

**Leadership Learning Community  
Evaluation Convening  
September 23, 2003**

**Background**

The Leadership Learning Community has had a deep interest in strengthening the evaluation of leadership programs by sharing evaluation tools and resources, developing common indicators of impact, and developing shared understandings among funders, program staff, and evaluators about the value and use of evaluation. In 2002, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation funded a scan to learn how leadership programs are evaluating their outcomes and impacts. LLC was instrumental in supporting this research, which included interviews and document review of 55 leadership programs. One of the scan recommendations was for the leadership development community (including those who fund, run, evaluate and study leadership programs) to consider developing a shared learning agenda. In reflecting on the need for such an agenda and providing a rationale for the LLC evaluation convening in September 2003, the scan's authors commented:

Currently, learning is driven by questions that each program decides. Programs have many more questions about their programs and their impact than they can possibly afford to evaluate. Some programs are exploring some of the same questions and coming up with many of the same answers. Figuring out what we already know about developing leadership and its impact, and where the gaps in our knowledge are, might enable the field to better allocate its evaluation resources to learning that will advance our collective knowledge. (W.K. Kellogg Foundation, *Evaluating Outcomes and Impacts: A Scan of 55 Leadership Programs*, 2002)

**Objectives of the Gathering**

With funding from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, LLC convened a one-day evaluation gathering that had the following objectives:

- Debate and understand thoroughly the pros and cons of developing a common learning agenda
- Develop a collective learning agenda for the field that can focus learning from existing evaluations and create broad data gathering tools that can be implemented across programs to deepen learning
- Provide input on a set of evaluation questions that can be incorporated into leadership program surveys and interviews to deepen learning around our collective agenda
- Formulate strategies for building legitimacy for leadership evaluation methodologies and findings in the foundation community
- Use the work of the Evaluation Scan and the Sustainable Leadership Initiative, in particular the EvaluLead framework, as a resource to support the community to strengthen its evaluation approaches

## **Participants**

Over 30 participants attended the gathering, including funders, those who run leadership programs, evaluators, and scholars.

## **Learning Process**

The morning began with a brief overview of the evaluation scan, followed by a discussion about the potential benefits and drawbacks of having a shared learning agenda. We then proceeded to discuss the gaps in our knowledge and the questions that we most want to answer. For this discussion we broke into small groups according to whether we were funders, program staff, or evaluators/scholars. While LLC generally discourages homogeneous groupings, we were interested to learn whether there would be common questions across groups, or whether there would be evidence of distinctly different perspectives that we would need to take into account in the formulation of any shared learning agenda.

John Grove introduced the group to the potential of using an open systems approach to evaluate leadership programs and discussed using both “evidential” and “evocative” methods to capture more fully the impact of leadership programs.

After compiling the questions that each group asked, we selected two thematic areas for more in-depth discussion.

1. How do we understand leadership and its strategic role in the process of social change?
2. If leadership development is an “open system,” how can evaluators and others who evaluate programs build credibility around learning work and identify the best tools to use?

Our charge to the small groups was to take these overarching questions and probe what deeper questions emerge.

We ended the day by considering what opportunities we had (or could create) to move forward our collective evaluation work and enhance our evaluation learning as a community.

## **Benefits and Drawbacks of Having a Shared Learning Agenda**

Benefits include:

- Maximize use of evaluation resources
- Increase sample sizes for research questions
- Learn better how to design future programs
- Develop a shared language about evaluation
- Create a shared framework for making the “case” for leadership development
- Make us more conscious and candid about shared and divergent values
- Help identify realistic expectations, e.g., what results one can anticipate from different program tactics
- Compile theories of leadership development
- Create participatory learning opportunities
- Cross-pollination of strategies

- Develop promising practice standards
- Understand where programs fit in relationship to one another
- Identify gaps in leadership development programming.

Risks and drawbacks include:

- Failing to adequately recognize value system
- Tendency to ignore contextual differences among programs
- Conflating decision-making with learning
- Cannot ignore specific learning within individual programs, e.g., one approach does not fit all
- Cannot isolate evaluation from other shared learnings about leadership development
- May focus learning only on improving our own program, not on improving the whole field—silo thinking
- Not supporting grantees to conduct evaluation

### **Questions that We Most Want To Answer**

#### *Practitioners*

- Can we make a certified, validated list of knowledgeable evaluators of leadership programs?
- What resources have programs developed (and are they willing to share) for in house evaluation?
- How can we avoid reinventing the wheel?
- What evaluations and tools exist that can be shared with others?
- How do we mobilize and organize alumni?
- How can we make alumni networks useful to funders?
- How do we support participants in identifying their own leadership development needs?
- What do we know about when to conduct an evaluation, e.g., the timing?
- How do we evaluate leadership programs so that it is validated or invalidated as a strategy for funders?
- What are the long-term and larger scale outcomes of leadership programs?

#### *Evaluators, researchers, and scholars*

- How can we teach stakeholders about what can be known and not known about the way open systems work (beyond linear cause and effect)?
- How can we encourage multiple methods in designing programs and evaluations, rather than looking for a silver bullet?
- How can we connect learnings from different levels of analysis?
- How do we expand support for qualitative evaluation?
- Is leadership development an effective social change strategy? How do we know?

#### *Funders*

- If leadership is happening independent of us, are we needed to make a difference and how would we know?
- What leadership support strategies will generate the scale and scope of leadership demanded by the current situation?

- What paths to collaboration?
- Is there a way of surfacing useful best practices and if not, what is the alternative?
- Is leadership investment seen as a “luxury” strategy for prosperous times?
- Is there a way to educate senior staff and trustees about leadership?
- How can we effectively make a case for leadership programs in the context of social change goals?
- How can we develop indicators that leadership has contributed to our desired social outcomes?

### **Using an Open Systems Approach to Evaluate Leadership Programs: Some Considerations (John Grove)**

Is it possible to say that a leadership development program caused the changes observed in individuals, yet alone in the organizational or community domains? In most cases, the answer is no. The EvaluLEAD Framework assumes an open-system view of interactions and connectivity between activities, programs, people, organizations, and communities. This perspective recognizes that participants benefiting from leadership development programs also experience a multitude of non-program stimuli and are influenced by innumerable interactions and requirements on their time and attention that are not linked to program demands and expectations. Attributing and documenting causal relationships between the program activities and the results by domains is not the aim. The more modest aim of EvaluLEAD is to map the space of the possible results toward which a program might expect to contribute. Assigning results to relevant domains and forms of inquiry better positions program staff, evaluation facilitators, and other stakeholders to make visible the program's theory and logic of change, organize data collection, and start the process of building a body of credible information (not necessarily causal proofs) in support of the program.<sup>1</sup>

### **Leadership and Its Strategic Role in the Process of Social Change**

The group acknowledged the difficulty of understanding more fully the role of leadership in social change without more longitudinal data collection. The alumni of leadership programs are an untapped resource for capturing the story of the enduring impact leadership development interventions and supports demonstrated over time. There was interest in trying to build an online network across programs of graduates who have been applying leadership skills and developing personal mastery over at least 5 years. If 10-15 programs could identify at least 10 graduates we could begin to gather an interesting collection of stories that might reveal some trends.

As the discussion engaged more deeply around the involvement of participants we agreed that it is important to have participant input on the front end of programs, i.e. in the identification of skills and qualities that would be most likely to support the success of participants over time in the context of their specific social change work. Most programs had identified a set of leadership skills and capacities that they felt were critical to the

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<sup>1</sup> Excerpt from Grove, J., Kibel, B. EvaluLEAD: A Handbook for Holistic Evaluation for Leadership Development Programs. October 2003. Draft Field-Test Manual. Unpublished.

success of their program participants. Most programs did not test these assumptions with the participants as they entered the program. There was emerging interest in doing pre program surveying of participants about their leadership needs and program aspirations. Most programs focus on the usefulness of what was offered but may be missing needs not addressed. This combined with tracking the success of leadership program graduates over time to understand the contributions of their respective program's curriculum to their achievements may give a fuller picture of how to best support social change leadership.

By collecting information about desired skills and useful application of specific skills/competency building approaches it may be possible to: gather information across programs about whether leadership programs are providing development in the most important areas; identify those skills development areas that seem to contribute most effectively over time to social change efforts; and share information about successful curriculum approaches for cultivating more universal social change leadership skills.

### **Evaluating Leadership Programs: Open Systems Approaches and Tools**

#### ***Open Systems Approach***

An open systems approach pays attention to “the noise that is reality.” Outcomes, whether positive or negative, may be influenced by many factors other than the program. This makes it difficult to attribute change to the program. An alternative approach is to look at what the program is contributing to the outcome. One suggested way to explore the relative contribution of various interventions on outcomes is to ask people to distribute points to a set of activities/events that may have contributed to an outcome in order to determine the significance of the contribution of a particular intervention. We need to educate boards and senior leadership that leadership development is an open system that makes it very difficult to determine cause and effect.

#### ***Expanding Evaluation Awareness of Senior Foundation Leadership***

There was general agreement that foundation boards are receptive to mixed methods. They like both stories and quantitative data. The challenges to non-quantitative methods often come from the senior leadership staff. We discussed trustee/senior leadership training and asked: When and where can you have these conversations? What processes have evaluators used to educate senior foundation leadership and trustees?

#### ***The Power of Stories***

We need to raise the credibility of stories. One person questioned who gets to tell the stories. It is powerful to have participants speak to foundation boards from their own experience, not having it mediated by evaluators, program officers. Leadership program participants may have a lot to offer boards about a strategic area that the foundation is investing in, e.g., what is working, what is not, and what else needs to be done. We also need to discuss the unsuccessful stories. We need to seek verification of stories, not just rely on the person to tell his/her own story.

#### ***Communicating and Using Evaluation Data***

How do we mainstream evaluation in our programs? How do we use evaluations to improve our programs? Public Allies uses multiple methods, triangulates data, but how

do you manage all that data. How do you rationalize and package it for various audiences? (Discussed the fact that information needs to be framed and targeted to speak to the issues and concerns of a particular audience. Need to make sure we understand our audiences and not just assume that we know what they are thinking. They need to be involved in shaping the questions, helped to identify their own questions so that they will have shared expectations about what they are going to learn. We should not be providing answers to questions that no one has.)

### ***Surfacing Program Assumptions***

We need to surface program assumptions early on with key stakeholder groups, e.g., what is the program trying to do and how. This needs to include grantees, because it is potentially damaging to the program if the discussion takes place with foundation folks, but doesn't involve the grantee.

### ***Leadership as a Cross-Cutting Theme***

We acknowledged that many foundations are shifting their focus from viewing leadership development as a distinct program to viewing leadership as a core component of every initiative; leadership as a cross-cutting theme. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, for instance, now has a human capital area where all leadership/scholarship programs reside. Will enable them to do some cross-program examination.

### ***Levels of Learning Over Time***

We talked about the need to have an integrated evaluation strategy that addressed multiple levels. The problem sometimes is that evaluation investments are made at the individual level, but the desire is for information at the societal level or the strategic level. These changes often unfold over time. Evaluation investments need to be commensurate with what the learning needs are. Alumni programs offer a great opportunity to get longitudinal data and understand better how participation has affected career.

### ***Retrospective Studies***

There is often value in doing retrospective studies, e.g. looking at the role of leadership in social movements. A story was told about the Farm Services Administration, which by all measures, was a dismal failure, but which can be seen as a source for the civil rights movement. The point is that by taking a retrospective look, you may come to value the contribution that a program made in a new way.

### ***Modeling and Open System***

Funders, evaluators, and program folks are themselves part of an open system. We need to demonstrate/model the openness of this system. [In other words there is a lot of influences on each group, the key is to find ways to be in conversation, to develop some common language and frameworks that can help us develop shared expectations and shared knowledge.]

Other questions we posed as a group:

- How do we strengthen open systems and narrative approaches?

- What are the aspects of communities/organizations that nurture effective leadership?
- How do we effectively evaluate leadership development (a group process) not leader development (an individual process)?
- How do we recognize and value multiple methods of measurement and training and select which ones are appropriate in which context?
- How do we bridge the gap between what we know about leaders and leadership and their evaluation? Leadership not equal to leader or position.
- How do we use leadership theory, e.g. Wheatley, Heifetz, Gardner, to “transform” the field? For example, does Gardner’s work on leadership and narratives explain the “stories” of our different realms, e.g. foundations, programs, and academia?
- What are the implications of cultural differences in terms of determining both goals and outcomes, measurement and development?
- What can we teach stakeholders about an open systems approach to evaluation that leaves room for learning the unintentional?
- How do we connect levels of analysis, e.g. individual, organization, and community?
- How do we mine and understand the unpredictable?
- How do we capture informal leadership development efforts?
- What do we know about the fit between a leadership opportunity and the leader who is offered that experience?
- How well do investments match desired outcomes?

### **Emerging Opportunities and Next Steps**

- Create systematic ways of sharing information through, for instance, the LLC website
- Coordinate and develop panels at AEA, ILA. Consider possibility of mobilizing a leadership TIG at AEA.
- Explore convening leadership evaluation discussions at COF and affinity groups to discuss open systems approaches to evaluating leadership programs
- Develop a two-page concept paper on an open systems approach that we could share on the LLC site to further introduce people to this idea
- Showcase evaluations at Creating Space, ILA, as a way to raise and discuss complex issues. Need to ground our discussion in the concrete. [Might be interesting to develop a set of questions that could guide a presentation of an evaluation that would contribute to our collective learning, this would include questions that address context.]
- Identify three or four evaluation questions that we want to explore and ask programs to include them in their evaluations.
- Encourage participation in the EvaluLead field test.
- Create a taxonomy of people/programs and what they have investigated, and what they have to offer.

### **Resources**

- *Evaluating the Impact of Leadership Development: A Professional Guide*, Jennifer Martineau and Kelly Hannum, Center for Creative Leadership, 2004.,

- EvaluLead Framework and the Sustainable Leadership Initiative  
<http://www.popldr.org/leadership/leag.cfm> or  
<http://www.leadershiplearning.org/pools/evaluation/contributions.adp>
- *Evaluating Outcomes and Impacts: A Scan of 55 Leadership Programs*  
<http://www.leadershiplearning.org/circles/evaluation/dgproject.adp>

### **Concluding Reflections**

Creating a shared learning agenda is a complex process. It is not so simple to figure out what questions we are asking in common, and then set out to answer those questions. We do not have a common language or frame of reference for asking questions. We bring vastly different learning needs to the discussion based on whether we are funders, practitioners, scholars, evaluators, or participants in leadership programs. Furthermore, we do not have well-developed approaches or methodologies for evaluating leadership development that are widely recognized as useful and valid. We have few ways to systematically capture and organize what we are learning. What we do have is a deep and abiding interest to continue working together to find a common language and to test and refine our approaches and methods so that we can all have more confidence in what we are learning. The LLC and the Evaluation Learning Circle will continue to provide a forum for discussion, shared learning, and joint action. We welcome your thoughts and ideas. Please feel free to contact Claire Reinelt ([creinelt@developmentguild.com](mailto:creinelt@developmentguild.com))  
Evaluation Learning Circle Convenor.