

bushCONNECT: Three Years Out

Using events to inspire, equip and connect
leaders

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The Bush Foundation
Learning Papers Series

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At the Bush Foundation, we believe leaders do their best work when they have the opportunity to meaningfully connect with one another and with new ways of thinking.

Our overarching goal is to support innovative, creative problem solving to make our region better for everyone. If we truly want to spark innovative change in our region, we know it starts with people, specifically with leaders who have the power to influence their communities each and every day.

So how can we help?

It takes time and effort for people to build their skills — and their networks — to be the most effective leaders they can be.

Additionally, there's something to be said for mixing things up. Author Steven Johnson wrote the book "Where Good Ideas Come From: The Natural History of Innovation." In it, he observes that creating an environment for innovation requires a little bit of engineered serendipity... A little bumping elbows with someone unexpected, where your work might collide in some unusual way, and you just might come up with a crazy idea.

Our event strategy zeroes in on supporting and producing events that have three main qualities: they inspire, equip and connect leaders in the region we serve: Minnesota, North Dakota, South Dakota and the 23 Native nations that share the same geography.

Along with creating a program to sponsor great events produced by others, a few years ago, we dreamed up a new event that we would build and host ourselves: We called it bushCONNECT.

After producing the event for three years, we've honed in on the unique elements that make it most impactful. This paper aims to share what we've learned, both for other event organizers and for bushCONNECT partners and participants who have so generously shared their feedback to help us build upon the event year over year.

The Event

In 2014, we welcomed more than 1,000 participants through the doors of the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis for the first time. For the next 10 hours, they mixed and mingled in every nook and cranny of the building, from rehearsal rooms to the main stage theater. (We also hosted a welcome reception the night before to warm people up a bit.)

Our goal with bushCONNECT (bushCON for short) was to produce one big annual event that would inspire, equip and connect leaders from across sectors, disciplines, ideological divides, cultural communities and geographies. We use several intentional techniques to facilitate and encourage both the sharing of ideas and the building of relationships.

Foster Meaningful Connections

First, we work hard to build a broad array of engaging, interactive sessions and activities throughout the day that are designed to build connections.

From the moment participants step off the escalator and into the "Network Zone" of bushCON, they are pulled into activities with creatives from across the region. They can choose from things such as Careercatures (where an artist illustrates your career path and passions) or Network Mapping (where you can explore how you're connected to others at the event and see who you might want to meet). In sessions, attendees can interact with well-known community leaders and peers in intimate salon discussions of 20 people. Or, they can lose their inhibitions by trying something brand new such as a Stage Combat class.

Weaving all these things together is our strategy of making it easy to connect. For example, attendees are pre-assigned session tickets and have the option to trade with one another. (One sneaky way of getting them to interact!) The entire event is set up in a way that, we hope, makes it easy to do typically hard things (like starting a conversation with a stranger). Or, on the flip side, it makes it hard to do the easy thing (like sitting all alone — you can do that anytime! — and that's not the point of this day).

Curate a Diverse Audience

The second thing we do is to very intentionally curate as diverse an audience as we can. Only a very small number of tickets are available to the public as General Admission. About half the attendees are Bush Foundation grantees or Fellows, with tickets spread out across all programs and topic areas. The other half are allocated to Recruitment Partners across the region.

What is a Recruitment Partner? Recruitment Partners are the key to bringing people and communities to the event that represent the diversity of our region. We truly believe there is tremendous value in people working and thinking across sectors and across many other differences, so each year we invite organizations to apply to be a Recruitment Partner. Those selected have the opportunity to gather a set of 15-25 people, or more in some cases, from their own network to bring to the event. They might bring people from a certain geography, such as a group from a developing district in Rapid City, SD; a certain industry or sector, like government employees with the State of Minnesota; or a certain demographic group, like participants who have come with the Council on American-Islamic Relations. This strategy gives partners a push to interact with leaders in their own spheres, and we begin to connect people across groups during the event itself. Ultimately, this allows everyone to build much richer and more robust networks of their own and to gain new perspectives.

Co-Develop Engaging Sessions

Thirdly, we envisioned this as an “event of events.” To create that, we work with organizations across the region that already do fantastic programming — or want to develop it — to build our list of event sessions. Know about community building? Great! Present that workshop. Have tips on giving a memorable elevator speech? Let’s do it. Each organization applies to be a Programming Partner. Our biggest requirement is that the sessions be interactive and engaging. By working collaboratively with partners and funding the work to develop the sessions, we get new and creative ideas from people who are experts in their topic areas. We also have the ability to push them a bit to think about how they deliver the content in an exciting way, and we’re able to offer them a platform among other leaders who might be valuable to them.

Bonus: One valuable aspect of both the Recruitment and Programming Partner experience is that it truly is collaborative. We bring all our partners together throughout the year leading up to the event to help shape it, and to help them get to know one another, too. So even the partners are building their relationships, and can then help their cohorts and colleagues better connect.

Key to all of this work are two important aspects of the planning process.

Create an Inclusive Environment

Setting the tone and welcoming people to an event is important. We intentionally work to put people at ease, and make this event feel truly inviting and inclusive — a place where you can step outside your usual work day, be yourself and make authentic connections.

We do this by putting people first and trying to anticipate their needs, from our first promotions and communications to the registration form and the event location itself. We use universal design as much as possible so no one feels like a special case, and plan for things ranging from dietary restrictions and accessibility needs to whether anyone needs a prayer space or nursing room during the day. Our maps mark everything from gender-neutral restrooms to a Quiet Zone for people who might need a break.

Commit to Gathering Data – and Use It

The other thing we’ve placed a high priority on is the importance of using data and feedback to improve the event year over year. Ticket trading was too hard the first year? We made a video to explain it the next year and made it possible to trade via our app. Finding strangers to eat lunch with was too complicated? We tried a different small group activity the following year. Elevators were too crowded? We split people into three groups to move throughout the building and ease congestion, and people reported it was much better.

We’ve made a point to send out both session surveys and larger-scale event surveys, to have feedback calls with partners, and to reflect ourselves after each year. Most importantly, we enter these periods of reflection ready and willing to hear what worked and what didn’t, and we build from there.

What Works

The data we've collected validates our strategies and also informs how we continue to build the event. Since 2014, we have collected post-event surveys each year and follow-up surveys that have gone out anywhere from three months after the event to as many as three years after. These insights from attendees guide the decisions we make as we continue to improve the experience.

Inspire

Over 90 percent of survey respondents reported that the event did, in fact, inspire them to think bigger and think differently. Additionally, 85 percent stated that bushCON helped them to generate new ideas. When attendees were asked to reflect back on their experience at least a year after the event, these are the themes that they remembered.

"I felt so inspired after attending bushCON; the programs were so very uplifting and inspired us all to dream together."

"I loved getting to connect with so many people from around our region and hearing what people are doing to impact their communities. It helped me to think about what I can do in my community."

"There are a lot of really good people in the MN, SD, ND region--and BushCON is a wonderful opportunity to explore new collaborations, support the work of other people, learn from one another, and remember that a lot of innovative thought and action is happening right in our communities."

Equip

The majority of people, although slightly fewer — more than 75 percent — agreed that bushCON equipped them with new knowledge, skills and tools to more effectively lead change in their communities.

"I talk about innovation in a different way now- in terms of venture capital and risk and I think about including art, music and improv in my work...to generate and communicate ideas."

"I learned alternative leadership styles that not only helped me better engage my staff but my whole community."

"I actually now identify [bushCON] as one of the first steps I took in figuring out my next career move, and how I was going to switch careers. It made me think differently about what was possible for myself."

Connect

One of our biggest goals was to better connect leaders. In our 2017 survey, we asked all past attendees to reflect on the event one, two or three years later. When we asked whether they had connected with other attendees afterward, we were pleasantly surprised. About 70 percent said yes.

On average, attendees reported connecting after the event with 5-6 people they had met, primarily via in-person meetings or email, followed by phone, text or social media. People reported the reason for staying connected as primarily for network building or collaboration, with fewer citing social reasons. We take all of this as a good sign that the event and our explicit invitations to keep connecting have been useful in starting conversations.

"I loved the meaningful connections fostered at the conference. I came away inspired and have stayed connected with people I met during the day."

"[I remember] the incredible sense that this was powerful beyond words for connecting across sectors on the work I do, building a stronger Minnesota."

"The first year I attended, I had several compelling questions--how do I meaningfully engage our partner organizations, how do I create systems change. I found people who could provide resources and support to address all of these issues."

Other Themes

When we asked in 2017 what people remembered most about bushCON, the top themes aligned with what we hoped to find. Most responses related positively to Connections/Networking, Speakers, and Sessions/Workshops, and following those were the energy/atmosphere, the attendees, and that people found the event inspirational. Many participants also shared that they felt the event was diverse and inclusive, and people shared some heartening comments about the intentionality of how we bring people together: “All were welcome!” Negative responses were far fewer, but the areas we can work on include people feeling it was too crowded or that it was difficult to make connections.

Opportunities and Challenges

One thing we continue to evaluate is whether people are able to make authentic connections at such a large convening. This isn't a dinner party around your best friend's kitchen table. This is 1,100 people navigating a 285,000-square-foot building. Some people love it. And we also know it can be overwhelming for people who are more comfortable in small-group settings. We've tried to facilitate connections by offering options: an array of session sizes; ways to chat electronically through our app and social media; and matching people up by their interest areas, introducing them via email before the event and scheduling time for them to get together at the event.

As we move forward, refining the latter idea and facilitating small-group interactions will be a focus area for us. We will also continue to refine how we describe the event ahead of time, so participants have a clear understanding of what it will entail.

Another aspect we've received constructive criticism on is producing the right mix of programming. At bushCONNECT, we hope each session or activity will either inspire, equip or connect leaders. Participants shared that the event was great at inspiring and connecting them, but some want more “equip,” or the type of skill-building you might expect from more traditional conferences. In 2016, we added a second day of programming, where a handful of partners offered half-day or full-day workshops. And whether it was too complicated to understand the options, or we were asking for too much of people's time — surveys show both had an impact — turnout on Day 2 was rather low. We've decided to go back to a one-day event, and put our energy into doing it as well as possible. We'll continue to think about how we get the right mix as we select partners.

Finally, another area we'll continue to think strategically about is the role we should play in facilitating follow-up connections among attendees. Should putting on a great event and setting people up for success on site be enough? Or should we help people continue the conversations with follow-up events, reminders or social media groups? Philosophically, what should the role of a foundation or event planner be? We see value in turning the work over to each attendee to make their experience their own, but we'll continue to listen and experiment.

What's Next for bushCON

We've hinted at a few of these things, but after three years producing bushCON, here's where we're headed...

First, we plan to spend significant brain space on how to make small groups work at a large event like bushCON, to help foster meaningful connections.

Second, we plan to make the Recruitment and Programming Partner experience even more enriching by including more workshops and intentional connection among those who are helping to create the event. We plan to do away with short, monthly planning meetings and replace them with two full-day workshops where

Beyond bushCON!

Some past bushCON attendees and partners have built lasting relationships and have gone on to collaborate or create their own projects together. Here are a few examples.

The North Dakota Department of Health decided to host an internal Ignite-style speed presentation series, including coaching the speakers, to help improve communication and encourage people to share ideas within the department.

A 2016 Bush Fellow connected with another leader from the same Native nation who helped accomplish the goal of opening a community art center in Belcourt, ND, on their reservation. GenerationArt is now open! The next big idea is bringing more live theater to the reservation.

The State of Minnesota Department of Management and Budget brought a cohort to bushCON and afterward, created their own version of bushCON for employees to hold together!

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they can really dive into a few topics and big ideas together. We'll follow up with logistics emails and phone calls, one on one.

Third, we plan to better integrate our event planning work with the Foundation's program objectives. One thing that makes bushCON unique is that it brings stakeholders together from across our multiple programs and topic areas. We know we can capitalize even more on the Foundation's collective creativity and networks by engaging our colleagues earlier in our planning process. They can help us better design programming that meets the needs of their grantees and Fellows. And they can help us identify the best potential partners to provide that programming.

Finally, we're planning to move bushCON from being an annual event to an every-other-year event. In 2017, we took a year off to take stock of the event and its impact. We heard from stakeholders, and our board, that bushCON is awesome! It also takes an awesome amount of time and resources to plan. We used 2017 to flesh out an idea we'd been piloting, which is to take smaller cohorts of 25-50 people from our region out to events across the country that are hosted by other organizations. By doing this, we offer leaders the opportunity to connect with one another, and with others from outside our region. And, we show up to represent the Upper Midwest, which is often underrepresented at events held on the coasts. We've received very positive reviews about these experiences, and often, we're providing these opportunities to leaders who might not have had the means to attend otherwise. We find great value in both bushCON and these "on the road" experiences, so we plan to offer them both in alternating years.

Overall, we're thrilled that our focus on bringing people together in person, in intentional and creative ways, is helping people build stronger networks and creative problem-solving capacity. We will continue to invest in events as a strategy, and hope to inspire others working in this arena to elevate similar opportunities.

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About Bush Foundation Learning Papers

The Bush Foundation launched this series of Learning Papers to share what we are learning as we invest in great ideas and the people who power them. Unless otherwise noted, Learning Papers are written by the staff who worked directly on the projects covered therein. We will write and publish occasional papers when we have lessons that we think could help others do their work better or help our community in a broader way. Sources of insight may come from an external evaluation, internal process review or other forms. We always welcome feedback. Please send to info@BushFoundation.org.