

A Dance That Creates Equals

Unpacking Leadership Development

**Denise Altvater
Bethany Godsoe
LaDon James
Barbara Miller
Sonia Ospina
Tyletha Samuels
Cassandra Shaylor
Lateefah Simon
Mark Valdez**

About this project

Our cooperative inquiry focused on the question: How can we create the space/opportunities for individuals to recognize themselves as leaders and develop leadership? It was borne out of the work of the Leadership for a Changing World (LCW) program. (For a description of this effort, please see the inside back cover.) LCW includes a Research and Documentation component, housed at the Research Center for Leadership in Action (RCLA) at the Robert F. Wagner School of Public Service, New York University (also described on the inside back cover), which uses three parallel streams of inquiry—ethnography, cooperative inquiry, and narrative inquiry—to explore questions related to the work of leadership. The program is committed to developing participatory approaches to research and uses dialogue with LCW participants as the core of the research process.

Cooperative inquiry (CI) is a small group participatory research technique in which the participants use their own experience to generate insights around an issue that is of burning concern to all. In this type of inquiry, participants formulate a question, agree upon a course of action, individually engage in action through their work, and then collectively make meaning from the data generated by their actions. This cycle of reflection-action-reflection is repeated several times until the group feels it has successfully addressed its concerns. Sometimes facilitators support the group to ensure that its members use the process to its full advantage. We have learned firsthand what the literature on CI says: it contributes to creating new knowledge grounded in practice, deepens the participants' leadership potential, and strengthens relationships among group members (Heron, 1996; Bray et al, 2001).

In our case, participants included members of the Research and Documentation team, who served as initiators and facilitators of the group, and social change leaders, who were either LCW award recipients or members of the LCW awardee organizations. They included Denise Altvater of the Wabanaki Youth Program of the American Friends Service Committee; Bethany Godsoe (Facilitator) of RCLA/Wagner/NYU; LaDon James of Community Voices Heard; Barbara Miller of the Silver Valley People's Coalition; Sonia Ospina (Facilitator) of RCLA/Wagner/NYU; Tyletha Samuels of Community Voices Heard; Cassandra Shaylor of Justice Now; Lateefah Simon of the Center for Young Women's Development; and Mark Valdez of the Cornerstone Theater Company.

The following document is an abridged version of a larger report, which is available through RCLA.

Acknowledgements

The members of this Cooperative Inquiry group and the LCW Research and Documentation Team at the Research Center for Leadership in Action would like to acknowledge the many contributions of co-researchers, partners, and other social change leaders in LCW who have been active participants in shaping our learning. We want to particularly thank the Ford Foundation for its generous support for the LCW program and the Research and Documentation effort.

Leadership Development: A Shift in the Leadership Relationship

Our cooperative inquiry focused on the question “How can we create the space/opportunities for individuals to recognize themselves as leaders and develop leadership?” Early on, our group realized that we were not referring to leadership as an individual act as is traditionally the case. Instead, most of the stories we shared throughout our inquiry dealt with the details of close working relationships with people in our organizations and communities.

For example, in our second meeting, Denise Altvater spoke of her relationship with Laura (not her real name). Together, they had headed up a major effort to fight youth drug use in their community. Laura began to make her leadership visible to others only after a long process of sharing personal stories and community concerns with Denise. Through these conversations, they developed a deep relationship that enabled them both to strengthen their common work.

Exploring what must happen for leadership to be shared led us to see the need to encourage a genuine shift in the leadership relationship, in which someone steps back (whether they do it consciously or not) and someone steps up. (In our conversations we’ve termed the latter crossing over.) We are very clear that these two actions are linked but are not necessarily sequential.

The shift that we call leadership development is not limited to one-on-one leadership relationships. We shared stories, based on our actions, which indicated at least three levels at which the shift can happen.

- First, the leadership relationship may shift in an organizational context wherein a formal leadership role has been defined. For example, when the director of Mark Valdez’s theater company went out of state to work on a project for several months, he implicitly stepped back simply by being out of the office, and Mark stepped up to play the role of formal leader in his absence.
- Second, the shift may occur on a daily basis or one-to-one. We found that this kind of continuous negotiation of the relationship happens most often in the context of an organization whose mission involves developing leadership in a particular group. Cassandra Shaylor’s work with women prisoners and Tyletha Samuels’s and LaDon James’s work with women on welfare are targeted at helping women develop leadership, so their processes of stepping up and back are ongoing.
- Finally, the shift can even happen when you don’t have a particular person in mind, but you do your work in such a way that it leaves room for others to step up and become part of the leadership. For example, Barbara Miller chose to remain silent in a key meeting with EPA administrators. Her hope was that other members of her organization would speak for the group and that by adding new voices the group’s effort would gain new leadership and strength. Because she took time to prepare them thoroughly for the meeting and then clearly stepped back, they stepped up into a leadership position and spoke out.

We saw the need to encourage a genuine shift in the leadership relationship, in which someone steps back and someone steps up.

The role of power

Perhaps the most difficult issue we confronted is the role of power in our leadership relationships. We recognized that there is inequality in these relationships and that being aware of the power dynamic is important. We have also noticed, from our own actions, that in every leadership relationship, one person starts with a choice to create or not create space so that others can recognize themselves as leaders and develop leadership.

By drawing attention to this power dynamic, we also acknowledge that in most cases the leadership relationship is asymmetrical, that is, both sides do not start with the same power. The asymmetry of the leadership relationship is neither simply a natural occurrence, nor is it just created in a specific context. We suspect it comes from the way our society functions and from the inequalities this produces—the very inequalities against which we are working.

For many of us in the inquiry, the recognition of this asymmetry and our own associated power caused anxiety and discomfort. Our work in social justice and our own life experiences had made it hard to recognize anything but the negative uses of power and its traumatizing effects. Ultimately, we realized that power can be used for progressive ends. In the context of the leadership relationship, we learned we can acknowledge and make transparent our formal power and rebalance the asymmetry. We can practice a type of leadership development that makes it possible for us to shift power to those whose power has not been recognized. This is not about granting power to the powerless; we are recognizing and supporting the power that people have within themselves already. Thus, it is our particular worldview—based in a commitment to social justice—that may initially constrain, but ultimately frees us to do leadership development in this unique way.

How this project developed

The learning reflected here comes out of cycles of action and reflection taken up by our group (See “About this project” on the inside front cover) to answer the question: How can we create the space/opportunities for individuals to recognize themselves as leaders and develop leadership? We explored a burning question shared by members of a group grappling with leadership in a very particular context—one that is grassroots and has an explicit agenda to challenge basic beliefs about the world. Because our goal is social justice, the leadership we want to develop is social change leadership. We are building power among welfare recipients, bringing diverse people and communities together through theater, fighting an entrenched mining industry to bring social and environmental justice to rural areas, organizing women prisoners to imagine a world without prisons, helping young Native Americans reclaim the power of their culture and history, and gathering young women from both inside and outside the juvenile justice system to become leaders in their community.

We have focused on how we might create space/opportunities for people who are affected by the issues that our work addresses. Because these populations have long been

marginalized, this focus represents an explicit attempt to re-imagine who can be a leader. We believe that, with the right support and skill base, anyone can influence the world. Regardless of formal education or training, when people have personal life experience with regard to a given issue, they have a right to be at the table and to be a leader on that issue. This way, social justice work helps recognize the power people already have when they come through the doorway.

We used cooperative inquiry (CI) as the means to answer our question. We came together five times for 1½-day-long reflection sessions, and each of us took individual actions in our day-to-day work between meetings. These actions helped us to test and refine the hunches we developed collectively. For most of the action cycles, we would each perform a different action based on the same theme (e.g., observing the role of power in leadership relationships). Through these action-reflection cycles, the inquiry allowed us not only to learn about our question, but through our actions, to actually create space for others in our communities to join with us in leadership. Ultimately the process has changed how we view ourselves and how we do our work.

Stepping Back: When One Decides to Open Space

Stepping back has to do with moving from a place where one provides direction to a place where one holds back so that others can do the work or hold the public spotlight. Stepping back, however, is not about granting space. It is about opening space so that others can claim it. It is also about broadening space, so that others can join in doing the work. Finally, in stepping back, a person can gain perspective on his or her own work.

Done responsibly, stepping back can help build power.

The positive effects of stepping back

Observing the consequences of deliberate efforts to step back led us to believe that these actions can make a positive impact on the “cause” we are fighting for. For Lateefah Simon, stepping back—taking a sabbatical away from the office—helped her gain perspective as she viewed her role differently. Through the experience, she learned that as the formal leader of the organization she had to pay attention not only to making sure that the organization functioned (raising money, grants, and so forth), but also to making the organization a place where people wanted to be. This related to issues such as cultivating people, “teaching” them to do things, and especially promoting rituals that gave meaning to the work and could be perpetuated when she left. As she reflected on her deliberate intention to step back, she saw her role as shifting away from figuring out administrative issues to counting on others to do the work of supervising administrative functions and helping staff use a “program” rather than an administration lens. She concluded that leadership included “cultivating” the organization, helping people create space for themselves, and developing values and ethics so that people feel safe and included.

The risks of stepping back

In exploring the benefits of stepping back, we also identified some risks—though ultimately, we concluded that it is worth taking these risks as it is the only way to create space for leadership. One risk is that people who step up may take the work in a different direction, and one may lose control over the outcomes of the effort. We saw this in a story Denise Altwater told of the group she organized to work on substance abuse issues in her community. As she stepped back, the group took a path that she was uncomfortable with, so she decided to leave, while the group’s members continued to do the work.

Stepping back without someone to step up is “checking out.”

Stepping back before others are ready to step up brings additional risks, one of which is that no one steps up and a vacuum is created. Sharing leadership deliberately requires paying attention to this possibility. As Cassandra Shaylor reminded us, stepping back without someone to step up is “checking out.” It is not leadership. By the same token, it is possible that stepping up without someone stepping back can be about “taking over,” rather than sharing leadership.

Stepping back deliberately requires doing your homework beforehand. This means helping create the conditions that prepare others to step up. At the same time, doing it well requires providing needed support for those who are willing to step up. This is particularly true in situations where those stepping up may become vulnerable to mistreatment, attack, or even jail as a result of their actions. A recognition of these possible repercussions—so often associated with social justice leadership—is a critical aspect of stepping back responsibly and preparing others to step up with a clear sense of the risks involved.

Stepping back and the dynamics of power

Opening or broadening one’s space is something that happens in relationship and has consequences for all involved. There is great responsibility in stepping back. As noted in the introduction, there are important issues of power involved, as well.

*Acknowledging the power dynamic in the relationship
means accepting some privilege and also some responsibility.
It can produce discomfort/anxiety.*

Acknowledging and owning the discomfort associated with the power expressed in stepping back creates an awareness that we believe may be a pre-condition to stepping back responsibly. It provides the impetus to be transparent about the asymmetry in most leadership relationships. Cassandra Shaylor, in her work with women prisoners, put it this way: “Because I am a free person and a person with legal skills, and because the people inside [the prison] so desperately need that... assistance, I am in a position to influence the direction people take. So it is important to have that conversation, to be honest about that, and to try to rectify that power imbalance.”

“Stepping back is getting your power out of the way,” said Denise Altvater, “so there is room for others’ power.” However, by itself, stepping back constitutes only one half of the equation. For people to develop their leadership, they must step up as others step back.

Stepping Up: Claiming One's Authority and Leadership

Stepping up—recognizing oneself as a leader and developing leadership—requires what the group has called crossing over. Crossing over happens when a person gives him or herself the authority to act as a leader.

The shift in the leadership relationship that results in leadership development does not happen by accident. It is an intentional process. In our conversations we have noticed that we are conscious of when we choose to back away from some aspect of our leadership role in order to make space for others. We believe that leaders must take the risk of stepping back in order to see whether others are ready to be leaders; in other words, to see whether they are ready to step up. Then what happens once others have stepped up depends on the particular people involved and the context.

Crossing over is different from being empowered. It is not something that is granted by others, but something that we claim for ourselves.

Once people claim a space by crossing over, they reframe the way they see themselves in the world. They have taken up their authority to influence others. Only in one person stepping back and another crossing over can the power dynamic truly shift in this way. In this relationship, the shift is irreversible. Once you have “crossed over,” you will never be the same. As Tyletha Samuels said, “They can’t take my leadership away.”

In exploring what contributes to making this shift in the context of social justice leadership, we identified, among others, the following conditions:

- Personal transformation and healing
- Faith in the power of personal experience
- Readiness
- Need for support (safe space)

Personal transformation and healing

In order to cross over, a person must move beyond the fear and shame that often comes from personal experience in an oppressive society. At times the oppression runs so deep and is experienced for so many years that it becomes internalized. When oppression is internalized, people begin to believe the negative stereotypes society attributes to them, and the fear and shame are magnified. We have identified this fear and shame as primary barriers to people recognizing themselves as leaders and developing leadership.

In order to cross over, a person must move beyond the fear and shame that come from personal experience with a given issue in the context of an oppressive society.

Doing leadership development without healing is not enough for people to step up. Lateefah Simon emphasized how preparing young women in her organization, the Center for Young Women’s Development, to step up often involves healing. She offered the image of a wounded arm lifting a weight; you cannot lift heavy weights without first healing the wounds from past experiences. Her organization, therefore, offers women coming out of juvenile detention the chance to work at the Center as a way to begin to build self-confidence and the ability to work cooperatively with other young women. This enables them to heal themselves and eventually to take up their own leadership in the community.

We talked about the process of overcoming internalized oppression in terms of people recognizing their own humanity and regaining faith in their capacity to change the world. Denise Altvater related this to her own experience providing the leadership to start the “Silent Cry” group, a group of women who were all victims of abuse. “If I didn’t do my own healing work, I could have never done it,” she said.

Faith in the power of personal experience

Beyond this healing as described above, stepping up or crossing over also involves claiming one’s personal experience of oppression as a source of authority to speak to an issue and guide the process toward changing a situation or taking action.

When people speak from personal experience with oppression, they are able to recognize themselves in a new role. This recognition is central to their ability to assert themselves as a leader. LaDon James told us a story of a welfare recipient who had become an active leader. She was in turn ready to step back in a meeting with a Congressperson to allow other women to speak from their experience. This story demonstrates to us how far this process can take someone. She not only claimed her personal experience as a source of authority, but she was also eventually able to step back and make space for others to do the same.

Stepping up or crossing over also involves claiming personal experience of oppression as a source of authority..

Readiness

Based on our personal experience and what we’ve observed of others, we believe that if people are ready to step up but have no opportunity to do so in their organization, they’ll find the space someplace else.

During one action cycle, Denise Altvater did a workshop with a group of young people. The workshop was meant to be a place where they could get to know each other. In the beginning, she opened the floor to anyone who wanted to tell their story. One girl started and gave a tragic, painful account. The others immediately followed her lead. Denise reflected, “I see her as taking that space without me intentionally giving it to her. I opened the space for any member of the group. She would have taken space wherever she could find it. She was ready.”

Need for support (safe space)

In recounting where she came from to do this work, Tyletha Samuels remembered that she had stepped up originally because someone gave her the confidence and the support. In other words, someone gave her the opportunity, and she took it. If they hadn’t given her the opportunity, she wouldn’t have realized that she could step up. They let her know that she was the expert on her issue. They created the space for her to see that—something she couldn’t see before. We would argue that for people to feel ready to step up, they need support or a safe space in which to develop confidence in themselves.

Strategies for Leadership Development

Based on the stories our cooperative inquiry group shared with each other from our past experience and from our specific actions in the inquiry group, and based on the further reflections they triggered as reported in this paper, we offer a list of strategies we believe are critical for those interested in doing leadership development.

- **Information dissemination.** Sharing information about an issue can help with the process of moving from awareness to consciousness. It also provides the preparation necessary for people to feel confident enough to step up. Information can be disseminated in many different ways. Barbara Miller, for example, recognized herself as an expert in speaking with community members, or as she put it, the “politics of the grocery line.”
- **Dialogue.** Genuine dialogue does not eradicate the power dynamic that exists in a leadership relationship, but it does open the door to people working together over the long term. Cassandra Shaylor defined dialogue as listening to how each person makes sense of his or her actions and searching for common space without denying the validity of each others’ point of view.
- **Respect and listening.** Support from an individual, organization, or community that sincerely cares about the people who are crossing over makes it possible for them to take necessary risks in order to develop leadership. In Lateefah Simon’s experience, the support that comes from this caring will allow people to comfortably be who they are and gain confidence to step up. At the same time, there must also be mutual understanding and a shared vision of the goals of the work.
- **Storytelling.** Sharing stories of personal experiences with the issue helps people recognize themselves and others in the leadership relationship. This is an important mechanism that helps people cross over: “My story got heard, and something happened,” said Tyletha Samuels, recognizing the power of this tool in her own transformation. By telling one’s own story and having others listen, one goes beyond one’s own self, joins others with similar experiences, and can see the connection to broader issues.
- **Acknowledging our anxiety/discomfort.** Owning anxiety and discussing it can help people become more aware of the role that power plays in this process. Feeling uncomfortable with the asymmetry of the leadership relationship is a motivating factor for someone to step back. Acknowledging the anxiety this generates is important to building an authentic relationship. Hence, one’s anxiety/discomfort about the power to allow space is an important aspect of leadership. Mark Valdez and Cassandra Shaylor asked, “If, in fact, this anxiety did not exist, would there be less leadership?” The group seemed to agree that this is the case.
- **Open direction.** Keeping the direction of an effort open to change by people who claim the space adds to the power of the shift in a leadership relationship. LaDon James is now testing this idea in her work with welfare recipients to see what happens in terms of creating space if she lets the women’s stories define the direction of the campaign, rather than looking for their stories to fit a pre-defined campaign.

The actions we agreed to do in our communities, the reflections on the consequences of those actions, and implications of those consequences for our question led us into a process of collective thinking that helped create new insights about the nature of leadership, leadership development, and ourselves. In learning about each other’s work, sharing stories, and supporting each other as we continue to struggle with the challenges of our work, we believe we have ultimately transformed how we view ourselves and how we do our work.

About the Authors

These descriptions reflect the CI participants' work and roles during the inquiry. Since then, several individuals have changed positions in their organizations or moved on.

Denise Altvater

I am a Passamaquoddy woman who works with Wabanaki youth in Maine around issues of culture, leadership, oppression, and history. I work with the American Friends Service Committee.

Bethany Godsoe

I served as Associate Project Director for the Research and Documentation component of LCW during this inquiry. I came to that work with experience in community-based non-profit organizations and an interest in participatory forms of research. I entered the inquiry in the role of facilitator.

LaDon James

I am a former welfare recipient who now has more than eight years of community organizing experience. I am a former co-chair of the board of directors of Community Voices Heard, a New York City organization of low-income people, mostly women on welfare, working together to improve their lives.

Barbara Miller

I am the director of the Silver Valley Community Resource Center, an organization in Idaho working to educate and organize the community living in the largest Superfund site in the United States. Our goal is to hold EPA and other political officials accountable for cleanup of more than 1500 sq. miles and millions of tons of mine waste, including lead and arsenic accumulated over a century of time.

Sonia Ospina

I designed and direct the Research and Documentation component of LCW with a team of colleagues from a graduate school of public service, where I also teach. I came to the CI with a commitment to participatory research and a desire to learn more about how to create good theory from practice.

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Tyletha Samuels

I started with Community Voices Heard as a member turned active leader. I went on to an organizer trainee position, and finally an organizer at Community Voices Heard, working to empower low-income people and people on public assistance.

Cassandra Shaylor

I am the Co-Director of Justice Now, an organization in Oakland, California, that works with women in prison. Justice Now is a training center that provides direct legal services to women in prison and supports organizers inside and outside of prison. The broad goals of Justice Now are to challenge the prison industrial complex in all of its forms and to promote a long-term vision of a world without prisons.

Lateefah Simon

I began working with other low-income young women in San Francisco, California, at age 17. Now 26, I am the director of the Center for Young Women's Development, which works to bring together girls in the juvenile justice system to benefit their communities.

Mark Valdez

I am the Associate Artistic Director of Cornerstone Theater Company in Los Angeles, California. Cornerstone works in and with communities throughout the country, creating plays about specific communities with members of that community. I also have a formal education in theater, as well as experience in theater administration.

About the Research Center for Leadership in Action at the Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service, New York University

The Research Center for Leadership in Action (RCLA) promotes practice-grounded, social-science based, interdisciplinary research that will help strengthen both the theory and the practice of leadership in public, nonprofit, and community-based service. The RCLA is based at New York University's Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service.

RCLA is a hub where people from multiple sectors and disciplines undertaking critical public challenges come together to explore the complexities of their work, find creative ways to address them, and create new knowledge. RCLA promotes the use of practitioners' "learned wisdom" to further leadership theory and practice through different strategies and approaches. For more information, visit www.wagner.nyu.edu/leadership.

About the Leadership for a Changing World Program

Leadership for a Changing World (LCW) is a recognition program of the Ford Foundation that supports community leaders known in their own communities but not known broadly. In addition, it seeks to shift the public conversation about who are authentic leaders to include the kinds of leaders participating in this program. Each year, LCW recognizes 17-20 leaders and leadership groups. Awardees receive \$115,000 and participate in bi-annual program meetings, collaborative research, and a strategic communications effort. LCW is a signature program of the Ford Foundation in partnership with the Advocacy Institute –a US-based organization that works to strengthen social justice advocacy groups in the US and around the world –and RCLA at Wagner/NYU.

A critical component of LCW is the Research and Documentation Component, based at RCLA. The Research and Documentation team uses a multi-modal approach and collaborative methodologies to generate new knowledge about the process of leadership. Leadership for a Changing World awardees are co-researchers in this effort. The insights from this research are being captured in a series of reports and publications such as this booklet.

Members of the Research and Documentation Project Team include:

Sonia Ospina, Co-Director, RCLA and LCW Research Director

Marian Krauskopf, Co-Director, RCLA

Amparo Hofmann-Pinilla, RCLA Associate Director, R&D/LCW Program Director

Erica Foldy, Affiliated Faculty Member

Jennifer Dodge, Research Associate

Sanjiv Rao, Research Assistant

Elizabeth DiLauro, LCW Project Coordinator

Ana Maria Carvajalino, RCLA Assistant Finance Manager

For more information about Leadership for a Changing World and the Research and Documentation Component, visit www.leadershipforchange.org or call 212-992-9880.

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NYUWagner

Research Center for Leadership in Action

Research Center for Leadership in Action
Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service
New York University
295 Lafayette Street, 2nd Floor
New York, NY 10012-9604

t: 212-992-9880

e: wagner.leadership@nyu.edu

<http://www.nyu.edu/wagner/leadership>