

Leadership Learning Community California Bridge Leader Forum

Sponsors:

Funding Partners: The California Endowment, The California Wellness Foundation, The James Irvine Foundation, The Levi Strauss Foundation, and The Walter and Evelyn Haas, Jr. Fund

Project Coordination: The Leadership Learning Community

Facilitation: The Bridge Institute, a program Fusion Partnerships, Inc.,

The Gathering:

At the May 2000 Council of Foundations Meeting held in Los Angeles a panel of leaders spoke about Los Angeles in the aftermath of the riots and the critical need for more leaders who could bridge traditional boundaries of race, class, gender and sector. Craig Mc Garvey of the James Irvine Foundation responded to this call by asking if other funders present would be interested in getting together to explore the ways in which they could support bridge leadership. Representatives from The California Wellness Foundation, The California Endowment Foundation, Levi Strauss Foundation and Walter and Evelyn Haas Jr. Fund expressed strong interest. The funding team chose the Leadership Learning Community to organize learning and facilitate recommendations.

All agreed that hearing from recognized bridge leaders was an important first step for developing effective strategies to support bridgework. Each of the foundation representatives recommended 5 leaders respected for their bridge leadership. Fifteen leaders took time from very demanding schedules, some traveling from northern California to join in a conversation about why they are called to this work, what it takes to do this work and how this work could be better supported. Paul Harris of The Bridge Institute was chosen to facilitate based on his knowledge and experience in this field and on April 16th at the California Endowment, the conversation began.

The Conversation:

The conversation began with a question that arose from the membership, “what keeps us up at night, what gnaws at the pit of our guts in relationship to this work of bridging?” The question struck a deep chord in the membership. In many ways this group represents those of our community who hold the tensions between hope and desperation, between wealth and poverty, between difference and commonality, between faith and futility for our community. These are the people who do stay up nights working to make a difference and wondering if anything can really change.

The response from the group began with a story of a young man who was on parole and doing all right, in fact better than all right. He ended up back inside for a parole violation. When asked what happened, he said “I was fine until they pulled out that screen. I ran. They weren’t going to do that to me.” The screen refers to a device used by the LAPD to cover suspects so that they can be strip searched in public, in full view of the eyes of their community. This story served as a symbol of the assaults on the dignity of our young people of color that make it virtually impossible for them to stay out of the system once in, and all too easy to get in. The story unlocked a powerful and honest exchange that carried the group through the remaining time.

The offerings and stories from the members seemed to fall within six related areas framed by the following questions:

1. What are we battling?
2. What is the vision for change?
3. To what are we accountable, and what is the responsibility of others in this work?
4. Where is the spirit of connection and the connection to spirit within this work?
5. How do we broaden and sustain this work?
6. How do we broaden and sustain ourselves?

Though the origin of the effort was to define bridge leadership and identify if there was a common set of characteristics amongst bridge leaders that could be developed in others, the coalescing of the group may have indirectly offered the answer to this while at the same time moving well beyond the question. The balance of this article will explore each of these questions and will conclude with the recommendations that arose within the group as a potential direction for the effort to expand bridgework in California.

What are we Battling?

The dialogue revealed the devastating isolation that is increasingly a byproduct of our social system. Members mourned the individual and collective acceptance of a system which perpetuates a huge class of “untouchables” or “walking wounded” that range from our Black and Hispanic male youth to those condemned to the shelters or finding shelter under our bridges. There is a predictable “set-up” that channels our young people into the prison system. In the words of one member, “We have made a choice in the ‘New L.A.’ to leave a whole part of the community behind.” The effects of these choices have resulted in a “numbness” that is depressing and immobilizing families and communities from action. Members also spoke of the increasing disparity of the health and educational systems that parallel other symptoms of disenfranchisement.

The awareness of the group moved beyond the economic issues faced by the poorer members of the community to acknowledge that even where poverty is decreasing or not even present in parts of the community, “misery is up.” This is evidenced by the rage and the “low moan” that can be heard throughout the community. There were additional reminders that the pain is not only experienced by communities of color but by poor and working class Whites as well.

There were calls to recognize that the issues faced in California connect to those on a national and global level. There is growing international awareness of the need for building bridges and healing the wounds of “our common pain.” These efforts need to link with this global consciousness. Balancing the gravity of the current condition was a hopeful recognition that there is a perceivable “Hunger” for connection, belonging, and true civic life – a longing for relationship across the lines that isolate us. Members offered concrete examples of bridging in the ethnic media, amongst movements of young people and across generations. There was a call to acknowledge the realities of what is positive, and to support expansion of these efforts.

There was also an awareness of how much aloneness seems to be part of the nature of bridgework. The isolation of those who span social and cultural boundaries is strongly felt in relation to our communities of origin. Deep resentment is experienced as we attempt to build bridges that connect our people to others. “The further you push the boundary of race, the more you get your butt kicked.” “Taking on our own communities is dangerous business.”

What is the vision for change?

The question of vision was a theme throughout the gathering. The first question of the day was “For what?” calling the group to ask itself *WHY*, in the broadest sense, it was gathered. Under the mantle of vision, a variety of questions and seeds of a vision emerged. There was recognized that the history of leadership in change movements has often been from the stance of “against” and that as leaders themselves, there was a need to move beyond “againstness” towards a clear sense of vision. “If not against, then what are we for?” Members had participated in movements from Student Non Violence Coordinating Committee, California migrant labor rights, the Black Panthers and others. These members articulated the need to reexamine the basic premises of their activity towards change. They called for a broader collective “visioning of systemic solutions” that made no assumptions that what they held strongly to in the past was actually True. That all of our assumptions needed to be unpacked and held up to scrutiny in light of the world we currently live in. There was an understanding that what would likely be found through the process of examination was a very stark picture, one that individuals and justice advocacy groups may have refused to own up to in the past.

There was much work around the traps of the current models of change that many have accepted while knowing at our core that they are flawed. “We are prisoners of our own orthodoxies.” This discussion focused primarily on the scale of thinking and action. Non-profit action has been contained in very small efforts that are painted as models or pilots with no system of bringing the efforts to a scale that would actually create systemic change. The call from the group was to take the “time to do the heavy thinking” combined with resources from all sectors to bring the systemic solutions to scale.

One story offered to the group was a quantum shift in thinking on health conditions in Europe. Futile attempts were made to develop new medications and treatments for proliferating diseases in the population at the time. The situation only worsened. The solution is only found through “finding the other thing”, that which lies beneath the surface of the symptom. In the case of the story offered, that other thing was open sewage running throughout the populated system of the cities. When the sewage was attended to, the disease rates dropped dramatically.

There was a call to address the source of the current social pain. One member offered that it could very possibly be the denial of our connection one another. Seed images emerged of a true “multicultural democracy”, “connecting the dots” that stand between those we serve and true health, “reversing the balance” of institutionalized denial of the advances that have been made in the arena of human and civil rights, and recounting these strides with the young people who have been deprived of the connection to the history of this struggle and its success. There was a call for connecting to why we are involved in this work, and developing a real ideological platform upon which to build a collective vision that leaves no one out of the picture. There was a plea to articulate what this group believes about the categorization of people and how we as a society move beyond tolerance to cherishing each other. The members called for letting go of orthodoxy in favor of “orthopraxis”, the act of doing and being our values rather than being trapped by our conventions.

To what are we accountable, and what is the responsibility of others in this work?

Accountability was a thread that ran through the entire session, particularly where it related to personal responsibility. Members stressed self-examination and the examination of the

institutions the members had created or were a part as critical to creating change. It was clearly stated by one member when he asked, “If I died, would my work have mattered?” At the level of the broader system of not-for-profit organizations, the question arose, “Are we the fifth column of the corporate world, fed by the foundations” to perpetuate the status quo?

The cry for accountability extended from self-examination to a call for all sectors to undergo an inventory of how they perpetuate injustice, and how they could better support positive social movement. First among these was urging foundations to look at how their practices move the attention Executive Directors and programs away from their passion and purpose toward chasing the dollar. There was an expressed desire to see the faith community and spiritual leaders to amplify their voices for change, and for others to recognize these faith-based community leaders as allies who offer skills and experience with successful track records in the broader landscape of change.

It is widely known that all “points of light” can only handle 15% of the problem at best, and this number will never decrease because of the compounding impacts of poverty. The members called upon governmental systems to step up to the plate, and for the citizenry to hold our elected and non-elected officials to the task of bringing what we know to be effective change strategies to scale. The next level cry for accountability was to “this county’s predominant culture to rethink the capital obsession.” There too was a request for the members of the circle to reexamine their own models of leadership and consider “Listening, learning and then leading” as a basis for both action and accountability.

Where is the spirit of connection and the connection to spirit within this work?

The sentiment expressed by the membership recognized that bridge “relationships are seeded by need, but cultivated and sustained by meaningfulness.” It is often a crisis or battle that initiates the connection, but it is the commitment to nurturing the connection over time that amplifies the trust and secures the relationship enabling the gifts of the union to flow freely and continuously. The increased isolation of our subcultures has created a powerful longing for real, “high-touch” connections. One member likened it to the pervasiveness of electronic communication and in the midst of all that cold and distant information, the power of “receiving a hand written letter.” She echoed the compelling plea heard from the voices in the community, particularly from those early and late in life, “I need you to come back.”

As more was shared amongst the members the dialogue moved to many recognizing the place of spiritual connection to their daily work. This was coupled with an acknowledgement of the gifts offered through the gathering. “I am humbled by all who are here – I am humbled by what I don’t know.” It was expressed that those who experienced this connection to spirit must give themselves the permission to “give voice to what is spiritual.” Regardless of race, ethnicity, culture or religion, “we are all spiritual brothers and sisters.”

How do we broaden and sustain this work?

The urgency for continuity and sustainability was another thread that ran through the gathering. Coupled with the doubts and question of the efficacy of the struggle for justice and connection across lines of difference was a recognition that the fruit of this work will not be seen in our lifetimes, and that the next generation of bridge leaders needs to be cultivated now.

A story offered by one member simultaneously provides a model for bridgework and succession. One member was working with a youth who exhibited talent with his hands but needed direction and mentorship to navigate through the negative influences that surrounded him. He brought him to his Korean car mechanic, who he described as “not a man of few words, but a man of no words.” He asked him if he would allow the young man to work with him. After a thought-filled silence the shop owner said, “I will teach him everything I know.” The power of this story is in the embedded assumption that all three were connected as family beyond the differences of race and ethnicity which none of them shared – even beyond the casual relationship one might share with someone who services your car. What was expressed through this act is that we are directly responsible for each other’s well being. The other lesson this offers is that we can actively create links of bridging that build generational continuity for this work. “Knowing we belong to each other is the water supply” that feeds the well that will nourish healing for future generations.

Much of the conversation centered on “succession planning” – strategically reaching out to give everything that we know to the next generation of bridge leaders. There was also a recognition that the river flows both ways, that there is reciprocity in mentor teams. There already exist young people who have taken up this work who know more than we will ever know about crossing cultures. Their feet are planted in the soil that is already changed from a generation of tilling. They begin in a more diverse and more mingled place than we, and just as their relationship to technology is more fluid and natural than ours, so to is their ability to move across the boundaries and conventions of our generation. There was repeated mention of the disconnection from these younger leaders. The fact that none were present at the meeting exemplified the need for reaching out to these allies. From the perspective of “elders” of our community the need to share the history of this work with the next generation was significant.

Existing pockets of bridge leaders were identified in the new labor movements accessing broader constituencies and developing partnerships and strategic alliances to battle injustice. The ethnic media were also cited as developing powerful coalitions across these lines of difference and creating permeable boundaries that allow for the creation of new and dynamic relationships through vehicles of their work and blending audiences.

How do we broaden and sustain ourselves?

The session provided a taste of the power and possibilities of gathering those committed to this work. The nature of bridgework often strands the bridgeworker leaving her/him isolated between the worlds across which they travel – never providing a place to rest, reflect or rejuvenate. This reality was an undertone that could be heard throughout the gathering. It was expressed as a longing to continue to create the “space to be” and talk honestly “beyond the judgment.” There was an expressed desire to provide a context to “struggle with each other – healthy engagement” that encourages self-examination, accountability and experimentation. There was a call to share with colleagues who would understand without basic explanations, resources, experiences, challenges, and triumphs. . There was a desire to move the dialogue to a much higher level of complexity that might get at the “other thing” – the systemic understanding that might yield the points of leverage that could generate “the quantum leap.” Finally, there was a desire to explore the possibilities of collective action and linkages with each other that could give birth to new possibilities for change. The members were asking for time – “time to balance experience with reflection.”

Summary:

The group was asked to share the longings that emerged for them from the process of gathering. These desires converged around the following themes.

Continue to gather and expand the circle, particularly including the voice of younger people, creating an intergenerational exchange of wisdom, and to bring to the table the “hurt and fearing voices.”

Increase the support for the bridgework being done, in particular, there was a call expressing that “foundations need more courage to support unlikely and risky ventures.” There was a call to create the possibility of bringing the work “to scale.”

Drastically increased accountability to:

- ⊖ Turn ‘leave no child behind’ from a slogan to a systemic reality. Break our own codes of silence
- ⊖ Move beyond our own orthodoxies
- ⊖ Document and share examples of developing bridge leadership including principles, action and application.

Amplify the voice of this work to others, and share this set of skills.

Seed a vision for a “wide, progressive movement.”

Ascertain whether it is “fair and feasible” for society to ask these and other bridge leaders to teach the next generation everything they know. If so, how?

Determine how foundations and other resource vehicles can best to support bridge leadership development and expanding the work of bridging.