**Aligned Actions**

**Quote:**

“For effective change in a complex system, you need to find ways to constructively involve everyone who is impacted. This is because in a complex environment if you are impacted, you exert influence.” Seth Kahan [Kahan, S., [The Power to Convene and Set Context](https://www.fastcompany.com/1061235/power-convene-and-set-context), Fast Company, October 2008].

**Intro:**

Aligning public and private sector commitments is a specific iteration of collaboration between the Federal government and outside entities. While not rising to the level of formal partnership, commitment-generating devices like convenings and calls to action can spur an “all hands on deck” approach to catalyzing societal advancements. In particular, the Administration has a unique vantage point and the potent ability to act as an “impatient convener” [Chopra, A., *Innovative State,* Grove/Atlantic, Inc, 2016,p. 88]. A convening can be defined as leaders engaging with all sectors – public, private, non-profit, citizens, and others- to develop effective, lasting solutions to public problems that go beyond what any sector could achieve on its own.[“[Public Solutions](http://www.kitchentable.org/sites/ktd/files/documents/Public%20Solutions%20System.pdf),” Policy Consensus Initiative] By convening interested parties and innovative thinkers, it’s possible to launch high-impact multi-sector stakeholder collaborations involving companies, foundations, nonprofits, investors, researchers, regional initiatives, and skilled volunteers. [Collective impact](http://collectiveimpactforum.org/resources/collective-impact-principles-practice) principles are often employed by conveners to bring various stakeholders from multiple perspectives together at these gatherings, to broker partnerships, solicit pledges, and support a central call to action for which they have all been called together.

**Why:**

Aligning public and private sector commitments is an innovative tool for spurring collective, transformational change. The Federal government is uniquely positioned to summon multiple stakeholders, and put out clarion calls to action on issues at inflection points for change, adoption, or scale in the country, elevate an issue’s national profile from talk to action. Through high-level engagement, public officials can align executive action with specific commitments offered up by the private sector. As former US CTO Aneesh Chopra sees it, it’s an approach that leads “through coordination and collaboration, rather than fiat.” [Chopra, A., *Innovative State,* Grove/Atlantic, Inc, 2016,p. 134]. Moreover, the Federal government has already used convening tools like calls to action and pledges to catalyze societal advancements and target specific issues like insourcing American jobs and solving the global refugee crisis.

**How:**

In this approach, the White House uses its platform to call for action and elevate the visibility of external efforts that are aligned with the Administration’s goals and interests – but there is no formal partnership mechanism. Instead, external organizations respond to the president’s call-to-action, organically building their own coalitions to make financial and in-kind commitments that are aligned with achieving the president’s goal. This has been successfully demonstrated by initiatives like [BRAIN](https://www.braininitiative.nih.gov/?AspxAutoDetectCookieSupport=1) and [100Kin10](https://100kin10.org/). Convenings can be used to bring together stakeholders, and encourage them to cooperate in deliberate acts of transformation. Convenings allow for agenda-setting and open conversation about the desired goal and objectives, among all participants. They create a space for open and transparent discussion and can build trust by creating a common understanding of goals and objectives all participants agree to work towards. External issue-focused organizations often also play an essential role in providing support for the implementation of commitments, complementing the role that the White House and agencies are able to play as convener.

**Five Conditions of Collective Impact** [Collective Impact Forum, [“Collective Impact Principles of Practice”](https://collectiveimpactforum.org/resources/collective-impact-principles-practice), FSG and the Aspen Institute]. 

* ***Common Agenda***: All participants have a shared vision for change that includes a common understanding of the problem and a joint approach to solving the problem through agreed-upon actions.
* ***Shared Measurement***: Agreement on the ways success will be measured and reported, with a short list of common indicators identified and used across all participating organizations for learning and improvement.
* ***Mutually Reinforcing Activities***: Engagement of a diverse set of stakeholders, typically across sectors, coordinating a set of differentiated activities through a mutually reinforcing plan of action.
* ***Continuous Communication***: Frequent and structured open communication across the many players to build trust, assure mutual objectives, and create common motivation.
* ***Backbone Support***: Ongoing support by independent, funded staff dedicated to the initiative, including guiding the initiative’s vision and strategy, supporting aligned activities, establishing shared measurement practices, building public will, advancing policy, and mobilizing funding. Backbone staff can all sit within a single organization, or they can have different roles housed in multiple organizations.

**Case Study:**

[**BRAIN Initiative**](http://www.braininitiative.org/)

*[case derived from Kalil, T., phone interview with Policy Design Lab, August 1, 2016 and Chun, M. and Martin, C., phone interview with Policy Design Lab, August 11, 2016]*

**Summary:**

The [BRAIN Initiative](http://www.braininitiative.org/) -- Brain Research through Advancing Innovative Neurotechnologies -- was unveiled in April 2013 as a multi-agency Grand Challenge [crosslink GC]. The main goal was “To accelerate development of new technologies that advance understanding of the brain, [thereby] enabling researchers to produce dynamic pictures of the brain that show how individual brain cells and complex neural circuits interact at the speed of thought” [“[A Strategy for American Innovation](https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/strategy_for_american_innovation_october_2015.pdf)”, National Economic Council and Office of Science and Technology Policy, October 2015].The BRAIN Initiative brings the scientific community together with Federal and private funding partners to advance progress. The BRAIN Initiative exemplifies a complex, multi-pronged issue best addressed by a “whole-of-government” approach with widespread agency coordination in conjunction with significant private investment: Since its launch in April 2013, five Federal agencies have invested in the effort, with the Intelligence Advanced Research Projects Activity (IARPA) joining the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), the National Institutes of Health (NIH), the National Science Foundation (NSF), and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). [Kalil, T., phone interview with Policy Design Lab, August 1, 2016]

**The call to action**

The launch of the BRAIN Initiative began with a single question – “What do you believe are the moonshots of the 21st century?” -- that former Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP) deputy director Tom Kalil asked of the [The Kavli Foundation](http://www.kavlifoundation.org/). [Kalil, T., phone interview with Policy Design Lab, August 1, 2016] Neuroscience research is one of the foundation’s priorities. Having witnessed a two to three year lag time before comprehensive reports would reach their desks, White House leadership wanted to directly engage with the scientific community; “We needed to hear those voices as clearly as possible,” said Tom Kalil. [Kalil, T., phone interview with Policy Design Lab, August 1, 2016] Dr. Miyoung Chun, Vice President of science programs at Kavli, was an enthusiastic collaborator, agreeing that “Science is very dynamic; the frontier of science is not two years ago; it’s today.” [Chun, M., phone interview with Policy Design Lab, August 11, 2016]

**How the collaboration developed:**

After the initial conversation between Kalil and Kavli, the foundation kept an eye out for possible answers to the moonshot question. At a [September 2011 meeting](http://www.kavlifoundation.org/about-brain-activity-map-project) between the [Kavli Foundation, Allen Institute, and Gatsby Foundatio](http://www.braininitiative.org/milestones/)n, the seed of an idea emerged that Dr. Chun shared with OSTP. [Martin, C., Personal communication with Policy Design Lab, December 20, 2016]. From there, a workshop was held to invite ideas from top scientists and scope out an initiative that would focus on brain research. Kavli convened top experts from a broad spectrum of physical sciences to identify the key obstacles preventing scientific advancement in areas of brain research. At the convening, a shared understanding emerged about key obstacles stalling progress. Neuroscientists observed how far they were from a theory about how a brain encodes and processes information, focusing on the idea of “missing middle” in what could be observed of the entire neural circuit in real-time. From reflecting on how the field had advanced in the past, it was clear that new tools and new methods had been essential for answering frontier challenges. [Kalil, T., phone interview with Policy Design Lab, August 1, 2016]

Kavli reported back to the White House a strong, genuine interest in the research community for further exploration. “From a foundation’s perspective, we thought, ‘This is just so unbelievable that the White House is eager to hear actual voices of individual scientists,” recalled Dr. Chun. [Chun, M., phone interview with Policy Design Lab, August 11, 2016]

It took over 18 months to align all the pieces necessary to realize the collaboration, culminating in Congressional approval for increased funding in December 2015 [Nather, D., “[It’s Official: The NIH Budget is Getting an Extra $2 Billion](https://www.statnews.com/2015/12/18/nih-increase-congress-vote/)”, STAT, December 2015] During the lengthy process – fraught with uncertainty – Kavli acted as the “constant convener and the glue” for the scientific community. [Chun, M., phone interview with Policy Design Lab, August 11, 2016] Within government, OSTP coordinated prospective Federal funding agencies. Funding agencies worked together closely in the development and launch of the initiative, with NIH playing a key leadership role. [Kalil, T., phone interview with Policy Design Lab, August 1, 2016] At the outset, expectations were clearly managed; the White House emphasized realism instead of over-promising, with clear communication that through the collaborative process, the articulation of the end goal could shift. Concerted effort went into conveying to outside partners how Federal processes worked to outside partners. Clear lines were drawn for potential conflicts of interest, for example, between Federal funding agencies and scientists who would potentially benefit from funding decisions. [Chun, M., phone interview with Policy Design Lab, August 11, 2016]

The scientific community – about 150 scientists – had its patience tested through the long process, particularly given the uncertain outcome. But they remain engaged in multiple gatherings during that time period because of a shared, collective belief in could be achieved: “The initiative was possible because everyone believed, each one of them, that they were servicing their time and effort for something much greater than what they were doing individually,” Dr. Chun added. [Chun, M., phone interview with Policy Design Lab, August 11, 2016]

**Impact:**

"BRAIN will generate revolutionary new tools to measure the brain activities in thousands to millions of neurons in order to produce a general theory of the brain," Dr. Chun asserts. "We want to understand how we reason, how we memorize, how we learn, how we move, how our emotions work. These abilities define us. And yet we hardly understand any of it” [Pontin, J., “[Interview with BRAIN Project Pioneer: Miyoung Chun](https://www.technologyreview.com/s/513476/interview-with-brain-project-pioneer-miyoung-chun/)”, MIT Technology Review, April 2013]. Three years into the initiative, there has been **“**an unbelievable rate of tangible scientific achievement,” Dr. Chun says. Hundreds of [papers](http://www.braininitiative.org/resources/) have already been published as a result, and new methods and tools have already been developed. In July 2016, researchers announced they had discovered nearly 100 previously unknown areas of the brain, and published a “spectacular” [new map of the brain](http://www.nature.com/articles/doi:10.1038/nature18933) hailed as “an unprecedented glimpse into the machinery of the human mind” [Zimmer, C., “[Updated Brain Map Identifies Nearly 100 New Regions](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/21/science/human-connectome-brain-map.html)”, New York Times, July 2016].

“The President’s 2016 Budget includes over $300 million to support the BRAIN Initiative, with investments from the National Institutes of Health, the National Science Foundation, the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, the Intelligence Advanced Research Projects Activity, and the Food and Drug Administration. The initiative also catalyzed additional funding across the network. The private sector is also making commitments of hundreds of millions of dollars to support the BRAIN Initiative” [“[A Strategy for American Innovation](https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/strategy_for_american_innovation_october_2015.pdf)”, National Economic Council and Office of Science and Technology Policy, October 2015]. “Major foundations and private research institutions, including the Howard Hughes Medical Institute, Allen Institute for Brain Science, and the Kavli Foundation, as well as patient advocacy organizations and universities have committed over $240 million to the BRAIN Initiative. In addition, members of the National Photonics Initiative and other companies such as GE, GlaxoSmithKline and Inscopix have joined this effort through commitments of more than $30 million in research and development investments” [“[Obama Administration Proposes Over $300 Million in Funding for The BRAIN Initiative](https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/microsites/ostp/brain_initiative_fy16_fact_sheet_ostp.pdf)”, White House Office of Science and Technology Policy, February 2015.]

**Key learning insights**:

* Choose the “right problem” at the “right time” [crosslink problem definition content]
* Strong leadership, combined with deep, genuine high-level engagement by members
* Inter-agency cooperation can be essential for fully activated engagement
* Convening is a shared power; sharing the credit augments that power

**Right problem, right time**

At the outset, problem definition is foundational for success. By selecting a problem that will resonate with a range of stakeholders, it inspires a wide range of engagement from individuals and organizations.

**Strong leadership, combined with deep, genuine high-level engagement by members**

Deep, sustained engagement from the White House was essential in realizing the collaboration, Kavli explains; “Tom Kalil really brought the right leaders at the right time,” Dr. Chun says. “Scientists could never have accomplished this on their own.” [Chun, M., phone interview with Policy Design Lab, August 11, 2016] Kavli firmly emphasizes its own role as a neutral, independent mediator between government and the scientific community, noting that many collaborators were proactive in pushing the initiative forward: “Scientists stepped up. Funders stepped up. White House leadership stepped up. […] We like to think that we stepped up, in our own way -- but the fact is that everyone stepped up.” [Chun, M., phone interview with Policy Design Lab, August 11, 2016] The NIH allocated $46 million in 2014 and $81.4 million in 2015, almost doubling its funding [“[About Us- Brain Research Through Advancing Innovative Neurotechnologies (BRAIN)](https://braininitiative.nih.gov/about/index.htm)”, National Institutes of Health, November 2015]. As previously stated, private-sector organizations including foundations, universities, and research institutions have already committed over $240 million.

**Inter-agency cooperation can be essential for fully activated engagement**

The BRAIN initiative began with the participation of three agencies (NIH, NSF, DARPA) and has since worked with several others, including IARPA and FDA. “What’s interesting is that because they have different missions, they were able to tackle different parts of the problem,” observes Tom Kalil. [Kalil, T., phone interview with Policy Design Lab, August 1, 2016] NIH brought its expertise to bear on fundamental research and elements related to human health, whereas DARPA focused on its strength – high-risk, high-return research – to immediately respond to aspects of the BRAIN Initiative that might help veterans. The NSF, on the other hand, focuses its BRAIN initiative efforts on its own core competencies: integrative and interdisciplinary research; new theories, computation models, and analytical tools that will guide research questions and synthesize experimental data; and the development of innovative technologies and data infrastructure required to handle the large scale datasets resulting from this research [“[Obama Administration Proposes Over $300 Million in Funding for The BRAIN Initiative](https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/microsites/ostp/brain_initiative_fy16_fact_sheet_ostp.pdf)”, White House Office of Science and Technology Policy, February 2015.] By concentrating on agency-specific strengths, and facilitating communication amongst agencies, the BRAIN initiative efficiently promotes full participation and expansion.

**Sharing credit augments the power of convening**

“Spreading the credit around when something succeeds is very powerful,” observes Dr. Chun. [Chun, M., phone interview with Policy Design Lab, August 11, 2016] The White House consciously attributed progress to partners in the collective group effort, making sure to involve scientists in announcement events. The Kavli Foundation notes that the continued credit-sharing after initial successes were “tremendously reassuring,” and continued to build trust within the collaborative partnership. . [Chun, M., phone interview with Policy Design Lab, August 11, 2016]

**Read more**:

[The 2014 call to action](https://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2014/02/24/white-house-call-action-advance-brain-initiative)

[Interview with BRAIN project pioneer, Dr. Miyoung Chun](https://www.technologyreview.com/s/513476/interview-with-brain-project-pioneer-miyoung-chun/)

[February 2016 fact sheet on BRAIN Initiative activities](https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/microsites/ostp/brain_initiative_fy16_fact_sheet_ostp.pdf)

[May 2016 report to the Committees on the activities of the Interagency Working Group on Neuroscience (IWGN)](https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/microsites/ostp/NSTC/iwgn_congressional_report_final.pdf)

[BRAIN Initiative milestone map: Key moments in brain research](http://www.braininitiative.org/milestones/)

**Next Steps/Checklist:**

**Relevant Policies:**

**Additional Resources:**