

Community Leadership Network Evaluation

**Executive Summary of
Key Findings from a Survey of Participants**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This evaluation report presents the major findings of an evaluation survey on the effectiveness of two inaugural Community Leadership Networks (CLNs) that brought together community foundations with the overarching goal: “To create results-oriented networks that will build individual community foundation capacity and the field’s knowledge base on community leadership.”

The CLN was developed by CFLeads in partnership with the Community Foundation Leadership Team (CFLT) of the Council on Foundations (COF) and Aspen Institute Community Strategies Group (CSG) to help community foundations put into practice the “Framework for Community Leadership by a Community Foundation.” The framework was created by the National Task Force on Community Leadership (NTF) in 2008 to define community leadership and its building blocks. The NTF was empanelled by CFLeads and endorsed by the CFLT in 2007 to respond to the need for a framework that would be used by the community foundation field in building the capacity of those community foundations that wanted to become more effective community leaders.

The pilot CLNs were intended to be a replicable model that could help a critical mass of community foundations practice effective community leadership and move the field toward the larger goal of making effective community leadership a defining core competency of community foundations. The Superior pilot group was regional, involving 11 community foundations from Minnesota and Wisconsin and co-hosted by the regional associations of grantmakers serving those states and ran from April 2008 to February 2009. The Alpha CLN consisted of six community foundations drawn from across the country and ran from July 2008 to May 2009. Each community foundation was represented in the CLNs by teams of up to six staff and board members that participated in three, two-day peer-learning institutes.

The format of the institutes included presentations by community foundations from inside and outside the CLN, presentations by outside content specialists, introductory community leadership stories by each community foundation, structured peer advising, informal time for networking, team action planning, and updates from community foundation teams on action plan progress. Each team identified at least one internal or external community leadership challenge (a “Learning for Action Question”) that it wanted to pursue and receive peer support on during the course of the CLN. The institutes were customized, with content based on the community leadership interests and challenges identified by members of each CLN through pre-session interviews conducted by the CFLeads-Aspen planning team.

Sample description:

There were 74 attendees from 17 community foundations and three regional associations that participated in one of the two CLNs. We had a **100% response rate** with 17 of the 17 CLN organizations providing two or more respondents each. The focus

of the survey was on the opinions and progress of the community foundations attending the CLNs. For 16 out of the 17 organizations, one of the respondents was a CEO.

Satisfaction with the CLN Process

The survey data show that the CLN was successful both in offering a valuable experience that cannot otherwise be found in the community foundation field and in building the capacity of its participants to take on community leadership.

- *Ninety-four percent of respondents agree or strongly agree that “CLNs...would be a worthwhile, on-going investment for the community foundation field.” Note that of that 94%, 61% “strongly agree” with the statement.*
- *Ninety-two percent of survey respondents agree or strongly agree that “the CLNs, as they are currently designed, are an effective strategy for helping community foundations at different points in their community leadership development [to] build capacity to practice effective community leadership.”*
- *Eighty-nine percent of respondents would choose to take part in the CLN again.* Respondents noted several reasons why their participation in the CLN was valuable and why they would choose to take part again. These can be grouped into three common themes:
 1. Board participation was very valuable for building internal accountability, shared understanding, and common commitment to community leadership.
 2. The peer learning element was unique (does not exist elsewhere in the field) in its structure, intensity and value.
 3. There were a lot of practical benefits - new tools, concrete techniques, exposure to best practices and a framework for understanding community leadership and time to work on real world projects - that will strengthen and advance CL work.

While the survey demonstrated overwhelming support for the process, there were a few people with concerns about the process. Two participants did not feel that the time commitment for senior staff and board members was worth the benefits reaped from the CLN process, particularly for organizations that were more advanced in their community leadership work. Concerns related to the feasibility of broad replication of the CLN were also expressed by three of the participants. In addition, there was a concern that the Alpha CLN was too diverse in terms of size, region and community leadership experience to develop a cohesive, on-going learning community. Finally, one participant was expecting the CLN to bring community foundation leaders together by region to learn how to collaboratively address specific issues and so, was disappointed.

Impact of the CLN Process

CLN members reported broad, deep and identifiable changes in community leadership capacity. The majority of survey respondents reported changes to staffing, finances, programming and/or policies and processes in their organizations that fall in line with the goals of the CLN and reflect the community leadership framework.

- *Ninety-one percent of respondents said that the CLN facilitated progress in a broad and deep number of areas and cited a number of accomplishments that resulted (partially or directly) from CLN participation. All of these are changes that have potential to deeply impact the work of the foundations.*

Overall, the respondents felt that they had made “some” or “significant progress” on a wide variety of community leadership benchmarks (associated with the community leadership framework). The types of changes reported indicate that the CLNs supported foundational changes in the majority of participating organizations and that there are areas where more focus could be considered.

Of the building blocks where some or significant progress was made, the *most significant* progress was reportedly made, with over one quarter to one third of respondents reporting significant progress, on the following:

- Addressing equity, diversity and inclusion issues (37%);
- Board engagement (32%)
- Incorporating community leadership into strategic plans (31%)
- Incorporating community leadership into work plans (29%)
- Board composition (27%)

When their responses were analyzed separately, CEOs also indicated that *significant progress* was commonly made on choosing and timing leadership issues (44%) and making community leadership part of their organizational mission statement (47%).

Finally, participants indicate that they made the *least progress* on:

- Developing messages that work (23%)
- Engaging donors and other co-investors (23%)
- Measuring the impact of community leadership work (17%)
- Board engagement (15%)
- Developing a business model that supports community leadership (15%)

These are areas where further focus may be necessary during the CLN and/or during follow-up and network maintenance.

- *Ninety percent of board members report that they are engaging more deeply in community leadership work as a result of the CLN.*

Specifically, they reported that “as a result of participating in this CLN” they have lead formal board discussions about community leadership, represented the foundation in public settings on community leadership matters, participated in strategic planning related to community leadership initiatives and addressed governance issues. Only one reported that he had not engaged in community leadership activities.

- *Eighty-one percent of the respondents perceived growth in their organization’s community leadership capacity from before the CLN to after the CLN. The majority of respondents felt that the CLN contributed to shifts in organizational community leadership capacity.*

Organizations that considered themselves less experienced with community leadership at the start of the CLN, felt that their organization’s community leadership capacity had grown more over the course of the CLN. Those that started with more perceived capacity reported smaller changes. This finding indicates that significant changes in capacity get more difficult as the organization gets closer to the ideal definition of “community leader.” This is not a surprising finding but may help guide the field in thinking about where the CLNs will have the most bang-for-the-buck from a capacity building standpoint.

- *When asked how they would describe what they learned, more than half of survey respondents volunteered that the CLN provided participants with a deeper and more nuanced understanding of:*
 - Elements of community leadership
 - The depth and breadth of leadership work being done
 - The importance and benefits of community leadership*And/or*
 - The difficulties and limits of leadership roles

Representative quote: “I learned about why Community Foundations are so uniquely positioned to serve as catalytic leaders in the community. I learned about the essential elements a [community foundation] needs to be an effective leader and was exposed to cutting edge tools to help make it happen. I met a number of incredible innovative, passionate, dedicated, and fun individuals.”

CLN members are investing in their community leadership capacity at a higher rate (85% versus 65%) than the baseline for the community foundation field.

About 85% of survey respondents indicated that they had made changes, or planned to make changes in the coming year, in resource allocation (staff time and/or finances) to increase their organization’s community leadership capacity. In comparison, according to the baseline 2007 community foundation national survey results, approximately 53% of respondents had made changes to staff or finances

and an additional 12% planned to make changes for a total of 65% of community foundations nationally that were investing in community leadership.¹

Organizations that made clear that their resource changes devoted to community leadership pre-dated the CLN, also noted that the CLN had encouraged progress in their community leadership work.

Key Attributes of the CLN Process

The elements of the CLN design that make it unique to the field are the elements that appeared to be the most valuable pieces of the process. These include: face-to-face peer learning, involvement of board and staff, great facilitation, a long-term commitment, a multi-meeting format, and a focus on applied learning. The data suggest that these elements, which were called out as individually strong, are strongest when used in combination with one another.

- *The face-to-face peer-learning element is unique in its year-long, multi-meeting structure and intensity (does not exist elsewhere in the field) and was cited by every participant, at some point in the survey, as the part of the CLN with the greatest impact.*
- *Ninety-two percent agreed or strongly agreed that face-to-face time with peers provided by the CLN is essential for building trust and strengthens the potential for future communication and cooperation amongst community foundations.*

The process helped to build new and strengthen old relationships in ways that provided both practical benefits and personal rewards. In some cases, relationships formed and strengthened have already contributed to on-going learning and collaboration. Peer-to-peer interaction in several forms (presentations, small groups, and one-on-one time) was beneficial because it allowed participants to network, learn from peer examples, receive feedback and guidance, share ideas and information, build relationships, and explore collaborations. The peer-to-peer environment also facilitated a sense of accountability that pushed most community

¹ “Feedback from the Field 2006 & 2007 Survey Results on Community Leadership” prepared for CFLeads by FSG Social Impact Advisors, March 5, 2008. An additional survey was conducted in 2009 but the data were not available at the time of the writing of this report. It should be noted that when FSG’s national survey was administered in 2007, the National Task Force (NTF) on Community Leadership had not completed their work on the Community Leadership Framework for Community Foundations. The Framework defined community leadership for the field and this definition was used extensively in the CLNs. When the FSG survey was administered in 2007 the definitions of community leadership that the 211 respondents to the national survey were working from were their own individual definitions of community leadership. It is possible that the definitions they were using were more or less rigorous than the one presented in the framework. Regardless, the CLN members were working from the common, comprehensive definition developed by the NTF whereas the rest of the field was not. This fact makes the comparison of the 2007 data and the comparison of the present CLN data less precise. However, the data offers interesting insight into the priority that the CLN members place on investing in community leadership, as compared to the priority placed on community leadership investment by the community foundation field more generally in 2007.

foundations to make progress on the issues they brought to the table. In addition, the peer learning environment encouraged bonding between board and staff within teams.

Representative comments:

“This type of peer learning is great and fluid in that as the participants change, insights and opportunities also change. Great learning and engagement model for those trying to implement leadership efforts in their communities.”

“I believe that meeting three times was very valuable. We were accountable to the group as a whole to do our work and the results of each meeting expedited all of our work by possibly years.”

“A strength was the process by which elements of the leadership model could be learned, tried out and reported on, as well as receiving feedback from peers.”

- *Eighty-nine percent of participants agreed or strongly agreed that board participation in the CLN process was essential to the CLN having a lasting impact on their organization (66% strongly agreed) and should be maintained in future CLNs.*

Board participation was very valuable for building internal accountability, shared understanding, and common commitment to community leadership. The opportunity to bring board and staff together in a “neutral” space and with the support of outside experts allowed for dialogue about values and strategies that contributed to team building, alignment and often, greater board engagement.

- *Facilitation by Aspen Institute was also considered to be an essential part of the CLN’s effectiveness by the majority (88%) of participants. Two respondents said they would not keep Aspen as facilitator and two said they would alter the facilitation in some way.*
- *In response to an open-ended question regarding strengths of the CLN process, the majority of respondents noted that the structure of the CLN allowed for the introduction of and experimentation with new tools, models, best practices and techniques that participants found extremely valuable.*
- *As leadership capacity develops, the barriers to and issues with community leadership that community foundations face appear to shift. Future CLNs may want to address those shifts in different ways.*

While some barriers to community leadership that existed before the CLN were addressed by the CLN sessions, old, unsolved issues remain (such as having appropriate staff and dollars to devote to community leadership) and new issues with community leadership practice came into focus for the organizations (such as

how to prioritize issues of most importance once an organization becomes recognized in the community as a leader).

Summary and Implications

There were several interdependent elements that were essential to the CLNs success in building individual and organizational capacity to practice community leadership

- The peer network approach provided community leadership practitioners with the opportunity to create and strengthen peer relationships that facilitate information sharing, collaboration, and learning.
- The CLN long-term, peer learning process built the understanding of participants and the will to practice community leadership.
- The applied learning component is important because it gave participants the opportunity to institutionalize new understandings in their organizational goals, strategies, routines, processes and structures.

There are several ways to strengthen these elements

Peer network approach

- *Provide longer-term follow-up (network support and evaluation)*
- *Organize regional and issue- based cohorts*
- *Provide incentives for more experienced participants to mentor*
- *Involve regional grantmaker association leaders*
- *Maximize efficiency of getting- to-know-each-other activities*
- *Include more one-on-one time with experts presenting tools and strategies*

Foundations of community capacity – understanding and will

- *Structure peer advising and other sessions to reflect the traits and needs of the full spectrum of participants*
- *Format sessions so that they are more digestible*
- *Use the internet to facilitate sharing and provide on-going support*
- *Look at formats that can maximize reach over time*

Applied skill building

- *Focus on metrics*
- *Provide more time with tool presenters*
- *Consider some additional areas of applied focus*
- *Expand curriculum to include evolving challenges of community leadership as well as continuing to adapt sessions to address community foundations with different levels of community leadership experience.*