample Questions for Sector Interviews

1. What role does your organization play in this ecosystem?
2. What is going well with this ecosystem?
3. Who do you coordinate/collaborate with most often, and why?
4. Where does communication, handoffs or referrals break down?
5. What duplication or confusion do you see?
6. What gaps concern you most?
7. What keeps coordination/collaboration from going deeper?
8. What would make coordination/collaboration worth your time?
9. What voices are currently missing?
10. What shared outcome would be worth aligning around?
11. What small experiment would you support in the next six months?

Appendix B. Sample Collaboration Charter Elements

- purpose
- scope
- membership
- values and norms
- accessibility commitments
- communication cadence
- decision rules
- conflict process
- action tracking method
- review timeline

Appendix C. Sample Shared Metrics

- partner participation rate
- number of warm referrals completed
- average referral follow-through time
- number of joint initiatives launched
- partner perception of trust and usefulness
- participant perception of access and dignity
- reductions in duplicated outreach or effort
- progress on 3 to 5 shared outcomes

Appendix D. Sample Micro-to-Macro Expansion Questions

- What lessons from this sector apply to other sectors?
- Which issues are cross-cutting across multiple sectors?
- What valley-wide barriers keep showing up?
- What backbone capacity could be shared?
- What data standards or collaboration norms could become regional?

Appendix E. Suggested Deliverables

- sector stakeholder map
- service and geography map
- relationship and referral map
- findings memo from interviews
- collaboration continuum self-assessment
- collaboration charter
- pilot briefs
- 12-month learning report
- valley-wide synthesis after multiple sector pilots

Appendix E. Example of the Region's Leadership Ecosystem

The Community Leadership Ecosystem: *Players, Functions & Connection*



Acknowledgments

This framework was informed by the Boulder Food Rescue Participation Framework; the RFL's Beyond Silos project materials, brainstorming, roundtable notes, and the STARC Team; adaptive leadership concepts associated with Ronald Heifetz, Marty Linsky, Dean Williams, and the Kansas Leadership Center; and broader nonprofit collaboration and collective impact practice.

It is designed for the leaders, staff, volunteers, funders, public servants, and community members working across the Roaring Fork + Colorado River Valleys and connected regions who continue to show up in service of stronger systems and greater belonging.

Most importantly, this framework recognizes that durable collaboration is built not only by organizations, but by the people and communities whose lived experience reveals where the system succeeds, where it fails, and where new possibility begins.