

Neighborhood Leadership:

A Report on Lessons Learned from the Experience of The Denver Foundation's Strengthening Neighborhoods Program

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Strengthening Neighborhoods

A program of The Denver Foundation

This report is dedicated to the grassroots leaders who take commitment to another level, and to those who give them the necessary support to achieve their goals.

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I. INTRODUCTION

At a time when research shows a strong decline in civic engagement, the leaders whose experience informs this report represent a bright ray of hope. These are leaders who care about their communities. They care deeply enough to take action to address the issues that affect the lives of their families, friends, and neighbors. They care deeply enough to reach out to the strangers on the next block to reweave the social fabric of their neighborhoods. They are in the vanguard of a burgeoning effort to reawaken in their fellow residents an interest and involvement in civic life. From the moment they take the first step toward making a positive impact they face extraordinary challenges. To be successful in this difficult work requires an extraordinary devotion of time and energy, as well as great flexibility and adaptability. And at a time when personal material consumption has been elevated to social duty, the rewards they receive almost never offer them any direct material benefit.

The report that follows focuses on grassroots leaders – not in terms of their impact on community issues, but rather on how they grow and develop, and how that growth and development can best be supported. The report examines the influence on these leaders' growth of formal leadership trainings, of support from the staff of organizations that invest in resident-centered neighborhood development, of the leaders' relationships with mentors, families and friends, and of their own life experiences.

II. BACKGROUND

The Strengthening Neighborhoods Program

The Strengthening Neighborhoods Program (SN) is The Denver Foundation's grassroots neighborhood development program. The program helps residents of ten partner neighborhoods use their existing strengths and assets to make their communities better places to live. Established in 1998 as an initiative of The Denver Foundation, Strengthening Neighborhoods became a permanent program in 2003.

Strengthening Neighborhoods makes grants directly to residents for projects that are developed and led by the residents themselves. In 2006 the program awarded 167 grants totaling almost \$310,000 directly to residents and resident-led groups in its ten partner neighborhoods. These grants included planning grants of up to \$500 and project grants of up to \$5,000. Strengthening Neighborhoods has distributed over \$1.5 million since its inception.

In addition to grants, The Denver Foundation provides a variety of leadership development opportunities. These include a formal leadership training program called the Neighborhood Leadership Development Program; technical assistance provided by consultants hired by

residents and paid for by SN, usually specific to a capacity-building issue, such as increasing group membership; one-to-one advice and guidance from SN's staff; and scholarship opportunities to attend trainings offered by other nonprofit organizations.

The Learning Community

This report is the first significant written outcome of SN's "Learning Community." Starting in 2005, SN's staff, The Denver Foundation board committee that supervises SN's work, and SN's many neighborhood partners set out to create an intentional learning community. The community includes anyone interested in strengthening communities at the grassroots level, and it is the focal point of SN's evaluation. The Learning Community's goal is to engage in a constant and ongoing process of reflection about what makes neighborhoods stronger, how neighborhood leaders develop, how resident-centered groups can be more effective, how residents can work across neighborhoods and regions to effect positive social change, how institutions and service providers can become more resident-centered, and how SN can best support this important work. This report was commissioned as part of the Learning Community's commitment to reflect on key aspects of grassroots community development. The Learning Community also includes gatherings of resident leaders to discuss important community issues, enhanced outcome reporting and data gathering processes that encourage residents to reflect regularly on their work, a networking directory of SN's grantees, and annual larger-scale learning exchanges on topics of wide interest to neighborhood partners.

III. METHODOLOGY

The report's authors interviewed eleven leaders selected by The Denver Foundation staff. Five of the interviews were taped and transcribed (three after translation), and six were summarized in notes that identified basic themes. Most of the leaders interviewed were from a larger pool of SN grantees who had participated in the Foundation's Neighborhood Leadership Development Program. Two were leaders from Metro Organizations for People (MOP). The group consisted of six women and five men, three of whom were Spanish speakers.

The leadership experience of those interviewed covered a spectrum ranging from limited training and a focus on a single neighborhood to intensive national training and work on a national campaign that included multiple testimonies before Congressional committees.

Interviews were conducted between May and July of 2007. In addition, a focus group including eight of the leaders was held in August 2007.

IV. FOUR SIGNIFICANT FACTORS IN LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Interviews with these eleven Denver area leaders revealed four significant factors that contributed to the development of both leadership skills and the attitude of leadership, i.e., thinking of oneself as a leader. These were:

- Family and friends
- Mentoring (both formal and informal, including from professional staff)
- Life experience
- Formal trainings focused on grassroots leadership development

Family and Friends

Many of those interviewed cited family – including parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles – and/or members of their family’s social circle as primary formative influences in their development as leaders. One, for example, described the “forceful Black women [who were] involved in everything” as setting the stage for her future leadership.



Several leaders reversed the common wisdom of learning from one’s elders to point out how much courage and inspiration on their journey as leaders they drew from their children. One leader described how she overcame the fear and anxiety she felt at chairing a large public meeting for the first time – a fear and anxiety that has derailed the development of many promising grassroots leaders – with the help of her seven year old daughter. As she was preparing for the meeting, her daughter said, “Mom, I am going to sit in the front row and give you a thumbs up. Now I know that if you work hard you can make a difference.” As her mom developed in her new role, the daughter then came to assume that leading like her mother was something she could do too. Seven years later she testified at a Congressional committee hearing on children’s health insurance.

The vision of a better future for others, especially their own children, was also a primary source of inspiration for many leaders. When asked what kept her going, one leader replied, “On the one hand all the children and on the other my own daughters.” She then described how her involvement had made her a role model for both her daughters, and had a tremendous positive impact on their academic achievement. This, in turn, inspired her to do even more. “It changes one’s life, [to learn how] to look for things for the children,” she observed. Another leader noted, “For me to be a leader is to have the power...to see my children, my future generation, have the opportunity of getting ahead.”

Mentoring

Closely related to the factor of Family and Friends is the factor of Mentoring, both formal and informal. The relationship that many of those interviewed had with adult family

members who inspired and trained them could, in fact, be considered informal mentoring. Much of this occurred during the early part of a person's life – mentoring by osmosis, if you will.

Later in life, leaders described mentoring taking place within more prescribed relationships, frequently in organizational settings. In one case, a leader was mentored at her workplace, where a senior level staff person provided insight, support, and encouragement. Several leaders described how they developed connections with key staff from other organizations working in the same area or on a similar campaign or project, but often with a broader scope.

Mentoring from Professional Staff – Mentoring type relationships from professional staff, such as SN or Denver Foundation program officers or MOP organizers, were cited by a number of leaders as highly significant to their development. While none of these were explicitly designed as mentorships, the nature of the relationships often led them to evolve in this direction. For example, several SN leaders who were parents in the Aurora public school system were supported by SN staff from the earliest initial phases of their work through ongoing issue development and the launching of a major campaign. These leaders' relationship with the SN staff person evolved from formal training into mentorship over many months.



Another leader said of the Foundation staff, “While dollars were very important, the positive feedback, encouragement, and advice we received were just as important.” Another cited the “support and trust from the Denver Foundation” as a factor in her being a more confident leader. For one young leader, the personal relationship with Foundation staff was the “most beneficial thing” he got out of his association SN. He felt it “surpassed the classroom learning” of the formal leadership training. In fact, when asked the question “Who influenced you as a leader?,” many leaders mentioned specific SN staff by name.

A leader from MOP described his experience with staff support in a similar way: “That is what really motivates me, [when] someone who is at the top of an organization is really interested in what you are doing.” Another described the impact of staff mentoring on him as follows: “One improves oneself, and then one has to thank them for what they have done for you. They really know how to motivate you. I feel gratitude for them. And I feel energy to continue working and applying what I have learned.”

This close support from professional staff is a type of mentoring. While it clearly provides beneficial outcomes for leadership development, it is also very labor intensive and expensive and, as a result, may be limited in scope.

Leaders also raised other examples of mentoring that they experienced within more formal leadership development settings. The two leaders from MOP, for example, described the

benefits they received from mentoring provided by their community organizer, as well as from the evolving relationships they developed with more experienced resident leaders within MOP. These leaders also spoke of mentoring relationships with institutional leaders, such as clergy, from other parts of the country that developed through their work on national campaigns that advanced issues that the leaders' local organizing campaigns were also addressing.

Formal Trainings, which are also treated separately below, also contained elements of mentoring for some leaders. Although there is a distinction between training *per se* and the ongoing one-to-one relationship that a mentor provides, formal trainings often provide an opportunity for initial contact that can lead to the development of significant relationships



between grassroots leaders and more experienced staff and/or leaders. These relationships can then lead to sharing of insights, identification of challenges, and development of solutions to these challenges.

The positive effects of mentoring and the extent to which it was noted as a significant aspect of leaders' support suggest that SN might consider arranging mentoring relationships as an intentional part of its leadership development training.

Life Experience

According to many leaders, personal experiences provided an important basis for their grassroots leadership development and/or reinforced its growth. Leaders highlighted four dimensions of life experience that seemed developmentally significant.

Exposure to Injustice, Overcoming Obstacles, Pursuing a Passion – Some leaders cited their increased awareness of a problem – often caused by a personal experience with social injustice – as having ignited the leadership spark in them. Others referred to personal hardships, such as poverty or discrimination, as leadership catalysts. One leader worked with an activist organization in Los Angeles, The Mexican Brotherhood. He had participated in a strike at a factory and met Cesar Chavez, and this experience continued to resonate with him in his own work as a leader many years later. Juxtaposed – but related – to these are the leaders who described their motivation as coming from their passion for art or music. As one leader stated, “My own life has been the best training I have had for this work.”

The relationship between leadership inspiration derived from anger at injustice and that based on love of art is especially intriguing. While the former is more familiar, the latter suggests a more asset-based approach to personal leadership development. Many leaders whose motivation remains primarily anger-based eventually find that their work is difficult to sustain over the long haul. Ernie Cortes of the Industrial Areas Foundation has stated that anger is not enough to sustain organizing for community change, and that ultimately leaders have to connect their organizing work to love to be successful. It would be useful to explore this “passion-based” motivation in greater depth, since it offers such

rich possibilities for engaging new leaders, especially in the absence of a burning community issue.

Influential Reading - Several leaders cited reading they had done as a significant source of inspiration, e.g., the writings of Ghandi, Steven Covey's *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, and Peter Senge's *The Fifth Discipline*.

The Importance of Faith – A number of leaders referred to the importance of faith to their work as leaders, especially in sustaining them over the long haul. As one leader put it, “I need faith in order to recharge every day or it will just be work.” Another capped the description of a “defining moment” in her development as a leader with the words, “It changed my relationship with God, who had always been in me and always taken care of me.” Another stated, “I think God has really helped me out to maintain myself. I am here for a reason.”

The Role of Sports – Two of the leaders cited sports as being important to their leadership development, especially when they realized that younger people were “looking up” to them. This highlighted the sense of responsibility that many leaders expressed – whether to particular people, to the community, or to a principle. One of these leaders said organizing youth around teams or sporting events resulted in passing on the process of becoming a leader to this younger generation: “So your vision of this sports organization is a way of giving them motivation, of leadership ideals, these dreams of the future.”

Formal Training

All eleven leaders interviewed participated in some type of formal leadership training at some point in their development.

Six of the eleven participated in either the English or Spanish language version of SN's own Neighborhood Leadership Development Program (NLDP). The NLDP enrolls twenty or more residents from SN's partner neighborhoods in English and Spanish-language classes each fall. Working with one or more partners from the same neighborhood, participants



develop a neighborhood project from scratch or build upon an existing project. Along the way they create a vision and mission for their group, learn how to recruit and retain a core group of volunteers, create a strategic plan for their project, and evaluate their results. Many of these projects then receive grants from SN.

Leaders who participated in the NLDP considered the experience very important and useful, particularly in helping them acquire or enhance “hard” skills, such as running meetings efficiently or creating strategic plans for their projects.

Two leaders were affiliated with MOP. These leaders participated in ongoing training related to community organizing, as well as five-day trainings with PICO, a national organizing network with which MOP is affiliated. MOP and PICO trainings taught leaders how to use organizing to develop a base of power to effect community change. Leaders learned how to conduct one-to-one visits with community members, identify issues, conduct research and analysis, translate their work into effective action, and evaluate their work. One leader described the impact of PICO training in the following way: “There is definitely a change in awareness to be able to articulate what you want. Now I am modeling what the organization did with me to new leaders. To identify what strengths they have. This is about people empowering others.”

Another leader had participated in “Visiones,” a program designed to develop leadership among Hispanics that is now defunct. While early experiences had led her to believe that leaders were “usually men and usually dictatorial,” Visiones showed her that “leaders came in many forms, that there wasn’t just ‘one right way’ to be a leader.” As a result of this program, she saw herself as having the potential and skills to be a leader for the first time.

One young Latina leader worked with technical assistance providers who had developed a leadership model based on Latina and Native American culture called the “Latina Leadership Retreat.”

It was clear that the leaders grew as a result of their participation in formal leadership training programs. Leaders reported gains ranging from acquisition of important skills (running good meetings, interviewing other residents, conducting effective research, analysis, and evaluation, improved public speaking, etc.) to fundamental changes in the way they look at the world. Primary benefits may have come from elements such as the programs’ structure, the consistent presence of experienced trainers using a set curriculum, the opportunity to interact regularly with other leaders through role-playing and dialogue exercises that were part of the trainings, and exposure to new ideas that challenged assumptions and/or led to personal growth. Further study would be warranted to determine in a more systematic fashion what leaders found most useful about the trainings in which they participated, and to analyze their feedback to draw out common themes and conclusions that might be useful in program design.

V. OTHER FINDINGS IN LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

What leaders said about leadership

Since the leaders interviewed for this study were selected based on the leadership qualities they demonstrated while working in their communities, the researchers thought it worthwhile to ask them what they considered to be the key attributes or behaviors of leaders. Most had well developed ideas about what leadership entails. Their responses can be grouped as follows:

Personal Qualities – Interview participants cited a number of key personal qualities that they considered critical for any leader to have. Interestingly, these tended to shade more toward “people skills” than toward the more aggressive attributes typically revered in the business or corporate sector. Leaders cited qualities like being “other-focused,” “listening,” “caring,” “being concerned,” “honesty,” “integrity,” “patience,” “commitment,” “humility,” and being “a servant.”

Organizational Skills – Those interviewed also understood that leaders need to be well-organized and to have the “hard” skills to get things done. Qualities mentioned in this category included “not getting bogged down in details,” “not pushy but makes decisions with others,” “willing to do whatever is necessary,” “organizational skills,” and “ability to communicate.”

Inspirational Characteristics – A significant number of responses described the inspirational characteristics that are often associated with leaders, such as “having a vision,” “having an impact on people,” and “good at motivating others.” This grouping, however, also included several descriptions that hinted at the importance neighborhood leaders place on the more conciliatory attributes that do not often make more traditional lists of leadership qualities. These included the statements such as “a true leader isn’t noticed,” “has ability to get others to cooperate and compromise,” “builds relationships,” “has a non-adversarial approach,” “provides a role model,” and “a good leader needs to recognize leadership in other people.” This last characteristic was especially important in light of the ongoing concern about burn-out expressed by many neighborhood leaders. Finally, one leader noted that a particularly important attribute of the neighborhood leader is that he or she is aware of the good traditions in the community.

In response to this inquiry about their own opinions about leadership, one leader even shared a poem he composed that matched the letters of the word “lider” (Spanish for “leader”) with qualities he thought a leader represented: Luchador (fighter), Instructor, Dedicado (dedicated), Entusmado (enthusiastic), and Responsable (responsible).

The Importance of Social Networks

All of the leaders unequivocally valued continued connection with other neighborhood leaders, and thought that providing opportunities for this was one of the most important resources SN could provide. Their rationale included the value of sharing information and experience that could help their groups achieve their goals. There was also a clear sense of the importance of establishing more developed and ongoing relationships among people who were committed to making change in their communities. One described this as “the absolute power of networking.”

This hunger for opportunities to share experiences and insights was made all the more urgent by the leaders’ conscious acknowledgement of the challenging nature of their work and the serious issues facing their communities. There was unanimous support for the Foundation bringing small groups of leaders – like the focus group that met at the conclusion of this report’s research phase – together on a regular basis, so the same people could meet regularly over a period of time. Even in the few hours of the focus

group, leaders were eager to provide both practical and emotional support to one another, sharing difficulties, offering tips, exchanging information on resources, and trading expertise and offers of help.

One participant expressed this directly when she said, “Why don’t you bring us together again — to continue the conversation, build relationship, and support each other? Share each other’s phone, addresses and emails – we might be interested in going to each other’s events to support each other.”

Challenges

Several recurrent challenges were named in the interviews and focus group. Two of the most widespread and vexing echoed entrenched and common problems in all neighborhood leadership and organizing. The first was the difficulty of delegating responsibility to others, and the extent to which this creates a major drag on leaders’ work. One leader, for example, articulated how difficult it was to entrust the work of her project to others and to “let go.” This led another leader, who had more experience in formal training and support, to observe that the process of approaching, engaging, recruiting, and developing others to move the work forward is really “about control.” This leader continued, “There is a tension between organizational discipline and growth. The key is, how do we continue to learn together?” This leader’s point seemed to be that “getting things done,” which often means leaders doing the work themselves, controlling the process, not delegating responsibility, has to yield at some point to the important task of giving new leaders opportunities to grow and develop their own skills. Ultimately, she seemed to be saying, this will help the organization grow as well.



The second entrenched challenge noted by the leaders was the difficulty of recruiting new participants to renew the base, the core group of volunteers and “foot soldiers” on whose efforts the success of any neighborhood activity depends. Several leaders agreed that the same people are involved in all the community groups, boards of directors, etc. in a given neighborhood.

Various leaders also cited as a key challenge having enough time to dedicate to their community work, beyond the responsibilities of job, family, and other commitments. A related challenge was the frustration leaders felt when other volunteers with similar time constraints were not able to follow through on their commitments. There was some understanding, however, that volunteers with children, in particular, had serious time constraints. One leader also expressed a compassionate understanding that other people in low-income neighborhoods often had difficulty getting involved in community issues because their lower wage jobs and consequent heavy work schedules do not leave them any surplus time for involvement.

The Spanish speakers in the interview group also cited language as a barrier in their work as leaders. Although each of the three Spanish speakers had made a commitment to learn English, they had varying degrees of fluency. Inability to communicate effectively limited these leaders' interaction and effectiveness when working with other individuals or groups who spoke only English. While accommodations are often made for non-English speakers through the use of interpreters, translation of documents, etc., leaders who are not fluent in English still stated that they experience a sense of limitation and even disconnection that can limit their direct participation in community activities.

VI. OBSERVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE STRENGTHENING NEIGHBORHOODS PROGRAM

One of the main goals of this report is to help SN more effectively support leadership development at the grassroots. Through the interviews, focus group, and external research that provided the data for this report, seven clear recommendations have emerged. The following section lays out these recommendations, grouped in three categories. The categories are Enhancing Peer Networks, Improving the Neighborhood Leadership Development Program (NLDP), and Offering Additional Staff Support. The challenge for Strengthening Neighborhoods, of course, is to decide which of the many options for enhancing leadership development will be implemented, given SN's limited financial and human resources. The recommendations are presented in an order that reflects both what the authors heard from leaders and that is supported by the lessons learned from other grassroots leadership development programs.

In addition, SN is interested in knowing how the program's leadership development activities advance its program goals. Evaluations of the extent to which goals are or could be met through the various activities described are included in this section. SN's program goals are:

- Goal 1:** *To support positive relationships among residents in our partner neighborhoods based on equality and the valuing of everyone's contributions*
- Goal 2:** *To support resident leaders in our partner neighborhoods*
- Goal 3:** *To help residents organize to create positive change in their communities*
- Goal 4:** *To connect residents and resident-led groups across neighborhoods so they can learn from one another and take action on common concerns*
- Goal 5:** *To bring new partners to the work of resident-centered community building*

Enhancing Peer Networks

Use experienced leaders to mentor emerging leaders

Leaders who have been involved in the NLDP expressed a strong desire to continue or deepen their involvement with SN. Many of them have a wealth of experience and expertise, and their grassroots perspective is uniquely suited to helping others working at the neighborhood level. Many of SN's emerging leaders, on the other hand, could benefit greatly by building a relationship with an experienced leader. This suggests that SN

intentionally pair emerging and experienced leaders in either formal or informal mentoring relationships.

Such relationships would enable the experienced leaders to see themselves as valued members of the SN team. If the mentoring relationship were explicitly built into the NLDP, it would also help to address the problem that SN's staff and resources limitations make it unlikely that more than a few leaders in any NLDP class will have the opportunity for focused attention from staff. Deliberately building mentoring into NLDP with NLDP grads as mentors would thus both engage experienced leaders and be of real value to the current NLDP participants.

The value of the mentoring relationship would be increased, of course, if emerging leaders were paired with leaders who are experienced in the emerging leader's particular issue area (or a similar one), who have already developed an organized response to the emerging leader's problem, or who may have skill in organizing others on this issue.



SN staff may also be able to use the resources of The Denver Foundation to further mentoring relationships outside of its own circle of leaders. By connecting its leaders to people who may have started their careers with similar neighborhood issues and who have moved on to play significant roles in the life of the community as a whole, SN could help its leaders to develop a broader perspective and a greater sense of their own possibilities. The Foundation's network of relationships holds numerous potential contacts for mentoring through various civic groups with which it is engaged, as well as with individuals from the private, public, and nonprofit sectors who volunteer with the Foundation or work with it on collaborative endeavors.

Development of an intentional mentoring program would meet SN program goals One, Two, and Four. Goal One seeks "to support positive relationships among residents," which mentoring would do by supporting the creation and growth of new relationships and widening the circle of connection between and among residents. Goal Two seeks to support leaders, which mentoring would do by helping emerging leaders to develop their skills and to feel supported in their work. Goal 4 seeks to connect residents across neighborhoods, which would inevitably occur as emerging leaders were paired with experienced leaders in, for example, the NLDP.

Create more opportunities for inter-group gatherings

Both in interviews and at the focus group, leaders clearly communicated their desire for more interaction between their groups. Their primary interest was in sharing experiences and learning from one another. It is likely that leaders from different neighborhoods also value gathering with leaders from other neighborhoods because it provides them with the opportunity to broaden their perspective and to "cross pollinate" their ideas. Leaders also

simply value the chance to socialize and build relationships with others who are engaged in similar work and who share their commitment to being active in their communities.

This desire is echoed in the experiences of other grassroots leadership programs. The WK Kellogg Foundation, in a report on its Grassroots Leadership Development Program, observed: “For most programs it is almost a given that what people learn from having the chance to spend time with others, learning about their experiences, sharing ideas and stories, and building new relationships is the main benefit. The best programs are those that recognize this from the beginning and consciously create time for this relationship building and learning to take place.”



The Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation’s report on their Promoting Grassroots Leadership Development Program reached a similar conclusion: “Contact with other people engaged in similar work decreased participants’ sense of isolation, gave them a sense of being part of a larger movement in the region, and provided a network of peers who share common values. . . . The experience of sharing successes and challenges fostered cross-site learning and a broader perspective . . .”

It seems clear, then, that SN should promote opportunities for its leaders and their project groups to gather. Such gatherings could bring together groups that work in the same community but on different projects, to learn more about the breadth of work taking place in their community; or groups that work in different communities but on similar projects, to learn how the same issue is being handled in other neighborhoods.

A larger question, though, is whether SN should be the actual convener of these groups. Most gatherings of the sort described above will not happen spontaneously. Planning the gathering, figuring out the mix of groups, extending the invitation, paying for dinner, childcare, translation, etc., will be beyond the resources of most groups. SN has the resources, and when its own program goals or other reasons dictate, it may be appropriate for it to extend these resources and to play the lead organizing role. There may be very good reasons, however, to create a space for groups to gather and network across neighborhood or project lines that are independent of any particular project or goal that SN might be seeking to advance. SN might thus consider supporting a third party to create such opportunities, particularly if the groups themselves might thus gain some control over the timing and agenda of the gatherings.

Creating more opportunities for inter-group gatherings is likely to further SN Goals One and Four. Such gatherings would certainly support the development of positive relationships between residents, which is Goal One’s primary focus, and would also explicitly and intentionally connect residents and resident-led groups across neighborhoods. While bringing groups together would not necessarily lead to Goal Four’s outcome of “taking

action on common concerns,” the leaders interviewed certainly believed that it could lead to better outcomes within their groups’ own projects.

Create a directory of neighborhood leaders and their skills

For some time now SN staff have discussed the idea of publishing a grantee directory, sorted by neighborhood and type of project. This idea needs to become a reality. The directory would be an additional avenue for individuals to make connections and enhance their development by sharing experiences and providing mutual support.

SN might start by developing a directory of current and past participants in the NLDP, with a brief description of their areas of interest and experience, the type of project they worked on, their organizational affiliations, etc., along with contact information. Ultimately, the directory could be extended to include all recipients of SN grants, whether in the NLDP or not. Because access to and use of technology is not equal in its partner neighborhoods, the directory would need to be made available in both electronic format and hard copy. In order to remain useful, the directory would need to be updated on at least an annual basis.

Improving the NLDP

The NLDP is described in Section IV. under the Formal Trainings subsection, above. This report’s research indicated that the NLDP is clearly useful in moving its participants along a leadership development path that is consistent on several levels with SN’s five program goals. Nonetheless, the program could be enhanced based on the feedback provided as part of this report. The following are several recommendations for expanding and enhancing the NLDP.

The leaders interviewed who had participated in the NLDP stated that they found the experience valuable and empowering. They did not, however, regard it as the culmination of their learning. Quite the opposite, the NLDP seemed to whet their appetite for more – for an advanced level of training, for more opportunities to interact with other leaders, for more information about specific topics, for a deeper relationship with SN staff. This is a clear sign that NLDP is developing leadership.

Develop a second level of NLDP training

Several leaders talked about the need for an advanced version of the NLDP. This was especially true for leaders who are part of groups that are ongoing and struggling to sustain themselves. “I would like to learn more about how to keep the group going and growing” is how one leader described it. One way to structure such a second level training might be to have leaders who graduate from the NLDP take some time to practice the new skills and use the tools they learned, then return six months later for a more advanced version.

In addition, leaders identified two entrenched and recurring challenges that are echoed by grassroots leaders in almost every setting: effectively delegating responsibility to others, and recruiting additional volunteers and core group members to the work. If a second level NLDP could include a concentrated focus on these two challenges and could help leaders

devise effective solutions to them, it would be a major contribution to the entire field of grassroots leadership development.

Make training opportunities outside the NLDP available to graduates

Although most NLDP participants are not involved with groups that have or seek to have 501(c)(3) status, many still face the same issues that trouble fledgling non-profits, such as managing finances, raising funds, and recruiting, training, and supervising volunteers. Numerous training opportunities exist in the metro Denver area to help NLDP graduates develop their skills and understanding in these and other important areas. The Community Resource Center (CRC), for example, offers regular training on many topics relevant to the development of NLDP leaders and their groups. Because of the strong established relationship between SN and CRC, one option would be for SN to provide scholarships to NLDP graduates for these training. Of equal importance would be ensuring that the graduates regularly receive information about these and other training opportunities. SN might consider making similar arrangements with the Colorado Nonprofit Association and Metro Volunteers.

A related issue concerns the use of SN resources to send leaders to MOP or PICO national trainings, where they receive intensive instruction in community organizing principles and techniques. Several of the leaders interviewed attended these trainings, including leaders affiliated with MOP organizing units and unaffiliated leaders. While these intensive trainings were extremely effective for leaders who were part of MOP, it was not at all clear that they offered benefit to leaders who were not. Two suggestions emerge from this finding: SN should ensure that MOP leaders have the opportunity to attend PICO national trainings by providing resources to MOP to underwrite the trainings; and SN should encourage leaders who are not affiliated with MOP to take advantage of other trainings, such as the NLDP and those offered by the Community Resource Center, rather than sending them to MOP or PICO multi-day trainings.

Add public officials and institutional representatives to the NLDP curriculum

SN should strongly consider making presentations from relevant public officials, such as city council members and the Mayor's neighborhood liaisons, and representatives of important community institutions, such as school district superintendents, a regular part of the NLDP curriculum. These leaders could share their perspectives on how grassroots leaders can work to effect positive change in their communities, according to the needs and goals they have defined. Such presentations would broaden neighborhood leaders' perspective and help them to see how they can be agents of change on larger issues and/or in the larger community.

This recommendation would also help SN achieve Goal Five, which focuses on bringing new partners to the work of resident-centered community building, by introducing public and institutional representatives to actively engaged and well-trained neighborhood leaders who are interested in making a positive difference in their communities.

Offering Additional Staff Support

Without exception, those people who had the opportunity to develop an individual relationship with a SN staff member saw that relationship as a major factor in their leadership development. The ability to turn to a professional for advice and guidance was viewed as extremely valuable. This relationship also brought with it a sort of validation that the individual, as well as the project they were involved in, were worthwhile.

Leaders who had the opportunity for this individual support were unanimously enthusiastic about the positive impact it had on their growth as a leader, often valuing it above formal training. If SN staff were able to provide this individualized support to more leaders, it is likely that the effort would pay off in stronger neighborhood projects.

An example of the extraordinary benefit of close SN staff support is the work done by SN's staff organizer in Original Aurora with groups of monolingual Spanish speakers. The staff member attended numerous strategy sessions with the newly engaged leaders, teaching organizing techniques and helping them evaluate options. Over several months the leaders developed into a confident group of active parents that achieved its goals and that came to see the SN staff member as an ally in their cause.

It is important to note, however, that within any given group there are likely to be at most several individuals who emerge as key leaders and who benefit most in their development from the type of close support described above. It is recommended that SN pursue the goal of traditional community organizing groups, which is to increase the number of groups and their leaders that a staff member can support, rather than having the groups become increasingly dependent on the staff member and unable to function without his or her guidance.

Other Observations About Leadership Development Training

The interviews and research conducted as part of this report suggest that most leadership development training, regardless of the specific approach, has value to the participants. At the most basic level, being selected to participate in a leadership development program gives the participant a new self-perspective. For many, participation in a leadership development program helped them to self-identify as leaders for the first time, so their participation was a validation of their status in the community. Participants also learned that there is no one "correct" style of leadership, and that leaders can come from many backgrounds and all different ages, genders, and classes.

Leaders interviewed for this report also indicated that they found the "nuts and bolts" components of the training they received to be extremely valuable. These segments included instruction on such skills as how to run a meeting and how to write a grant proposal. Such skill-based content should be a prominent part of any leadership training that SN offers.

Spanish speaking leaders also indicated ongoing difficulties related to their lack of English fluency. These difficulties persisted despite accommodations such as the provision of

interpretation and translation. This suggests that SN concentrate additional resources on helping monolingual Spanish-speaking leaders to become bilingual. It seems clear that their leadership abilities will be enhanced if they can move easily between English-speaking and Spanish-speaking worlds.

The research for this report did not, however, suggest any clear answers to the question “What kind of leadership development training is better?” It is especially difficult to compare a program such as the NLDP, which focuses on developing leaders at the neighborhood level who can successfully complete a neighborhood project, to programs such as MOP’s or PICO’s, which focus on developing leaders who will take action on a broader scale leading to regional, statewide, or even national social change. The leadership development outcomes of programs with such different goals and strategies are essentially impossible to compare.

VII. SUMMARY

This inquiry set out to answer the question “How can grassroots neighborhood leaders be most effectively supported and developed?”. No one clear answer to this question emerged. The fairest conclusion that can be drawn from the report’s research is that there are many different strategies, and many different influences, that can support and influence the development of neighborhood leaders.

The leaders interviewed for this report had many experiences and characteristics in common. These included role models in their families or neighborhood, religious faith, participation in formal leadership development training, formal or informal mentoring, their response to personal challenges or hardship, an experience that led them to become acutely aware of social ills, and their own ethical sense of right and wrong. It would appear that it is a combination of these experiences and characteristics – plus the factors of opportunity and personality – that result in a person becoming a neighborhood leader.

Furthermore, the research also suggests that it may not be possible to segregate the impact of these experiences or characteristics in any precise way. Rather, it would seem that these many elements interact and interplay within each individual in different ways to produce unique results and unique grassroots leaders.

The research does suggest, though, that leadership development programs do not, on their own, create leaders. It is more likely that the person who seeks out programs of this kind is already on the path to becoming a leader in his or her community. Leadership development programs can, however, serve as a “launching pad” for an emerging leader, or provide a boost to the experienced leader. When combined with additional and ongoing support of the type suggested in the previous recommendations, such as opportunities to meet with other leaders, to be mentored, and to be supported by professional staff of a program like SN, a leadership development program can have a substantial and lasting

influence on leaders, and in turn on the communities and issues they to which they are committed.

VIII. APPENDIX

The authors did some web-based research to explore other examples of grassroots leadership development programs, and to discover what other foundations had learned from their own leadership development programs. The following websites and reports were used as background information for this report:

www.mrbf.org – Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation, *Promoting Grassroots Leadership Development: The Role of a Learning Program*

www.mrbf.org/resources - Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation, *Fertile Ground: Reflections on Grassroots Leadership Development*

www.wkkf.org – W.K. Kellogg Foundation, *Grassroots Leadership Development, A Guide for Grassroots Leaders, Support Organizations and Funders*

www.leadershiponlinewkkf.org – W.K. Kellogg Foundation, *Engaging New Leadership Voices for Catalyzing and Sustaining Community Change*

www.nfg.org/otherpubs/ – *Research on Barriers and Opportunities for Increasing Leadership in Immigrant and Refugee Communities: Public Report*

www.grassrootsleadershipcollege.org – a leadership development program based in Madison, Wisconsin