How Social Change Organizations Create Leadership Capital and Realize Abundance amidst Scarcity

The growing buzz over collaborative leadership terms and concepts begs the question: how are they actually practiced? The Research Center for Leadership in Action's research over the past eight years offers a look into the practices of nonprofit organizations that have been leading social change in a collective way and impressively doing so in environments of extreme resource scarcity. Looking at leadership more as "work" rather than personal attributes, we identify three bundles of practices that these organizations engage in to produce "leadership capital," a type of capital based not on material wealth but on human capacity and active engagement in leadership tasks. These leadership practices and the capital they produce infuse meaning into standardized and professionalized management functions and keep organizations focused on their missions.

Concepts like distributed, shared, collaborative and collective leadership have gained currency both in the academic literature[i] and in the world of practice.[ii] These concepts challenge traditional views of leadership and shift attention from formal leaders and their influence on followers, to the relational processes that illuminate everyone's leadership in a group, organization or system. These new approaches also invite a shift in attention from the individual attributes that make leaders successful, to the "work of leadership,"[iii] the actual practices and joint work group members engage in to produce collectively owned achievements.[iv] Yet despite their growing appeal, in practice, we don't know exactly what these new approaches to leadership look like and how they are enacted. While many scholars and practitioners agree that new models are needed, organizations—public, nonprofit and private—continue to be based on and create incentives that promote traditional, individual notions of leadership.

The predominance of an individual notion of leadership is particularly problematic for nonprofit organizations. In *Good to Great and the Social Sectors*, Jim Collins argues that power is more widely distributed in the social sector than in the business world.[v] Social sector leaders must therefore work with multiple stakeholders such as Boards of Directors, staff, volunteers, funders and the community. These stakeholders have some degree of power to help drive or prevent change, and also the ability and oftentimes the authority to act independently. To be effective, Collins says, social sector leaders need both executive skills—the exercise of direct power, and legislative skills—the ability to influence people through motivation and persuasion. Indeed, the latter represents a more collaborative form of leadership—one, we argue, that trusts group wisdom, draws on difference and seeks achievements that are shared by the group. This form is more attuned to today's shared power-world[vi] and its complex problems. Yet the nonprofit literature and leadership

development programs tend to focus on the executive competencies of the heroic individual in positions of authority.

The Research Center for Leadership in Action's (RCLA) research over the past eight years offers a window into nonprofit organizations that have been effectively practicing more collective forms of leadership. We have engaged social change leaders in 90 organizations across the US to understand *how leadership happens* as they work to produce social change in their communities.[vii] These social change organizations (SCOs) connect the needs of marginalized communities to universal demands for social justice. They engage in organizing, advocacy, community development and service delivery activities to pursue agendas of social transformation. We have found that their leadership creates pockets of abundance where there is scarcity and shapes public spaces for deliberation, contestation and collective action that transform thinking, policy and systems. This work is based on collaborative leadership practices that can shed light on new models of leadership.

Despite their invisibility in the nonprofit literature, SCOs represent a crucial segment of the 501(c)3 world and a rich resource of US civil society.[viii] These organizations and their leaders offer lessons to other social sector organizations and beyond on leadership and democratic governance. In this document we share highlights of our research findings and hope you find them helpful for your leadership practice. Please see the Appendix for more information on how we did our research.

What social change organizations tell us about the work of leadership

SCOs are committed to addressing "systemic problems in a way that will increase the power of marginalized groups, communities or interests."[ix] This particular type of nonprofit organization helps their constituents and communities bring their voices into the public debate as they engage in collective action to become protagonists of public problem solving. SCOs manage to do this against tremendous odds and despite scarce resources. Perhaps for this very reason, they have found ways to become more resourceful and to identify, grow and utilize their endogenous talent and knowledge. They transform these often untapped resources into actualized power through which they are able to influence powerful others in external contexts, including public officials at the policy table. We argue that it takes deliberate work to accomplish this transformation: this is the work of leadership.

Our research suggests that the work of leadership in SCOs is about creating the conditions where participants, independent of their position in the system, understand their unique leadership role, feel prepared and ready to take it up, believe in the importance of their contribution in what is collectively perceived as an urgent and legitimate cause, and abide by a moral compass agreed upon by the community. The work of leadership is about creating what management scholar Joseph Raelin calls "leaderful" organizations and systems.[x] It is in this sense that leadership is not only something that belongs to each individual, but it also becomes collectively shared when each member takes up his/her leadership within a mutually agreed framework.[xi]

When we looked for this collective dimension of leadership in our research we were able to identify many adaptive, creative and pragmatic ways of acting and relating, grounded in the contingencies of reality,[xii] and aimed at generating the leadership that ultimately would help the organization to leverage the power needed to create social change. This work was clearly articulated through a distinct set of practices, which we call "leadership practices." These are clustered into three groups representing different types of leadership work. Reframing discourse, bridging difference and unleashing human energies open up the spaces for people to take up their own leadership.

Reframing discourse: Social change leaders realize they cannot advance their missions by relying on the same language, images or cognitive models that disempower and alienate their communities[xiii] or reinforce injustice. They work to disrupt established frames, while proposing others more congruent with their vision for the future. Reframing creates new ways of seeing the world, or cognitive shifts,[xiv] in targeted audiences that in turn, produce changes in power relations. An example is reframing an issue such as the erosion of caribou roaming grounds from an environmental issue to a human rights issue because of its impact on the community's livelihood, which relies on a thriving caribou population. Reframing practices rely on understanding dominant frames and their permeability, crafting new repertoires, language and narratives that counter unacceptable dominant paradigms such as racism, and often living the new "frame" through action. Social change leaders develop frames that are recognizable, so that they resonate with people, while rejecting dimensions of them that dehumanize people and reproduce the status quo.

Bridging difference: This type of leadership work entails practices that create the conditions to bring diverse actors together and facilitate their joint work while maintaining, appreciating and drawing on their differences. Some practices operate at the individual level, building connections across diverse affiliates. Weaving relationships among people from different worldviews builds community and breaks the isolation and fragmentation that many individuals experience as a consequence of poverty and marginalization. An example of this is bringing Latino and Black communities that live side-by-side but have traditionally experienced animosity or tensions to work together on projects around common interests. Bridging difference can also happen at the inter-organizational level to leverage different types of resources and advance nonprofit missions. An example is an immigrant rights organization partnering with a gay rights organization because they each bring something to the table. In either case, all bridging work highlights interdependencies and nurtures diversity so that collective action becomes obvious and collective achievements natural[xv].

Unleashing Human Energies: Practices to unleash human energies stem from the assumption that knowledge is power and the fundamental source of power comes from within the community, despite its apparent material scarcity. The point of departure for this work is the belief that people already come with a deep knowledge of the problem, which is derived from their own lived experience. Unleashing practices entail creating the conditions for transformational learning, which allow every member of the group to reclaim their full humanity and, in the process, recognize their inherent power to direct their lives. Such learning can be facilitated through formal educational mechanisms such as language

classes, trainings and leadership development. Yet it also happens through dialogues[xvi] that enable people to reframe their sense of self by reflecting on the structural causes of their situation, their roles in both the current and envisioned societies, and the solutions that will transform society[xvii]. The latter often takes the form of popular education.

These practices are not mechanistic procedures or fixed activities, but fluid bundles of actions and interactions that create the conditions for participants to experience the outcomes of the work as a collective achievement. In a sense, these practices support and give meaning to the more mundane work required to sustain these nonprofit organizations. Leadership *happens* in SCOs when the three types of leadership work described above— reframing, bridging and unleashing—are woven together and used consistently to animate and sustain mission-related organizational work, including managerial activities like strategic visioning and fundraising, as well as political activities like advocacy and organizing.

More specifically, this leadership work generates a new kind of abundance, a new organizational capital based not on material wealth but on human capacity and "leaderfulness." "Leadership capital," we argue, is a reservoir of vital expressive energy (and the capacity associated with it), that, as it accumulates, moves participants to coproduce results based on a compelling shared vision for the future. It is "capital" because it is generative – the more people feel empowered to produce change, and the more actual change they see their work achieving, albeit incrementally, the more they see themselves as leaders and the more leadership emerges and multiplies. As any form of capital, it grows and reproduces when it is nurtured. Our findings suggest that leadership capital is more likely to exist when collaborative forms of leadership are practiced.

The leadership practices we have described are not fixed formulas that can be easily replicated, but they do offer insights about how more collaborative forms of leadership are enacted to produce effective outcomes in SCOs.

Implications for leadership in nonprofits

Reframing discourse, bridging difference and unleashing human energies require highly adaptive, incremental and iterative work. By identifying and documenting these in detail, the findings of our research help illuminate how more collaborative forms of leadership are enacted to produce envisioned results. The type of leadership work we document suggests where SCOs—and perhaps other nonprofits—should put their energy when thinking about the role of leadership in their work. If effective nonprofit leaders use and adapt both management technologies and political activities to the needs and contingencies associated with their vision of change, they must learn to devise the leadership practices that will support the work. For leadership work to give life to management choices, then the more invisible aspects of leadership must become visible, and leaders must learn to tap on its multiple dimensions—rational and emotional, individual and collective. If this type of work generates needed leadership capital to address the scarcity of other resources that can sustain the work, then leaders in nonprofits must prioritize this work as much as they do efforts to bring in financial resources.

Yet today leadership training for nonprofits is understood mostly in terms of capacity building, that is, mastering the capacity to manage organizational functions—doing strategic planning, setting up and running systems such as budgeting, performance measurement or human resources, and managing processes such as board development, communication and fundraising. There is, of course, an urgent need for nonprofits to develop individual and organizational capacity around these technologies of management so as to ensure effectiveness and efficiency for their mission. Our work with social change organizations suggests that these skills are necessary but not sufficient, if the work is to transcend the instrumental accomplishment of goals, and instead awaken the expressive dimension that is at the core of nonprofit work.[xviii]

It is this expressive dimension that makes participants in nonprofits believe that their work will bring a different world into existence. This vision then propels them into action and motivates them to learn what they must to be effective at it. After all, as research on other effective nonprofits suggests, high performance is associated with an outward orientation anchored in the desire to produce such change.[xix] We have found that when things are moving forward in SCOs, when the work feels at its best to those participating, social change and management activities are woven together through leadership practices that infuse meaning into the work. In a sense, leadership practices connect the instrumental and the expressive dimensions of the work required to produce social change. Ignoring the expressive dimension of organizational leadership, or reducing it to what a few at the top envision and do, may limit our capacity to understand what is essential for nonprofits to thrive. It also ultimately risks compromising organizational performance.

Appendix I

How we learned about leadership in social change organizations

RCLA's perspective on leadership influenced how we designed and conducted the research. Compared to the traditional focus on the "who" (leaders and their attributes) or the "what" (behaviors and activities), we were interested in unpacking the "how" of leadership and surfacing practices that illustrate new ways of enacting leadership in new contexts. Our theoretical lens into the research enabled us to think of leadership as a process in which people come together to pursue change, and in doing so, collectively develop a shared vision of what the world (or some corner of it) should look like, making sense of their experience and shaping their decisions and actions. This lens led us to pay attention to the actual activities participants were engaging in to pursue their mission. This work of leadership was the *focus* of the research more than the behaviors of people we call leaders. Since the focus was on the experiences associated with the work of leadership, it was compelling to invite social change leaders engaged in the work to inquire about its meaning. We thus chose a *stance* of co-inquiry and co-production, a participative approach where we conducted research with leaders based on the principles of mutual appreciation of what each party could bring to the process.

Focusing on the experiences of the work of leadership required qualitative research and the use of several research methods to ensure multiple perspectives. We collected and analyzed stories through *narrative inquiry*, in-depth interviews with organizations and their stakeholders. While narrative inquiry allowed us to examine the practice of leadership from participants' points of view, *ethnography* helped to view leadership in context over time. We used a particular kind of ethnography that is both collaborative and community-based where the ethnographer facilitated and supported an ethnographic inquiry process driven by the community members. The goals of the ethnography were to produce new knowledge about the ways in which communities engaged in the work of leadership and to draw out lessons that were useful to the community involved in the study. Thirdly we used *cooperative inquiry*, a form of action research where social change leaders collected "data" on their own practices and brought it to the group to analyze. Each group started with a research question that arose from participants' practices in their work. They then created new knowledge based on collective interpretations of cycles of action and reflection around members' personal experience, which became the main source of "data."

These three research streams produced a variety of learning products. Some were authored by the social change leaders and were intended for a peer audience. Some, developed by the research team, contributed to the scholarly field of leadership studies and were published in academic journals. Other products, in the form of Op-Eds for example, addressed various audiences by lifting lessons from SCOs for other contexts.

RCLA will soon release our archive of research material, which reflects this variety. We hope that learning more about the leadership of social change organizations reignites your sense of purpose and infuses your everyday work with deep meaning and conviction.

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[ix] Op cit, Chetkovich & Kunreuther, p. 14.

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