

Lessons Learned from the Leadership Network Grant Program

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For more than 50 years the Leadership Programs of the Bush Foundation have invested directly in individuals through the Bush Fellowship Program. In mid-2014, we decided to expand our reach to support organizations that foster the development of leaders while simultaneously creating networks and connections amongst leaders. This pilot program was known as Leadership Network Grants (LNG).

The power of our region is fundamentally sourced by the abilities of its people to create change. Investing in people has been core to our mission since we were founded. We know that investing in inspiring, equipping, and connecting people in our region creates a more equitable and sustainable place for all.

We learned a great deal through the pilot and, based on that experience, have now discontinued the LNG program and introduced two new leadership programs. Through this paper, we aim to reflect on what we learned from our pilot program and look forward to what is next.

BACKGROUND

We built the Leadership Network Grant Program to aid in our goal of finding new ways to influence leadership development efforts across the region. We designed the program to support organizations that inspire, equip, and connect people to be successful leaders in their communities. We looked for organizations that also connect people of different backgrounds and perspectives across geographies, sectors, ideological divides and/or communities. Our ultimate hope was that, by investing the funds at the organizational level, we would see more active hubs of individual leaders, an increase in collaboration amongst leaders and organizations and more creative problem-solving.

Our theory of change predicated on the belief that successful networks of leaders in our region existed both at the organizational and the individual level. We hoped to see increased connections between organizations striving to become network hubs and for the participants of the leadership development programs to be better equipped and connected so they could more effectively apply their skills and build effective networks. We recognized that our own Bush

Foundation network was siloed and thought others' may be too. We knew there was strong work happening in our communities and wanted to be able to aid in the connection of these siloes to strengthen the capacity of the region as a whole.

THEORY OF CHANGE

Knowing that leadership can show up differently from one community to the next, we attempted to keep our selection criteria broad so it would not exclude or limit how organizations defined their work.

We were looking to support programs that:

Inspired and equipped people to successfully lead in their communities.

Connected people of different backgrounds and perspectives—across geographies, sectors, ideological divides and/or cultural communities.

Possessed a clear plan and strategy to define and measure success.

We gave preference to proposals that:

Expanded leadership development opportunities for individuals with attributes or experiences that are underrepresented in leadership positions across our region, with a specific focus on increasing racial diversity in those positions.

Built the cultural agility of leaders in our region to provide effective leadership in increasingly diverse communities.

We intended for 2014 to be a pilot year for the program with hopes that, in consultation with the LNG grantees, we would garner lessons on how to better support the strong network hub organizations in our region. We hoped that requiring programs to connect people across differences would introduce new ideas, new people and new points of view and, as a result, would spark inspiration for new methods on how to make change in our communities. Additionally, by placing preference on programs that create access to opportunities and foster cultural agility we hoped to begin to see the landscape of the leadership field evolve to more accurately represent the people who live in our cities and towns.

THE GRANTEES

We received more than 140 applications requesting more than \$20 million from organizations representing various intersection points between individual leadership development and fostering network connections. Through the review of these applications we were impressed by the number of strong applicants in the pool that truly represented critical work being done in the region.

We ultimately chose 12 grantees to both receive funding for their programs and to participate as a cohort of grantees to learn from each other.

WHAT WORKED?

MAKING CONNECTIONS

As the grant term began, the grantees immediately voiced a desire to be brought together. The request was based on the premise that, if each individual organization was working toward building strong networks of leaders, coming together as a collective of networks would strengthen their efforts. Many organizations acknowledged that even though they might be physically close to each other, they felt isolated. To facilitate a learning opportunity, the Bush Foundation staff organized a retreat for the LNG Grantees.

At first glance, some might consider the retreat standard. It had an agenda, an icebreaker and clear goals for outcomes. The thing that made it powerful was the participants and their level of dedication to the collective impact they could make together. We went into the retreat prepared to discuss the theories and practical applications behind network health. However, the cohort expressed an interest in harnessing the power of one another's skillsets, insights and expertise. We quickly realized how hungry they were to learn from each other. They identified extreme value in just being in the same room and connecting with each other.

BUILDING STRONGER NETWORKS

While there is a lot of recent research on how to build a network, use it and be a productive network member, it was still important in this initial retreat to really build a common understanding of what a network is before we could build a stronger network.

Of course, people emerged as the strongest thread between each component. Connecting as individuals, building relationships and serving as resources all rose to the top when identifying what was needed to build a network.

WHAT WERE THE CHALLENGES?

HOW DO LEADERS AND ORGANIZATIONS MAKE SUSTAINABLE CONNECTIONS ACROSS GEOGRAPHY AND SECTORS?

We weren't capturing how the organizations were building connections between the individual hubs of leaders, even down to the organizations identifying struggles with connecting the alumni within their own networks. Other organizations expressed challenges in attracting diverse participants to form these hybrid networks across the "divide- as defined by each community."

In our final grant report, we asked, "if you could go back to the start of your grant and give yourself one piece of advice or learning, what would it be?" The Initiative Foundation acknowledged

"We learned two important facts as a result of our work. First, it is easy to define a leader and leadership. However, an individual rarely defines themselves as a leader, even though others may see them as a leader at their work or in their community. Going forward, it would be beneficial for us to examine how to seek leaders who may go by another name..."

HOW TO MOVE FROM "PROTOTYPE" TO ACTION?

What we came to realize, and what truly was an 'ah-ha' moment for our staff was that we might be entering into untapped potential of our region. We knew we were committing funding in an area that many other funders were not participating in, however, we thought we would be funding the strengthening of work that was already underway. In fact, in many cases building networks of leaders across our region was still in the "prototype" stage.

HOW DO WE MEASURE SUCCESS?

We found evaluation to be trickier than anticipated. In order to measure a networks' growth, you need to first be able to identify each member in that network, but this grant program was investing in organizations who were investing in individuals. It was individuals who really made up the network, and in many cases they were either current members of development programs or alumni who may, or may not have been still connected. While our theory of change may have placed our intervention point at the organizational level it was really to serve the ultimate goal of developing individuals who would make our region more equitable and sustainable for all. Evaluating progress and movement of all the different pieces became unwieldy and we had to choose a specific evaluation focus.

WHAT'S NEXT

Since the launch of the Leadership Grants in 2014 we learned a lot about what it means to support organizations that support leaders. We talked with them, read their reports and completed our own reflection period. The challenges we faced in connecting leaders only encouraged our commitment to this work, although, in a slightly different way. The former Leadership Network Grants work has now branched into two specific areas of focus.

Ultimately, we determined that selecting a set of leadership development programs with the goal of connecting networks of networks was both challenging to accomplish and challenging to measure. With our lessons from this pilot, we are now focusing our grantmaking around two concepts. First, across all of our programs and initiatives we are taking an ecosystem approach. As such, in 2016, we offered Leadership Ecosystem Grants to those organizations who are supporting the leadership development ecosystem. Second, we also realized we had a specific interest in building networks of leaders who had very specific skills to support our region. To that end, we are launching the Change Network in 2017.

LEADERSHIP ECOSYSTEM GRANTS

WHAT ARE THEY?

Ecosystem grants awarded through the Leadership program support networks of leaders to solve problems—within and across sectors—to make our region better for everyone. It is general operating support to help sustain organizations that create unique and significant value for our Fellows, grantees and others.

WHO IS ELIGIBLE?

Organizations

HOW DOES THIS ADDRESS THE LEADERSHIP GOALS?

By investing in these organizations that help create an environment for other networks of leaders to be successful.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN FROM LNG THAT INFORMED THIS PROGRAM?

There are a lot of leadership development programs out there, but there is not a lot of intentionality in connecting organizations that serve as hubs for their field. We want to create the environment for networks to exist and are investing in the organizations who are critical to larger network hubs.

CHANGE NETWORKS

WHAT ARE THEY?

Leadership development cohorts to help leaders build and apply key leadership skills to lead more effectively.

WHO IS ELIGIBLE?

Individuals

HOW DOES THIS ADDRESS THE LEADERSHIP GOALS?

By inspiring, equipping and connecting individuals who want to achieve a higher impact in their communities.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN FROM LNG THAT INFORMED THIS PROGRAM?

Leaders want to be connected with the skills to really make a difference in leveraging relationships and making change.

CONCLUSION

We feel so grateful to our 2014 Leadership Network grantees who partnered in learning with us. We continually feel inspired by the work that is happening all across our region and the capacity of individual people to make such a difference. We will continue to learn and be curious about what the region needs in order to become more equitable and sustainable for all. We have evaluation components built into all of our new programming and are excited to share our lessons in the future.