Feature

Securing Trust in People and Place
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NONPROFITS SEEKING TO IMPROVE COMMUNITIES FACE THE HARD WORK OF BUILDING TRUST. SUCCESS REQUIRES PRIORITIZING THE PEOPLE YOU WORK WITH AND PROCEEDING PATIENTLY.

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AMERICANS HAVE MUCH LESS social trust than they used to, scholarship and polls suggest. The public has precious little faith in everything from the federal government to organized religion to the media to people of divergent political sympathies. “Our [country’s] stock of social capital—the very fabric of our connections with each other—has plummeted, impoverishing our lives and communities,” concludes Harvard University political scientist Robert Putnam in his 2000 book Bowling Alone.

What are some practical implications of low trust? Individuals will have less support when in need. They will find basic life steps, including finding and keeping a job, getting and staying married, maintaining health physically, and starting and running a business, prohibitively challenging. Such obstacles are more acute among the less educated, the less well off, and people of color. Only one-quarter of those earning more than $75,000, one-fifth of those with postgraduate degrees, and 31 percent of whites are “low trusters,” according to a 2019 Pew Research Center study. Low trusters tend to think other people can’t be trusted, look out only for themselves, and would try to take advantage of them if given the chance. By contrast, 45 percent of those earning under $20,000, 43 percent of those with only a high-school diploma or less, and 44 percent of Blacks and 46 percent of Hispanics have low social trust.

But low trust among individuals tells only part of the whole story. Neighborhoods marked by low trust are less likely to have residents
who collaborate—formally or informally—to advance individual and common goals. Such lack of cooperation makes everything harder, from acquiring childcare in an emergency to ensuring streets are safe to looking for a job. Low social trust disadvantages everyone living in a neighborhood and makes it more likely that any outside organization looking to help residents will be mistrusted at first.

While many factors influence general social trust in a given neighborhood, the wealth of associational life is especially important. Neighborhood watch groups, residential associations, and weekly children’s activities “generate a web of ‘mundane’ routines that lubricate collective life, although seldom planned as such,” writes sociologist Robert Sampson. This dynamic is evident in the conclusion of the Pew study: “Some believe their neighborhoods are a key place where interpersonal trust can be rebuilt if people work together on local projects, in turn radiating trust out to other sectors of the culture.”

While scholarly research highlights some of the ingredients critical to general levels of trust—and how these levels affect social and economic outcomes—few sources exist for learning how organizations can systematically secure and sustain trust within a specific population. Philanthropists, nonprofits, and public institutions rarely consider the trust problem when they seek to address various social problems. They don’t usually ask questions such as: What secures, sustains, or diminishes trust with my organization, staff, or initiative? What role does this trust play in the success of projects? What projects can enhance a neighborhood’s social capital and general social trust? Instead, they tend to view problems and solutions through a material or technical lens, and consequently suffer large blind spots regarding anything related to relationships. When they subsequently stumble, they tend to conclude that their failures originated with the group they targeted, rather than with their own approach.

Communities engaged by organizations with trust-related blind spots are likely to be less open to local input or to sharing power because they will tend to view such organizations suspiciously, and cascading effects will ensue in everything that follows. This dynamic can be especially acute in distressed neighborhoods, where residents who have experienced a history of exploitation or exclusion have widespread mistrust, especially of outsiders. Organizations who want to surmount this barrier need to change their approach.

To get a handle on the problem, we can turn to what has proven effective in particular neighborhoods, cities, and regions. Organizations such as Life Remodeled and Partners for Education—Detroit- and Appalachia-based nonprofits, respectively, that are focused on enhancing opportunity, education, and community in their respective geographies—have developed effective approaches to securing and sustaining trust. Specifically, they show the importance of leveraging local talent, sequencing activities, and adapting to and bolstering local contexts to building trust in low-trust neighborhoods. Such efforts demonstrate that cultivating relationships, developing local talent, moving slowly and deliberately, and being sensitive to local context can be far more important than anything to do with an initiative’s material goals or technical details.

Caught Off Guard

Since 2011, Life Remodeled (LR) has brought together Blacks and whites to work together to repair homes, renovate high schools, and clean up neighborhoods in and around Detroit. While many factors contributed to Motor City’s decline in the past 70 years (the city has lost two-thirds of its population since its 1950 peak and went bankrupt in 2013), one is surely race and how it influences levels of trust, the nature of social networks, and access to power and resources. Broken relationships between insiders and outsiders, suburbanites and urbanites, and white and Black residents have long shaped how the city and region have managed disinvestment, emigration, abandonment, and blight. The split is perhaps best represented by Detroit’s Eight Mile Wall, a half-mile-long wall built in 1941 to separate a Black neighborhood from a white housing development.

LR has developed a highly practical frame for renewing people and bridging divides: It gets together volunteers from a wide range of neighborhoods and backgrounds to renew buildings and infrastructure. “I’ve found that if you try to get two people who are polar opposites on issues of race, religion, or politics to sit down at a table, look each other in the eye, have a conversation, and work it out, 9 times out of 10 that’s not a very productive conversation,” says Chris Lambert, LR founder and CEO. “But if you can invite the same two people to work shoulder to shoulder on an action-oriented project, something magical happens, where they begin to develop foundations of respect for one another.”

After several years of development postlaunch, LR had built a good working relationship with local leaders in many neighborhoods while growing to encompass three main activities: renovating and refurbishing neighborhood assets, such as schools,
parks, and sports facilities; beautifying sections of the city through intentional, six-day sprints that mobilized thousands of volunteers; and repairing houses. LR designed each activity to build community and bridge divides by bringing people together to solve problems.

Then, in 2016, LR partnered with the Detroit school district to refurbish and repurpose a former middle-school building. The project would transform the site into a community hub that would house a wide range of organizations, such as nonprofits and small businesses, that could serve a mostly poor Black neighborhood. The project, at least to LR, seemed like something residents would be excited about. And when Lambert informed community leaders of the plan, they seemed supportive. LR leased the huge, handsome building for 50 years at only $1 per year; no other organization or individual received an opportunity to make an offer.

But LR was caught off guard when it finalized the contract with the district and announced its intentions to the community. A backlash ensued, with some calling for the contract to be dissolved and others threatening to sue the district. Two community meetings drew large crowds—and palpable anger. Many questioned why a white outsider, and not a Black community member, had gotten such a sweet deal, and whether it signaled that gentrification was going to push struggling residents out of their own neighborhood. While LR had worked successfully with neighborhoods across Detroit and had built many relationships with local leaders, the act of acquiring real estate—especially in this fashion—was seen as a threat in ways that removing blight and renovating houses were not. While Lambert thought of himself as a good communicator and an inclusive leader whose extensive travels, work in Africa, and years running LR had taught him what contextualization was all about, the reaction strongly suggested that he was failing to understand something important about how residents viewed the world—and him.

Deep mistrust of government, outsiders, and whites persists among many people of color who call Detroit home. “Over 80 percent of the city’s population is African American, and yet almost every decision that has any significant bearing on Detroit’s future is made by a small group of [suburban] white men,” observes city planner and author Alan Mallach.1 Dwan Dandridge, LR’s vice president at the time and now the head of Black Leaders Detroit, knows this dynamic too well: “We Detroiters, we aren’t very trusting, and there is a reason why. ... History has taught us not to be.”

Lambert’s initial impulse was to respond, to argue his case, and to explain the benefits the project would bring.2 But Dandridge advised Lambert instead to just listen and learn. “It’s not reasonable to ask Blacks to trust you, given the history, which is much longer and relevant to them than your five years of good work,” Dandridge recalls telling him. “They didn’t invite you, they don’t know you, and they don’t believe you know them.”

Dandridge acted as a translator, deeply sympathetic to the goals of the project and trusting of Lambert, yet fully aware of the roots of residents’ concerns. Local residents wanted to believe relationships mattered more than the project before they would consider it. Dandridge encouraged Lambert to hang in there, quietly accept the testing and chastening, apologize when necessary, absorb the anger being expressed, and learn how to read the social context. Lambert was humble enough to be aware that he didn’t have all the answers and could learn from the process and people. As a former pastor, he was motivated by his faith to be vulnerable and full of unconditional love, and he was open to making the changes necessary to enable the relationship to move forward on more equal footing.

This posture allowed the neighborhood to become Lambert’s teacher. LR adapted its approach to ensure that the neighborhood had co-ownership of the project. “I can now give yet another example of how much my life needs remodeling,” Lambert says. “And a lot of that remodeling requires demolition of false beliefs, false expectations, and wrong perspectives.”

**Five Stages to Trust-Building**

**Despite wanting to** bring people together, break down barriers, and build a collaborative community, LR had somehow failed to secure the kind of trust necessary to launch the project. How could the organization change that?

LR learned a lot as it developed the community hub. Specifically, it formulated a five-stage approach to securing and sustaining trust, embedding new organizations in a particular place, and transforming relationships in the neighborhood. Starting in an area where residents did not always trust its motivations, LR has incrementally built confidence in its role, catalyzed the development of new institutions and norms, and helped foster a community that is more oriented toward cooperation and collective action. These combined efforts have led to both more trust in LR and denser and more widespread trust networks throughout the neighborhood.

**First,** LR commits to showing up over and over again in a single neighborhood, repeatedly demonstrating an earnest willingness to listen, learn, and be vulnerable. This means emphasizing hearing what people have to say, especially in small groups at the street level. Breaking bread with residents is essential to this process. The organization doesn’t promote plans; instead, it shares ideas only when asked. And it spends less energy facilitating large group gatherings where people tend to pontificate and the loudest voices (sometimes from outside the area) may dominate, pressuring others to oppose change.

**Second,** LR identifies individuals with robust trust networks in each part of the neighborhood and gradually offers them influence—and ownership—over the initiative, giving them the confidence to invite others to join the effort. By embracing their ideas and being transparent about its intentions and respectful with its language, LR lets neighborhood residents know they are being treated with dignity, and not as victims. “No one likes to be treated as a charity case,” Lambert says. “And, in fact, talent is distributed equally across populations even if opportunity is not.”

**Third,** LR undertakes a series of smaller-scale initiatives in the neighborhood so that the organization starts to lay a foundation of trust as residents get firsthand experience with it. This means running the neighborhood beautification project and undertaking home-repair work in a neighborhood before doing anything more substantial. In the case of the community hub plan, LR did not do...
this, instead running smaller projects concurrently with the redevelopment, rather than beforehand. The fact that relationships in the neighborhood were less developed when the larger project was announced contributed to the controversy.

**Fourth, as trust develops, LR gradually builds up a core institution** staffed mostly by people from either the immediate area or nearby enough to know the place and people well—people who can ensure that the organization is grounded in local values and norms. It formally incorporates influential residents and organizations into advisory groups that are regularly consulted so that they have the power to guide and extend the institution, sustain trust networks, and solicit community cooperation. Combined, these steps enable the organization to deepen its foundation so it is strong enough to support an ambitious structure (such as the hub)—one that is able to organize a wide variety of initiatives and programming (rooms).

**Fifth, LR encourages extensions and spinoffs so that more and more organizations and institutions work** in a similar fashion, feeding a virtuous cycle of change. It scales up the initial effort and ensures that the density of social institutions increases across a place. This strategy includes having the role models and sources of authority lead efforts to improve the neighborhood, so that they have greater sway over its culture.

On the whole, LR seeks not simply to build trust, but to earn it. You cannot tell someone they should trust you; you can only show them that you’re trustworthy. And that takes time. “We couldn’t ask anyone to believe us,” Lambert says. “It wouldn’t work, especially in this context. Instead, we asked people to hold us accountable to do what we agreed to do. We were confident we could deliver.”

Although LR had always sought to solicit the opinions of neighborhood residents to ensure that its focus is demand-driven, it has concentrated on increasing this practice since the public disagreement over the middle-school building project. “The community knows its own needs better than any outsider but doesn’t necessarily have the resources and relationships,” Dandridge says. “But understanding is a resource in itself. ... Outsiders—including philanthropists—may have money, but that money by itself is no good without the understanding that the community has.”

**A Bloom of Associations**

*Residents are the real heroes, LR recognizes. They are empowered to determine what occurs in their neighborhood and must be partners in moving it forward. Lambert worked with an informal group to negotiate various obstacles, and eventually this group became a formal, 14-person advisory body for the hub and LR. It included some who were previously against the whole initiative, such as Andre McCullough, a long-standing member of the neighborhood involved in community development. “I got everything I was looking for to help my community over the last 30, 40, 50 years,” he says. “Life Remodeled is bringing that to fruition. We’re helping each other. So it’s all good.”*

In addition, a youth advisory council of students from Durfee Elementary-Middle and Central High School meets monthly to advise LR on the evolving desires and expectations of neighborhood residents and schools, hold it accountable for its decisions, and inform the neighborhood and students of new opportunities as they arise.

Besides working with neighborhood adult and student leaders to develop the vision, LR seeks to boost trust, community collaboration, and social capital in many other ways. Its various initiatives and advisory boards strengthen the influence of community and school leaders by raising their profiles across the neighborhood. Its focus on service promotes the ideal of giving back to the community and improving the neighborhood. Its free community events and resource giveaways build connections with residents that extend to partners/tenants in the hub. Neighborhood residents who visit the hub can access free diapers and formula; pediatric therapy; a health center; a cancer-support group; senior citizens’ programming; and pop-up youth activities, such as violin, chess, theater, and dance, offered by other local nonprofits—all located in a single building. What was once a middle-school auditorium now hosts choir rehearsals, school dances, weddings, and community events such as movie nights.

LR also gets personal with residents by “hitting the pavement” to attend block parties and community events and by going door-to-door to canvass the community during warmer months. Its recruitment of tenants establishes a new set of stakeholders willing to commit long-term to collaboration with other organizations in the building and neighborhood revitalization, and partnerships with the school system and city bolster community resources and social linkages outside the area. None of this is easy, especially given the high transiency in the neighborhood. While many residents have lived there for a long time, the area experiences significant churn—every year relationships must be developed with newcomers. Putting “people over projects,” as LR emphasizes, is highly time-consuming and involves a lot of relationship building. It is far messier than renovating a structure or cleaning up a neighborhood, and often requires compromising operational efficiency in the short term.

Today, after investing more than $5 million in the hub, LR has transformed the former school building into the Durfee Innovation Society (DIS), a name Durfee students created to commemorate the school that used to be housed there and to reflect their desire to bring more opportunity to their neighborhood. The building is fully occupied with 39 tenants—nonprofits and social enterprises dedicated to community services, job and workforce development, and youth programs. About seven-tenths of the tenants are Black-led. Not one had a brick-and-mortar presence in the neighborhood beforehand. They collectively employ 230 full-time staff, and 200 more, mostly from nearby, work part time. By linking residents to opportunity and support beyond the community, they build connections beyond the neighborhood—something that was lacking previously. Once they have set up shop and become a member of the DIS collaborative community, they become stakeholders in the revitalization of the neighborhood.

“I was most excited about the collaboration between other business owners to support the children and the adults and the seniors of the immediate community,” says Teresa Singleton, who
owns BouTiki, a women's clothing boutique located within the DIS. “I didn't feel like I was on an island alone.”

In addition, the four square miles around the school have been significantly improved from LR's work repairing homes and mobilizing volunteers annually to clear blight—efforts that were concentrated in the neighborhood from the time it took over the school building. While broader dynamics fueling Detroit's stabilization and gradual recovery have certainly helped, DIS's impact as a wellspring of renewal is palpable. It shows the catalytic possibilities of scaling up and connecting efforts in a particular place. The more these connections and institutions embed people in social structures that can sustain and propel them, the more likely neighborhood residents will benefit from social capital and thrive in their lives. The goal, Terence Willis, a member of LR's advisory council, says, is “not just to invest in a building, it's also to regenerate a neighborhood by setting an example and sowing seeds that others in the same area—or elsewhere—can learn from, generating a self-propagating process of renewal.”

The sense of revival is palpable. In Dexter-Linwood—the neighborhood in which the hub is located—crime has dropped; many more students are accessing after-school tutoring, skills development, and leadership programs; and property prices are rising as the area gradually becomes a more attractive place to live. Across Detroit, LR has beautified 1,810 blocks across Detroit, repaired 194 homes, boarded up 2,062 houses, and invested $38 million (some of it in-kind) in neighborhood assets across the city as of 2021. Such increased prosperity has sprouted from the community ties and social trust that LR helped build.

Adapting to Appalachia

LR's work in Detroit highlights how to establish trust between organizational leaders and the communities they partner with. The geography and demographics of eastern Kentucky are markedly different from those of eastern Michigan, but the importance of trusted partnerships persists. In Appalachia, outsiders—even those from a few miles away—are viewed warily. One county or even one part of a county can differ substantially from another. This hyperlocalism forces any organization working in the area to build relationships and customize its approach community by community.

One organization that has effectively modeled local leadership and adapting to context is Partners for Education (PFE). Founded and led by Dreama Gentry since 1995, PFE combines a variety of strategies to maximize its impact on the region's children and the social context in which they grow up.

A native of the region and a graduate of Berea College, Gentry, like most of the best-educated people in Appalachia, had looked elsewhere to complete her education and find employment. She went to the University of Kentucky for law school and then became a practicing lawyer in Bowling Green. But, again like most people in the region, she always maintained strong local ties and dreamed of returning if a good enough opportunity presented itself.

Gentry got that opportunity from her alma mater. Her connections to the school and the region, her strategic thinking, her charisma, and her risk-taking courage made her a good fit to be Berea College's director of special programs, where she was given autonomy, mentorship, trust, and encouragement by its
president, Larry Shinn. This confidence allowed her to build on a pilot program in the neighboring Kentucky county, Rockcastle. Using the skills she learned during her legal training, Gentry sought out the latest ideas and research, gradually becoming an expert in the many ways in which educators were working to better schools and students across the country. Under her supervision, the pilot became PFE.

PFE grew out of an effort to better identify disadvantaged or underappreciated Appalachian high-school students who wanted a college education but were unlikely to get it. But PFE quickly evolved to become a broader initiative to “ensure that the underdeveloped talent of youth of the region is properly recognized, challenged, and channeled,” according to an internal document. The idea was to lift the education level of the whole region, not just help Berea increase its number of qualified applicants. Today, PFE acts as a hub, coordinating efforts to address the social breakdown precipitated by the outward migration of investors, leaders, and models and the unemployment, poverty, substance addiction, despair, and family dysfunction that afflict the area’s youth and prevent them from reaching their full potential.

Spurred in part by the economic and social crisis that has taken a further toll on the already disadvantaged families and already weak school systems in the region, the organization has expanded into a 420-person, $43 million operation covering 31 of Appalachian Kentucky’s 54 counties.

PFE leverages schools—often the only formal organization in rural communities with weak social fabric—to serve 50,000 youth. PFE identified the community school model from Harlem Children’s Zone (HCZ), which has worked to boost education outcomes in New York City’s historically Black neighborhood through a holistic approach that touches upon every communal influence on a child’s life. PFE took this template and then worked to create an Appalachian version of it. The comprehensive, place-based, cradle-to-career pipeline and broad range of social, educational, and economic interventions that HCZ developed to support its youth, their families, and the broader community became a national model—but it could be transferred to Appalachia only if it was translated to meet local needs.

One of those needs was to show the benefits of a college education to parents who did not attend college themselves. “I’m a daughter of Appalachia, the first in my family to attend college,” Gentry says. “The college degree opened doors for me that my parents could never imagine. My work—my calling—is to open those doors for all Appalachian students.”

Parents’ values and the worry that educated individuals will move away from their hometowns and not return. PFE addresses these concerns by building relationships of trust, taking students and families to visit schools, raising expectations, and showing how students can help their own communities with the skills they acquire.

PFE’s results highlight its achievements and the scope for further work in what is one of the four poorest parts of the country. In counties where PFE’s universal GEAR UP program, a six-year college-access initiative, runs, high-school graduation rates have climbed from 74 to 94 percent. In its counties covered by Promise Neighborhoods, a US Department of Education antipoverty initiative, PFE has boosted kindergarten readiness from 16 to 36 percent, math proficiency from 27 to 40 percent, and English arts proficiency from 35 to 50 percent over five years (2012-2017). In its eight counties covered by Promise Zones, a US Department of Housing and Urban Development antipoverty initiative, it has boosted math and reading scores enough that they are now higher than the state average. And at Leslie County High School, where it could run several of these programs simultaneously and complement them with a variety of additional interventions, PFE was able to help the school move from a ranking of 224th (out of 230) in the state in 2010 to 16th in four years by boosting the graduation rate from 68 to 97 percent.

**Embedded and Empowered**

What accounts for PFE’s success? It directly responds to its region’s social challenges through a variety of initiatives aimed at boosting each layer of the social context: family, neighborhood, community, and school. Many students are traumatized, hungry, living without electricity, and unsure where they will sleep at times. Families have disintegrated or made homes unhospitable or even dangerous. “I’ve had principals tell me that over half their students are being raised by somebody other than their parents,” Gentry says. Communities lack cohesion and leadership—and money—to address their basic challenges. And schools—in particular high schools, which have many more students and require more rigorous college preparation—are simply incapable of addressing youth needs, especially given their own funding and staffing challenges.

As an eastern Kentucky native, Gentry realized early on how relationships and trust are critical to any social initiative, es-

**HIRING LOCALLY AND EMBEDDING STAFF WITHIN COMMUNITIES IS ESSENTIAL TO DEVELOPING THE KIND OF INSIDE-OUT PERSPECTIVE AND APPROACH THAT WILL BUILD TRUST AND REFLECT LOCAL NEEDS.**
pecially in a place as relational as Appalachia. Over time, PFE has adopted a strategy of embedding its staff in communities—a prerequisite to gaining trust in place. Programs and policies emphasize finding local talent and placing it as close to the work as possible. The organization hires people from the particular place where it operates as much as possible; these individuals have direct knowledge of people, problems, and ways of working that outsiders don’t and as such are much more likely to know how to customize and prioritize initiatives and ensure that they are implemented as planned. Because they often lack the education, experience, and technical knowledge that can be found elsewhere more easily, they require more training and time to adjust to the work initially.

PFE leverages AmeriCorps, a federal initiative to encourage adults to work for modest stipends in nonprofit or public organizations for up to three years, to uncover and upgrade untapped local talent. Participants are inserted directly into schools to run critical functions, such as mentoring students and coordinating a variety of public, school, and PFE services, and then encouraged to enhance their skills by, for example, completing their bachelor’s degree online. Many eventually become full-time employees of the schools. The program reduces unemployment, which is extraordinarily high in parts of this area, and builds a culture of service to the wider community.

On the whole, four-fifths of staff work in local offices, schools, and neighborhoods. PFE now has eight offices throughout its target region. By prioritizing building trust, long-term relationships with everyone from students to caregivers to school administrators to teachers to government officials to community leaders to students, PFE commands the easy access, early information, and high credibility necessary to identify risk factors—a change in a child’s appearance, family situation, or performance in school, for example—and prevent problems from occurring, rather than simply responding to them, as most nonprofits do. This intimacy helps the organization identify problems before they occur, as well as opportunities that others may miss at the county, school, or student level.

PFE also decentralizes decision-making, empowering local staff and partners to ensure that members of communities—sometimes of as few as 4,000-5,000 people (e.g., Owsey County)—lead the work, determining the best strategies to meet common standards; learning skills such as facilitation, data analysis, and resource building; and building collective capacity to address challenges in other areas. For example, superintendents are given a significant say in how PFE money is spent in their districts. Such local decision-making also ensures that choices likely reflect local consensus and will be well received and more easily implementable afterward.

Similarly, although PFE does its own data collection and analysis, it shares data and analytical tools with local decision makers—whether staff, teachers, school leaders, or public officials. This approach encourages a culture of continuous improvement by highlighting how small changes can impact results. It also assists schools in becoming more data-centric so that they can make as much use of the information as possible. PFE is results-focused but aware that the same goal pursued in different locales may require very different approaches. For example, whereas the cause of low levels of kindergarten-readiness in one county was a lack of training of care providers, in another the cause was inadequate facilities.

PFE also uses a dual-focus approach to help communities build up their own strengths while they are advancing PFE goals. Early-childhood programs strengthen families. Mentoring programs support both students and caregivers. Educational initiatives are designed to also strengthen workforce skills. Building local capacity beyond students not only helps provide stronger support for the students’ own goals but also helps communities that must inevitably face the danger that their graduates will migrate elsewhere—brain drain—and leave the community (and often their families) less well off as a result of their own investment.

“I never thought that I could be a leader, that I could really make a difference,” says Cailin McDonald, a high-school student in Knox County. “But seeing the different things I’ve been able to do within my own community, the way [PFE] has allowed me to get involved … has been very beneficial to the community and my own personal growth.”

PFE has found that working through partnerships is more sustainable over time. Funding may dry out, but the relationships that partnerships create are like seeds, and they can be resown to continue to serve PFE’s region. As a result, wherever possible, PFE encourages partner organizations and schools to share their knowledge with each other, learn about new opportunities and funding sources, and participate in training. PFE sees the development of other organizations serving its area as furthering its mission. In some cases, the partners themselves learn new skills such that funding is no longer necessary to maintain the same level of programming.

Part of this effort, and despite substantial investment in training, is PFE’s expectation that many staff join partner organizations within communities. Even though these departures create short-term costs to the organization, they strengthen local institutions by infusing them with new skills, perspectives, and leadership. They especially help partner schools, which often face a shortage of quality teachers, counselors, and administrators. And they create advocates within the local school and government for PFE programming that is grounded in evidence-based best practices. In this way, PFE gradually strengthens the community, thereby increasing its ability to further its own mission.

**Asking the Right Questions**

Building trust is never easy. Doing it in a way that scales up an organization, embeds a large number of people in a network of mutually enhancing relationships and institutions, and raises expectations and norms across a locale—increasing social capital and collective efficacy in the process—is rare. In successfully tackling such challenges, LR and PFE show what might be possible elsewhere.

In particular, the two organizations direct us to better questions to ask about place-based work. Instead of primarily asking
Ask who. | First, hiring locally and embedding staff within communities is essential to developing the kind of inside-out perspective and approach that will build trust and reflect local needs. LR and PFE make this an explicit part of their strategy. Each organization is based in its target geography, and each prioritizes hiring people either from or familiar with their community. (In PFE’s case, all of their staff are from Appalachia.)

And the who question doesn’t stop with hiring. Both organizations empower local leaders and local staff to make critical decisions. PFE delegates decision-making to people on the ground—where it is likely to be most dependent on local knowledge and preexisting relationships. LR empowers its advisory boards and staff from the places where it operates. In both cases, the organizations make decisions in close consultation with local officials, partners, social leaders, and staff, creating an accountability that is not present when decisions are made far away or based purely on technical knowledge. As a result of all these efforts, both organizations became accountable to partners and citizens in a way that is improbable when an organization focuses only on material goals and depends on outside support to operate.

Ask when. | Second, we must recognize how slow and incremental securing trust can be. LR discovered that the graduated sequence of its projects mattered: It had more success starting off small in a new area before trying to launch a larger project. Through trial and error, LR gradually developed a way of working with residents and a sequence of activities that rooted it in the local neighborhood and secured residents’ trust. Similarly, PFE learned that growing incrementally and first experimenting with models, building relationships and skills, and earning the trust of community members were essential.

Then ask what and where. | Third, the success of one’s own efforts often depend on first addressing barriers in the overall social context in which one operates. Any action that is part of or complementary to an initiative—and that enhances trust and social capital in the community—will likely further one’s own goals in time. Instead of just recruiting tenants, LR sought out organizations interested in building a collaborative community and working with residents to revitalize the neighborhood. It did not just offer services to residents but sought to weave them together in a way that would strengthen social ties and advance their interests. Similarly, PFE sought to run programming (e.g., via its dual-focus approach) and build up staff, partners, and local institutions (e.g., in its openness to staff becoming partners) in ways that would contribute to the counties where it worked.

Finally, each effort must be adapted to the local context. In Detroit, LR established a critical role for local advisory groups to influence larger projects, such as the Durfee Innovation Society. In Kentucky, PFE customizes what programs it runs in each county or school district. While scaling up is important, customizing the model for each particular neighborhood or area is essential for lasting success. It recognizes the individuality of local leaders and their talents, the unique history of a community, and the necessity of finding paths forward that are determined and taken together, and slowly.