

Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION Review

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Leadership

Grounding Leadership in Community Wisdom

To advance equity, leadership programs must affirm, center, and strengthen the collective skills, knowledge, and aspirations of communities.

By **Brian Carey Sims** | Mar. 8, 2023



(Illustration by Raffi Marhaba, *The Dream Creative*)

“We are what we imagine. Our best existence consists in our imagination of ourselves. Our best destiny is to imagine who, and what, and that we are. The greatest tragedy that can befall us is to go unimagined.”—N. Scott Momaday

During the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, the global shutdown sparked an unexpected return to and reinvigoration of Indigenous culture in Peru. When the pandemic and government lockdown eliminated urban jobs, hundreds of thousands of people left Peru’s cities and walked home to their ancestral homelands. Termed “The Walkers,” these newly migrant individuals and families found security in rural communities that were able to feed everyone throughout the shutdown, using traditional agricultural practices. Offering the world “**a silent master class in resilience and sustainability**,” these Indigenous farming communities—which have weathered centuries of colonialism and racism and have long been stigmatized as places of poverty and shame—not only absorbed the sudden increases in population, but also integrated new members, including many youth, into community life and leadership.



Recognizing Leadership in All Its Forms

This article series, presented in partnership with the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and other organizations involved in the **Beyond the Hero** leadership initiative, explores the social sector’s need to broaden its narrative of leadership so that it supports leadership in all its complex, dynamic forms.



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In the United States in recent years, the pandemic—alongside other crises and threats, including the country's persistent legacy of racist violence—has surfaced similar patterns of community-centered survival and leadership, making them increasingly visible. These patterns, both domestic and abroad, speak to a single, profound truth that philanthropy must not only acknowledge, but also center in its efforts to support leadership development: Leadership that leads to equity is grounded in community wisdom.

Community-Driven, Collective Leadership

Community-driven, collective leadership is tough to measure or understand using surveys or quantitative research methodologies. The knowledge in which it is rooted is borne out of generations of living and dying, singing and dancing, praying and working, and *being*. It is encoded in ceremonies and meals, transcribed in smiles, analyzed in barbershops, and disseminated through webs of relationships. Like those intact rural communities in Peru, communities all over the world *know* how to survive. They know what they need.

Perhaps the most important skill for people interested in supporting the leadership and wisdom of communities is the ability to know and trust it when they see it. For people who do not belong to a given community, this can be difficult. The faces of a community's leadership can change on a month-to-month or even day-to-day basis. Frequently, the people who communities entrust with leadership, such as farmers who know the land but never attended college or street-smart neighborhood organizers who were previously incarcerated, are not the people who funders would entrust with it. When philanthropists seek to invest in leadership, they risk missing the leadership capacity that is right before their eyes.

Here are three tips from people who live and work close to injustice about how philanthropy can better recognize, support, fund, and center community-driven and collective leadership.

1. Fund and support the unique knowledge, cultures, and practices that shape community leadership.

Funding work that communities prioritize and lead may be the most direct way to support leadership and advance equity.

The **Seventh Generation Fund for Indigenous Peoples**, alongside other funding partners, offers a good example. The fund is supporting the development of a 235-megawatt wind farm named **Anpetu Wi** (Lakota for “morning light of the sun”). Launched in 2020, the project is grounded in Indigenous Peoples’ traditional land and water stewardship practices and wisdom. The group leading the effort is **SAGE Development Authority**, a public power authority owned by the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe, which gained international recognition for its leadership in the non-violent protest against the Dakota Access Pipeline.

Like other communities, the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe understands its present and future challenges and is uniquely suited to designing solutions. Anpetu Wi is not only the largest Native-owned alternative energy project in the world, but also a true form of **just transition** in which Native people will own and control the energy. Designed to fight climate change, improve people’s lives, and enhance the tribe’s ability to invest in community energy and development projects for the next 500 years and beyond, the project is also an expression of cultural values.

“For our people and me, this project is a prayer,” says Joseph McNeil, Jr., general manager of SAGE. “It allows us something to leave behind for future generations of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe and reflects our cultural values by prioritizing people, land, and nature over profit. Our model certainly includes investors, but also allows us to benefit directly from its revenue for hundreds of years to come.”

2. Support community-defined leadership.

Funders should support leadership efforts that build on unique local cultures, values, and assets. This is important everywhere, but certainly in US rural communities, where leadership is deeply relational and less about power and privilege than about who steps up to move things along in times of need.

Advancing equity in and for rural communities is a unique challenge. When impacted by crises—economic or otherwise—rural areas are typically harder hit than urban areas and take longer to recover, yet the public and private financial resources allocated to rural areas are disproportionately low. Rural leaders must also navigate the tension between cultural values like neighborliness and rugged individualism. In rural communities, which are neither culturally nor politically homogeneous, diversity is an especially vital asset. As rural leaders identify, embrace, and build on the strength of that diversity, they create bridges of understanding across seemingly insurmountable cultural and political divides.

To help rural communities leverage and expand on the existing foundations of local leadership, which are necessary for maintaining and rebuilding community vitality over the long haul, government

programs and philanthropic organizations need to increase investment in leadership as defined and understood by these communities.

In the late 20th century, changes in federal natural resource policy caused a drastic downturn in the Pacific Northwest timber industry, resulting in the need for local leadership to spur economic recovery. This led to the formation of an innovative program that was initially funded by state and federal agencies and subsequently by private funders, including the Ford Family Foundation of Roseburg, Oregon. The program, implemented by the organization **Rural Development Initiatives (RDI)**, builds and sustains a critical mass of diverse, skilled, and active resident leaders to support locally driven initiatives over the long haul. It is grounded in the beliefs that: local leaders should be driving local solutions; collaborative, locally led action is sustainable, resilient, and equitable; and anyone, anywhere can grow into leadership roles. RDI builds fundamental skills and connects emerging and existing rural leaders in ways that encourage community involvement, collective action, and leadership transitions.

Since 2020, RDI has observed a marked increase in program participants bravely wading into discussions of civil discourse and justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion (JEDI) principles. These discussions have generated locally driven projects that build JEDI leadership skills, decrease discrimination, and strengthen community relationships. In the Walla Walla region of Washington, for example, a local leadership class initiated community diversity trainings and the purchase of books by Black and Indigenous authors and authors of color for several area libraries. In Sweet Home, Oregon, two youth leadership cohorts focused their efforts on the concept of belonging, leading to the delivery of mental health first aid and suicide prevention trainings for teachers and other adults in the community. In the Palouse region of Washington, local leaders created a diversity toolkit for small businesses, designed to make local businesses more inclusive and welcoming of diverse residents and college students.

3. Value the research skills and creativity of community members.

To advance equity, funders and leadership programs need to fully recognize the expertise and capabilities already present in communities.

A classic example of leadership grounded in community wisdom is the design, execution, and dissemination of the **Seven Neighborhoods Study**, which was conducted by incarcerated men in the 1990s and demonstrated that 75 percent of New York State's entire prison population came from just seven New York City neighborhoods. Recognizing the relationship between these neighborhoods and

the state prison system, these men went on to design culturally relevant interventions for youth and proposed alternatives to traditional prison strategies.

Each of the seven neighborhoods identified in the study was plagued by extreme poverty, gun violence, and hyper-surveillance policing, coupled with a profound lack of mental health and social support services. The interventions designed and recommended by this study nearly three decades ago laid the groundwork for **Community Capacity Development (CCD)**, a human justice and healing organization working to uproot systemic challenges in marginalized communities. It also laid the groundwork for other community-led organizations addressing incarceration and justice issues through community leadership development, resources, and support service interventions. CCD's visionary founder and executive director K. Bain is both a product of and a driver of leadership development grounded in community wisdom. His community-led implementation of the **Human Justice and Healing Model**, which focuses on community investment rather than criminal justice reform, has contributed to a 15-percent decline in shootings in the 17 highest-violence precincts in New York City, and continues to be an effective framework for achieving justice, safety, and the well-being of communities.

Similarly, in 2018, **Community Change (CC)**—a community-based organization founded in 1968 by leaders of the civil rights, labor, and anti-poverty movements—launched a leadership program for women of color within its network of partner organizations. Called Power 50, the program supports the leadership of women who have lived the realities of racial and economic injustice and understand how to address it. It is grounded in trusting, valuing, and integrating participants' wisdom into a reciprocal process of teaching and learning. The program, which builds on training frameworks developed by CC staff members for formerly incarcerated women of color, provides tools and networks that allow participants to grow as leaders in a way that centers personal and community transformation.

"I'm incredibly proud to have this program deepen and build upon the important leadership development we offer women of color via our campaigns," wrote Trish Tchume, CC's Director of Leadership Development, in a 2018 press release. "We've built a program that gives women-of-color leaders the space, relationships, and tools they need to tap into their strategic imagination while remaining grounded in purpose. It's essentially the program that I—and so many of my peers, frankly—really could have benefited from at different points in my career. So it's humbling and satisfying to be able to offer this as a resource to our partners in the field."

From Transactional to Transformational

These tips and the examples that illustrate them show that leadership must be relational and anchored in the wisdom of communities—in their deep understanding of strengths, needs, and solutions. More

importantly, they demonstrate the need for funders to support leadership already happening in communities and efforts that develop community-centered leaders, rather than designing programs based on a single, externally imposed definition of what constitutes leadership, or dismissing the leadership of people who don't hold certain credentials.

Funding that takes this into account—including flexible, long-term resources allocated by grantees according to their own definitions of success—supports leadership that is unique to each community and context in which it is exercised. It also demonstrates trust: a central factor in shifting the funder-grantee relationship from transaction to transformation.

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