



COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP FOR COMMUNITY CHANGE THE ESSENTIAL ROLE OF THE COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION

It is often in the midst of change projects that organizations and communities need the most support.

INTRODUCTION

Approaches to leadership for community change are evolving. People who believe that change needs to be owned by local communities are growing new leadership. Those who believe leadership needs to reflect more fully the range of voices and perspectives of the community, are cultivating leadership that is more inclusive of those previously left out. People who know we need to address the structures that perpetuate inequities and injustice are crossing boundaries to form relationships capable of collective action. All of these efforts are part of creating collective leadership that advances positive community change.

Over the last several years, through grants by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, 11 communities have supported each other in learning about cultivating collective leadership for community change. They are working across boundaries of race, class, age and citizenship, among others, to make their communities healthier and more just. They are tapping into diverse sources of wisdom embedded in community members not normally engaged in leadership.

As the communities involved in the Kellogg Leadership for Community Change (KLCC) initiative worked on local challenges, they learned how to more effectively organize their collective talents and passions to make a difference. One of the prominent findings of the KLCC initiative was that **local community-based organizations play a pivotal role** in holding the collective leadership and change process.

This paper identifies the role of community-based organizations in ensuring that needed capacity is available at the right moments to impact community change. It describes the capacities an organization needs when using collective leadership, factors in organizational readiness, the dilemma of small organizations, and the ways organizations can renew and continue building capacity. These lessons can help those working on community change, whether they are the individuals and organizations working in communities or the foundations and government entities who want to help them.

HOLDING THE WORK – THE ROLE OF A SPONSORING ORGANIZATION

Believing in collective approaches to leadership in communities affects the way community-based organizations operate and shifts the approach to community change. It moves the paradigm from a few people knowing what to do and recruiting others to a model in which people connect around shared purpose and passions and discover solutions together. It becomes more than mobilizing people to carry out a campaign. It engages people to be responsible for stewardship of their community for the long term. The collective leadership approach is less top down and more networked.

Collective leadership brings a diverse group together to tap into the full range of community wisdom. It looks for good ideas, wherever they come from, and then engages the group in building the capacity to carry out those ideas. All of the participants need to have a sense of the whole and find ways to link individual passions and ideas to the larger purpose. As people build their capacity and connections, what starts out as a project becomes a way of life.

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To cultivate leadership that is collective, organizations need the capacity to:

1. GATHER PEOPLE FROM THE COMMUNITY TO WORK ON AN ISSUE

Attracting people with different community perspectives can stretch an organization to look beyond its current constituents. To do this, an organization needs to have credibility so people in the community trust how they work with others. For instance, an organizing/advocacy group in Buffalo New York was good at attracting community activists. To work on education issues, they invited people knowledgeable about education but limited in activism experience. This additional perspective led to trying different approaches beyond advocacy and the group successfully coordinated efforts to land a multi-million-dollar after-school program.

2. GROUND THE WORK IN THE CULTURE, HISTORY AND EXPERIENCE OF THE COMMUNITY

People who join in collective leadership for community change need to know their local context and how change is done in that place. In Montana, an initiative sponsored by Salish Kootenai College, brought together Native Americans and Whites to improve local schools for the benefit of all their children. Race played a prominent role in dividing groups into parallel lives. It was important to understand the Native American experience in that community. Their tribal lands had been opened up to Whites for homesteading in the early 1900s. Following that, boarding schools sought to extinguish Native culture into the mid 1900s. Native Americans in this community initiative brought deep suspicion of educational institutions. Taking time to

understand how this history was showing up in current times helped the larger group build deeper relationships. They knew they had to help families, particularly Native Americans, feel safe in working with the schools.

3. PROVIDE SPACE FOR DIFFICULT COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS AND HELP PEOPLE DEAL WITH TENSIONS AND CONFLICT IN POSITIVE WAYS

Making crucial shifts in how the community works together requires that people have honest discussions about the issues that are most divisive. The issues of disparity and injustice can bring out deep emotions. An organization hosting the collective work must seek to become a model of openness, safety, belonging and non-judgment.

When KLCC host organizations came to the brink of difficult conversations and stayed in them, their work shifted in good ways. These conversations were about disparities around such divides as race, age and class. In the segregated city of Buffalo, they learned to collaborate across race. In the Lummi tribe, they learned to incorporate youth voice into tribal processes organized for elders and adults. In Minneapolis, communities of color that often competed over resources, learned to build coalitions to advance similar goals.

4. ALIGN THE CHANGE GOALS OF THE COMMUNITY WITH THE MISSION OF THE AGENCY

In Chelsea, Massachusetts, Roca is an organization good at helping youth move away from the challenges of the streets to more promising pathways for education and jobs. Though they work with many immigrant youth, the agency is not primarily dedicated to immigrant education. In KLCC, they brought together youth and adults to advance just communities. This occurred during a period of heightened immigration raids in the community that had the devastating effect of splitting families — separating parents and young children. One group worked on educating immigrants about their legal rights if stopped by an immigration official. This effort had initial success and could have foundered if the agency had not incorporated the work into its overall institutional agenda. As the agency took more responsibility for this change agenda, the number of people trained in knowing their rights increased dramatically.

5. CONTINUOUSLY CULTIVATE NEW WAVES OF COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP AMONG COMMUNITY MEMBERS

People engaged in community change work live demanding lives. In addition to supporting themselves and their families, they contribute their time, passion and talents to making the community better. There is a lot of fluidity in this work. People come and go. Some because they attend college and others because they take on a new job, move, or need to attend to their families. Such fluidity calls for an entity that can reliably help new volunteers develop collective leadership skills.

In Benton Harbor, Michigan a Boys and Girls Club has transformed their traditional model of youth leadership development into a model of youth and adults working as partners to improve their community. At the end of each year, some of the youth

head to college. The Club continues to create a pathway for the next generation of youth to learn the leadership skills that help them effectively partner with adults in the community on such issues as AIDS education, civic engagement in city elections, and tutoring/college preparation. The Boys and Girls Club has effectively become a change organization and is no longer solely a youth development group.

Collective leadership for change takes time and requires organizations with staying power and stability.

6. DEVELOP PARTNERSHIPS TO MORE BROADLY HOLD THE WORK

Each community organization adds a specific capability and value to improving the community. While organizations can add new capacities, collective leadership suggests one prominent way to build capacity is through partnerships. It is helpful to look at the change issue and develop a picture of the whole system surrounding that issue. Who has a similar approach? Who is doing work your agency does not do? This helps organizations determine who they need to partner with to make progress on the issue.

In Minneapolis, Migizi Communications is working to improve the lives of urban Native Americans. Achieving educational equity for Native American students is a prominent issue. Migizi provides alternative approaches to educating Native American high school students. They wanted to improve the success of the public schools in educating Native American Youth, so they developed partnerships with organizations that had other strengths. They collaborated with the Organizers Apprentice Program, an organization that conducts a state report card on racial equity in public policy. This group did specific work to analyze the impact of the school district in educating youth of color. By partnering, they were able to make a case and build agreements with the school district governing how schools would work with Native American families and students. The partnerships have increase Migizi's reach and impact.

READINESS OF THE HOST AGENCY FOR COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP

Community-based organizations have varying levels of readiness to foster collective leadership capable of community change. This work takes time and requires organizations with staying power and stability. Organizations need a certain level of health to be able to carry out this work. In challenging economic times, when many in the nonprofit world experience funding instability, organizations need to adapt their fund raising and try different ways to build revenue flows.

Money is not the only route to stability. At KLCC sites, people committed to strengthening their communities as a way of life found creative ways to add capacity. In Montana, a retired educator volunteered over four years to provide group facilitation. In South Texas, two key

leaders became professors. Through them, their universities partnered more directly with community groups to improve the region's education system. Identifying who else in the community is working on the issues you care about helps determine which partnerships will build staying power.

Providing ongoing support for leadership development requires dedicating staff specifically to leadership development and change initiatives. Doing so helps anchor the change work. Project management and communication are specific skill sets needed to advance change work. Community change initiatives are messy processes. Keeping track of the many people and details involved requires

strong management skills. It also helps to have staff that can facilitate group processes and deal effectively with tensions that emerge. While groups engaging in collective leadership eventually share more responsibility for facilitation and action, in the early stages, it is beneficial to have someone hold this role until others are ready to step in. The initial investment in staff capacity pays off in the long run as participants in the collective work develop their skills and can assume more of the role staff played. This is one of the promises of utilizing collective leadership.

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One of the most essential characteristics is for the organization's leadership to be open to learning and to their own transformation. Change organizations are often good at creating transformation in others but less capable of addressing the changes they themselves need to make. In collective leadership, they need to be willing to share power more collectively with those they engage. This openness needs to extend to building truly collaborative partnerships in the community. This is more than finding other organizations to help you do your work. It means holding the larger work together. Each organization involved in KLCC went through their own transformation as they reached out to community members more broadly.

As they worked with youth involved in gangs and other countercultural activities of the streets, Roca used to view other agencies as adversaries. The schools suspended students, essentially dumping them into the streets. The police profiled certain youth and moved them into a criminal justice system that was largely punitive. Over time, they started to have conversations with these other organizations and eventually realized they had similar goals of making the community safe and encouraging people to act responsibly. They shifted from an adversarial stance. This opened up new possibilities for collective action. Youth and police officers worked together to reduce youth violence. Youth and administrators collaborated on developing alternatives to school suspensions. In being open to this transformation, Roca has substantially increased their impact.

DILEMMA OF SMALL ORGANIZATIONS

It is often the communities with the greatest need that have the least organizational capacity. The necessary organizations may not exist or they may be small and struggling. We can't abandon these communities, so we need to learn to work with the organizations that are on the edge.

Small nonprofits are particularly reliant on a few key individuals who hold the organizational knowledge and the big picture. If one of these individuals is absent due to an illness or they decide to leave the organization, the organization can become destabilized. Big Creek People in Action (Big Creek), an organization in West Virginia's coal mining country, held a "wake" at one gathering of KLCC communities. This activity illustrated all the stakeholders of the community who would mourn the organization's absence if it no longer existed. The exercise highlighted outreach strategies the community needed to take to strengthen the organization.

Shortly after this exercise, the Big Creek co-founder's spouse became terminally ill and died. She was absent for an extended period and eventually left the organization. For a while, the organization was in limbo. Fortunately, an outside consultant provided interim managerial support while a long-term staff member, who had great standing in the community and strong organizational knowledge, focused on keeping the programs going. Together, these efforts enabled Big Creek to buy time for the board to make critical decisions about the organization's future.

As the Big Creek example demonstrates, small organizations need to assess the extent to which staffers are collectively holding the work and whether the organizational knowledge resides primarily in one person such as the executive director. Even small organizations can share power and knowledge and do some advance preparation for transitions.

It may be that small organizations are providing crucial lifelines in vulnerable communities. When funders provide resources to support their survival and capacity building, they are making valuable investments to help vulnerable communities avoid being completely overwhelmed.

RENEWING THE ORGANIZATION BY CONTINUALLY GROWING CAPACITY

KLCC offered a range of supporting activities that proved helpful to organizations leading change efforts.

KLCC created a learning community where communities could break their isolation and gather face-to-face with others doing similar work. Participants could meet people who had different backgrounds and contexts but shared similar issues and challenges. As a participant from Big

Creek said to other communities, “You are our window to the world.” For some KLCC participants, this was the first time they had an out-of-county experience.

The gatherings provided the time and space for team reflections from each community. Teams identified their lessons learned and developed plans for next steps. The approaches of other communities stretched their thinking. Additionally, they built strong, caring relationships with other communities that offered inspiration and support.

A national team worked directly with local community facilitators/coaches from all the sites. This team served as critical friends and provided outside perspective to local leadership teams. Periodic visits by the national team helped local leadership take stock of their progress and learning. The main focus of these on-site visits was to facilitate reflection of what was and wasn’t working, identify specific assistance needed, and create next step plans. Sites reported greatly appreciating this time and space for reflection. The visits also provided a way to orient new staff, and help board and community partners understand the potential of collective leadership for their agencies and communities.

Capacity building and technical assistance support for host agencies can increase agency stability and help with key transitions. Each agency has its own needs regarding the capacities they see as important to build in order to be strong and stable for their communities. The KLCC organizations were given funding support and guidance to identify local consultants capable of working on key areas. The types of technical assistance used by sites ranged from helping with executive director succession, developing agency brand, designing communications plans, creating digital storytelling labs, planning fund development, recruiting staff, etc.

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If a community group does not have ready access to these support structures, they can work to attract them. Learning communities can be self-organized and groups can initiate relationships with volunteers who can serve as critical friends. They can also seek support from foundations for specific technical assistance needs.

THE COMMUNITY LEARNING EXCHANGE SUPPORTS CAPACITY BUILDING

For KLCC communities, this kind of change work has become a way of life. As the first phase of work funded by the Foundation ended, the communities came together to create a Community Learning Exchange (CLE). The purpose of the CLE is to allow these organizations to stay connected to advance their own learning and to extend the learning to other communities.

The format is an accessible and affordable three-day exchange hosted by a community to offer their particular approach to community change. Each CLE also offers time for teams from other organizations to develop plans for how they can apply the learning in their own context.

CONCLUSION

In KLCC, we found community organizations to be a critical resource in building a community's capacity to cultivate collective leadership that carried out relevant local change. They can provide a strong platform that attracts community members who want to transform and give back to their communities.

Utilizing collective leadership approaches affects the way organizations operate. Organizations that do this work need to develop the capacity to partner with individuals and organizations in the community. They continually look at what the community needs next, who is doing work in that area, and what approaches they have to offer. They know their own strengths and how to connect to the strengths of others.

They seek out perspectives and ideas from other communities and critical friends to keep their work growing and adapting. Ultimately, they need to stay open to their learning and maintain the flexibility that helps them connect deeply with the community.

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For more information on KLCC and collective leadership or to learn about the Community Learning Exchange, contact the Center for Ethical Leadership at: center@ethicalleadership.org or 206.328.3020. Also visit our Web site at www.ethicalleadership.org.