Cutting Through the Complexity: A Roadmap for Effective Collaboration

By David Ehrlichman, David Sawyer, & Matthew Spence Mar. 15, 2018

Collaboration is appealing in concept but challenging in practice. While extensive resources—including ones from the Community Tool Box, The Intersector Project, and NewNetworkLeader.org—exist online to support collaborative efforts, the fact remains that we human beings are simply not very good at making "we" work. And yet, most changemakers today acknowledge that to address the complex social and environmental challenges we face we must learn how to collaborate—across organizations, sectors, networks, and differences. Effective collaboration must become a reality, not just an aspiration.

Most of us are familiar with the challenges of collaboration. Personality conflicts get in the way. Participants avoid difficult conversations. People are too formal and polite. We don't take time to deliberately build trust. We don't understand leadership in a collaborative context. And we fail to devote resources to essential coordination functions so that collaborations can truly flourish.

Building on the work of many others, we have developed a roadmap that cuts through the complexity. We have tested and refined this framework over years and across domains, and we tend to apply it in the spirit of statistician George Box, who famously said, "All models are wrong. Some models are useful." We have found it to be useful and hope others will too.

The Five Cs: a roadmap for effective collaboration

While the *why* (the focus) and the *what* (the activities) of collaborations differ widely, the *how* (the process) is remarkably consistent. Launching and sustaining effective collaborations and networks requires that we pay constant attention to five activities:

- Clarifying purpose
- Convening the right people
- Cultivating trust
- Coordinating existing activities
- Collaborating for systems impact

These activities help us navigate the personal, political, cultural, and organizational dynamics inherent in collaborative efforts. They are never fully complete, and they are not strictly linear. They inevitably loop back and forth on each other, and require revisiting throughout any collaborative effort. While it's impossible to know exactly what's going to happen until people actually get in a room together, the purpose of the roadmap is to outline the "deliberate" aspect of the collaborative process—the aspect that, to a meaningful degree, can be planned and facilitated. Here, we outline *why* each of these activities is important, *what* tactics can be applied to address each one, and *how* to put the framework into practice.

1. Clarifying purpose

Though a collaboration's purpose—its reason for being—can evolve over time, an initial high-level purpose statement is essential to get people in the room. As leadership expert Simon Sinek said in his well-known TED talk, "Start with why."

The purpose should be ambitious enough to inspire, clear enough to identify the right participants, and specific enough to focus the work of the collaboration. Collaborations can be bounded around an issue, geography, population, outcome, or combination of the above. For example, the RE-AMP network's high-level purpose is to "reduce global warming pollution 80 percent by 2050 across eight Midwestern states." The high-level purpose of the California Summer Matters Network is to "increase and improve the summer learning opportunities for all children and youth across the state."

Clarifying purpose also entails making meaningful sense of the issue at hand. Albert Einstein famously said that if he had an hour to save the world, he would spend the first 55 minutes understanding the problem, and the last 5 minutes solving it. This process is what the design community calls "sensemaking."

Sensemaking involves surfacing diverse perspectives, developing a shared understanding of the actors and organizations involved, and making sense of external trends and forces. It also involves understanding the local context, decoding the history of the place or system, identifying political and power dynamics, and unveiling hardwired assumptions.

Through this exploration of the system, participants begin to acknowledge their differences, while also recognizing the perspectives they share and the values they hold in common. This becomes a foundation on which participants can begin to act and eventually tackle the more-difficult conversations about issues they don't agree on.

"The scarcest resource is not oil, metals, clean air, capital, labor, or technology," systems theorist Donella Meadows once said. "It is our willingness to listen to each other and learn from each other and to seek the truth rather than seek to be right."
The Santa Cruz Mountains Stewardship Network (SCMSN) is a region-wide, cross-sector collaboration of 19 organizations that are working together to improve land stewardship in the 500,000-acre region of California between San Francisco to the Monterey Bay. Participating organizations include federal agencies, state and county parks departments, land trusts, nonprofit organizations, the region's largest timber company, research institutes, special districts, and the area's largest Native American tribal band.

The network initially formed in late 2014 when a number of large public and private land owners and managers realized that although their organizations were all committed to caring for the region's natural resources, they weren't working together on a scale that would be necessary for both the natural and human systems to thrive in the area. They knew they needed a collaborative approach, but they also knew that social fragmentation (the area had a history of tensions and mistrust) would limit progress.

Before the collaboration's first meeting, we held in-person conversations with more 20 potential participants. Because these conversations were confidential, participants shared their honest thoughts, fears, concerns, and hopes for the collaboration. As expected, we heard concerns about hidden agendas and learned that participants had very different priorities in their day-to-day work. However, despite significant differences of opinion, there was also a meaningful amount of common ground. Participants generally agreed

that effective stewardship required a "mosaic approach" that would accommodate a variety of land uses. They recognized the value of sustainable timber harvesting, and were aware of threats from real estate development and climate change. Importantly, everyone agreed that the region, as well as the work of each organization, would benefit from stronger connections and more collaborative relationships.

At the first convening, we anonymously reflected back what we learned to the whole group, acknowledging differences while highlighting areas of agreement. As a result, participants were able to begin crafting a high-level purpose statement just a few hours into their first gathering, thereby clarifying the collaboration's reason for existing and charting a collaborative path forward.

Over the course of their first two convenings, participants also completed a historical analysis of the region, examined external trends and forces, considered future scenarios, and identified shared values. This sensemaking process helped the network evolve its high-level purpose statement into a memorandum of understanding, which all 19 members ratified at the end of their third convening. (For more details on the first two years of the network's formation, see the case study here.)

2. Convening the right people

Convening the "right" people means bringing together whoever is needed to tackle the challenge at hand. Although there is no single correct answer to who to include, we agree with Marvin Weisbord and Sandra Janoff, creators of the "Future Search" planning process, who write: "The more far-reaching your objective, the greater your need for a broad selection of diverse players." According to Weisbord and Janoff, this includes people with:

- Authority to act, such as decision-making responsibility in an organization or community
- Resources, such as contacts, time, or money
- Expertise in the issues under consideration
- Information about the topic that no others have
- A stake in the outcome and an ability to speak to the consequences

We would add two more. First, the "right people" include those who can listen deeply and consider diverse perspectives. As author Margaret Wheatley wrote, "Real listening always brings people closer together."

Second, the "right people" are simply those who stay engaged. Over the course of any collaborative effort, it is normal—even expected—that some people will leave the initiative, and others will join as the collaboration evolves. In effective collaborations, the right people show up, stick around, and follow through.

Getting the right people in the room doesn't necessarily mean issuing an open call to everyone who may have a stake in the effort. Open invitations are often motivated as much by the fear of appearing exclusive as they are by convening a broad selection of participants who need to be involved. Researchers at the University of Colorado Denver's Center on Network Science have found that collaborations that begin and grow through "thoughtful inclusion" tend to exhibit greater long-term sustainability and effectiveness. Rather than engaging with all possible participants, thoughtful inclusion begins by recruiting a core group of committed individuals and organizations, even one by one, to clarify an initial purpose and plan of approach. As the initial group develops deep trust and cohesion, it invites additional participants to add necessary capacities and resources, and to increase the collaboration's reach.

3. Cultivating trust

In our view, trust is the single most important ingredient of effective collaboration. Enduring relationships are not a "nice to have"; they are a "need to have." The web of relationships that develops between participants is the invisible structure that makes collaborations work. Trust, however, has become something of a buzzword. Everyone says it's important, but failing to cultivate trusting relationships is where most collaborative efforts fall short. Google recently spent millions of dollars and thousands of hours to figure out why some teams stumble while others soar—an initiative called Project Aristotle. It reviewed a half-century of academic studies and studied hundreds of teams, struggling to find evidence for the common assumption that the composition of a team makes a difference. "We looked at 180 teams from all over the company," said Abeer Dubey, a project leader, in a *New York Times* Magazine article about the initiative. "We had lots of data, but there was nothing showing that a mix of specific personality types or skills or backgrounds made any difference. The 'who' part of the equation didn't seem to matter."

Google ultimately found that high-performing teams have high levels of "psychological safety," as measured by an equality of turn-taking in team discussions, as well as high degrees of social sensitivity, or group members' ability to read each other's social signals. Psychological safety, as defined by Harvard Business School professor Amy Edmondson, is a "shared belief held by members of a team that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking," and "a sense of confidence that the team will not embarrass, reject, or punish someone for speaking up ... It describes a team climate characterized by interpersonal trust and mutual respect in which people are comfortable being themselves."

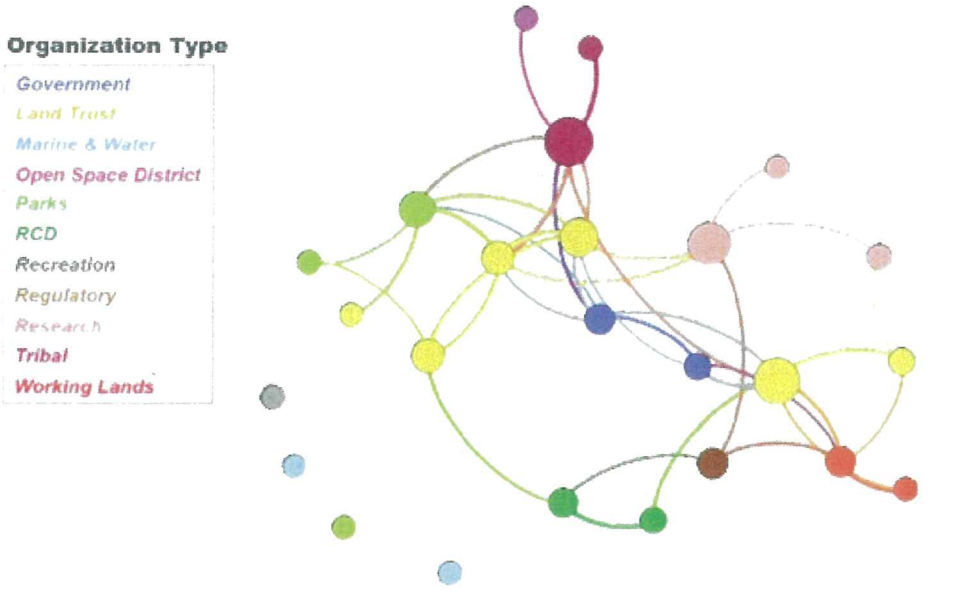
In other words, people work together most effectively when relationships are strong and authentic. When they listen deeply to others and feel free to speak their minds. When they value diversity of thought and experience, and can tap into the unique gifts that each person brings. When there is a high degree of mutual respect and, in a word, *trust*.

Trust is not the same thing as "liking" or "agreement." To work together, people don't need to like each other. And they shouldn't agree with each other on every issue. When we talk about trust, we mean trust for action—what we call "trust for impact." The type of trusting relationships that can hold the tension through difficult conversations, engage in generative conflict, find a slice of common ground, and make collaboration a reality, not just an aspiration. We've also found it's possible to build trust more quickly than most people think, as long as you go about it deliberately.
For the Santa Cruz Mountains Stewardship Network, we conducted a social network analysisjust before the network's first convening in March 2015, and every six months thereafter, to track and support the growth of these relationships. This data helped us to strategically "weave" connections across the network to maximize its potential for collaboration.

The network maps below illustrate this work. Each circle, or "node," is a leader in the network. The colors indicate the organization type they represent, and each of the lines connecting the nodes signifies a personal or professional relationship between them. The network was initially fragmented, as seen in the first map, particularly in terms of the connections between different types of organizations.

In the second map, you can see that after only two convenings—during which we deliberately took time to establish a foundational level of trust between previously disconnected participants—the system became much more interconnected. Even if the network had never met again after September 2015, the region was now much more resilient than it was before the network formed. There were new and deeper relationships, stronger flows of information, and greater recognition of the opportunities for collaboration between organizations.

Santa Cruz Mts Stewardship Network, Mar '15



Source: Converge For Impact

Santa Cruz Mts Stewardship Network, Sept '15

Source: Converge For Impact

Five Steps to Building an Effective Impact Network

In *The New Network Leader* series, seven network entrepreneurs—leaders at the heart of some of today's most sophisticated, large-scale solutions to the world's social problems—have shared their accounts of catalyzing networks to create powerful social change. Although these networks take many forms, each has required consistent engagement with four network principles—*trust, not control; humility, not brand; node, not hub; and mission, not organization*—as well as the following fundamental process:

- **Clarify purpose.**
- **Convene the right people.**
- **Cultivate trust.**
- **Coordinate actions.**
- **Collaborate generously.**

These steps don't necessarily happen in order; leaders must reaffirm them throughout a network's formation and evolution. Consistently engaging with this process helps ensure that the four principles get baked into impact networks as they emerge.

Here is a look at each step, with examples from the network entrepreneurs who contributed to the series.

Clarify purpose. Clarifying a network's purpose—its reason for being—is an ongoing endeavor. It must be clear enough initially to identify the right partners and encourage them to meet. As these individuals and groups convene, the network should refine its purpose. Purpose must also be ambitious enough to require that early network members engage those they would rather ignore or compete with. That's one reason Dreams InDeed uses the word "dream" to drive its work rather than "good idea," "mission," or even "purpose."

Clarifying purpose requires sense-making: mapping the system, examining the problem from diverse perspectives, finding shared values, and recognizing external forces. It also requires understanding the local context, including the history of the place or system, related efforts, political and power dynamics, and hardwired assumptions. By clarifying purpose and context, each network member becomes keenly aware that they are just one among many participants working across the system. And in the process, they begin to understand and embrace the network principle of acting as a *node, not hub.*

The Graustein Memorial Fund, for example, convened its network of collaboratives across 52 Connecticut cities and towns to help design an early-childhood system that would work for all. But before it could reach its goal, the

network needed to figure out *why* Connecticut was achieving less-than-optimal results for young children. It embraced systems thinking, explored hard issues, held real conversations, and collectively identified racism and economic inequity as the primary drivers that contribute to poor education outcomes for children across the state.

Convene the right people. The "right people": 1) collectively represent all parts of the system, 2) have the ability to get things done, and 3) are willing to cross boundaries and work with people who may have very different perspectives and priorities. This includes everyone impacted by the issue, even people you may not want to work with. Real progress on complex or "wicked" problems requires uncommon coordination and collaboration across divides.

Seattle's "Grand Bargain" on affordable housing, for example, emerged only after the Mayor invited 28 community leaders—who collectively represented all parts of the housing system—to the table. This diverse group of stakeholders showed a "willingness to let go" and work together despite contrasting priorities.

Sustainable Conservation convened stakeholders from across the nursery and environmental system to drastically reduce the number of invasive plants in California. This "PlantRight" network developed a shared understanding of diverse perspectives, built trust, and began to collaborate. Ultimately, the network achieved effective and sustained results in large part because nursery business leaders offered a more-credible message and helped educate their peers on the value of the program. The prominent national ornamental plant grower Altman Plants, for example, introduced PlantRight to The Home Depot buyers and helped secure The Home Depot's commitment to not sell invasive plants in California.

Cultivate trust. Sustained, authentic relationships are the foundation of all successful collaborative efforts. Cultivating trust intentionally, rather than passively, provides the basis for a culture in which network participants embrace the network principle of *trust, not control*. When a network runs on trust, its potential for scaling impact drastically increases. As Eric Heitz and Barbara Wagner from the Energy Foundation write, "The trust and fluid communication that can move ideas quickly comes through human relationships."

Building trust doesn't mean that people have to like each other or agree, but it does mean they have to be willing to engage in authentic and sometimes unpleasant conversations about the things that divide and challenge them, including gender, race, and power. The objective is to create *trust for impact*. This specific type of trust enables diverse actors to hold the tension through difficult conversations, find a slice of common ground, and work together, despite organizational differences and personal disagreements. Especially in volatile, emerging contexts, trust for impact must be rooted not just in shared purpose, but also in shared values and a shared understanding of how to behave and treat each other when disagreements inevitably arise.

The nonprofit Interise has embraced a relational approach to scale its mission of economic revitalization, growing a network of trust-based partnerships to rapidly scale and distribute its award winning StreetWise 'MBA' program to more than 60 low-income communities (and counting) across the United States. Interise CEO Jean Horstman says, "From program to network—it's all about trust. Once established, trust is resilient. Unlike a transactional model, where money can come and go, trusted relationships stay put."

Coordinate actions. By identifying and coordinating work that is already happening, participants can leverage organizational resources, collaborate around common goals, and avoid duplication of efforts. And because emergent collaborative solutions are so dynamic, the most effective networks assign and coordinate roles as well. Network roles may include a "core team" to handle certain governance decisions, a facilitator to design and lead the convenings, and a network manager to serve the network's emergent needs.

Network entrepreneurs don't insist that all participants across a network agree on any single issue or project. Wicked problems are constantly evolving; no single action or organization can solve them. Instead of looking for a silver bullet, it's critical to address the problem from many angles with a smart, coordinated effort.

For instance, to reach the goal of a "no-kill nation," animal welfare organization Maddie's Fund strengthens and coordinates existing efforts by supporting effective organizations large and small, rural and urban, and helping establish a shared measurement platform that allows organizations to compare what worked and what didn't in different communities across the United States. But Maddie's Fund also works to address areas for leverage in the animal welfare system, promoting the veterinary specialty of shelter medicine education, building the capacity of local community shelters, and driving public awareness and culture change.

And to advance clean energy in the United States, the Energy Foundation is building both state and national networks, including a network of 12 state coalitions (Energy Efficiency for All) and a national network of more than 100 members (Network for Energy, Water and Health in Affordable Buildings).

Collaborate generously. A generous collaborator does not count transactions, giving only as much as they get in return. Instead, they assume positive intent, communicate frequently, and consistently look for opportunities to work with others in support of shared goals, not personal gain.

Generous collaborators are what organizational psychologist Adam Grant calls "successful givers" in his research on "Givers, Takers, and Matchers." The Offre Joie ("Joy of Giving") volunteer network is a great example; network members work together to rebuild bombed homes, churches, mosques, and public buildings across Lebanon, not asking for anything in return. As the Offre Joie slogan says, "Volunteers don't seek recognition. Don't thank them. Join them in the Joy of Giving."

Generous collaboration results directly from practicing the network principles of *humility, not brand*, and *mission, not organization*. Network members are most likely to embrace a mindset of generous collaboration when they have developed a clear shared purpose, trust for impact, and just enough structure to focus the work.

Building a Resilient Network for the Long-Term

Cultivating an effective and sustainable impact network requires dedicated effort and a long time-horizon. Impact networks must remain adaptive to changing circumstances. Participants change jobs, organizations shift priorities, external forces change, and problems evolve. Therefore, impact networks must constantly reaffirm their shared purpose, convene the right people, and cultivate trust. As Eric Heitz and Barbara Wagner write, "You can't expect to plant the seed of a network and walk away when it sprouts."

Given the complexity and time-intensive nature of building a successful impact network, we have seen many instances where roles are divided between multiple people. For instance, it often makes sense for a respected individual or organization to take an initial leadership role in clarifying purpose and convening the right people, given their existing web of relationships and ability to pull together an initial meeting. The network can then bring in a more experienced network entrepreneur to facilitate convenings, cultivate trust, and serve the network's emergent needs.

Just as there are teams of business and social entrepreneurs who launch a startup together, there can also be teams of network entrepreneurs who work together to catalyze and sustain networks. A team can be stronger and more resilient than any single person, if they too are connected through a shared purpose and trust for impact.

Growing the Movement of Network Entrepreneurs

We have shared seven real-life examples of how impact networks have achieved dramatic and sustained change, and we suspect that there are countless other such networks working in this way across the globe. We are committed to supporting and building a movement of network entrepreneurs who help boards, funders, and leaders to think and work in networked ways on behalf of a better planet.

In our view, a positive future requires that we build regional and global networks of people aligned around shared values and shared purpose, who engage authentically and with deep trust, and who collaborate generously for maximum positive impact. We must build networks of diverse stakeholders

that see the largest possible context, seek to address root causes instead of just symptoms, and plan for the long-term.

Trust for impact, above all else, is the critical ingredient needed for successful collaboration—no matter the type of structure or level of resource. Investing in "return on relationships" makes all the difference.

4. Coordinating existing activities

When people have identified a shared purpose and built trust, they are far more likely to seek out and follow through on opportunities to support each other's work. This requires that participants share the work they are already doing that relates to the collaboration's purpose. In the process, participants find opportunities to partner together, find quick wins, and avoid duplication of efforts.
Working together, even in small ways, allows participants to strengthen their relationships with one another, creating a virtuous cycle of trust and action. Analysis of the Fire Adapted Communities Learning Network, a collaboration of 60 communities throughout the United States working to create more resilience to wildfires, shows a strong statistical correlation between the depth of relationship between two participants and their perception of collaborative opportunities between them. In other words, as relationships develop, participants notice more opportunities to collaborate, which in turn strengthens their relationships.

However, the altruistic commitment of participants isn't enough to sustain collaboration. On the contrary, collaboration must also serve the personal and organizational objectives of individual participants. Otherwise, they won't be able to justify the time it requires to participate fully. This overlap between individual priorities and the collaboration's shared priorities is what we refer to as the intersection of self-interest and shared interest, and finding a proper balance between the two is essential.
To this end, participants should have an opportunity early on in a collaboration's formation to publicly identify their *gives* and *gets*—what they can *give* to the collaboration to support other participants and what they need to *get* out of the collaboration to make their participation worthwhile. The more specific the gives and gets, the better participants will understand one another's conditions of engagement. Examples of *gives* include connections to funding sources or influencers, access to a volunteer base or a fleet of trucks, or time and energy to contribute to the work of other partners. Examples of *gets* include a professional grant writer, capacity or expertise to support a project, a conference room to host a meeting, or tangible outcomes from the effort.

Participants should also express legitimate constraints on their ability to contribute. Left unstated, others may perceive these limitations as a lack of commitment or a failure to follow through. Constraints may include issues such as the time participants can commit to the collaboration, the expectations of their board or senior leadership, and legal restrictions on their ability to participate in advocacy and policy change.

5. Collaborating for systems impact

For true systems change to occur, collaborative efforts must seek to address the root causes of problems, rather than just mitigating the symptoms. Actions to reduce immediate suffering, such as filling a cavity, are essential. But we will never produce lasting change without also addressing the root causes of the issue at hand, such as providing young children with quality oral care from the outset.

Getting at root causes necessarily requires acknowledging and addressing systemic and structural issues, such as racism, sexism, and income inequality. As Junious Williams and Sarah Marxer write in their article "Bringing an Equity Lens to Collective Impact": "Without rigorous attention to persistent inequities, our initiatives risk ineffectiveness, irrelevance, and improvements that cannot be sustained." And according to the authors of "Collaborating for Equity and Justice," this requires that collaborations "embrace the principles of equity and justice and reexamine their membership, distribution of power and resources, social change agendas, and current commitments to an equity and justice work plan."

One way to address root causes is by identifying and taking action on a set of "leverage points" that address the collaboration's central purpose. Leverage points are places in a system where "a small shift in one thing can produce big changes in everything," as Meadows has said. In a collaboration, leverage points also represent opportunities where participants can have greater impact by working together than they can by working alone.

100Kin10, a collaboration of more than 200 partners working to support STEM educators and train 100,000 excellent new STEM teachers by 2021, engaged hundreds of teachers to identify 100-plus challenges standing in the way of quality STEM learning for all students and to assess the relationships between these challenges. Through this process, 100Kin10 identified six primary leverage points to achieve its goal: 1) Raise state standards, 2) improve the quality of the curriculum, 3) expand financial support for STEM college majors, 4) develop accountability systems that promote teacher creativity, 5) increase the time available for professional development, and 6) increase the time available for teacher collaboration.

In addition to the comprehensive systems-mapping approach that 100Kin10 took, collaborations can identify leverage points through an in-the-room systems mapping exerciseor through a design thinking approach that can help them move quickly from ideation to prototyping. Collaborations must then provide participants with structures to act, such as project teams focused on specific objectives. Participants typically engage when they feel they can have an effect, and where their organizational priorities align with the work of the team.

Putting it all together

In addition to the Five C's roadmap, effective collaborations also require a degree of governance, structure, coordination, and funding to accomplish their goals.

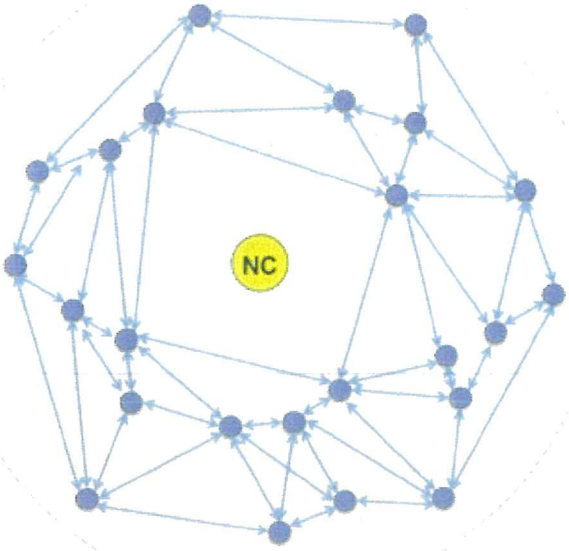
Governance: As collaborations and networks move towards shared action, formal governance procedures can help participants make timely decisions, invite new members, design and facilitate convenings, and integrate a suite of online collaborative tools. The purpose of good governance "is not to tell members what to do, but to enable them to do what they want to do," write Madeleine Taylor, Peter Plastrik, and John Cleveland in their article "Connecting to Change the World."

Structures: From our perspective, a network is the structure that operationalizes collaboration. The right network structure enables a collaboration to effectively channel the creative impulses of its participants. But too much structure risks stifling individual initiative, and engaging with too many rules and procedures. According to Frances Butterfoss, author of *Coalitions and Partnerships in Community Health*, "One should adopt the simplest structure that will accomplish the collaboration's goals."

Some examples of basic network structures that can support collaborations include:

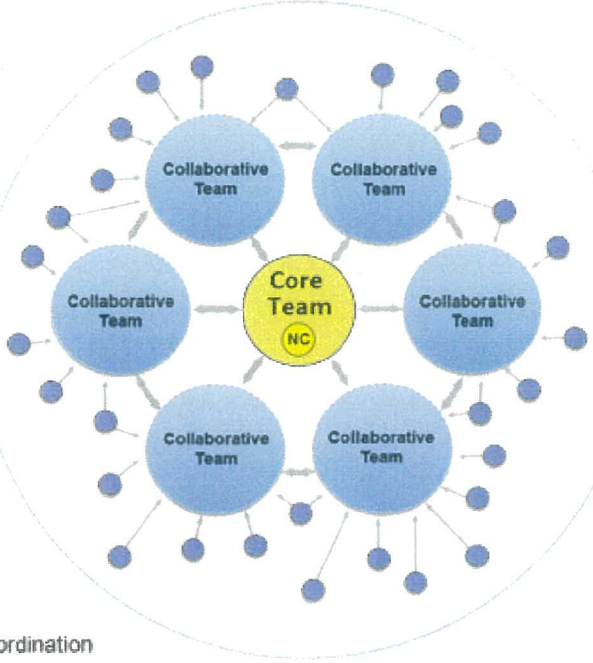
- Learning networks, including the Fire Adapted Communities Learning Network
- Action networks, including the RE-AMP Network
- Action/learning networks, including the California Summer Matters Network
- Network of networks, including the Network for Landscape Conservation

Learning Network



NC = Network Coordination

Action Network



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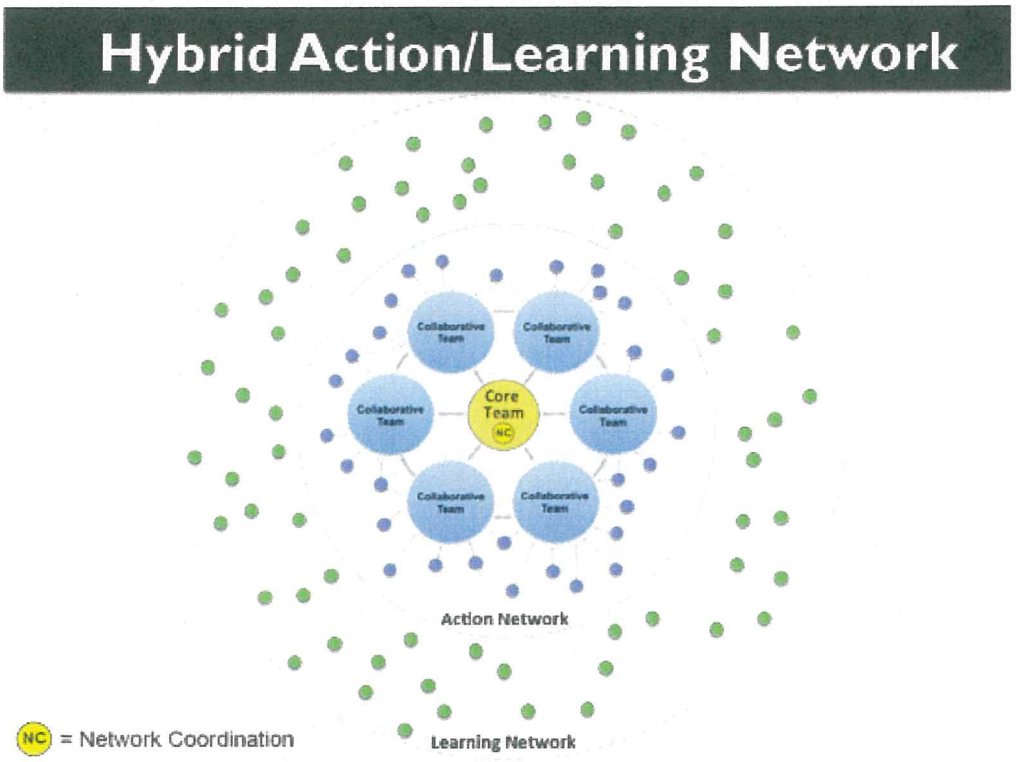

Coordination: Collaborations can't achieve ambitious goals through self-organization alone. Some form of coordination is needed to mobilize a constellation of people and resources to address complex challenges. Those who perform these roles have been called systems leaders, systems entrepreneurs, network leaders, network entrepreneurs, strategic conveners, and accompagnateurs. Whatever they are called, their primary role is *to coordinate*.

The role of a coordinator, or team of coordinators, is to constantly sense and respond to the emerging needs of the collaboration as it evolves. They work to help participants clarify the purpose and the values they hold in common, identify who else needs to be involved, cultivate trust, find opportunities for mutual benefit, and catalyze collaborative action toward shared goals. Coordinators do not seek the spotlight. Instead, they are typically motivated by the collaboration's purpose and their ability to help others achieve their potential for impact.

We have found it useful to think of coordination as a set of responsibilities that can be organized in three major areas:

- **Front of the house**: external communications, public relations and outreach, and resourcing
- **Middle of the house:** weaving, process design, meeting facilitation, conflict management, and member on-boarding
- **Back of the house**: logistical preparation for convenings, project tracking, evaluation, financial planning, and tech support
  Funding: Collaboration is under-resourced. As the authors of the recent Harvard Business Review article "Audacious Philanthropy" write: "Collaboration of any type can be difficult and costly, so few philanthropists meaningfully support or engage in it, even though most are frustrated with the inefficient proliferation of siloed change efforts." Yet foundations and philanthropists have a critical, unique role to play in supporting collaborations and networks.

The primary challenge for funders is to support collaboration without restricting or controlling its path. Funders must be willing to let the participants define a collaboration's purpose and direction, or they run the risk of stifling the very energy that gives collaboration its potential for impact.
The S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation has found that it can effectively support collaborations and networks to pursue emergent solutions by:

1. Allowing for flexibility in the collaboration's objectives and deliverables
2. Viewing the development of trust as a valid collaborative outcome
3. "Making room" for other funders to support collaborative projects by investing in a network's operational capacity
4. Supporting specific collaborative functions, such as convenings, facilitation, and coordination
5. Approaching collaborations and networks as a learning opportunity
6. Being prepared to adapt their support as collaborations evolve over time

A decisive moment

Social philosopher Tom Atlee has written something that struck us as a good summary of what's happening on the planet right now: "Things are getting better and better, and worse and worse, faster and faster, simultaneously." If he is right—and we think he is—then we urgently need to consider two questions: How can we amplify the things that are getting better and better? And how can we minimize the damage from things that are getting worse and worse?

We believe the answer to both questions lies in cultivating effective collaboration—that is, meaningful attempts to work together on behalf of a shared purpose—across and between silos, organizations, sectors, and networks. From our perspective, it's not an overstatement to say that our ability to work together effectively across all kinds of differences is the last great hope for humankind.

"The basket with two handles is meant to be carried by two."Egyptian Proverb

SHARE

Want Impact? Networks Trump Organizations

In an Egyptian village roasted by the merciless sun, civil engineer Yousry and I sat down on shaded bamboo chairs in April 1999. A sniffing and wagging session ensued to find out if we could work together.

I'd been asked to found Habitat for Humanity in the Middle East. Perhaps my skepticism of its prospects in the Arab world was forgivable, given its American profile and Jesus Christ's name in its legal charter. But I agreed to visit its only pilot project on Arab soil.

Yousry had turned down a promotion in a premier construction firm in Cairo to join Habitat. After days with him in garbage-recycling cities and rural squalor, I began to understand why.

Two things struck me. First, Egypt's poverty. Inhuman. Desperate. Staggering.

It got under Yousry's skin, too. "I grew up in Cairo, but I'll never forget my first sight of poverty. A family of ten in a two-by-three meter room. They couldn't stand upright because they'd built a loft so everybody could sleep at the same time. Those in the loft had it better; those below slept in beds on stilts in ten centimeters of sewage water. The next thatch-roofed house was six-by-seven meters, but I lost track of those living there when my count reached 23 – and the father was blind."

And second, Yousry's solution. Risky. Audacious. Compelling.

I asked him why he'd walked away from his big career chance for this. His voice was quiet, but steely. "I have a dream. To solve the poverty housing problem of Egypt."

I wondered out loud, "How do you propose to do that?"

He asserted, "Over twenty million of Egypt's seventy million people suffer in sub-human housing. In my lifetime, I'll help two million volunteers build their own homes, and they will show the other 90% how to solve the problem without me."

But with no organization legally registered, I knew he could not hire staff. Nor open a bank account. Nor sign a single mortgage.

I did some quick math: "Your target is 400,000 houses in 25 years. Habitat just celebrated building 200,000 houses worldwide in 30 years. How will you double that impact, in less time?"

His answer pinpointed the paradoxical power of weakness.

"An Egyptian proverb says, 'The basket with two handles is meant to be carried by two.' There are over 17,000 nonprofits registered in every corner of Egypt. We'll team up. Alone, we're weak. Competing, we'll fail. But together, we'll succeed."

I figured if I could help just this one guy achieve this dream, it'd be worth five years. So I signed on. Habitat's traditional organization model was stopped cold right out of the starting gate. The bureaucratic legal registration dragged on for over four frustrating years.

That headache was a gift in disguise.

Weak, we couldn't go it alone. So we cultivated friends. And explored networks. We assessed values alignment. And trusted volunteers. We forged collaboration. And empowered allies.

And then we jumped to get out of their way!

The exponential curve of families housed started climbing. What began crawling at under 30 homes/year in 1997 gained momentum until 25 strategic alliances and entire communities of families together built over 2000 homes/year in 2007. So far, over 15,000 Egyptian families have moved into decent homes.

Dignity as God intended is now reality for those who never dared to dream.

Fully 99.7% are repaying loans on time, most from two-dollar-a-day incomes. That rate held steady in the 2008 global economic meltdown. Egyptian villagers faithfully paid back while the world's mightiest banks begged for mortgage crisis bailouts.

All this on a shoe-string budget with nine staff.

I'd worked myself out of a job. And by then, I'd bumped into other dreamers like Yousry in even harder places. Insiders with the right values. And the right dreams.

I pondered how to strengthen them.

An intriguing article[1] caught my eye as I bid Habitat farewell in 2005, headed to Harvard to research the keys to impact in even harder places. On arrival, I phoned Jane Wei-Skillern, a business professor researching networks. "Could we meet? I've just lived a story that confirms your findings."

Yousry's approach was soon published as a Harvard Business School teaching case.[2]

But Yousry is not an isolated example. Wei-Skillern and Marciano's field research demonstrates that "networked nonprofits achieve their mission far more efficiently, effectively, and sustainably than they could have by working alone."[3]

Among practitioners and academics alike, the insight that networks trump organizations is gaining traction.

The findings of Stanford MBA's Brafman and Beckstrom support their striking metaphor that likens centralized, top-down organizations to spiders (which die if beheaded) – contrasted with adaptive networks that function as starfish (which regenerate when cut up).[4] Similarly, social development researchers Taschereau and Bolger affirm that networks generate synergies: "In networks, $1 + 1 > 2$."[5]

But as Yousry and I had learned in the trenches, effective networks are anything but haphazard. When mapping network emergence stages, practitioners Krebs and Holley spotlight the role of "network weavers", informal and active leaders with "the vision, the energy, and the social skills to connect to diverse individuals and groups and start information flowing."[6]

Networking stems from a growing realization that our problems are far bigger than any one organization. Wei-Skillern and Marciano conclude that because "most social issues dwarf even the most well-resourced, well-managed nonprofit...it is wrongheaded for nonprofit leaders simply to build their organizations. Instead, they must build capacity outside of their organizations...focus[ing] on their mission, not their organization; on trust, not control; and on being a node, not a hub."[3]

The Bridgespan Group in Boston advocates collaboration across organization lines to build strong fields for scaled impact.[7] Similarly, at Oxford, Hartigan promotes the "critical need to scale to the *issues*." However, this requires "giving up ownership of the issue, which can be difficult given the existence of egos, and...the reality that donors and investors drive organizations to differentiate themselves from others doing similar work, increasing fragmentation."[8]

This preoccupation with ego is decried by Krebs and Holley: "if two or more community development organizations start battling over turf and control of the community then the result may be two or more competing...networks that ignore the larger community need and just focus on the survival of their own network."[6]

Impact requires servant leaders to set aside ego to serve the common good.

Dreams InDeed is committed to serve as network weavers with visionaries in hard places. But talk is cheap. And egos resurgent. So we've learned that we need to *live* our core values – passion, humility, wisdom, faith, and integrity, as modeled in the life of Jesus Christ – to effectively embody this role.

Like Yousry, we aim to catalyze change that multiplies far beyond the visionaries with whom we have immediate contact. He doesn't aim to become a social entrepreneur rock-star. He aims to see the last family on his waiting list move into a decent home to live in dignity as God intended.

And he's getting there.

Why? He chooses to put the last, first. And the first, last. That's how the whole becomes more than the sum of the parts.

Funding Successful Collaborations

JUNE 4, 2012 | JANE WEI-SKILLERN

SHARE

[illegible] succeed.

In studying successful nonprofit networks, I have found that there are four key operating principles that are critical to collaboration success. These soft skills are the 'secret sauce' that differentiates mediocre collaborations from those that achieve transformational change. Surprisingly, the operating principles of funders who have successfully supported networks differ dramatically from common practice in the philanthropic sector.

1. Mission not Organization – The Energy Foundation was founded in 1991 as a collaboration among Rockefeller, Pew and McArthur Foundations. With a $100 million commitment over 10 years, the founding donors provided patient capital, agreed that EF should be governed by an *expert board* rather than *large donors*, and encouraged the founding executives to be entrepreneurial and let the work of the foundation speak for itself (and to other potential donors) rather than get caught up in building the organization's infrastructure. Their foresight enabled EF to catalyze the growth of energy philanthropy such that billions are now being committed to the field worldwide, though EF's own budget has remained relatively modest, amounting to $100 million annually. EF's goal has always been *leveraged impact*, *not* organizational scale.
2. Trust not Control - EF makes grants to regional groups that carry out energy policy work, then helps them coordinate so they can learn and adapt. Sometimes, EF grants to coalitions of nonprofits which are then able to regrant the funding according to how the local nonprofit leaders think the resources can best be utilized across the coalition. EF president, Eric Heitz describes the foundation's operating philosophy as 'service to the field.' He notes, "We believe that people who are closer to the challenges are often in a better position to make the strategic call." This is the ultimate in unrestricted funding--*allowing the grantee full flexibility to use the funds not only internally, but also through its peers.*

3. Humility not Brand - The Energy Foundation actively seeks to give credit to grantees, instead of trying to take the credit for itself. Indeed, I commonly refer to EF as the biggest foundation you've never heard of. It has been tremendously skilled at building the broader field of energy philanthropy yet it is little known. Its track record of success was instrumental in attracting multibillion dollar commitments to catalyze a network of similar foundations globally (see www.ClimateWorks.org). To get work done effectively through a network, participants need to *build a reputation for making others look good rather than building a brand for its own sake.*
4. Node not Hub - Although EF has no endowment and must fundraise annually for its own operations, it routinely suggests that donors give directly to others in the field if it is not able to add value. Furthermore, EF routinely invests resources toward field building without an expectation of a direct benefit. For example, EF has lent its executive staff for months at a time to peer organizations to develop capacity for working through networks among their counterparts globally. Eric Heitz will often give presentations to educate other donors to give to the energy field even if funding for EF is not forthcoming. *The goal should be to grow the 'market' rather than to to be the market leader.*

While there are untold numbers of funders who promote collaboration among their grantees, the number of donors who live and breathe these principles in practice and as expectations among their grantees is rather small. If funders really expect to see more collaborative behavior in the field, a good place to start might be with themselves.

[illegible] teaches social entrepreneurship and studies leadership [illegible] fewer resources.

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Four Network Principles for Collaboration Success

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Garnering recognition for organizational achievements and building organization brands are considered critical for fundraising success and, in turn, organizational sustainability. It should therefore be no surprise that humility is not the norm in the nonprofit sector. To harness the tremendous potential of networks, all nonprofit leaders must let go of conventional wisdom and shift their focus from organization-level goals to network-level impacts.

A rich literature on applying networks in the nonprofit sector has emerged in recent years (Plastrik & Taylor, 2006; Monitor Institute & GEO, 2011; Wei-Skillern, 2008), with research on network structures (Grossman & Rangan, 2001; Huggett, Kramer, & Smith Milway, 2010), systems (Kramer & Kania, 2011), and technological tools (Kanter & Fine, 2010; Scearce, Kasper, & McLeod, 2010). The leadership skills and culture that are essential to successful network building, however, are often overlooked. We maintain that these skills are the critical factors that differentiate failed or mediocre collaborations from those that achieve transformational change. Yet, the leadership mindset and skills critical to the success of networks are the opposite of what is typically rewarded in the philanthropic sector. Since the skills for successful networking are counterintuitive relative to common practice, they are worth highlighting here:

Focus on mission before organization. Effective network leaders build strategies that advance the mission even when it does not result in direct benefits to their organization.

Build partnerships based on trust, not control. Leaders depend upon shared values and trust rather than top-down controls and accountability systems.

Promote others rather than yourself. Network leaders exhibit a strong norm of humility above all else, sharing credit and foregoing opportunities for individual advancement and institutional growth and brand building.

Build constellations rather than lone stars. Leaders who catalyze successful networks acknowledge their weaknesses as readily as their strengths. The goal is to build the larger system that is necessary for delivering on the mission, not to become the "market leader."

Network leaders have succeeded often not because of, but despite, the contexts in which they operate. Nonprofit leaders – whether funders, board members, or nonprofit executives – tend to focus on their organizations as the primary vehicle for delivering their ambitious missions despite the reality that working with other external actors is fundamental to mission success. It is often assumed that controls and performance-accountability systems ensure quality impacts, when in fact shared values and trust among funders, nonprofits, and beneficiaries can actually lead to superior results. Nonprofit leaders are routinely lauded for increasing budgets, expanding programs, and building their institutions. Garnering recognition for organizational achievements and building organization brands are considered critical for fundraising success and, in turn, organizational sustainability. It should therefore be no surprise that humility is not the norm in the nonprofit sector.

To harness the tremendous potential of networks, all nonprofit leaders must let go of conventional wisdom and shift their focus from organization-level goals to network-level impacts. To show what this shift looks like in practical terms, we illustrate each of the four principles below using examples from the Energy Foundation case.

Many partnerships have failed because they have been forced from the top down, often by well-intentioned funders. Rather than identifying existing relationships in the field and investing to further support them, funders have tried to orchestrate new collaborations based on their own funding strategies.

According to an independent evaluation, EF has been highly successful at advancing its goal of a sustainable energy future (Parzen, 1998). In the mid 1990s EF launched six regional campaigns to promote renewable portfolio standards that require minimum levels of renewable energy by power companies. In 15 of the 16 states that have adopted the renewable portfolio standards, 15 of the adoptions could be traced directly to EF campaigns (Koehler, 2007). By playing a role behind the scenes to weave together a broad network of funders, grantees, and energy policy experts, EF was able to contribute to reaching these goals. Yet, rarely, if ever, was EF's role in these policies shared publicly, except when making the case for continued support to its own funders.

Successful network leaders often do the opposite of what conventional wisdom would suggest – forsaking organizational-level gains for mission impact. Although individual organization success contributes significant incremental impact on the ground, these organizations focus on the bigger picture and are aware that achieving mission impact requires vastly more than their own institutional growth. In the short term, this might mean a shift in focus from program expansion and replication to investing in peer networks to improve and broaden services. This can translate into expanding impact without necessarily bearing the burden of additional costs because the network as a whole is generating the value together and at greater efficiency (e.g., reduced duplication, leveraging expertise).

Principle 2: Build Partnerships Based on Trust, Not Control

Partner selection is of the utmost importance in successful networks. Selecting trustworthy partners lays the foundation upon which trust can be built. Many partnerships have failed because they have been forced from the top down, often by well-intentioned funders. Rather than identifying existing relationships in the field and investing to further support them, funders have tried to orchestrate new collaborations based on their own funding strategies. By ignoring the alignment of values and trust that is necessary among partners, funders often inadvertently sabotage their own efforts to promote collaboration. Consequently, partners often come to the table for the wrong reason – the promise of additional funding for their organization, rather than affinity toward their peers or desire to work collaboratively. These funder-driven relationships tend to focus on developing systems and processes for coordination rather than building the social capital that is essential to making the collaboration succeed over time.

Networked nonprofits, in contrast, invest heavily in due diligence to select partners with whom they can work in the long term. They select a partner based not on how its credentials look on paper, but on its reputation for impact and its track record of commitment to working with others based on stated values. As the network develops, these shared values guide partners' decision-making and build in accountability to the shared goals. With these commonalities, participants are freed from trying to micromanage for every contingency and enjoy greater flexibility to respond to changing circumstances and strategic imperatives. Ongoing investment in the relationships further engenders trust among network participants.

The goal is not to become the leaders in their fields first and then engage in collaboration to further establish dominance. Instead, the goal is to mobilize the various organizations and resources that together can deliver more impact.

focus on gaining recognition for themselves and their organizations. Highlighting the contributions of one's peers engenders high performance throughout the network.

The Energy Foundation deliberately plays a behind the scenes role, supporting groups that play a more public role. While its grantees routinely appear in the press and in public forums, EF does not see that as its role or as how it can add the most value. Thus, EF actively seeks to give credit to grantees, instead of trying to take the credit for itself.

This approach has served EF particularly well in its China Sustainable Energy Program (CSEP), whose goal is to support the country's efforts to increase energy efficiency and renewable energy. CSEP, whose staff are indigenous Chinese, utilizes a service-oriented model, offering assistance to Chinese agencies, experts, and entrepreneurs to address energy challenges. The program links Chinese experts with best-practices expertise from around the world. As China emerges as one of the world's sustainable energy leaders, CSEP is beginning to share best practices from China with the rest of the world. EF's approach with CSEP is to elevate local champions and to play a support role wherever possible. EF's president has quipped that the foundation is "servant to many, master to none." He describes the EF approach as based on the thought of the ancient Chinese philosopher Lao Tse: "The leader is best when people barely know we exist. When the work is done, people will think they did it themselves."

To get work done effectively through a network, participants routinely strive to help others do their best and make others look good. Networked organizations see the work of others as integral to their own ability to achieve mission impact. As a result, they look to the strengths of their partners and seek to support and empower them. The synergies among partners' respective skills, knowledge, and resources, in turn, generate superior results.

Principle 4: Build Constellations, Not Stars

Networked organizations do not strive to be the brightest star, but rather to build the constellation that will enable achievement of the shared vision. They see themselves as nodes within an array of equal, interconnected partners, rather than as the center of their universes. The goal is not to become the leaders in their fields first and then engage in collaboration to further establish dominance. Instead, the goal is to mobilize the various organizations and resources that together can deliver more impact. Resources of all types – leadership, money, talent – can have dramatically more impact when leveraged across organizations, fields, and sectors. Not only does this approach save each organization from trying to do everything on its own, it promotes a dynamic in which resources are allocated where they can make the most impact. If another organization is better able address an issue, then it makes sense to invest in that effort rather than to reinvent the wheel in one's own organization. This is the approach the EF takes.

Alongside the results that EF has seeded on the ground, it has played an instrumental role in developing the broader energy philanthropy field. Although EF has no endowment and must fundraise annually for its own operations, it routinely suggests that donors give directly to others in the field if it is not able to add the most value. Furthermore, EF often invests its own resources in field building with no expectation of a direct benefit. For example, EF has lent its executive staff for months at a time to peer organizations to develop capacity for working through networks among their counterparts globally. EF executives will often give presentations to educate other donors to give to the energy philanthropy field, even

Often, performance-measurement systems are developed from the funder's interests and needs when, in fact, much of the expertise for understanding performance is dispersed throughout the network.

in with a fundamentally different mindset, letting go of conventional wisdom and shifting their focus from organization-level gains to mission- and field-level impact. Leaders must find trusted partners with whom they are willing to invest while sharing control and recognition. The norm of humility must replace self promotion. The quest for the organizational success must be relinquished for the real potential of solving problems. The shifts required are summarized in Table 1.

While there are funders that encourage collaboration among their grantees, the number that live and breathe these principles in practice is rather small. If funders expect to see more collaborative behavior in the field, a good place to start is with themselves. It is often said that he who pays the piper calls the tune. Armed with these principles, funders are in the unique position to 'be the change that they want to see in the world.'

To begin on the path to "being the change," funders might consider:

- Selecting grantees that embody the leadership capabilities to work through networks with a track record of working through networks. Invest in these leaders and their existing networks rather than trying to create new networks among grantees that might not have the inclination or ability to collaborate.
- Providing unrestricted, long-term support to enable grantees to experiment with and develop networks that have the greatest impact. If sufficient due diligence is done in selecting network leaders, it is likely that fruitful networks will emerge. Funders are infusing additional support into networks that developed organically: They are going with the flow rather than trying to redirect the river.
- Rethinking performance metrics, shifting from organizational-level to network-level impacts, allowing grantees and beneficiaries themselves to help identify performance metrics and develop accountability systems, and at the same time remaining realistic about the timelines required for achieving network-level impacts. Often, performance-measurement systems are developed from the funder's interests and needs when, in fact, much of the expertise for understanding performance is dispersed throughout the network. Tapping into this resource can enable dramatic improvements in measurement systems.
- Working in networks themselves for greater impact, with networks of other funders or even across sectors. For funders, walking the talk is powerful at multiple levels, not the least of which includes aggregating capital, sharing expertise, leveraging resources, and strengthening the norms and culture for working through networks among grantees. The virtually untapped potential of networks in the philanthropic sector paints a hopeful picture of what the sector has the power to achieve.

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