

CFI's origin story

Liz Skelton and Kerry Graham 2024

"...Ideas undergo a process of emergence by emergency. When they are needed badly enough, they are accepted."

R.Buckminster Fuller

The best beginnings usually start by accident, Collaboration for Impact (CFI) emerged out of need and experimentation.

Chapter 1: sensing the field

In 2012 several Australian specialists and practitioners in social change convened to explore and share observations from different perspectives. There were common themes of frustration as we observed the systems we were working in being highly fragmented, increasingly detached from the very people they were meant to serve, and failing First Nations people and other marginalised groups. There was a palpable need for learning on how to collaborate effectively to address complex challenges in ways that centre those most impacted. Most of this group agreed to take on the quest. Before CFI had its name, it began as a network.

As members of that informal network, Kerry Graham and Dawn O'Neil were delving into the Collective Impact approach from the US and Canada, exploring its potential in Australia with support from the Centre for Social Impact. Concurrently, Liz Skelton in Social Leadership Australia, The Benevolent Society was experimenting with extending the practice of adaptive leadership with systemic collaborations working on complex challenges.

In 2013, Kerry & Liz decided to bring their experience and skills together. This quickly led to them organising and delivering practice in convenings and meetings with practitioners and communities across Australia to understand the questions, needs, and appetite for collaboration. While the need for collaborative efforts was evident, the response was less certain. This uncertainty galvanized them to unify their individual efforts and the emerging network of collaboration practitioners under the name **Collaboration for Impact**.



Chapter 2: connecting the field

In 2014, CFI (along with other partners) launched 'The Search' -- a 9 month capacity building program with a financial incentive to find and fund Australia's most promising early-stage collective impact initiative. Eighty communities engaged and 11 were shortlisted by an international judging panel. Between this initiative and our first first sell-out annual conference, the emerging field of collaboration in Australia began to 'see itself'.

Structurally, CFI became a charity with a vision of a thriving society and a purpose of developing and nurturing the Australasian practice of collaboration to address large-scale change to tackle our most complex problems. Liz and Kerry became Executive Directors, later joined by Kyrstie Dunn.

Chapter 3: enabling the field

Between 2015 - 2018 we were able to employ a Business Manager and admin support. We described our role as building capacity and facilitating learning for leaders, collaborations and organisations. We did this through enabling a growing network of collaboration, leadership and community engagement specialists and developing a world-class learning platform for collaboration. The learning platform had 3 pillars:

1. Enabling learning: Curating freely accessible online tools, research, knowledge, case studies, and resources. CFI collated and captured tools, stories and examples of best practice and, in 2018, launched [Platform C](#) - an open source curated learning space for people tackling complex challenges through collaboration. By making these resources freely accessible, we aimed to democratize knowledge and empower communities to take charge of their own collaborative initiatives.

2. Building knowledge: Offering a calendar of learning events through webinars, communities of interest, workshops, and conferences. With CFI's network of practitioners and key International partners we introduced and showcased different approaches to collaboration on complex challenges. This included community engagement masterclasses, annual Collective Impact conferences, bi-annual Evaluation and Complexity conferences, 101 workshop series across Australia, and Adaptive Leadership masterclasses. We integrated, and experimented with numerous approaches to meet the emerging momentum and learning

appetite. By 2018 we moved from the CFI annual conference to partnership with place initiatives resulting in the first [Changefest](#) emerging in the Australian ecosystem in Logan, Qld.

3.Embedding support: Walking alongside collaborations over the long term to support learning and development. As momentum for Collective Impact and demand for capacity building grew, CFI became a learning partner embedded within multi-stakeholder collaborations. At its peak, CFI was embedded in 40+ collaborative initiatives across Australia. The role of learning partner was varied and encompassed:

- Capacity building through collaborative systems change skills and practice development, coaching and advising.
- Partnership brokerage and condition builder between communities and governments and philanthropies
- Advocating for innovative practice, agenda alignment, new procurement arrangements, and the shifting of power to communities
- Enabling solutions to shared challenges across multiple communities

Some learning partnerships lasted 9 years (e.g. Kerry's role embedded with the [Maranguka initiative in Bourke](#)), while others were shorter and focused on 'getting started' and 'getting unstuck'.

Chapter 4: stretching the social change field

Through CFI's unique field building role, we saw that collaborative practice in Australia needed deepening and stretching. Between 2019 - 2022, with core funding in place, we focused on stretching the field in two strategic ways:

Systemic change: CFI, along with other international intermediaries, saw that the dominant frame for collaborative work was policy change, funding reform and service integration. While this work was important, we knew it was not going to be sufficient to change the underlying conditions holding inequity and injustice in place. CFI stretched its own practice and that of the field to weave in systems change narratives and frameworks. This expansion brought an elevated focus on strengthening connections within and across systems, shifting power dynamics, and influencing mental models. New more relational practices of storytelling, shared decision-making, and healing began to emerge. The most significant of these was Deep Collaboration.

Deep Collaboration: Since its conception, most of CFI's work has been working alongside First Nations communities. We saw firsthand that collaborative practice in Australia needed to become better at collaborating across cultures. Building on the practice and stories coauthored in the 2014 book [Lost Conversations](#), Liz Skelton and Grant Paulson convened conversations, dialogue and workshops to test appetite for capacity building in working across and shifting the power dynamics in collaborations with First Nations and other Australians. Mark Yettica Paulson joined Liz in 2019 to lead the development of a practice we now call Deep Collaboration. The practice draws on the combination of decades of experience working in

cross-cultural facilitation and leadership development and years of work working with skilled practitioners, collating resources and codifying the process. The codified practice was made available in the open source [Deep Collaboration](#) platform and the design and delivery of public and tailored learning programs. The practice is now integrated into CFI's work with First Nations collaborations with a pool of practitioners supported to deliver the practice nationally.

Chapter 5: transitioning leadership

By 2020, Liz and Kerry had been leading CFI for 8 years and we knew it was time for different leadership to take CFI forward. We spent two years preparing for leadership transition by solidifying CFI as a leading intermediary and practice centre for collaborative systems change, and undertaking an international search for our first CEO. In 2022, we were thrilled to appoint Anna Powell to the role. Anna had been a member of CFI's Network, a strategic partner, and a Practice Lead within the organisation.

With Anna's appointment, Liz became the Chair of CFI and Kerry continued as a Board member. From the Board, Liz and Kerry focused on supporting Anna and developing CFI's next strategy, governance model, and sustainability plan. In 2024, Liz resigned as Chair and left the Board. Kerry remains a Board member.

The story of Collaboration for Impact is an ongoing one of experimentation, evolution, learning, community and impact. Under Anna's leadership, CFI continues to lead and contribute to a maturing field through relentlessly pursuing CFI's original question: *how do we collaborate effectively to address complex challenges in ways that centre those most impacted?*





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