

**Leadership Learning Community and Northern California Grantmakers
Program on Leadership Development
Commonwealth Club, San Francisco
March 19, 2003, 9:30 am - 1:30 pm
PROGRAM NOTES**

BACKGROUND

On March 19, 2003, members of the Leadership Learning Community (LLC) and Northern California Grantmakers (NCG) came together to explore a mutual interest in leadership development. Participants were Foundation staff and trustees, staff of local leadership development programs, and a few independent professionals working in the field of leadership. They brought to the session a diversity of perspectives on--and experiences with--the work of leadership. Objectives of the half day program were to enhance participants' understanding of important leadership capacities and skills; to explore a variety of approaches to strengthening leadership development through grantmaking; and to provide an opportunity for funders and practitioners to connect and think together about how to strengthen leadership development and social change in the nonprofit sector.

During the day, participants shared their individual questions about leadership development; explored in small groups the question, "What capacities should leadership development cultivate?"; heard from a panel of foundation staff about their experiences with leadership development activities; and engaged in deeper small group exploration of questions of common concern. The program offered a learning community approach to exploring the issue of leadership, placing a high emphasis on respecting the diversity of perspectives brought to the issue by each individual, seeking to identify places of emerging commonality and to understand points of difference, and looking for linkages among the perspectives that would support participants' deepening of their individual and collective inquiry and understanding of the issues.

PARTICIPANTS' CONCERNS

At the start of the program, participants were asked to introduce themselves and to share one question about leadership development with which they had come to the session. Foundation staff generally raised more conceptual questions that related to understanding the work of leadership development and how it could be integrated both into their organizations and their grantmaking. LLC participants asked questions about issues more specific to program design, delivery and evaluation. The blending of perspectives offered participants a fertile opportunity to deepen their understanding of the complexities of effective leadership development. Participants' questions were noted and later used as the basis for the afternoon small group discussions; they clustered into general categories (a listing of specific questions can be found in the addendum):

- *Conceptual issues.* These questions contained three broad themes: (1) What are the different perspectives on leadership development, and how can they inform grantmaking and foundations' support of the organizations they fund? (2) What is important about leadership development--leadership to what end? (3) How do we develop language that can better convey the essence of leadership development? What language can we use to communicate the importance of leadership development--to funders, to participants, to the broader community?

- *Leadership in Specific Populations.* Several participants came with a desire to explore how to better support the development of leadership in their populations of interest, which included: nonprofit executives; emerging immigrant community leaders; parents families, and educational institutions; and foundation trustees and staff. A few participants were specifically interested in how to build commitment to civic leadership among business leaders and business school students.
- *Program Development and Strategy.* Meeting participants, particularly those from the Leadership Learning Community (many of whom direct or manage leadership programs) raised a number of questions related to how to strengthen their program delivery. These questions focused on three areas: (1) specific skill areas, such as cultural competence, sensitivity to disability issues, collaborative leadership, and inner capacity; (2) process strategies, such as how to effectively incorporate technology and media use, or how to bring participants together from disparate communities in a way that fosters the building of relationships; and (3) program sustainability, in both an economic sense as well as a philosophical one--how to sustain the learning of a short, intense curriculum over time, and how to help ensure that the benefits gained by an individual participant are infused into that individual's organization.
- *Meaningful Evaluation.* The questions on evaluation clustered around three themes: (1) how to capture meaningful information, such as how to evaluate in ways that respect the cultural and contextual sensitivities of participants, and how to evaluate efforts to build inner capacity of leaders; (2) how evaluation can help make visible the impacts of leadership development--how to connect the individual work of leadership development to positive social change in society, and how to use the results of evaluation as a tool to promote leadership development; and (3) and how evaluation can be used as a tool for sustaining learning.
- *Collaboration.* In addition to questions about how a collaborative perspective can be cultivated through leadership development work, participants also came to this mixed gathering with questions about how collaborative leadership development efforts might be developed, and how funders and leadership programs might work together to identify creative strategies for developing and sustaining the work of leadership development.

CAPACITIES THAT LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT SHOULD CULTIVATE

To begin a conversation about leadership development that would help identify places of emerging commonality as well as places of difference, participants explored in small groups the question, "What capacities should leadership development cultivate?" In addition to eliciting a list of skills and capacities, the question necessarily sparked discussion among participants about the use of language and terminology, and the nature of leadership and leadership development.

The Use of Language

"Leadership Development" is a term that can shelter a broad variety of activities and perspectives under its umbrella, and as groups sought to define the capacities fostered by such efforts, many attempted to first define the terms for their discussions. Two distinctions were described:

- *Leadership versus Management.* Participants generally seemed to define management in terms of particular "tactical" skills related to running an organization, whereas they spoke of leadership as more of an internal process--as one group put it, "developing the link/connection between head and heart, and being able to use that knowledge." Participants generally accepted that both perspectives were important for success, though an open question remained about whether leadership and management abilities are equally "teachable."
- *Skills versus Capacities.* Some participants also attempted to clarify a distinction between skills and capacities, defining skills as potentially more concrete or definable (and potentially measurable) abilities--such as facilitating meetings--and capacities as more related to particular sorts of sensitivities or awarenesses, such as cultural or linguistic competence.

Nature of Leadership and Leadership Development

The conversation elicited some of the now-familiar themes of discussion for LLC members about the nature of leadership and leadership development, including the necessity of asking "leadership for what?", the distinction between "ordinary" leadership (the idea that anyone can be a leader) and "extraordinary" leadership (the idea that there are some people who better suited to being leaders, and others who are less so), and the tension between leadership as Being and leadership as Doing. Indeed, at the heart of the discussions of terminology appeared to be the varying degrees to which participants viewed leadership as what one "is" and/or what one "does"--and the implied attendant limitations on what leadership development can teach.

Regarding leadership development, meeting participants generally appeared to agree on:

- The value of leadership development as an activity integrated into other efforts, rather than as a stand-alone effort
- The idea of leadership development as an ongoing, dynamic process rather than a time-limited activity that is "completed" at some point
- The understanding that leadership development is highly context-specific. Implied in this is the importance of being able to define the "community" of the leader (that individual's environmental context, or circle of influence); several participants noted the challenge of making such a definition in a meaningful manner, as in when the community is not geographically bounded but defined through other means (for example, an online community)

Other interesting points included:

- The notion of "translation skills" as a component of leadership development programs that work primarily in one culture, or context. The idea expressed was when developing leadership within a particular culture, those efforts need to be augmented with skills for working within the larger context or system (of the broader community, or society).
- The perspective of leadership development as more of a practice. A practice differs from the notion of leadership development as a process in its lack of a "goal" orientation; a process still implies that at some (distant) point the process will come to an end.

However, the discussions also elicited several interesting controversies and questions about the nature of leadership and leadership development. Points raised included:

- The terms "leadership" and "leader" do not have positive connotations in all cultures. Some people don't wish to be identified as leaders, though perhaps they are the ones engendering change in their communities. How does one go about identifying and supporting these leaders? And, are we defining leaders as change agents?
- How intentional does leadership need to be? Is individual modeling of positive behavior sufficient to be considered leadership, or does leadership imply a more intentional extension of those behaviors into the community? Can individual acts that have unintentional influence be considered leadership?
- An observation was made that "values-based" leadership development programs seemed to result in personal change and transformation, whereas "strictly skills-based" ones didn't. The question that was raised: Is personal transformation required for leadership development?

Skills and Capacities

Despite the rich discussion on the nature of leadership and leadership development, participants did appear to agree on a number of abilities that they felt should be cultivated by leadership development efforts. Utilizing the distinction between "skills" and "capacities" above, the abilities identified fell into three broad categories: skills, capacities that related to internal awareness and ability, and capacities that related to external awareness and ability (a detailed list of responses can be found in the addendum).

- *Skills.* For the most part, the skills participants identified as important to be cultivated through leadership development divided into two types: (a) interpersonal skills and (b) skills related to translating vision into action. Interpersonal abilities listed included facilitation, consensus building, conflict resolution, deep listening skills, effective communication, ability to motivate staff and the ability to cultivate the potential in others. In terms of translating vision into action, participants identified analytical ability, risk-taking, strategic thinking, and board development skills.
- *Capacities--External Awareness.* Participants strongly resonated with the importance of the contextual validity of leadership development, and this is reflected in the sorts of external capacities that were identified. More than half of the capacities identified in this category were related to this, and included cultural competency, understanding and being accountable to one's community, ability to understand and appreciate difference points of view, ability to work in a multicultural setting, and "linguistic competence"--speaking in a manner that has meaning to one's community. Other capacities were relationship-based: ability to create community, ability to develop networks and partnerships, ability to build relationships and trust, and social adeptness. The final few capacities were related to the ever-changing societal context and included flexibility and adeptness at navigating change, the ability to initiate change in one's community, and working for social change.
- *Capacities--Internal Awareness.* Threaded through all the skills and capacities identified as being important to be cultivated by leadership development was a sense of the importance of self-knowledge. Indeed, in some responses these internal capacities could be seen as the internal foundation for the external behavior: for example, a leader's ability to trust others will have an impact on that person's ability to cultivate others' potential, and to build trust, partnerships and networks in their community. Capacities identified here included authenticity (ability to be true to oneself and transparent in one's actions), understanding one's limits and when to not "go it alone," knowing one's passions, having confidence and courage to act on one's convictions and values, ability to trust, ability to question "the way things are" and to value Not Knowing, and personal resilience.

MOVING THE WORK OF LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT FORWARD

During the afternoon, participants moved again into small groups with the goal of brainstorming some practical strategies for strengthening their own work of leadership development in areas of common concern. Given the high level of interest in discussing evaluation and program sustainability, participants divided according to their interest in exploring one of three questions:

- How can evaluation be used to make visible the impact of leadership development (in a meaningful manner)?
- What are strategies for making an effective case for funding/supporting leadership development?
- In a climate of potentially declining resources, what are practical, creative strategies for continuing to strengthen leadership development -- for funders, for programs, for funders and programs together?

While the time allotted did not appear to be sufficient to enable participants to come to resolution about specific answers to the questions posed, the discussions raised many pertinent issues that could form the basis for future collective exploration. Insights gleaned from the discussions include:

On Environmental Context

- *Foundations and leadership development.* Participants noted that barriers to expanding funder engagement in the work of leadership development included the fact that frequently foundations choose to fund only specific programs, and that many foundations don't provide professional development for their own staff. They felt that educating funders about the nature and importance of leadership development was a necessary part of the work. They also noted that even when foundation staff understand that it is critical to address capacity building as a component of other efforts, that because of the power dynamics in the relationship it is often difficult for funders to engage their grantees in the discussion of what would be beneficial without it coming across as proscriptive.
- *Cross-institutional collaboration.* Related to the above, a point was raised about the necessity of individuals in both foundations and nonprofit organizations (be they leadership development programs or other service, community-based, or advocacy organizations) to shift their conversations with each other to language that is less judgmental and more openly honest about the challenges that each is facing in their work. Participants felt that this was critical in developing the relationships that would allow for successful collaborative efforts, by creating an atmosphere of mutual exploration--that "we are each trying approaches and need a community of learning." Participants discussed the idea of "responsibility networks" as a context for this.
- *Nonprofit and private sector perspectives.* Participants also sought to explore what could be gleaned from the differences in perspective between the nonprofit and for-profit sectors that might fruitfully be brought to bear on the issue of strengthening leadership development efforts. Participants expressed a belief that financial investment in human capital appears to be more the norm in the private sector (though this is possibly due to greater availability of financial resources); they felt that a prevalent nonprofit "scarcity mentality" might be adversely impacting engagement in leadership development efforts. Another point raised

was that lessons that might be adapted from the private sector included appreciating the importance of networking, and the understanding of core competencies.

On Evaluation

- *Planning for evaluation.* Participants noted important questions that should be explored when considering evaluation, including: Who is the audience for the evaluation? What will it be used for? What should be the balance between qualitative and quantitative measures? When should evaluation be done? Participants also explored the question of how they could paint a coherent picture of leadership development through evaluation, given that the richness of their program experience didn't always allow them to paint the sort of simple, clear picture that would be most compelling to their target audiences.
- *Evaluating inner work.* Participants felt that inner work could be measured through individuals' stories; several individuals noted the power of storytelling as a means of capturing the personal growth and transformation that can occur through leadership development. At the same time, participants also shared a belief that "inner work translates to outer work," implying that the change in this outer work might be more quantitatively evaluated.
- *Qualitative and quantitative evaluation.* A point of discussion that was raised several times was the relative importance of qualitative and quantitative evaluation. Mirroring an ongoing tension in the larger evaluation community, participants discussed how to place qualitative and quantitative evaluation "on the same plane," and how to determine the appropriate balance in their evaluative methods between storytelling and testimonials on the one hand, and gathering "hard evidence" on the other. Participants noted that leadership development is about relationships and that the story is developed over time, raising again the question about how and when to evaluate.

CONCLUSION

The meeting closed with an invitation to participants to join the ongoing learning process of the Bay Area LLC learning circle and to attend the national gathering, Creating Space IV, being held at Fort Mason in San Francisco from May 15 - 17.