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The Constellation Prototype & Guide

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Introduction

To address urgent human resource and capacity building needs of the non-profit sector in BC, collaboration is key. Effective collaboration across organizations can lead to new ideas, combining of resources, and movement from conversation into action.

The Constellation Collaboration Model is the vision of Tonya and Mark Surman, building on their work with the Centre for Social Innovation (CSI) in Toronto. It is a framework for organizations to come together, create partnerships, and realize mutual objectives. This model has been used in a variety of contexts across Canada as a means of cross-organizational collaboration.

Within this Constellation Prototype toolkit, you will find a description of the original model, the prototype as it has been adapted for the BC non-profit sector, as well as a four-step “getting started” process for implementing the prototype.

The prototype outlined in this toolkit is one means of collaboration amongst many. It is our hope that collaboration across organizations in the non-profit sector in BC continues to grow as we learn to work together towards a more sustainable future.

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What is the Constellation Collaboration Model?

The model arose out the need to help multiple organizations work collaboratively, and to support the collaboration without having to create a new organization to direct how the work should be undertaken.[1] The model helps with the difficulties that may come with collaborative action, such as wide differences of power between stakeholders, a need to sustain interest and do more than talk, and the desire to quickly harness innovations.

The main principles of the model are:

- A clear reason for collaboration exists.
- Collaborative work satisfies the individual needs of participants.
- Governance is light. Work is directed by partially self-governing collaborative teams.
- Structure is light. Teams dissolve when the work is done.
- Leadership is present at the table, meaning action which has impact can be taken.

[1] Surman, Tonya (no date) *Constellation Collaboration: A model for multi-organizational partnership*, Centre for Social Innovation, Toronto.

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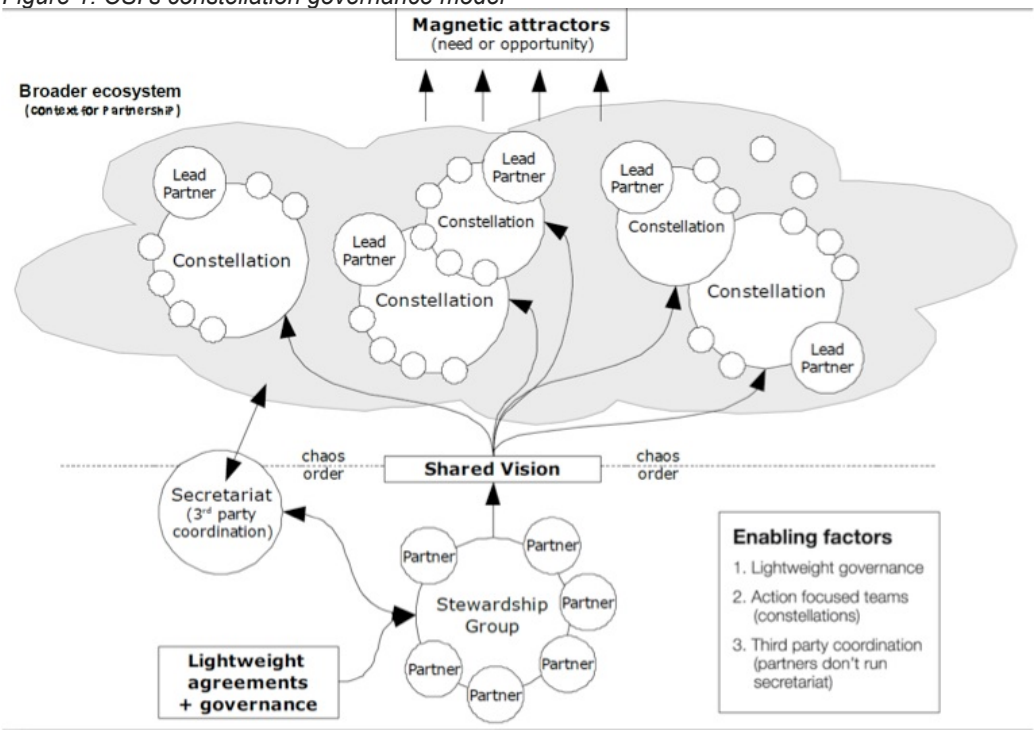
What does the model look like?

Below is a drawing of CSI's constellation collaboration model. This diagram gives you a sense of the original model so you will have a better understanding of the Constellation Prototype and it's adaptation to BC's non-profit sector.

Figure 1: CSI's constellation governance model[2]



At first glance, the model seems complicated. However, it is comprised of four main elements:

1. **Magnetic Attractor**: an overarching theme, issue or idea that makes the network a necessity. The best Magnetic Attractors represent an imminent threat or opportunity. The Magnetic Attractor identifies the common interest between the different Action Teams.

2. Constellation or **Action Team**: people collaborating to address a defined issued related to one Magnetic Attractor work together in a Constellation or Action Team. In particular, Action Teams:
   - Are self-directed, but relate their work to a Magnetic Attractor.
   - May establish a Stewardship Group to enhance oversight or balance power.
   - Are dynamic. Action Teams emerge, do their work, and then dissolve.
   - Are 'action' focused, as opposed to 'talk' focused.

[2] Reproduced from http://timreview.ca/article/183. Original by Surman, T., & Surman, M. 2008 Sep 15. Open Sourcing Social Change: Inside the Constellation Model. *Open Source Business Resource* [Online]

3. **Stewardship Group**: created as and when needed to provide guidance, coordination or oversight to one or more Action Teams. Stewardship Groups are useful when power is unevenly distributed amongst Action Team participants.

4. **Secretariat**: an independent role or organization that maintains and promotes the constellation model. It directly supports Action Teams and Stewardship Groups. The Secretariat also performs duties like coordinating monitoring and evaluation, curating knowledge and work generated by the Action Teams, resolve disputes, connect Action Teams together, and to specialist skills as necessary.

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What are BC's NPS challenges for collaboration?

The NPS in BC experiences the following key challenges for collaboration:

a) Geography – BC's estimated 20,000+ NPS organizations are spread unevenly across a large province.

b) Cost – the vast majority of NPS organizations operate with very limited funding. The cost of travel makes in-person collaboration harder.

c) Resources – while collectively, the 20,000+ NPS organizations have a vast amount of skills and resources, 82% have an operating budget of less than $250,000[3].

d) Size – 18% of the sector accounts for 92% of sector revenue.

e) Competition – the funding environment of the NPS is inherently competitive, making collaboration difficult.

f) Time – with low resources and high community need, NPS staff experience a high work load and have limited time to interact on low value collaboration.

g) Sector-wide human resources issues – leadership, succession planning, organizational structure in response to changing funding environments etc. are issues where broad sector collaboration is necessary to address these issues effectively.

[3] All statistics taken from BC's Government Non Profit Initiative
http://www.nonprofitinitiative.gov.bc.ca/pages/about/facts_and_stats.htm

How does the model address the NPS challenges?

The constellation model addresses the challenges listed above by:

a) Identifying a Magnetic Attractor – the model works by identifying an imminent threat or opportunity.

b) Using time efficiently by focusing on action.

c) Recognizing that the work done in Action Teams has to satisfy the participant's self-interests, or the effort can't be justified.

d) Limiting cost – by only relying on the Secretariat for limited services, a small Secretariat can help initiate a large number of self-directed Action Teams.

e) Dealing with power through Stewardship Groups – by providing a framework to manage the influence of powerful Action Team participants. Less powerful participants are therefore encouraged to engage.

f) Working at a distance – self-directed Action Teams can be created to work regionally or cross-regionally, using a variety of simple virtual platforms for sharing and communication.

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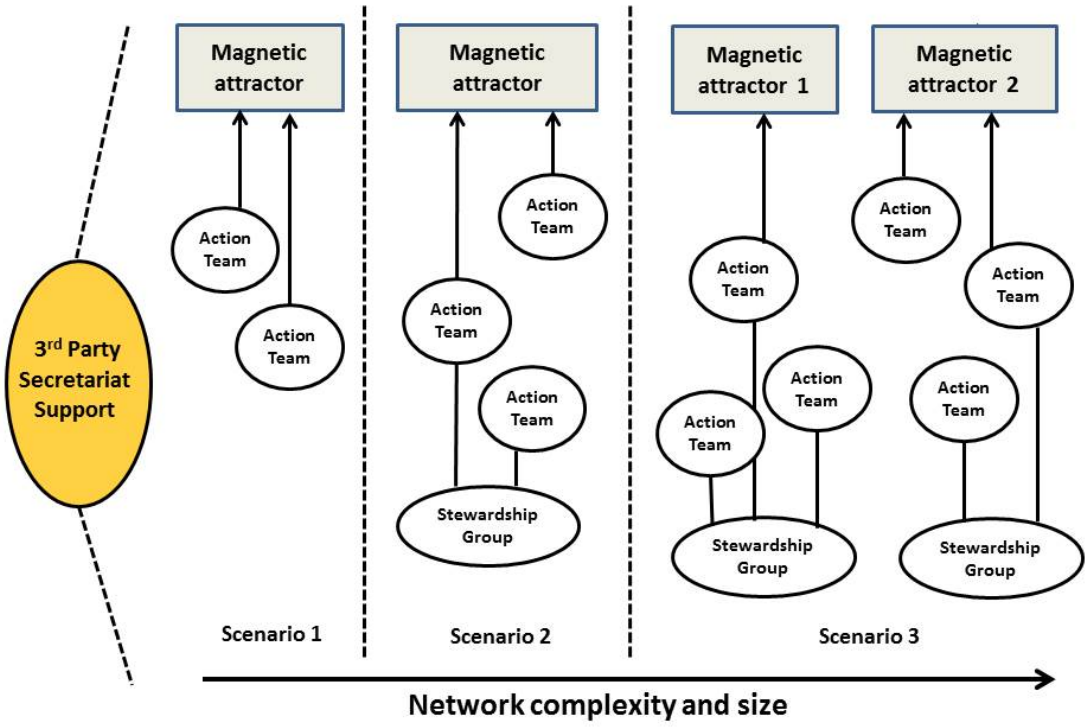
The Prototype: a network-based Collaboration Framework for the BC NPS

The Prototype Framework builds on the CSI Constellation Model for multi-organization collaboration; including an emphasis on action teams, light governance, and 3rd party secretariat support. The Framework also incorporates additional key elements; distributed networks, virtual collaboration, and scalability.

Note: 'Network' refers to all individuals and organizations; Action Teams, Stewardship Groups, Secretariat, and external partners, including government and donors. 'Collaboration' refers simply to "people working together".

Figure 2 outlines a scalable, networked framework to support multi-organizational collaboration in the BC NPS.

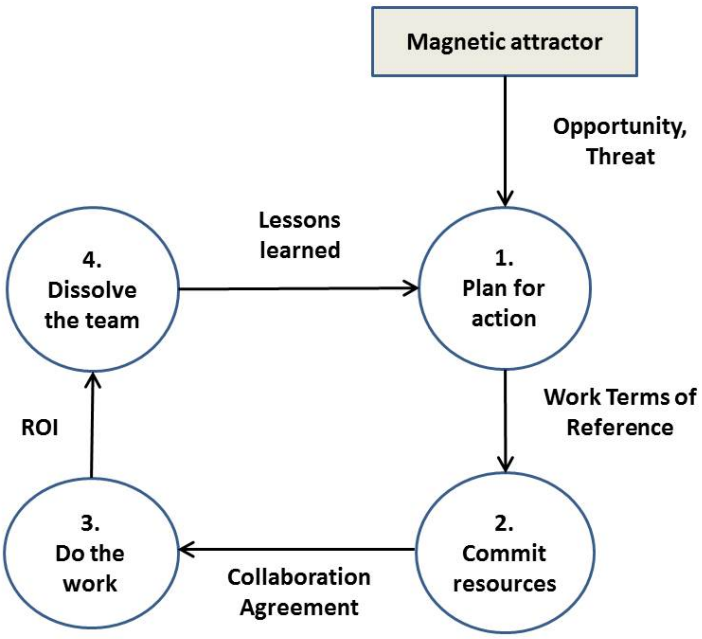
Figure 2: Networked Collaboration Framework for the BC NPS



Responding to "urgent" needs, opportunities or threats that are the Magnetic Attractor, NPS stakeholders collaborate on action, supported by a third party Secretariat.

Action Teams are at the heart of the constellation mindset. As shown in Figure 3; motivated by a Magnetic Attractor, and collaborative leadership, Action Teams emerge and assemble, propose a course of action, commit resources, do the work, and apply lessons learned.

Figure 3: Action Team Lifecycle



The formation of Action Teams is a dynamic process, involving dialogue and collaborative coordination. Coordination, e.g., between Action Teams and Secretariat, is formalized in a Collaboration Agreement. Collaborative leadership is required to align people, intent and action, guided by a shared vision.

Action Teams form and orient around a Magnetic Attractor. Yet, action flows from self-interest; “little will happen without energy and passion”. A four-step implementation process for starting up an Action Team, and the questions that need to be asked can be found below. An Action Team may dissolve once their work is done.

The Stewardship Group is optional. In some cases, a coordinating Stewardship Group may emerge, to help address the complexity of the challenge; e.g., bridge multi-stakeholder relationships and interests.

How does the network develop and communicate?

The Secretariat acts as network curator, connecting network members to each other. The Secretariat assists with ‘linking the thinking’, content distribution, network ‘cheerleading’, communications (e.g., via e-newsletter), content distribution (e.g., ‘how-to’ guides), e-learning (e.g., webinars), event management (e.g., workshops, meet-ups), and monitoring and reporting on network activity.

As the network grows, the Secretariat might also consider taking on a community manager role; a more involved and nuanced approach to community/network development. A typical community manager role includes handling relationship issues between community/network members, moderating online discussion forums and social media accounts, and communicating the community 'brand'.

The initial focus of the Secretariat should be on network development, not on community or community-of-practice development, which demand more attention and resources. Secretariat support could be scaled up, as resources permit.

How do you monitor and evaluate the Framework?

The Secretariat will play a central role negotiating, building and coordinating the monitoring and evaluation process.

The key questions that monitoring and evaluation should answer include:

- How 'magnetic' is the Magnetic Attractor?
- How do the Action Teams find **value** in working together?
- How will the work of the Action Teams **contribute** to solutions for problems?
- How enabling is the Framework environment?
- How well is the Secretariat performing key functions?
- How well is the governance structure operating?

Also, our evaluation section on StepUpBC.ca can help you to further evaluate the process.

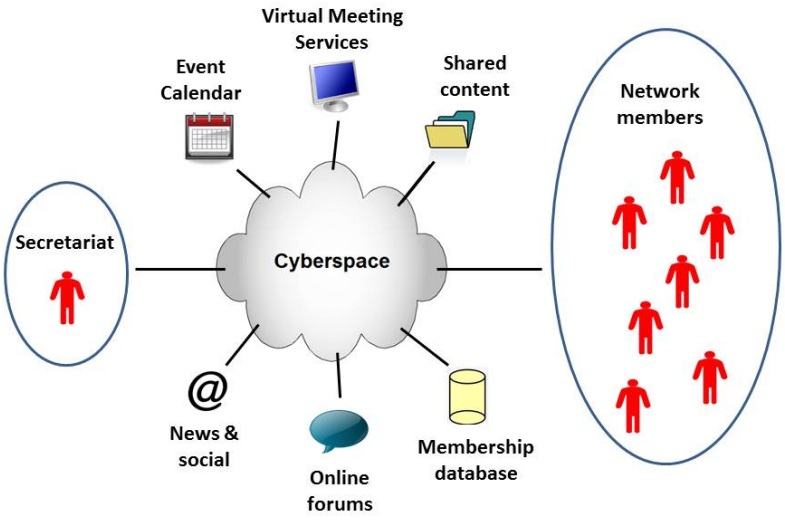
How would virtual collaboration work?

Virtual collaboration offers an opportunity to:

- further stakeholder relationships
- conduct conversations
- achieve action in a timely matter

Action Teams would likely work as small groups. Figure 4 provides a framework for virtual groups within a networked environment.

Figure 4: Virtual Collaboration Framework



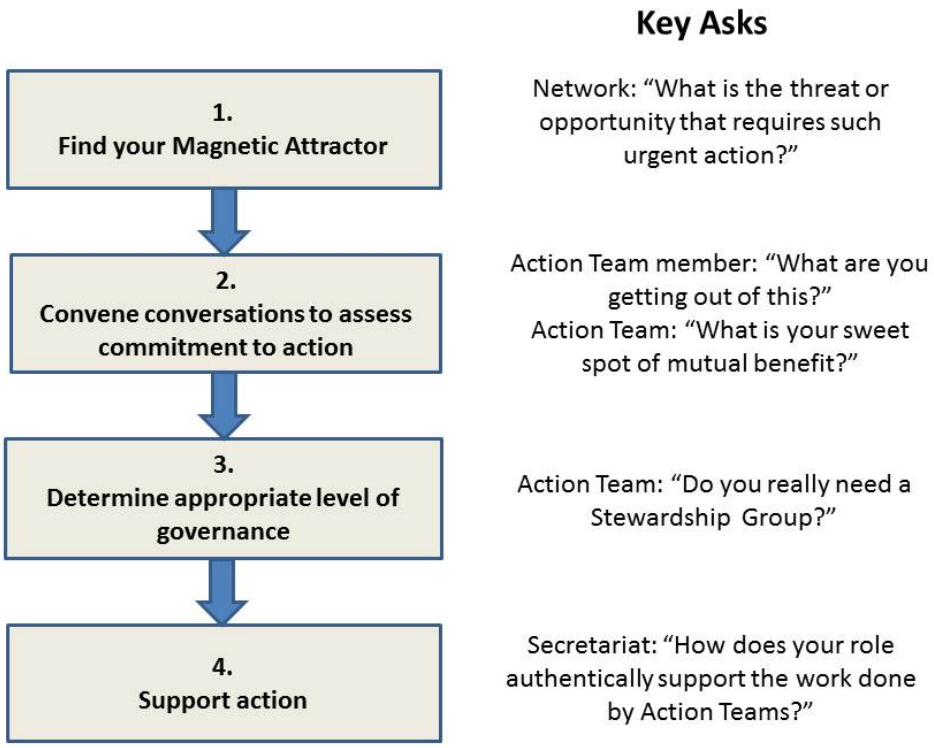
The shared virtual calendar, meeting services, file management, and news/social elements are relatively easy to implement, and at minimal cost. The most difficult elements to implement are online forums and a membership database. These elements are more complex, and require strategic intention and resources, to implement and sustain.

Getting started: a four-step implementation process

It's important to understand how you would start implementing the framework should you find it a suitable method for collaboration.

Figure 4 is a quick overview of a suggested four-step implementation process to get the model started, and below is a description for each of the steps in the process.

Figure 4: Getting Started - Implementation Process



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Step 1: Find your Magnetic Attractor

The Big Network Question
"What is the real threat or opportunity that makes this network absolutely necessary?"
Answer that, and you have a Magnetic Attractor.

There needs to be a compelling reason for the network to exist. A constellation model can be used to address human resource and labour market needs by identifying threats or opportunities to the sector. Examples have been suggested that include:

- Lack of recruitment and retention of skilled workers.
- Leadership gaps as current CEO's and ED's reach retirement age.
- Changing nature of roles within organizations, resulting from emerging workforce expectations and evolving funding landscape.

An environmental scan can be done to identify human resource issues that will have broad impact or appeal. The scan needs to identify one of the following:

- Imminent threats that could impact the ability of the NPS to operate. For example, an above average percentage of executive leaders leaving their positions in the next 5-10 years with no succession planning or emerging leaders to take their place.

- 'Unmissable' opportunities. For example, large pools of emerging funding or social movements provide excellent incentives.

It may be desirable to bring key thinkers together to highlight pool knowledge or decide how to create an opportunity. However it is accomplished, a strong Magnetic Attractor inspires the right people to get involved.

Step 2: Convene conversations to assess commitment to action

The Big Action Team Question
"What am I getting out of this?"
Help people answer that, and you know why people will agree to collaborate in Action Teams.

Once an example of a Magnetic Attractor has been agreed upon, it is time to engage a wider audience. This could happen through a variety of means and depends on the timescale available (i.e. how imminent is the threat or opportunity):

- An event or series of regional events.
- A process that researches opinions regarding the Magnetic Attractor.
- A call to action with a clear output that addresses the Magnetic Attractor.
- A mix of all of the above. More entry points increases engagement.

The engagement can be linked to other network building strategies that are planned, however it will work best when urgency spurs action. The purpose of the engagement is to:

a) Communicate the Magnetic Attractor.

b) Create an environment where individuals or organizations can express their self-interest in the challenge being faced.

c) Create the possibility of forming groups of individuals or organizations who have expressed a mutual self-interest.

The groups of mutual self-interest can, with guidance, become Action Teams within the model should they show interest in doing so. This can be done via a variety of facilitated methods that allow for self-selection into groups of mutual interest. Online methods could include creating forums. Action Teams are dynamic and as autonomous as possible. Keep in mind, they also need to be 'action-focused'.

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Step 3: Determine appropriate level of governance

The Big Stewardship Group Question
"Why do we think we need a Stewardship Group?"
Answer this, and you will have the governance foundation for the group (i.e. the most important area/item/issue that needs oversight)

Does the constellation model need Stewardship Groups? There is no right answer. The needs of Action Teams inform the necessity of Stewardship Groups. Stewardship Groups "help balance power", but should only be created when needed.

Indicative questions that Stewardship Groups could handle include:

a) Will the direction proposed by an Action Team satisfy the self-interest of all members, as opposed to the loudest or most powerful/resourced member of the Action Team?
b) Is the Action Team staying action-focused and meeting milestones? If not, are they getting bogged down in decisions that could be made at the Stewardship Group level?
c) What work is being done in other Action Teams that could prove mutually beneficial?
d) Are personalities clashing within Action Teams? Can the Stewardship Group help with an appropriate intervention?

The purpose of the role is high level, light governance. With all governance bodies, the Stewardship Group will benefit from a clear mandate and Terms of Reference so that interaction with Action Teams remains strategic, as opposed to operational.

If Stewardship Groups are a necessity, it is advised that the Secretariat plays a role to ensure that the governance fulfills the need within the Action Team without becoming burdensome.

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Step 4: Support action

The Big Secretariat Question
"How does our role support the work done by Action Teams?"
Answer this, and you have a framework for divesting power from the Secretariat to the Action Teams.

Defining the role of Secretariat has intentionally been left last. This reflects the importance of defining a reason to collaborate, and forming Action Teams of mutual self-interest. Once that has happened, and Action Teams and Stewardship Groups have defined their purpose and mandate, they should ask themselves:

1. What support do we need to do the work? (e.g. conference call communication options)
2. What can we do for ourselves within the group? (e.g. identify different platforms like Skype)
3. What are we unable to do within the group? (e.g. organize training on the use of Skype)

The goal is to leave as much power and autonomy in the Action Team as possible, while ensuring that the Action Team doesn't disappear because no one could organize basic logistics such as booking a meeting room.

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Final thoughts on the Collaboration Framework

The Constellation model offers a realistic framework for broad organizational collaboration across the diverse and geographically separated landscape of British Columbia. It addresses the problem of how to harness, energize or mobilize the thousands of NPS organizations across the province, and encourage the development of a professional and effective workforce across the sector.

Key to the concept is identifying a Magnetic Attractor. Without a strong Magnetic Attractor, it may be better to pursue other network collaborative concepts that place the Secretariat more in the driver seat. In those cases, the Secretariat plays a fundamental role creating the incentive for collaboration, either by granting funding to the working groups, or by acting as conduits to power, such as government ministries or major donors.

It is our hope that this model, as well as other collaborative models, will continue to build a bright more sustainable future for the non-profit sector in BC.

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About StepUp BC

The non-profit sector contributes as much to this province as traditional sectors such as construction, mining and agriculture—and its greatest resource is its people.

StepUp BC supports British Columbia's non-profit sector in finding creative solutions for attracting, retaining and developing the talent it needs to thrive.

We focus on six key areas:

Developing existing talent. We provide a range of strategies to help non-profit organizations maximize their existing talent.

Recruiting new talent. We help potential candidates see the exciting opportunities a career in the non-profit sector offers.

Preparing for leadership succession. We provide guidance on formal succession planning and long-term sustainability.

Increasing workforce diversity. We support improved representation through greater gender, age, ethnic and cultural diversity.

Ensuring employee satisfaction. We promote the appreciation, recognition and development of varied skill sets.

Telling a new story. We're changing perceptions by spotlighting the non-profit sector as a catalyst for revitalization and growth.

Whether you are leading a non-profit organization, working for one or considering the non-profit sector as a career choice, StepUp BC can connect you to the tools and information you need to succeed.

Learn more at StepUpBC.ca

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Funding provided through the Canada-British Columbia Labour Market Development Agreement