

Leadership Learning Community California Leadership Development Programs Forum

Participants: American Leadership Forum, Bridge Institute, Center of Excellence in Women's Health, Coro Fellowship Program, Eureka Communities, Groundswell Movement, Healthcare Forum Fellowship, James Irvine Foundation, Joshua Venture, Kellogg Fellows Leadership Alliance, Levi Strauss Foundation, Sierra Health Foundation, Women's Health Leadership Program.

The Gathering:

The Leadership Learning Community invited leadership development programs in the Bay Area to meet for the purpose of understanding bridge leadership as a critical leadership competency. Participants were asked to come to the gathering prepared to share their program's understanding of bridge leadership and the skills required to cultivate bridge competency, design and delivery strategies intended to develop bridge skills, and an assessment of their successes and difficulties in attempts to cultivate and support bridge leadership.

The Conversation:

The dialogue was informal and fluid, allowing the members of the group to explore a range of topics related to bridgework. The information from the focus session responded to six basic questions:

- θ What is Bridgework?
- θ What are the potential arenas for this work?
- θ What is "bridge leadership?"
- θ What challenges does this work face?
- θ What opportunities exist for amplifying this work?
- θ What resources are necessary to expand this work?

The following organizes the data through these questions, though the information was received in a non-linear form. There is a natural progress that is captured in the flow of this document though some of the information jumped around a bit during the session. The group seemed to move from the surface of the subject matter, to significant depth and subtlety in the dialogue as the session progressed.

What is Bridgework?

The setting chosen to hold this dialogue was an office suite with walls of windows overlooking the San Francisco Bay. The scene was dominated by a striking view of the Bay Bridge, which set the tone for the dialogue, provided regular occasion for rich metaphor throughout the session. When asked, "what is bridgework," this compelling image offered the first references.

The members seemed to identify themselves as bridge workers, speaking from the perspective of those engaged in this work, though that was not explicit in the gathering of this group nor assumed by the conveners. The group spoke of bridges being built from both sides toward the center, and that it spans chasms and rifts in our community. A bridge has a purpose; it carries things from one place to another. The group was quick to point out the differences in bridging cultures from bridging the landscape. This bridge building requires not knowing the result. At times it is intentional, but it is often an accidental byproduct of the work the members engage in.

An exchange ensued that began to raise the inherent tensions present in bridgework – tensions of difference and similarity, bridge work as a method to achieve something else, or as an end unto itself. There was a tension present in reaching for language to even describe bridgework while at the same time the members communicating a collective understanding of something difficult to articulate. Bridgework was described as communication, building knowledge of others differences and similarities. It was called “empathy” – feeling and talking about pain. It was referred to as “synergy,” combining communities and coming to collective understanding without losing the identity of the individual cultures being blended

The dialogue jumped to a broader level beginning with the idea of creating or repairing “Home,” linking the scattered pieces... “Coming into our own power as a global community. The job is “teaching to the future.” “There is spirituality in bridgework.”

What are the potential arenas for this work?

The group did not dwell on specific avenues for bridgework, the discussion remained fairly conceptual, however, the group articulated that bridging is needed across the various sectors of society, public, private, and not-for-profit. The group stated the need for bridging amongst bridge builders, and across the efforts that they are engaged within. There is a need to bridge or heal broken relationships in the community and a powerful need to bridge across generations. The work was seen in progressive, concentric rings beginning with the personal, and moving through interpersonal, organizational and culture divides.

What is Bridge Leadership?

Members spoke first of burden of bridging – its requirement to alienate ones self in order to move between divided aspects of our culture. They referred to the risk-taking required to do bridgework, and the need to reach for relationships with “unlikely partners.” The group also diagramed a spectrum of resources necessary to bridging from “creating space for intimacy,” through causing others to “do the right thing through tough love.” In order for the bridge leader to do this work s/he must be willing to open his or her own vulnerability to others. This process of revealing opens the trust and respect in the midst of challenge, and creates the opportunity for genuine appreciation and honoring to take place.

This began to emerge the notion of power in relation to bridgework, and planted the seeds for an exploration of an emerging model that offers a different relationship to power. One member illuminated this reality through a story of a process that was stalled until those in the power position within the relationship openly shared their vulnerability. The response from those being served was, “Now that I can see your pain, I can trust you.” The block was removed. The group also asserted that bridge leaders must “hold their own communities accountable.” “Bridge leaders gain power through empowering others and educating themselves.”

What challenges does this work face?

There was a dialogue on the notion of sustainability related to bridgework, and the tension between building and sustaining bridges. This discussion also raised the relationship of this question to the question of whether bridgework was a tool to achieve a specific end, or a goal. The latter would call for an examination of the sustainability of the bridge relationships that had been established; the need for sustainability of the former would be fully dependant upon the nature of specific end desired.

As mentioned earlier, there was call for the creation of “new models of change.” Questions and notions of the nature of these new models began to surface. One member asked, “What is the new definition of power?” “Relationships built not on respect and mutuality quickly become paternalistic.” There were calls to look at the existing power imbalances, even the notion of who we most often require to do the heavy lifting in the bridge building process being those that have historically had the fewest economic resources. “The conditions are different at the two ends of the bridge.” The group called for the whole community to be fully represented in this work as allies, and not to let the responsibility fall to those who are in the most pain to solve the issues. There was a reminder that community healing requires ongoing work. There was also recognition that it is much easier to destroy a bridge than to build one. The recent relationship of the United States with china was cited as a global example of this.

There were urgings to undergo self-examination. “How do we perpetuate the status quo?” “The problem we see is not the problem we are solving.” The group was called to look at how turfs undermine this work. It was stated that many things can weaken “the capacity of the bridge to hold the necessary weight” and that it is critical to develop understanding and consciousness through introspection to maintain and expand this capacity. This raised the question or challenge for this group to examine whether they should be about recruiting bridge leaders, or developing the bridge leadership capacity of those they convene.

What opportunities exist for amplifying this work?

The members thought it important to understand the “base structures” that support bridge work, and to begin to identify places to join in the work of bridge building. The

group also wished to explore what emerging new models for practice were out there and what vehicles existed to share these models.

Broader questions emerged such as “What is the new thing we are creating?” as did a new image – a new metaphor of the birthing process as a way of re-visioning this work. “It is the feminine side of humanity that we are calling” to establish a new way of leading change. “Creating safe spaces to grow.” This recasting of the way in which the group was carrying the work shifted the nature of the conversation. Both the tone and the content of the gathering moved to a very different place. The group took up “the power of forgiveness” as essential to this work – the work in South Africa around truth and reconciliation was raised as an example of this emerging spirit of bridgework. The members called for “healing the heart of diversity” through “working our own stuff – doing the inner work.” The conversation moved from the levels of work described earlier to seeing this work in the context of all that has come before and all that will come after. One member described each individual is a “micro-dot” in this immeasurable landscape, simultaneously insignificant as an isolated individual, but containing the potential power of the whole to the degree that one remains within, and impacts the “flow of the connections.” In other words, this work is about recognizing the interrelationship of us all, each having equal potential to effect change. The group articulated the goal of bridgework as responding to “the need to create a better world.” One member articulated what seemed the sentiment of the larger group, “Thank you for awakening the spirit in me.”

What resources are needed to expand this work?

The members said that there was a need to draw on intuition, dollars, tools and skills to expand the capacity for bridging. There is a need for work at an individual and group level to build these capacities. The group stated that this work was about both personal transformation and the humanizing of the oppressive systems that exist.

There is a need for teaching, and a process and context to carry it forward, beginning with an examination of assumptions – “where are we beginning?” The teaching needs to address skill development and experiences for transformation as well as systems thinking and social change strategy. Bridge leaders need to build their capacity to respond to the “horizontal violence” that perpetuates the existing structures. Training in “naming/truth telling” and developing the courage and risk necessary to action is needed to move this work to the next level.

The language of this work was raised repeatedly as a challenge. “How do you frame this so that others will understand?” “How do we define this work” to develop the necessary support? There was a call for resources to help to “build the base” and create a “pipeline” for spreading this work and the understanding of it. One member suggested linking this work to asset-based thinking which is growing as a recognized approach to organizing and community change efforts.

The group saw itself as both a potential laboratory for developing some of the above, and a resource for others to develop through the vast affiliation network represented by the members. The group articulated their own need for “renewal and sustaining activity” that is offered through just the kind of convening represented in that gathering. They identified the need to get together as necessary to support each other’s efforts – “all for one.” There was a challenge expressed of recruiting bridge leaders into the leadership programs.

There was a powerful call to move beyond the “outcome obsession” to see the “value of doing nothing but being present.” There was an identified need to “share the framework” to build support for these kind of activities, particularly in relation to raising the consciousness of foundations to support “people sustaining” work that develops the social and intellectual capital of bridge leaders. The group also recognizes that they need to prioritize taking the personal/professional time necessary to develop themselves and broaden their perspectives. Generally, the group indicated that support is needed to make this kind of work a priority.