Further Reflections on Evidence-Based Practice and Leadership Development: Developing Hypotheses and Case Examples

Leadership for What?

Over the past 20 years a set of assumptions have guided leadership development work, the most dominant of which has been a belief that stronger leaders will improve organizational performance which in turn will produce better community results. While improving life for constituents is often identified as a desired result in general, very little attention is paid to how better performing organizations actually produce these results. The focus instead has been on demonstrating which competencies leaders need to run effective organizations. The assumption about the impact of organizations on community outcomes is an extremely important question for the field of organizational capacity-building and not one that we are best positioned to answer. The question we are particularly interested in here is: What leadership strategies promote and support large-scale change that cuts across organizations and involves collective forms of organizing to accomplish results?

One common concern about the nonprofit sector is the problem of fragmentation and the tendency for work to become siloed. We believe that leadership as a collective process can align people, teams, organizations, networks and multi-stakeholder groups across silos to work together on solutions that are more capable of larger scale impact on systems. For this reason our interest in the topic of evidence-based practice and leadership has focused on what we are learning about how to develop and support leadership with a capacity to achieve population level results. Population level results are measurable improvements in well-being among some set of individuals, groups or communities. Population level results are unlikely to be achieved by one leader or organization, rather they require a committed effort across leaders and organizations in a community or region.

Too often in our leadership work there is a gap between our strategies, which focus on individual leaders and organizations, and the population level results we say we want. We believe that more clearly aligning our leadership strategies with the “for what” of our leadership work, is the edge of learning for the field. To move our learning as a field forward we propose to identify a set of hypotheses about how large-scale change is achieved so that we can test and confirm or disconfirm these hypotheses through our leadership practice. We should note, however, that pursuing the development of a stronger evidence base that links leadership strategies to population level results requires a sustained and focused commitment by researchers and
funders, which has rarely happened in the leadership field. Some exceptions are the case examples that we discuss at the end of this report.

**A Sampling of Hypotheses About Leadership Development**

LLC invited its members to participate in a survey that guided them through a process of creating a working hypothesis to make explicit the assumptions and expectations of their leadership program: who is reached, with what supports, and for what purpose. Our premise was that these responses would help LLC better understand what types of assumptions are informing leadership development work, and what level of clarity programs have about the results they seek and how leadership investments relate to those results. Ultimately we hope to encourage and support more programs to develop and test a leadership hypothesis so that they can make more informed decisions about what strategies to use and how to better assess whether they are achieving the long-term results they seek.

Over 50 people responded to the survey. We sorted the hypotheses into several buckets: those that proposed achieving community, field, population, or system level results using a relational strategy or an individual strategy. There were also hypotheses focused on organizational level results or individual level results (which we include in the Appendix A but which we do not address in this report.) There is almost no mention of population level results that are specific, concrete and measurable for a group of people or a community. Community, field, and systems level results are commonly expressed as: improved health in a particular population (community or state), improved conditions or quality of life in communities, a vibrant civil society, or increased equity.

**Relational Leadership Hypothesis**

We identified 18 programs that created a relational leadership hypothesis. In the aggregate these hypotheses can be stated as follows:

*If diverse groups are brought together in a collective leadership process (one that fosters relationships, learning, collaboration, networking, boundary crossing or some combination of these) they will be better able to achieve community, field, population or systems level results.*
The following propositions have emerged from our survey analysis and from our research on empirically supported relational leadership theories about collective leadership.

**Achieving Large-Scale Results**: When groups of people articulate the community, field, or systems level changes they want, they are more likely to pursue relational leadership strategies and are more likely to lead to achieving these results.

**Alignment**: When diverse groups of people and organizations align their efforts around a common purpose (e.g., adopt a shared framing of an issue, connect their resources, create networks, engage in collaborative planning and action), the scale and scope of their collective impact increases.

**Action Learning**: When a group engages in real work together, they learn how to develop practical solutions and work through differences.

In teasing apart these propositions and hypotheses further there are several common elements that are addressed: who, how and what.

- **Who**: There seems to be general agreement that diversity and work across boundaries are essential to produce large-scale change. Some of the hypotheses were explicit, e.g., community members and medical providers; multiple stakeholders in early childhood development within a specific city, young adults, etc. To create a strong hypothesis we believe it is helpful to ask who needs to be engaged to achieve the desired results and to be explicit about why.
• **How:** There were a number of sub-hypotheses offered by survey participants about how to support successful collaboration within groups or use networks. The focus on leadership as a relational process is relatively new and may benefit from creating more specific hypotheses about how to successfully support individuals and groups in coming together to align their actions on behalf of a shared purpose or concern. Our decision making will be strengthened if we can create and test hypotheses that help us to learn more specifically about competencies, processes and vehicles that strengthen relational leadership:
  o What competencies does a group need to take successful action to achieve their goal? Are programs confirming that their curriculum is supporting these competencies and that these competencies are making a difference in the group’s ability to achieve its results?
  o What processes support a group of individuals and organizations to align their efforts towards a common goal, e.g. how are groups being supported in decision-making, group dynamics work, trust building; and what is essential to their success?
  o What forms/containers will best support the group’s work? What do we understand about what forms best connect and support a group to achieve different results and under what conditions, e.g. a network strategy, organizations, communities of learning and practice, coalitions, leadership program convenings?

• **What:** Identifying a specific result or some agreement about measurable indicators of progress helps a group to not only act with purpose but learn from attempts and make adjustments that increase success and sustain commitment. Being able to measure progress requires the collection and use of data. Most of the hypotheses in the survey are vague about what difference their strategies will make. Clarifying outcomes and defining indicators of success will better position the field to learn about what works to make difference.

**Sample Hypotheses that are linking theory and empirical research**

The analysis of survey responses from LLC participants about their work is supportive of and supported by the theories about relational leadership that we referred to in the earlier report and have highlighted again below.

• If a core group of multi-sector, cross agency leaders not only respond to a call to action but also take aligned actions at scope and scale towards a desired result, then population level changes are most likely to occur.
• If you bring the appropriate people together in constructive ways with good information, then they will create authentic visions and strategies for addressing shared concerns of an organization or community.
• If a multi stakeholder group develops the capacity to observe the present with an openness, sense the future and prototype solution then they will be able to creatively solve significant problems.
Individual Leadership Hypothesis

We identified 11 programs that developed a hypothesis that posited a relationship between developing individual leaders and achieving community, field, population or systems level results. In the aggregate these hypotheses can be stated as follows:

If individuals have greater understanding, knowledge, skills, mentoring or other supports they will be better able to contribute to or catalyze community, field, or systems level results.

There were some interesting propositions about how individuals can leverage large-scale change that we want to draw out:

- **Critical mass**: When sufficient numbers of leaders have been trained in a specific geographic area or field, there is a cumulative community or field level impact
- **Catalysts**: When skilled individual leaders (innovators or social entrepreneurs) are identified, supported, and/or developed, they become catalysts or champions for large-scale change.
- **Advocates**: When individual leaders have policy and advocacy skills, their actions are directed towards policy level changes that are more likely to have population level effects.

Although we have chosen to focus on relational leadership theory for the purpose of this investigation of EBP as a methodology for leadership development, we think that these propositions may also warrant further testing. Over the years there has been a lot of discussion about critical mass and tipping points without clear conclusions. One concern about the critical mass argument is that the number of people may not be as important as who is connected and around what purpose. Ashoka and Echoing Green have done a lot of work to support social entrepreneurs and they have important lessons to share with the field about how catalysts and champions are identified and supported. PolicyLink has promoted the importance of policy skills in change, especially the importance of using leadership as a strategy that changes the configuration of who is at policy tables where decisions that affect many lives are made.

**Two Case Examples of Results-Based Leadership Work**

In this section, we share case examples and lessons learned from two leadership initiatives that have formulated leadership hypotheses that are being researched and tested in multiple settings. We highlight these examples to encourage others to consider a more intentional approach to developing an evidence base for their leadership investments. The first is an Education
Leadership initiative that The Wallace Foundation has invested in for over ten years to strengthen principal leadership and improve student achievement; the second is the Leadership in Action Program supported by the Annie E. Casey Foundation to achieve measurable improvements in well-being for children, families and communities.

A fuller write-up of these case examples may be found in Attachments B and C. There are several cross-cutting themes we want to mention.

**Hypothesis testing.** Both initiatives have found it valuable to articulate a testable hypothesis for their work. A hypothesis provides clarity about the focus of the leadership intervention, the key strategies for success and the link to a desired result. In complex leadership initiatives, a hypothesis can be a valuable tool for ensuring that multiple stakeholders share a common understanding and expectation for what the initiative will achieve. A hypothesis is also a valuable guide to inform a research and evaluation strategy.

**Clarity about success measures.** Both initiatives are clear about how to measure the success of their leadership investments. In the case of The Wallace Foundation they have developed performance measures for principals that are evidence-based and correlated with behaviors that are linked to improved teacher performance and student achievement. The LAP program in Maryland and Baltimore tracked changes in the standardized assessment that was used to measure school readiness for children statewide and at the city level.

**Research and data-driven.** Each of these initiatives prioritizes using research to produce evidence about whether the leadership strategy is successful, and what factors contribute to the desired results. In the case of The Wallace Foundation, they have used this data to differentiate grantee investments to appropriately target resources and supports based on performance. Research at one LAP site has shown support for the theory of aligned contributions; future research is planned in different areas around the country that have had varying levels of success to see whether the theory holds true in different contexts.

**What Next?**

To advance our learning and the impact of our leadership work, those of us who are most interested in population level changes need to make our assumptions about what it will take to achieve these changes more explicit. As we do this we can create and refine the hypotheses that have been generated in this report. As an EPB approach suggests, we would then need to look at how these hypotheses can be tested to produce more solid evidence of our ability to predict success in achieving large scale results with specific leadership strategies. We have an opportunity to accelerate our learning if we can draw from our combined experiences to test a set of hypotheses. We can cull through past evaluations to test our assumptions and we can collectively engage in action learning by identifying the evaluation methodologies that would enable us to confirm or disconfirm these hypotheses. This is a large undertaking but one that could strengthen decision making about how to invest in and design leadership approaches that will have a significant impact on the things we care more deeply about.
Attachment A

Leadership Learning Community
Membership Survey on Leadership Program Hypotheses

Community, Field, Population and Systems Level Result (Relational Leadership Development)

- If people understand empowerment as bidirectional and have a basic understanding of change leadership processes, they will seize opportunities to leverage personal power toward making a difference in their organization & community.

- If community teams from different communities break their isolation, are immersed in collective leadership experiences, exchange change strategies and approaches that work in marginalized communities, they will build new relationships capable of changing the systems in their communities.

- If those seeking to create change and exercise leadership understand how to work across boundaries (sectors, ideologies, generations, etc.), then they will be more effective at creating system-level changes to improve the functioning of our communities, institutions, and democratic system.

- If Cape Verdean community members and medical providers (as well as non-Cape Verdean health workers who serve the Cape Verdean community) work together on a coordinated health care project, then there will be positive health outcomes in the Cape Verdean community locally and in Cape Verde.

- If citizens understood and had encouragement to engage in community issues they care deeply about with a higher level of skill our communities would be better.

- If servant leadership as a collective effort works well then it will have a healing effect that will ripple throughout our society.

- If leaders and teams within organizations are more aware of their greatest strengths and challenges and work actively and collaboratively over a period of time to address them they can be much more successful in their efforts to bring change, reduce health inequities, and chief social justice goals.

- If leaders are supported in their work through increasing knowledge, having a kind "reality check" with peers and an on-going relationship with a competent mentor they in turn will be better able to address the complexity of their jobs to improve the health of their respective populations.
• If leaders are in transformative relationships with other leaders who have a shared commitment to health for ALL, then "resources" for community health and well-being are more likely to flow beyond privilege.

Community, Field, Population, Systems Level Results (Relational Leadership Network Strategies)

• If archivists are networked across organizations and issues and have training in communication and advocacy, then they are more likely to have an impact on information policy and funding issues.

• If leaders are networked across issues then they will be better able to share strategies and resources and strengthen their own as well as national efforts for lasting change.

• If mid career people have time to reflect upon their work and network with other professionals and meet with experts, they will form networks that will improve their careers and the field as a whole.

• If leaders form strong networks, then they will collaborate more effectively and join together to create systemic changes to improve the overall quality of life for the populations they serve.

• An effective leadership and networking [strategy is] always useful when it is directly linked with well-being of human being and also produces good outputs.

• If social change agents operate in networks in which the people who will be most effected by the change AND community leaders, then the status quo will be challenged and systemic change can be implemented.

• If organizations and multi-level stakeholders meaningfully engage young people their actions, ideas and impact will be more efficient and effective.

• If clinicians at all levels in the organization have stronger leadership skills (and confidence), they will more effectively lead the countless needed efforts to collaborate in patient care across departments and organizations

• Sub hypothesis about how to support collaboration
  If leaders can self-observe and manage their reactivity, they will collaborate, supervise and manage more effectively ice by generating cutting edge knowledge and seeding collaborative work.
Community, Field, Population, Systems and Field Level Result (Individual Leader Development)

- If we help a diverse group of participants who want to shape the future of the city develop a broader understanding of public issues and policies, give them skills to engage actively and effectively in civic life, connect them to Coro's diverse community of influential alumni THEN they will use these strategies and networks to sustain a lifelong commitment to influence change THEN our public processes and institutions will be more response and accountable to the individuals and communities that comprise them and a broader set of stakeholders will share power, decision making and resources.

- IF instructors, teachers, faculty members in every classroom at every level began to act like the "learning leaders" they in fact are, and IF they made the logical and readily doable distinction between their learning content subject matter (the "what" of their subject matter) and the means they choose to deliver their content (the "learning process elements—LPEs" they choose), THEN their students would more clearly see the connections between their learning work and the knowledge work they are preparing to undertake in our global, networked information society, AND the "new hire supply chain" could readily be extended and improved by adding classroom learning leaders and others not now involved."

- If grassroots Native leaders increase their leadership skills and their knowledge base, they will act as catalysts for healthier Native communities

- If elected officials understand the often hidden dynamics in groups and their role in them, they may be more likely to focus on the primary task of building healthy communities.

- If leaders in any organization or field learn from assessment, challenge and support, they can improve their leadership skills, move closer to achieving direction, commitment, and alignment, and, as a result, help their organization and/or community achieve their goals.

- If leaders consider the needs of all stakeholders including future generations, when they make their decisions, then they will make more sustainable solutions.

- S&T Policy Fellows carry with them an understanding of U.S. government programs and initiatives, the many factors affecting policy, and the critical importance of research, applied science, and outreach that address social, economic and environmental challenges, support public policy, and contribute to the wellbeing of the nation and citizens around the world. They move forward as policy-savvy scientists and engineers who can apply their expertise and skills as leaders to inform and promote evidence-based policies and practices from local to international levels.

- If more Kansans exercise leadership more often to help solve the major issues in their communities, then Kansas will be a healthier State.
• If women leaders in community and organizational settings were supported in their work through training, community building, mentoring, and personal renewal, they will have greater impact on quality of life and enhanced viability of their community and organizational vision and mission.

• When leaders and organizations develop the analysis, skills, strategies and support to advance racial equity in a systematic, inclusive and ongoing way, they can realize transformational change at the community, organizational and personal levels.

• If we provide young adults with an experience that integrates an intense, immersive year of full-time service focused on addressing a critical national challenge with a clear, intentional, and powerful leadership development strategy, we will set them on the path to being engaged and active civic leaders for life.
Leadership in Action Program: A Case Study of the Theory of Aligned Contribution

In 2001 the Annie E. Casey Foundation partnered with the Maryland Governor’s Sub-cabinet for Children, Youth and Families, and the Council for Excellence in Government to launch the Leadership in Action Program (LAP). LAP was designed by Jolie Bain Pillsbury and her colleagues at the University of Maryland building on the results accountability framework developed by Mark Friedman. The program is intended to make a measurable difference on the number of children in Maryland who enter school ready to learn. The goal was to demonstrate that within one measurement cycle the percentage rate of school readiness as measured by an annual statewide assessment would increase. The rate did increase by 3% and continued to do so for the following years. Implementing the program in the City of Baltimore in 2003, an even more significant increase occurred – 13% increase in just one year. How did this happen?

Leadership in Action Program

The Leadership in Action Program is designed to strengthen the leadership skills among government, nonprofit, business and community leaders to align and focus their efforts around achieving a particular result. They hold themselves accountable for moving to action in one measurement cycle to make measurable improvements in the well-being of children and families (Stark 2007). LAP is based

LAP brings together 40-50 “leaders in the middle” and equips them with a set of collaborative skills, a call to action, and a container to move to high action and high alignment. These leaders are often those who were “once passionate about the power to create positive change and have become mired in the bureaucracy of organizations...their sense of urgency around a result has been dampened by the seemingly intractable nature of the problem” (Pillsbury et al.).

LAP is a 14 month program that brings together a multi-sectoral group of participants for nine 2-day sessions every 6-8 weeks. There are three core elements of the program:

- **A call to action.** An invitation from a credible source to join and be publicly accountable for making a measurable difference in the common result in a short period of time. The invitation is issued by an “accountability partner” -- a network of recognized leaders from the public and private sector that publicly commit to work for a result.

- **A container.** A place, time, materials and support structure that creates a meeting environment conducive to working together on a common result. A critical component to an effective container is a “coach facilitator” that helps participants deal with conflicts, tackle adaptive challenges, resolve differences, and address power differentials.

- **A capacity to collaborate.** LAP focuses on the development of four leadership competencies during the course of the program to enable participants to engage in results-focused action.
These include:

- **Results-based accountability.** The ability to use data to align partners and resources to improve results for a specific population.
- **Race, class, and culture dialogues.** The ability to engage in constructive dialogue about race, class, and culture that enables leaders to take action to address issues of disparities.
- **Collaborative leadership.** The ability to listen, ask effective questions, make proposals, use interest-based negotiation, reach consensus, and commit to specific aligned actions.
- **Leading from the middle.** The ability to operate within exceptionally complex systems with implied assumptions about what can and cannot be done. Leaders reexamine their authority, make decisions, and take action without waiting for external authorization. (Pillsbury et al., 2009; RCLA, 2007)

**The Theory of Aligned Contribution**

Jolie Bain Pillsbury and her colleagues developed the Theory of Aligned Contribution to articulate the conditions that are needed to bridge the gap between desired results and the realities of the current system where year after year little progress is made in the number of children who enter school ready to learn. The Theory of Aligned Contribution is both a descriptive and predictive theory about how to move from talk to action that makes a significant contribution to a result.

*The theory predicts the acceleration of population results when leaders from multiple sectors equipped with specific skills and a sense of heightened urgency, make an unequivocal commitment to be publicly accountable for a result for a specific population: and, work together to take aligned actions to contribute at a scope and scale sufficient to make measurable progress and towards the result.* (Pillsbury 2009)

Pillsbury and her colleagues developed and tested a framework for assessing the practice of leadership to create aligned action towards a common result. They created rating scales to measure the level of action and the level of alignment among participants in one LAP site, an assessment that was done after each session. Building in the assessment to each session, not only tracked progress over time, but provided participants with a clear sense of what they were accountable for and how that was being measured.

The summary chart below defines a four quadrant framework for assessing aligned action for results.
The Four Quadrants of Aligned Action for Results

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<th>Low Alignment</th>
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<td><strong>High Action</strong></td>
<td><strong>High Alignment</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• High level of action that contributes to improved results</td>
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<td>• Does not work to be in alignment with others</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Low Action</strong></td>
<td><strong>Low Action</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Low level of action that does not contribute to improved results</td>
<td>• Low level of action that does not contribute to improved results</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Does not work to be in alignment with others</td>
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Criteria were developed for rating actions and alignment and tested by different raters to ensure inter-rater reliability. Analysis of the data showed an increase in the number of high level actions and aligned commitments and a decrease of the low level commitments as the sessions progressed. These findings are significant because they validate the hypothesis that a voluntary network of leaders can come together from different sectors and hold themselves accountable for their collective performance to measurably improve conditions of well-being at the community level (Pillsbury et al., 2009).

Lessons Learned

- **High cost of evidence-based data collection.** One of the challenges for evidence-based practice research is the cost of collecting and analyzing data across different contexts both in terms of dollars and also the time required of participants in the program. Building in data collection and reporting as a program activity enables participants to monitor their progress and use the results in their work.

- **Validating the theory of aligned contribution requires research across multiple contexts.** While much has been learned about how the theory of aligned contribution works in practice, validating the theory requires more extensive research across multiple contexts to learn what competencies and program components are essential to success.
Bibliography

Theory of Aligned Contribution and the Leadership in Action Program


The Wallace Foundation Education Leadership Initiative

http://www.wallacefoundation.org/SiteCollectionDocuments/WF/Knowledge%20Center/Attachments/PDF/FINALWallaceCLSPerspective.pdf

Catherine H. Augustine, Gabriella Gonzalez, Gina Ikemoto et al. (2009) Improving School Leadership: The Promise of Cohesive Leadership Systems

The Wallace Foundation embarked on an Educational Leadership Initiative in 2000 with the goal of improving the quality of teaching and student achievement in schools. They chose to focus their efforts on principal and superintendent leadership because a growing body of evidence was pointing to the fact that:

*Behind excellent teachers and excellent schools is excellent leadership – the kind that ensures that effective teaching practices don’t remain isolated and unshared in single classrooms, and ineffective ones don’t go unnoticed and unremedied (Leadership for Learning: Making the Connections Among, District, and School Policies and Practices).*

**Disproving the Leadership Pipeline Hypothesis**

Early in the Initiative, the Foundation commissioned research about what was widely perceived as a pipeline problem for school principals (e.g., not enough highly qualified school principals available for every school). Three studies, using different methods and data sets, all came back with a finding that there were no principal shortages.

**Development of the Cohesive Leadership Hypothesis**

Mid-way through the initiative, Foundation staff in conversation with field leaders, developed the “cohesive leadership hypothesis” to better focus grantmaking investments. The hypothesis states that:

*If states and districts work together and align their efforts to improve leadership standards, training for leaders, and the conditions leaders face, then school leaders will be more effective at improving teaching and student learning in their schools.*

A key driver for developing this hypothesis was the early assessment of a series of multi-year grants made to states and districts to develop leadership standards, train leaders, and create a system that rewarded improved performance.

**The Creation of a State of the Art Leadership Assessment System**

Wallace invested in the creation of a state of the art leadership assessment for measuring learning-centered leadership. The Vanderbilt Assessment of Leadership in Education (VAL-Ed) is a multi-rater, evidence-based approach to measure the effectiveness of school leadership behaviors known to influence teacher performance and student learning.

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1 A more thorough discussion of the Education Leadership Initiative is available [here](#).