



Rethinking “Leadership”: *Notes on Community, Collaboration, and Strategies for Systemic Change*



Rainbow Research Inc.



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for Systemic Change*

Prepared with support from

W. K. Kellogg Foundation

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April, 1996
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Over the past several years, we at Rainbow Research have spent time with numerous people, projects and organizations engaged in efforts to build communities, reform institutions, and change systems to be more responsive to the long-term interests of ordinary people. These projects have been rural and urban, and have involved configurations of diverse institutions including universities, neighborhood associations, religious institutions, farmer organizations, local and state government agencies, community organizations, and philanthropic foundations.

Recently the Evaluation Unit of the W. K. Kellogg Foundation asked us to summarize some of what we think we’re learning, especially from Kellogg’s Integrated Farming Systems initiative where we’re serving as “cluster evaluator” for 18 projects. We share these notes in the hope that they’ll stimulate others’ thinking and contribute to the dialogue we all need to have about how to more effectively renew community and respond to the challenges facing us. The question-and-answer format is modeled on the questions put to us by Kellogg, but modified to be more relevant to wider audiences.

- 1. What have you learned about identifying and developing leaders? What have you learned about the capacity of organizations and projects to provide leadership in their communities and effect public policy?**
 - People who exhibit leadership capacities often don’t identify themselves as “leaders.” We find that speaking in terms of “how are you (more) active and effective” is more accessible for many folks than is talking about their “leadership.” The term “leadership” tends to be invoked when somebody is

trying to goad someone else into taking responsibility for a community concern.

- People are empowered and inspired to be active and effective citizens and “leaders” through the experience of being valued members of a caring community. That’s where they derive the motivation and confidence to speak out and take action. “Leaders” emerge from, and are nourished by, strong communities. And their effectiveness as leaders -- in terms of their ability to influence “followers” depends on the breadth and depth of their relations with other people in their community, in their networks. The difference between a leader and a celebrity is that a leader has meaningful relationships, involving reciprocal information flow and accountability, with other people who together with him form some kind of community.

Implication for leadership development strategies: to find and develop leaders, invest in community-building.

- Leadership emerges based partly on how project work is organized: more leadership development can be stimulated by making more roles for people to fill, i.e. by creating more opportunities for people to exercise their leadership abilities.
- Broadly speaking, in our work we have become aware of two sets of leadership capacities. One has to do with individual outspokenness and activism; the other involves a person’s group skills and connectedness. When we ask people about “leadership” they often think primarily of the first set -- the traits of the outspoken individual; but when we ask about “who makes things happen” we’re told about people who exhibit the second set.
- Leadership “development” starts close to home. Participants grow their public communications skills and confidence through opportunities to speak about what they know best, to interested audiences, on their home turf. Those experiences prepare them for more-distant and more-obstreperous forums. Likewise, people develop their skills at bringing people together, mobilizing group activity, and nurturing accountability through involvement in local groups.

Implication for programming strategies: support people in local practice. Help them stay embedded in their community, in their current networks.

- Leadership development happens substantially through the experience of doing project work -- of acting with other people on issues that a person cares about. Most "leadership development" activities have not been very satisfying for participants in the projects we've observed; the widespread perception is that further innovation in this area is needed.
- However, several tools and constructs have been helpful to people in improving their effectiveness in working with people: awareness of Myers-Briggs types in oneself and other people, and of different styles in handling conflict; training in active listening, and in recognizing the differences between advocacy and inquiry, dialogue and debate. The "community voices" exercise has been an especially helpful listening and group-building tool.
- Regarding providing leadership in communities and effecting public policy: grantees in our cluster are influencing policy formation in a variety of ways and in a variety of institutions. Receipt of a foundation grant is empowering and legitimizing especially for smaller, community-based organizations -- it's an important asset in their leadership and policy work.

In scaling expectations for funded organizations and projects to influence policy, it's important to remember the magnitude of the forces groups are confronting. For example, in the Integrated Farming Systems (IFS) projects supported by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, the trends in the agricultural system toward globalization and industrialization are huge; there's enormous momentum in that direction. While IFS grantees are contributing to impressive systems change, those trends won't be reversed through a three- or five-year effort by these 18 projects.

- Access to information has a lot to do with how people respond to opportunities to be active. If people are kept in the loop, they're in a position to express their leadership potential. If they're kept out of the loop, they're neither positioned nor as well equipped to express their potential.

2. What have you learned about facilitating collaboration among a wide variety of organizations?

- Collaborative relations start with individuals from different institutions. Institutional relationships develop more slowly.
- Relations between diverse institutions can be facilitated by community elders or leaders who have ties to multiple institutions. When institutions are less embedded in webs of community relationships, there are fewer opportunities for bridges between institutions and fewer safe forums for resolving conflicts constructively.
- Collaborative efforts are more difficult when they span broader economic strata.
- History and local circumstances matter a great deal in influencing the shape and pace of collaborations. Different projects require different yardsticks for gauging progress -- a challenge for cluster evaluators!!
- Much can be learned about facilitating organizational collaboration from organizations and leaders in minority communities, and from women's organizations and networks, who have much hard experience in dealing with exclusion and other barriers -- but people and organizations in the dominant culture often display little curiosity about what can be learned from those sources.
- Time, energy and other resources are required to build collaborative relations. Consultants, mediators, facilitators, retreats all can help. Projects should be encouraged to include these kinds of investments in their budgets.
- Keys to progress in collaboration include: persistence -- hang in there!; listening; recognizing, understanding, and appreciating differences.
- Money from a funder can help diverse organizations come together, and stay together.
- Making the grant to the smaller, more community-based organization in a collaboration, as happened in many of the Kellogg IFS projects, can be a brilliant move that helps equalize relations between that organization and the more-powerful mainstream institutions in these collaboratives.

- Several veterans of collaborative projects have told us that some collaborations are too-forced, and that funders should exercise greater restraint as matchmaker.
- There's a lot we don't know yet about using conflict constructively. When is confrontation appropriate, efficient, effective for achieving systems change? When are "outside-in" strategies appropriate, and when are insider, consensus-oriented strategies more appropriate? Fortunately, our work includes projects and organizations with some variety in their predilection for confrontational versus collaborative strategies, so we expect to learn more about this over the next two years.

3. What have you learned about enhancing the diversity of projects and organizations and gaining wider participation of community members, especially those groups that have traditionally been underserved?

- "Gaining wider participation" is at least as much about "going to" and "joining with" as it is about "inviting," "recruiting" and "making room for."
- It's tough to add diversity later in a project; easier to include it from the beginning.
- Dealing effectively with diversity depends upon everybody being willing to change and learn. People must recognize and value what everybody brings to the table.
- One key is to help people see the benefits of more diversity: its power, its resources, its creativity. People and projects need to find ways to use their diversity as a strength, and not just be frustrated by the challenges involved in accepting differences.
- People are more likely to invest in greater diversity when they see the economic benefits of doing so: when they recognize the market potential, for example, of diverse cultural groups.
- Diversity is important; but it isn't easy! People don't know how; it feels uncomfortable; the issues involved in dealing with differences don't go away but require ongoing attention. Organizations must be encouraged, nurtured and challenged to connect with a wider range of community members.

- If diversity is a priority (and we think it's a worthy one), projects should allow time and resources for it -- because it requires time and effort.
- A funder's commitment to channel grants through community-based organizations is a powerful way to encourage diversity and bring marginalized voices to the center.
- A funder sends a powerful message on this theme when it models diversity in its own staff and consultants.

4. What have you learned about working with community-based organizations that maximizes the impact of those organizations on their communities and on systemic change?

- To maximize the impact of these organizations, it's important to remember the source of their power: it comes from their membership, their popular base. They are powerful and effective to the extent that they are close to, engaged with and accountable to extended networks of people in the community.

Therefore it's important to support these organizations in nurturing and dealing with that base. That base can't be taken for granted (though it often is by other, more professionally-dominated institutions); those relationships must be tended to, and person-to-person outreach must be ongoing. It's a mistake to support only the "projects" and the "policy work" of these organizations. Invest in their community-building work, the development of their internal membership and leadership.

- Some organizations that call themselves "community-based" may in fact have only weak cultural connections to the community they supposedly serve and represent. Being culturally based as well as "community-based" is important for maximum effectiveness in that community. Ironically, often it's the organizations without a strong cultural base that are more proficient at accessing mainstream resources -- because they're often more fluent in the dominant, mainstream culture. For greatest impact on larger systems as well as in their home community, organizations must be bi-cultural (or polycultural): fluent in their home culture as well as the dominant culture.

- It's important to appreciate the stress that these organizations are under, financially and administratively. Typically their staff have lower pay, fewer benefits, less job security, and less prestige socially than their counterparts in larger institutions. These stresses are somewhat counterbalanced by the psychic energy that comes from having your organization's mission aligned with your personal values.

Therefore: invest in their renewal, in strategies for burnout prevention. This includes affording them opportunities to travel and visit with peers in other places. For example, the cross-project networking the W. K. Kellogg Foundation supports is wonderful!

- A funder should be as public in its support of these organizations as it is asked to be. A foundation's support is potentially a valuable resource which organizations can leverage powerfully if the funder will let itself be guided by them in how to do so.
- Funders and other resource institutions should support these organizations long-term, and in ways that respect and leave space for their decisionmaking (i.e. don't tell them what to do or how to do it; help them find their own way). But funders should challenge these organizations to diversify their support base so that they're not unduly dependent on any one source.

5. What have you learned about the most effective methods (or capabilities) of projects to deliver on the goals and objectives of an initiative?

This is a mighty big question! Here are some notes in response:

- Talented people are a key. Where these are missing and must be developed, progress is much slower.
- Projects can't do all things equally well or equally quickly. For example, a simpler institutional collaboration will often make more headway in local innovation and community building; dealing with diversity and conflict in the central governing group draws energy away from other project tasks. Another example: starting with a vision and working to achieve it proceeds differently and will yield different results in a given time period than will a project that starts by inviting people to join in developing a widely-shared vision that will then be pursued.

- Projects that are far-flung geographically, especially across lightly-populated areas, will proceed at a slower pace since communications and relationship-building are more difficult and costly.
 - Social skills -- the ability to build relationships, to communicate with and learn from diverse people -- are crucial for making progress. In our experience, projects are more often hampered by poor skills in these areas than by a lack of "technical" expertise.
 - It's important to pay attention to how trust and information flow along lines of gender, ethnicity, and class, as well along institutional lines.
- 6. What have you learned about the major barriers to the success of programming initiatives? What kinds of actions by foundation staff and grantees diminish the impact of a cluster of projects?**
- One danger is the temptation to underestimate or overlook the challenges involved in project-level success, and to rush participants into focusing on cluster/network issues. A network's credibility will be limited by the credibility of its member projects. Time spent on cluster/network issues or an outsider's agenda can get in the way of projects' dealing with critical difficulties and opportunities in their home place.
 - As mentioned earlier, a funder may sometimes overreach in pushing prospective grantees together into a forced partnership. This probably grows out of an appreciation for the potential of broad collaboratives; but the funder should also remember the value of "outside-in" strategies, of strategies that develop alternatives to conventional institutions and systems -- not just strategies that seek to change the currently-mainstream institutions. Remember that innovation, creativity, new paradigms often come from those who are outside the mainstream.
- 7. What has your work revealed about managing cluster evaluations that might be useful in planning and conducting other major programmatic initiatives?**
- Cultivating the buy-in of project participants is crucial. Building a partnership of mutual respect and trust requires upfront and ongoing attention. It involves dealing with issues of control vs. free will, and safety

and confidentiality. Participants in our IFS cluster pushed us to articulate guiding principles for strong partnerships, and to develop a Memorandum of agreement with each project to explicitly declare what each party would contribute to the joint evaluation venture. Those principles and memos have been helpful in sustaining a warm working relationship.

- A funder could model respectful partnership with its cluster evaluators by making *grants*, not contracts, to them; and by allowing cluster evaluator and the funder to share the information and products generated by the cluster evaluation. *Accountability* rather than control should be the guiding principle in the relationship between the funder and its cluster evaluators. In our experience in working with projects and project evaluators, the strongest commitment to accountability grows out of respectful peer relations among co-discoverers -- a shared commitment to common learning and reporting goals, and clarity about deliverables pledged -- rather than from a relationship in which one party has directive authority over others.
 - To elicit greater buy-in and cooperation from projects, in our experience it helps to model respect for diverse kinds of expertise in the team assembled for a task. For example, in most of our evaluation projects we deliberately assemble teams that include people with experience as practitioners as well as academic qualifications, and also some diversity of gender, ethnicity, and regional background. This has been helpful to us in gaining access to multiple information networks, and in comprehending various dynamics and phenomena that otherwise would be unrecognized or inscrutable.
8. **What are some essential characteristics and components that a system should have for synthesizing and disseminating lessons learned on an on-going basis? What role should information technology play in this process?**
- To synthesize lessons learned (as well as to help disseminate them): convene co-discoverers for reflective conversation. That is, convene cluster evaluators, project evaluators, and project leaders and participants for conversations about what they're learning and accomplishing.
 - Regarding information technology: e-mail helps with some people! Not everybody uses it, but a growing share of people do, and it helps bridge the distance gap. Conference calls are also helpful. However, these enhance but can't replace face-to-face contact.

- Dissemination of lessons can happen powerfully through forums that allow people from within an initiative to join with other networks and circles in reflecting on what's being learned. Through the process of engaging with key questions, themes, and insights, people will create their own learning. The point of sharing "lessons" is to stimulate and deepen that reflective process.

9. What else have you learned from conducting evaluations that you think will be helpful for others to know at this time?

We continually remind ourselves of our responsibility to contribute to the capacity growth of project participants -- and of our duty to *do no harm* to projects by imposing irrelevant or ill-conceived data collection expectations. We must admit that we hear horror stories from participants in some other projects where the evaluators are apparently throwing their weight around.

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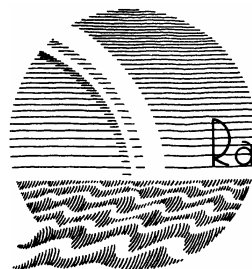
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Related Rainbow Research Publications:

- **Creating a More Sustainable Food and Farming System: Lessons from an Integrated Farming Systems Initiative;** By David Scheie; 4 *pages* (1996); #165A – \$5.00
- **The Importance of Community Collaboration to Support Sustainable Agriculture;** By Oran Hesterman, David Scheie and Betty Mosley; 13 (1996); #165B – \$6.00
- **How Can Universities and Colleges Become More Useful to Rural Communities Pursuing Development;** By David Scheie and Steven E. Mayer; 16 (1990); #085 – \$5.00



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