

What is Collective Leadership and How Can Grantmakers Support It?

With growing recognition of the complexity of the issues the nonprofit sector faces, many grantmakers and nonprofits see the need for a shift to a more collective leadership style. Collective leadership assumes that leadership can come from many places in an organization or a community, rather than solely from the executive director. Not only does this form of leadership require a different skillset among nonprofit executives, but it also requires a different approach to leadership development among grantmakers. This piece highlights the ways in which collective leadership differs from traditional top-down approaches and suggests four ways grantmakers can support collective leadership.

Defining Collective Leadership

Collective leadership is *shared* leadership both within the organization and across organizations. Inside organizations, collective leadership pays attention to the people beyond the executive director and nurtures leadership from staff at all levels, board members, constituents and community members. At the same time, leaders must be able to reach beyond their organizational walls and forge collaborations with others — even if that sometimes creates tensions or causes the organization to shift its priorities for greater alignment with the work of others.

Collective Leadership Skills

[Management Assistance Group](#) has identified a set of collective leadership skills,¹ based on the experience of members of the [Network Leadership Innovation Lab](#), a cohort of social change leaders created to advance shared knowledge about leadership of networks and movements.

For more information, see [Investing in Leadership, vol. 2: Inspiration and Ideas from Philanthropy's Latest Frontier](#) (Washington, D.C.: GEO, 2006).

¹ Robin Katcher, Mark Leach and Laure Mazur. "Toward 'Complex Adaptive Philanthropy': Preliminary Learnings from the Network Leadership Innovation Lab," Management Assistance Group, 2013, p. 4 – 5.

Leaders skilled in collective approaches:

- Establish a **clear vision** and compelling values while constantly analyzing the content of their work, aligning with others in their movement and networks, and adjusting strategies, tactics and scale accordingly.
- Replace traditional, top-down hierarchies with more **flexible forms of leadership**.
- Build **strategic, interdependent relationships** with others by establishing trust, relying on one another's contributions and appreciating their real constraints.
- **Forge networks** linked by shared culture and values, in which all participants contribute to impact and help manage ongoing tensions.
- Create fluid, frequently evolving, **nimble structures** where needed and learn to operate with increased ambiguity.

Ways Grantmakers Can Support Collective Leadership

Grantmakers can take a variety of approaches to foster collective leadership skills within nonprofits, networks and communities. Below are four ways grantmakers can support collective leadership. As the descriptions and examples will illustrate, many grantmakers are providing support that encompasses two or more of these approaches.

Provide team-based capacity building and training

Many successful leadership development programs reach beyond the executive director role to engage a team that is drawn from multiple levels of the organization. A team-based approach offers leadership development opportunities to a wider range of leaders within the organization and will help ensure the learning sticks because participants will reinforce and support one another's learning and development.

The [Alliance for Nonprofit Excellence](#)'s intensive Program for Nonprofit Excellence engages chief executives, board members and emerging leaders from each participating organization to ensure the capacity-building work is well integrated into the organization. The program includes a cross-organization peer networking component as well.

Nancy McGee, chief executive officer of the Alliance, said they have seen some exciting changes take place once the program began engaging emerging leaders a few years ago. "The emerging leaders are starting to realize they can push change from underneath," she said. "And the executive directors are recognizing ways they can and should give up control of certain things, which can be freeing and frightening at the same time."

Create opportunities for peer learning

A number of grantmakers create and nurture peer networks across organizations in an attempt to build relationships, reduce the isolation of nonprofits and their executive directors and build networks of nonprofit leaders who can support one another on an ongoing basis.

MAG's Network Leadership Innovation Lab is a peer learning cohort of social justice leaders that aims to both deepen the field's understanding of leadership in movement networks and support lab members so they can learn from one another and take their existing networks to the next level. Activities to foster peer learning include case studies and articles, learning sessions, action learning projects and peer coaching.

Create opportunities for leaders to grow

[A study, titled *Creative Disruption*](#), found that sending nonprofit leaders on sabbaticals can help them return to their jobs refreshed, and help organizations develop leadership skills among other staff in the executive director's absence.

The [Virginia G. Piper Charitable Trust](#) sponsors the Piper Fellows sabbatical program, in which fellows take a minimum of one month up to two months' time away from their organizations. Fellows typically spend this time with a mix of professional learning opportunities and some dedicated time for personal renewal. While the executive directors are away, other members of the staff have the opportunity to stretch their leadership skills in new ways. (For more guidance on creating sabbatical programs, see [resources from The Durfee Foundation](#).)

“In the movement landscape, we are all breaking down our own silos. None of us is winning at the level we need to be winning at. We need to have humility. We need to engage each other. Together we have a vision of what America should be, and we should be moving values together.”
— Sarita Gupta, executive director of Jobs With Justice, co-chair of the Caring Across Generations network, and member of the Network Leadership Innovation Lab.

Help leaders find the white space

For nonprofit leaders, often the most valuable support grantmakers can provide is support for their own renewal, reflection and some of the [white space](#), or flexible time, that's needed to explore new ideas, build relationships and determine how an organization and its leaders need to adapt in response to changing circumstances. This is especially important for collective leadership models, because networking, relationship building and strategic thinking require time that may seem like a luxury many nonprofit leaders don't have.

Through its Stanton Fellowship Program, the [Durfee Foundation](#) asks local nonprofit leaders what they would do to make Los Angeles a better place, and provides fellows \$75,000 over a two-year period to give them time and space to advance that vision. Peer learning is also an important component of the Stanton Fellowship. Fellows meet regularly to share their work and learn from one another.

“Stanton Fellows are people in our community who are best positioned to identify and solve a thorny problem, if they could just clear the decks,” said Claire Peeps, executive director of the Durfee Foundation. “The Stanton Fellowship buys them time to leverage their knowledge and contacts for improved solutions.”

Conclusion

Collective leadership skills are critical as more nonprofits and grantmakers recognize the need for increased collaboration in the sector. By supporting team-based leadership development, peer learning, renewal and more flexible time to explore new ideas and build relationships, grantmakers can help build collective leadership within organizations and across networks.