

Leadership Learning Community
Cross-Program Alumni Collaboration Phase I
Learning Summary
May 2005

Introduction and Background

The Leadership Learning Community (LLC), a national organization committed to sharing learning and resources in the field of leadership development, evolved from the perceived need to link leadership development program efforts. Through six years of regional and national learning amongst those who run, fund, study and participate in leadership development efforts, the need for increased collaboration across programs has become even clearer. In response to the rich diversity and substantial growth in the field of leadership development over recent years, the Leadership Learning Community convened a small group of leadership program alumni and staff to explore the benefits and challenges to collaborating across program boundaries and disciplines.

Beyond clarifying the question of “What is the goal of leadership development?” this effort was seen as way to open up a candid conversation amongst those in the leadership field about collaboration, an investigation of how resources might be shared and how social change goals of alumni might be supported more effectively by involving other leadership efforts.

Selection of Participants

After several months of discussion with foundation and program representatives about the need for and design of such an effort, LLC sent an invitation to those organizations in its database who had an active alumni program. Participation was not regulated in any other way, and LLC emphasized the need to have a diversity of organizations with differences in geography, topical focus and structure. While there was a desire to share information across programs and maintain a high degree of transparency in both the process and the content of the learning, LLC staff felt that it was important to begin this effort with those who already had some depth of experience in running alumni programs, and could bring their triumphs and challenges in that arena to bear in a discussion of cross-program collaboration. It should be noted that LLC and members of its extensive network of leadership programs, funders, researchers and consultants tend to hold a philosophy of public interest leadership and have a focus on social and community change through their program efforts.

Participants who expressed interest and were selected for the initial phase of this work consisted of a dozen program representatives and alumni from across the country representing leadership efforts in health, public affairs, the environment, youth, child and family development, and community and public service. Participants gathered in Oakland in early March of 2004 and in Denver in late September of 2004. A final meeting of the

first phase of this work was held in Oakland in March of 2005. Between meetings, e-mail and conference call communication maintained connection among program participants.

Goals and Philosophy

LLC's mission is to promote learning and resource sharing among those in the leadership development field, and all of its program efforts strive to support this work. The first phase of the cross-program collaboration work opened a dialogue for leadership programs and their alumni to explore possibilities for creating more explicit relationships around shared resources, joint programs and collaborative social change efforts.

The group was guided by a facilitator hired by the Leadership Learning Community and supported by generous contributions from the Rockefeller Foundation and Kellogg Foundation, and through substantial in-kind contributions from participating leadership programs sponsored by Rockefeller, Kellogg and the Annie E. Casey and Robert Wood Johnson Foundations. This support also enabled LLC to establish a fund to subsidize travel and accommodation costs for those participating and affiliated with community-based and non-profit run leadership development programs who had not allocated these costs in their annual budgets.

Aside from the perceived need described to project participants, discussions about needs assessment, perceptions of the field, best practices among leadership alumni programs and possible action to pursue were open to the participants in attendance at meetings or via e-mail or conference call communication. Because alumni efforts have been established to engage and be of service to alumni members of leadership development programs, LLC entered this learning process with the assumption that ideas should be initiated by alumni participants, and that any evolving recommendations would be alumni-driven.

Group Process and Participation

The group which gathered at the initial convening in March 2004 immediately saw the need to share backgrounds about the individual programs they each experienced or coordinate. There were many ideas generated about resources and recommendations that might be pursued that would help create linkages across programs and deeper questions asked about the purpose of doing such work, and the interest and need for alumni to connect beyond their own community of peers. This conversation was rooted in the clear initiative taken to speak candidly about broader needs and challenges in the leadership development field and in individual programs.

Safe Space, Exchange of Information and Candid Conversations

In a process which asks participants to travel beyond the boundaries of their own experience—in their leadership programs or current work—or in any process that asks that members connect in a different way with one another, significant care must be taken to create a safe space for exchange which comes from establishing ground rules and a culture of interaction, building relationships and ensuring that confidential information remains confidential. Participants first engaged in learning about one another on a personal and professional level, set clear boundaries for the culture of this learning community, and agreed that any information to be shared with other programs and the public would be completely transparent but also checked with all participating members for its veracity.

In paying close attention to the development of a community, this group attempted to model the establishment of an alumni community in, and across, leadership development programs. There was close attention paid to not only the content of what was discussed but also the process by which it was discussed as a means of learning about the evolution of alumni and cross-program alumni programs.

Leveraging Existing Work and Building on Strengths

Much of the rationale for beginning such a project, and confirmed by participants in the first phase of this work, saw a clear place for leveraging work that each program was performing, such as connecting alumni regionally or gathering participants for guest speakers and discussions on current issues. Oftentimes—if not always—leadership program alumni efforts are geared toward building a unique experience for their alumni based upon the culture that evolves from their particular community or leadership model. Leadership programs often require very intensive individual and community work, and the bonds that are made among participants can be quite powerful.

However, this can serve as a strength, rather than a liability, for programming and activities that occur after the formal leadership program has concluded. Placing alumni in contact with other leadership program alumni in their area or with their particular field of interest can be of significant service to creating professional and personal bonds which will put leadership development work to good use as fuel for social change. There is also much to be said for sharing resources and learning from other program models, practices and experiences for building a more connected culture of leadership in communities across the country.

More Value Working Together Than Separately

Much of the positive change that occurs in organizations and communities results from various individual and institutional actors working in concert, and the same might be said of the leadership development field. Currently, a great deal of work goes into maintaining separate databases, activities and alumni events for each leadership program. While this might not (or should not change), are there ways in which programs can explore where they might gain time and additional resources from collaborating with other programs. At the very least, would a regular forum provide an opportunity for more collaboration to take place, and deeper learning to occur amongst alumni of leadership programs and their staff?

Challenges of Transcending Boundaries

One of the principal obstacles when considering collaboration among programs of any kind are the institutional silos, structural differences and disciplinary distinctions that make programs unique—and often reluctant to engage with others. There is already so much work to do in catering to one's individual program and alumni effort, and alumni participants have their own very busy lives and might not have the time or see the value in creating a more collaborative cross-program structure. Meg Wheatley has written that "It's not our differences that separate us, it is our judgments about each other that do." And yet, there are some very real differences that create challenges and opportunities for transcending boundaries to form a more cohesive, collaborative culture of leadership—and therefore of social change. Programs develop individual identities and are primarily allied to their own work; foundations sponsor programs with significantly greater resources than non-profit leadership efforts, and though we all might see the power of connecting with others on a social or professional level, our disciplinary affiliations still create illusory walls that we can't—or refuse to—surmount.

Participant Investment and Involvement

Participants in the process have been incredibly engaged while meeting with one another face-to-face, and there have been genuine professional relationships that have formed, even after few opportunities for interaction in person or on-line. Building the community of initial participants was challenging from the start, because of the challenge mentioned above of programs only being able to focus on their own work for either resource or programmatic reasons. Program representatives were unsure of the value of this form of learning and have had mixed success with collaboration in the past.

Participants who did participate also did so out of an authentic belief in the need for this conversation to evolve into a new form of looking at leadership and its purpose. But they each maintain their own very busy professional and personal lives, and it is understandable that this work, while important, was often relegated to the bottom of priority lists among those in the initial group. This needs to be resolved moving forward through clearer facilitation, goal-setting and expectations, and developing a compelling

vision as a group that results in action that benefits everyone's leadership program legacy and current work.

Communication Strategies and Technology

The challenge in creating successful collaboration also revolves around the use of technology for communication and emerging strategies which may or may not promote group involvement. After mixed success with on-line efforts among the group, conference calls yielded higher engagement and a deeper sense of involvement among participants. However, the need for more appropriate communications strategies and technology can only be addressed if the issues around group participation are resolved through a stronger sense of purpose, and clear expectations and goals established from the start.

Linking with other groups pioneering communications involving both on-line and phone strategies, and exploring the possibilities of data networks that would link alumni across programs is a critical next step to both improve feedback and dialogue, and explore what platforms are already in use to engage the larger alumni community in conversations and joint work.

Funding Resources to Continue and Develop Network

While there is a palpable sense of excitement and possibility around creating a richer dialogue among leadership development groups and their alumni, and a general consensus that collaboration would yield more powerful work as leaders move forward in their careers and communities, all of this work requires financial and staff support.

The leadership field faces challenges as priorities among certain funders change or shift, and investigating collaborative opportunities both requires funding and provides an answer to changes in the funding climate over recent years.

The work of the Leadership Learning Community in this arena is moving into a second phase, where learning will continue alongside clearer conversations with leadership development programs around sharing data, opening events to other participants and cooperating around initiatives geared to make an impact on a regional and national level. The degree to which funding can be secured for this effort will determine its ultimate success, as many members of the core group involved with the initial phase of this work cited the need for additional resources and regular staffing of this effort to better link ideas, programs and initiatives.

A network is evolving, and the Leadership Learning Community has played a central role in assisting in its germination and early growth. Available resources will determine the rate at which such connections continue to develop, and the grace with which they unfold.

Building Infrastructure

The presence of adequate funding will allow the development of infrastructure to further guide efforts as the learning around cross-program collaboration deepens, and programs and their alumni convene around more formal means of creating connections. In establishing such an infrastructure, it is critical to not create an entirely new organization, but to provide an organic entity that can serve the needs of leadership development efforts nationally. The Leadership Learning Community has been involved in such infrastructure building efforts as the most recent surge in leadership development has occurred, and provides expertise in convening conversations and in topical areas such as evaluation, theories of leadership, and creating sustainable networks.

As this work proceeds into the next phase, critical questions have already surfaced about how these efforts might fit with or pose a challenge to those groups and collaboratives that are part of the broader leadership development network. The resolution to such questions may well emerge from just such an opportunity for continued learning and collaboration, one which includes greater participation and diversity of perspectives on the goals of leadership development, the role of alumni and the value of collaboration.

Philosophy and Theory of Change: New Perspectives

Over the course of LLC's convening conversations about alumni programming generally, and during the more intensive explorations with alumni and program staff over the past 18 months, there has been a great deal of learning that has emerged that can guide work in this arena as it moves forward. Much of this learning has been around the technical and community-building components of creating successful collaboration among leadership development program alumni. However, there are new perspectives that have emerged around the philosophy and theory of creating such connections as well.

While the initial hope for our work to be alumni-driven is still a core philosophy, there is clearly the need to engage leadership program representatives in this work, as two issues arose in our conversations. First, many alumni are clearly more connected to their current work than to the functioning and decision-making structure of the leadership program with which they are affiliated. There's not a consistent sense that alumni have the authority to make decisions regarding leadership program resources as either that is not their role, they were not presented with this authority, or they feel uncomfortable making those decisions as they are not full-fledged staff members. The other related issue is simply the need to have staff who are connected to programming and resources through a leadership development effort participate in the planning process, both to provide authority and a realistic sense of what is possible given organizational plans or limitations.

Co-evolving Efforts and Coordinating Strategies

While much work in the leadership development field around cross-program collaboration is still in its nascent stages, there are efforts that are evolving around the country. The Leadership Learning Community hopes to continue or forge connections with groups such as the Environmental Leadership Collaborative, the Public Health Institute, and the National Alumni Network initiated by the Open Society Institute and a variety of public interest law leadership programs. These particular networks, that tend to be associated around specific issue areas, are both ideal for initiating efforts within a particular discipline and can reveal further lessons around the opportunities and challenges inherent in collaborative work.

Recommendations for Next Steps

As this work moves forward, there are several recommendations which would serve to create the most powerful foundation from which to develop further learning opportunities and a basis for real collaboration among programs:

1. Clarity around purpose and value, leading to a co-designed, well-evolved theory of change model.
2. Structure clear expectations for participation of learning partners.
3. Diversify partners to include both alumni and leadership program staff representatives.
4. Clearly defined project or projects on both a local-regional level and/or via disciplinary areas such as health, environment, public affairs, and youth.
5. Increased membership-expand core group to 20 for next phase of collaborative planning and work
6. Proposals to foundations to link efforts and support further learning. Developing a partnership between leadership programs and funders that would support a network of leadership programs striving to collaborate, share resources and engage in conversation about evaluation of their work, the results of leadership development, and prospects for ongoing engagement of alumni and others in social change.