

# Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION<sup>Review</sup>

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*Leadership Supplement*  
**Creating a Cross Sector Leadership Network**  
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Stanford Social Innovation Review  
Winter 2018

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# Creating a Cross Sector Leadership Network

The James Irvine Foundation's New Leadership Network provides lessons about how to foster civic innovation.

BY HEATHER MCLEOD GRANT

**I**n 2012, the James Irvine Foundation hired Monitor Institute, where I was then employed, to research the potential for a nonprofit leadership network in California's San Joaquin Valley. The area was of particular interest to the foundation because it is rich in challenges—high unemployment and poverty, poor air and water quality, and health inequities, among others—and it has relatively few philanthropic resources with which to address these problems. In Irvine's conversations with local nonprofit grantees, the foundation had uncovered an interest in more capacity building to help nonprofit leaders tackle these challenges.

However, after our team conducted more than 50 interviews with local leaders from all sectors in Fresno County, we came to a slightly more nuanced conclusion. We realized that if Irvine only invested in local nonprofit leaders, they wouldn't actually move the needle on important issues in the community or in the region.

While local nonprofits provide a source of social innovation and deliver important front-line services, they often don't have enough power or resources to take on larger systemic issues by themselves. Specifically, we found that local business, government, and nonprofit leaders were working in silos, which kept them from tackling more complex, systemic issues. We also found that the younger generation of emerging nonprofit leaders was excluded from more powerful business and government networks in the city of Fresno, which hampered their ability to have greater impact.

Finally, the community seemed to be at an inflection point, with growing momentum for change. Under the leadership of then-Mayor Ashley Swearingin, Fresno was beginning to revitalize a destitute downtown, which had

been commercially abandoned during decades of growth. Additionally, several collective impact projects had recently been launched to address cradle-to-career education and workforce development, and public health issues. Many younger people were reversing the historical brain drain by returning to the region after college to start their careers and families. And lastly, the anticipation of a new high-speed rail line coming through Fresno within a decade promised to change the cal-

## KEY DESIGN ELEMENTS AND CHOICES

To design our network, we used what we call the I/We/It framework, which we developed by drawing on concepts pioneered by philosopher Ken Wilber of the Integral Institute. We didn't want this to become yet another leadership development program that focused only on helping individuals build their skills (the "I"); rather, we wanted it to be a *network* (the "We") of local cross-sector civic leaders who were interested in learning new approaches and collaborating to change their community (the "It"). Additionally, our theory of change posited that real impact mostly happens on the ground, in a physical place. By connecting leaders in one city and county, helping them create shared approaches to the work, building deep trust, and expanding their ability to work across boundaries, we thought we could reach critical mass.

With this framework in mind, we also wanted to integrate several important—and



Participants in the Stanislaus County New Leadership Network gathered in the Sierra Foothills in the fall of 2016.

culus of housing, jobs, and transportation by more effectively linking Fresno and the Central Valley with the Los Angeles and San Francisco metropolitan regions.

Armed with these findings, Irvine tapped our team to design and implement a cross sector leadership network. To do so, we drew upon the most impactful elements of existing legacy programs, including the Barr Fellows in Boston and the American Leadership Forum (ALF) in Silicon Valley, and combined them with new content. The Irvine New Leadership Network, or NLN, officially launched in Fresno in spring 2013.

relatively new—approaches to social change. To that end, we drew on everything we'd learned at Monitor and elsewhere about catalyzing and developing collaborative networks, underpinned with a focus on building trusting relationships. Additionally, we approached our understanding of the local context, and the ultimate "end game" of community change, with a systems lens—seeing the larger whole and finding leverage points for intervention.

We began integrating design thinking, working with colleagues from Stanford University's d.school and others to see how this method could help simplify big problems, provide insights about

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end users, and create a human “container” for civic innovation and community problem solving. For the most part, we set aside frameworks related to management and individual leadership development. We also approached the work with a sense of urgency. Rather than having each cohort last a year or more, our program constituted nine days of convening over six months.

Last, we designed an intentional arc of learning for participants: The first three-day convening was about understanding their local context and community through a cross-sector and systems lens. We also used that weekend to go deep very quickly: Through three-minute speeches, participants shared their personal stories and the “why I do what I do” behind their work, getting to know one another and building trust.

The second three-day session was a learning journey designed to be disruptive and encourage experimentation with new ideas. Participants traveled to either Portland, Ore., or the San Francisco Bay Area, looking externally for sources of innovation. Participants also received training in design thinking. The final three-day weekend brought it all home: These leaders began putting what they had learned into action through collaborative projects that emerged organically.

## LESSONS LEARNED AND CHANGES MADE

Fresno was a pilot site, so at the end of two years and four cohorts, we stepped back, analyzed data, and reflected on what we might do differently, were we to run the program again. We had that chance when the James Irvine Foundation invested in replicating the program in another San Joaquin Valley community: Stanislaus County, about 100 miles north of Fresno. Given this opportunity, we were able to tease out our lessons learned. These lessons are as follows:

**Balancing the I, We, and It** | In the first program, we put more emphasis on building the network (We) and changing the larger community (It)—partly to differentiate it from other leadership programs—but we deliberately downplayed the role of individuals’ own leadership. In so doing, we missed important opportunities for participants to give and receive feedback about how they “show up,” and to work on attitudes or behaviors that undermine or support their own effectiveness. We learned that when these three dimensions are balanced, they work together and reinforce one other.

**Adding individual coaching** | As a result of the insight above, we deliberately added individual coaching to our next program, hiring certified professional coaches to give each leader at least five individual sessions. While this added

to the budget, the cost wasn’t significant, and it has proved to be helpful for these leaders to address their own developmental challenges.

**Integrating design thinking** | Originally, we only had a half-day session on design thinking. But when we realized that this training led to a number of organic projects and collaborations, we decided to integrate this topic more fully into the program. Now, we introduce it at the first weekend, have participants do empathy interviews before the second convening, do a deeper dive at Stanford’s d.school during the learning journey, and have them work on projects throughout the program. We’ve realized that design thinking—in addition to being a great problem-solving process—can help create the “container” for civic innovation.

**Addressing race, equity, and power** | It may sound naïve, but in the first program, we didn’t tackle issues of class, race, power, and equity head-on. Plus, while the participants we recruited were diverse (across sectors, race, gender, age, education, socioeconomic status, etc.), our initial facilitation team was all white, albeit diverse on other dimensions. The second time, we seized the opportunity to address this imbalance by deliberately recruiting people of color to our training and coaching team, and by beginning to raise conversations about equity, power, and privilege. We have made a conscious commitment to explore how these issues show up in our facilitation team and how we model vulnerability and fierceness. We’re still on a learning curve, but we believe that the program is more relevant and powerful as a result.

**Embed in the community** | Another big shift was learning to find a community partner to act as our backbone organization, from the outset. In Fresno, there wasn’t an ideal institution to play this role, and as a consequence, when the cohort program ended, it was harder to maintain momentum in the network. This time around, we partnered on the grant proposal with the Stanislaus Community Foundation, which has helped with recruiting, program logistics, network weaving, communications, and more. Not only does the partnership help build capacity, but we’re hoping it helps maintain greater momentum after the program’s planned cohort convenings have ended.

**Recruit for attitude, not position** | Lastly, when we recruited NLN participants in Fresno, we didn’t really know whom we were looking for. We now know that it is better to recruit participants based on their having a civic innovation mind-set—i.e., change makers who are passionate about disrupting the status quo. Ultimately, we think there’s as much or

more value in finding and supporting the civic innovators in any community than in trying to change members of the established power base.

## SUMMING UP

We launched the NLN in Stanislaus County in fall 2016, but we’re still on a learning curve. We have just completed a summative evaluation in Fresno. Based on this evaluation data, the NLN has had real, concrete impact at all the levels of the I, We, and It:

**I (Leaders)** | NLN leaders in Fresno have grown because of this program and the network of relationships, developing new tools, mind sets, and connections. Many have progressed in their careers, being promoted to more important roles at larger organizations. Additionally, many have advanced in their community leadership: they have joined local boards and commissions, started new innovative initiatives, or stepped into larger community leadership roles.

**We (Network)** | The NLN network remains a strong core-periphery network: At least half remain actively involved with the network, while others are more on the periphery. Additionally, due to relationships created through the NLN, there has been lots of cross-fertilization, with members recruiting other members to join one another’s boards and promote shared causes.

**It (Community)** | It’s incredibly hard to move the needle on important issues, so it would be unrealistic to expect that the network would have done so in four years. However, the NLN has had measurable impact on creating innovative initiatives in the city: At one point, more than 80 collaborations were counted in the group. Additionally, members say the NLN has given a lift to collective impact initiatives; and they point to important signs of Fresno’s overall progress, of which the NLN is one significant part. The program has helped build real capacity for collaboration in the community.

In reflecting on this larger, growing body of cross-sector work, it’s clear that many of us are using slightly different language but effectively talking about the same thing. Regardless of what language we use, there is a real need for more of this leadership and work in the world. The issues we’re facing today are complex and systemic, and can’t be solved in silos, nor by our traditional, bureaucratic, centralized institutions. We need our institutions and our systems to adapt. Spearheading this charge are community-based leaders such as those in the NLN in Fresno and Stanislaus counties; they are fearlessly going where none have gone before in search of a better future for their communities and, ultimately, our nation. ✕