# Network-Focused Leadership Programs for People of Color

*A Review of Network-Focused Literature for the Linking Leaders Initiative*

**M A R C H   2 0 1 6**

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# Summary

In August 2015, the F. R. Bigelow Foundation contracted with Wilder Research to conduct a review of literature related to leadership programs for adults of color. The focus of this review was to find what program elements work to build emerging leadership, support existing leadership, and build capacity within public, nonprofit, and for-profit organizations to accept and value the leadership of people of color. The results of the review would help the Bigelow Foundation to provide funding and support for successful leadership programs for adults of color in St. Paul and the surrounding area.

The review began with a public search of relevant empirical studies and evaluations performed for programs that focused on developing leaders of color. In the course of this initial search, we found that the "bridge," or the links among individual, organizational, and community initiatives to support and train leaders of color, was particularly important, but we were unable to identify a body of empirical studies about this component specifically for leaders of color. With guidance from Bigelow Foundation staff, we undertook a second literature review covering the research of several thought leaders in the field of network development and analysis, as well as empirical studies that examined the efficacy of programs that actively integrated a focus on network development.

The following themes emerged from this most recent literature scan:

- Thought leaders in the field identified a number of compelling rationales and benefits to focusing on network development and collective leadership. The field of leadership is changing and expanding, with the centrality and need for individual leadership coming into question. There is increasing evidence that collective or network-centered leadership can more effectively bridge differences, ease tension between the two important principles of unity (support among those who have similar backgrounds and/or goals) and diversity (participation by those from different perspectives or experiences), provide opportunities for historically marginalized communities to make change, and leverage resources among disparate partners to effect systematic and community-focused change.

- A number of programs across the nation – some of which have been in existence for decades – have an intentional network-centered focus. These programs have common features that focus on network building and show common positive outcomes for individuals, organizations, and communities.

# Introduction

In August 2015, the F. R. Bigelow Foundation contracted with Wilder Research to conduct a review of literature related to leadership programs for adults of color. The focus of this review was to find what program elements are most effective to build emerging leadership, support existing leadership, and build capacity within public, nonprofit, and for-profit organizations to accept and support the leadership of people of color. The results of the review would help the Bigelow Foundation to provide funding and support for successful leadership programs for adults of color in St. Paul and the surrounding area.

In the initial scan of the literature, we found that the "bridge," or the links among individual, organizational, and community initiatives to support leaders of color, was particularly important. While there are a number of programs intended to build skills for leaders of color – and while those programs have seen success in equipping individual leaders – the concept of leadership itself is changing and broadening, with a greater emphasis on creating, nurturing, and leveraging networks among individual leaders, organizations that support leaders, and the communities that benefit from this leadership. Exploring the programs that develop these networks may be the key to building holistic and effective supports for leaders of color.

We were unsuccessful in our search for literature that specifically described such linking programs for leaders of color during our initial scan. With guidance from Bigelow Foundation staff, we undertook a second literature review, shifting our focus to initiatives of all kinds that actively fostered the development of networks. Many of these initiatives are guided by national and regional organizations that are well-regarded in the field, including the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the National Urban Fellows program, the Research Center for Leadership in Action, and the Leadership Learning Community. In studying the foundational research of these organizations, the rationale for developing collective leadership and fostering network growth and development became clear: their work converges on the finding that a focus on collective leadership and network building is essential for the development of a pipeline of leaders of color. Network-centered programs can also effect positive change within communities and in areas that are historically marginalized.

## Definition of terms

Subsequent sections include a number of terms that are woven into the fabric of network analysis, including the following terms:

- **Thought leader**. Throughout this report, we refer to the research, programming, and concepts of "thought leaders" in the field of leadership network analysis and development. Thought leaders are organizations or individuals who have been involved in the field for a number of years, even decades, and have produced thoughtful research and/or practice in leadership network analysis. Resources from these thought leaders provide the basis for this literature review, as well as several network-centered programs that currently exist.

- **Collective leadership**. Also called shared leadership, collective leadership is a non-hierarchical structure that relies on a team to share decision-making and other leadership duties. Collective leadership stands in opposition to traditional leadership, which tends to favor top-down communication and individual responsibility and decision-making duty; because of this, collective leadership tends to offer greater opportunities for leaders of color.

- **Network-centered program**. Network-centered programs integrate a network focus in one of two ways: they encourage program participants who are peers, or otherwise similarly-situated, to form networks during the course of the program itself or after its conclusion (bonding); or they encourage participants to create bonds across difference (bridging, though this is sometimes also referred to in the literature as "boundary spanning"). There is some variation in the extent to which networks are embedded in the formal activities of the programs that are outlined later in the report; however, each program featured has explicitly acknowledged the importance of developing and maintaining some form of network among its participants.

- **Bonding and bridging**. These two terms, from network analysis literature, describe the ways that groups relate to one another. Bonding is when a group of similarly-situated individuals (or organizations) connect based on those similarities, while bridging happens when individuals (or organizations) connect based on (or despite) differences. Both bonding and bridging have their place in network development, though bridging (also called boundary spanning) seems to appear more often as a need for organizations and individuals to effect major change across a topic area.

# Methods

We began this second phase of the literature review by examining the work of several thought leaders in the field of network development and organizational network analysis. The majority of these sources, provided by the Bigelow Foundation, supplied a rich background of information on the rationale behind focusing on network development. Using these background sources, we developed a set of criteria to examine network-centered programming that specifically focused on developing leadership capacity within either individuals or organizations.

A number of the thought leader sources pointed to specific programs that had successfully begun this work, both for the benefit of individual leaders of color as well as larger organizations and community initiatives that could benefit from a more diverse leadership pool. We used the criteria developed in our initial scan, enhanced by the thought leadership in this second phase, to examine the goals, components, and outcomes of this work in each program.

Overall, our search yielded 19 publications that were relevant and helpful to the topic. Of these, 11 publications explored the existing landscape and emerging need for network-centered leadership programming, including benefits to individuals and organizations; an additional 8 contained detailed descriptions of programs that cultivated or acknowledged network development in their design. The majority of these publications (15) were the work of nonprofit and philanthropic organizations, and the remainder (4) were research pieces supported by academic institutions.

The summary table at the end of this review provides an overview of characteristics of programs that incorporate the program elements considered most effective in this literature, and about which empirical research has been published.

# Review of previous research by thought leaders

Many of the initiatives focusing on network development are guided by national and regional thought leaders, including the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the National Urban Fellows program, the Research Center for Leadership in Action (an initiative of the New York University Wagner School of Public Service), the D5 Coalition, and the Leadership Learning Community. These organizations have done a number of large-scale program scans and other research laying the foundation for an understanding of the practice and value of network development. The foundational research from these organizations underscores the rationale for developing collective leadership and fostering network growth. The following is a summary of the findings from these organizations on the nature of network-centered leadership. Where applicable, programs that we found to exemplify these findings are identified by number; these numbers correspond to the identification numbers in the summary table on pages 13-15.

**The field of leadership is a shifting landscape** and the standard of individual leadership is being questioned. Recent breakthroughs in the field of leadership, researched and summarized by the Leadership Learning Community in 2009 for the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, show the increasing presence of collective leadership models where leadership is shared among a group of diverse individuals or organizations. This facilitates greater involvement and opportunities for leaders from a wide variety of different backgrounds, including (and particularly) leaders of color, as these collective leadership models allow for more authentic inclusion. While only a few of the programs specifically targeted and named non-hierarchical leadership models (3, 5, and 6), this focus on collective leadership is a common thread that runs through all of the highlighted programs.

**Access to robust, expansive networks is vital** to historically marginalized populations, or those who have been cut off from mainstream networks. While some research has indicated that relying solely on race-based networks can perpetuate marginalization in hiring (Fernandez and Fernandez-Mateo, 2006), programs that develop diverse networks may be more successful in providing a greater pipeline for diverse leadership. In a 2013 analysis of resources to enhance diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in the field of philanthropy, the D5 Coalition implicated the creation and development of networks as a way to create sustainable change in the DEI efforts of philanthropic organizations. Each of the seven programs highlighted in the summary table provide access to networks, each with its own method of doing so.

**Network-centered leadership creates opportunities to effect systemic change** in both specific organizations and broader focus areas by providing opportunities to widen perspectives at all levels of an organization or focus area. According to Richard Cross (2007, 2013), emphasizing informal networks – those that are based on relationships, as opposed to more traditional and formal organizational structures – allows greater input and cultivation of support from individuals who may have influence among their peers but may not have the power associated with positional leadership. This in turn creates a non-hierarchical, grassroots wave of support that can lead to more sustainable and systemic change than a more traditional top-down approach. While Cross's scholarship did not specifically mention empowering individuals of color, the emphasis on informal networks – and the de-emphasis of positional leadership – can empower individuals of color who are poised to take on roles in the non-hierarchical, collective leadership structure that Cross recommends. One highlighted program (6), which is itself a network of organizations rather than of individuals, focuses specifically on effecting systemic change through the creation of a decentralized and non-hierarchical network.

**Developing networks helps to acknowledge tension between unity and diversity** in a variety of areas. According to Angel Saz-Carranza, a scholar focusing on goal-directed network development and governance, unity is the state of being "without deviation," or being homogeneous in terms of goals, structure, demographics, and other organizational features; by contrast, diversity is the variability of these features within and across organizations. These contrasting states bring tension to organizations, both internally and in dealing with external connections, as unity (homogeneity) tends to be more harmonious but less innovative and diversity tends to produce more innovative solutions but also tends to be more conflict-prone. Developing networks that acknowledge differences and intersections among individuals' multiple identities and foster inclusion within organizations, while attempting to avoid tokenizing participants from historically marginalized populations, can bring balance to an organization and ease some of this tension. None of the highlighted programs had specific references to acknowledging this unity/diversity tension, though these programs may have addressed something similar without operationalizing it in their programs.

**Network development fosters a focus on broader community-based issues and creates new advancements for building capacity**. Rather than focusing solely on individual or organizational development, focusing on network development – particularly boundary-spanning and non-hierarchical networks – allow organizations to better leverage their resources to work toward collective goals and community impacts. Three of the seven highlighted programs (#1, 3, and 6) use networks to leverage resources on community-based issues in various ways.

**Organizations can supplement networks that support leaders of color** and community issues by convening goal-directed networks and investing in them. In his work, Angel Saz-Carranza (2010, 2016) discusses the concept of the goal-directed network, where a number of independent organizations create a cooperative relationship to achieve a collective goal. In discussing the governance of such a network, Saz-Carranza discusses the importance of having a lead organization to guide the network and help build capacity. One program, the RE-AMP Network (program 6), exemplifies this work through a non-hierarchical structure.

Many of the programs outlined in the next section are initiatives of the thought leader organizations and individuals summarized above. However, this review also includes a number of programs that are not funded by this handful of organizations, and which also see the importance of these rationales and outcomes. The existence and documented experiences of this wider pool of programs provides evidence of broader recognition for the potential for significant results and change via network development.

# Review of network-centered programs

In addition to the body of knowledge provided by thought leaders in the area of network development and analysis, the literature review uncovered a number of existing leadership programs that weave network development into the fabric of their operations, either by initial design or over time. Of the seven programs highlighted, five focused on developing the networks of individual leaders (programs 1-5), while two focused more on networking organizations around a broader topic or area of focus (programs 6 and 7); these two sets of programs tended to have similar approaches, goals, and outcomes despite these differences in focus. The populations served, goals, elements, and outcomes of these programs are summarized below.

## Populations served by network-centered programs

Most of the programs highlighted (programs 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5) claimed to intentionally include historically marginalized populations, particularly women and people of color, with specific program goals to widen the pipeline of these populations into positions of leadership or to mobilize organizations to include and involve these populations in their work. (It is worth noting that none of the articles written about these programs gave specific breakdowns of the representation of these populations.) All five of the programs that concentrated on developing and networking individual leaders (1, 2, 3, 4, and 5) intentionally focused their efforts on supporting employees by implementing a cohort system with a selective nomination or application process. The focus of the majority of programs on collective leadership meant that these programs (1, 2, 3, and 4) focused on cross-sector work with some combination of public, private, or non-profit representation; the community building focus of these programs also meant that they tended to focus on broad issues with public relevance (health, human services, social justice issues, etc.).

## Program goals and network components

In creating networks, four of the highlighted programs (1, 2, 3, and 4) focused on creating a cohesive and connected cohort through bonding activities, whether these activities were executed during the course of the program or after its completion. The most common bonding activity cited was some form of peer-to-peer skill building, such as mentoring or coaching. To this end, alumni networks were the most commonly shown or desired form of network building among program participants. With the Annie E. Casey Children and Family Fellowship program, for example, program participants noted that their involvement as alumni has provided crucial ongoing support for individuals as they continued on their career paths after the fellowship. To this point, this support has come in the form of the

creation of the Alumni Network, which provides a space for alumni to share resources and forge partnerships. As the older cohorts near retirement, the Alumni Network is figuring out ways to continue to support these network pioneers and continue to benefit from their combined expertise.

In addition, most of the highlighted programs (1, 2, 3, 5, 6, and 7) tended to focus on intentionally acknowledging and bridging gaps between populations or groups, either in isolation or in addition to providing bonding activities. The focus on bridging gaps – as highlighted in the earlier research from thought leaders – is meant to strengthen connections among organizations with a common goal, allowing them to better leverage resources in complementary efforts that allow for greater collective success. This intentional highlighting and bridging of gaps is called "boundary spanning" in some of the highlighted programs, though the same goal is seen in programs that did not call out boundary spanning as a specific term.

One key example of boundary spanning was seen in Operation New Dawn, which was an intentional effort of the U.S. Department of Defense and Department of State to collaborate effectively during a point of transition in the Iraq War. They managed this through an intensive "Combined Vision Development Seminar," a one-day session at the outset of Operation New Dawn where they defined both the differences between the groups and how best to bridge those differences, as well as intentional efforts from the leadership of both departments to align their vision, vocabulary, and priorities for the operation.

## Program outcomes

The network-centered programs reviewed here saw considerable positive outcomes for both program participants and the broader areas (organizations, communities, issues) that they serve. Three of the programs that focused on individual participants (2, 4, and 5) noted that their alumni had greater success within their own employment tracks, either through promotion or by assuming greater leadership responsibilities and roles. In addition, the same programs noted an increased ability for these leaders to create meaningful connections within their organizations or broader issue areas. With regard to changes within communities, three programs with individual participants (1, 4, and 5) noted that alumni were more deeply and easily connected to external resources (either people or organizations) through their networks and could more easily leverage those networks in service of their communities or issue areas. Two programs (1 and 3) defined their success in terms of positive outcomes for the communities served by their participants or alumni, rather than speaking of individual success; this broad community focus dovetails meaningfully with the concept that collective leadership, not individual achievements, are the primary focus of network-centered programs. While there was a common goal for programs that developed individual networks to increase the capacity of the field or

diversify the pipeline of leaders in that field, only one set of programs (those affiliated with the National Urban Fellows, program 4) shared that their programming achieved that particular result.

## Identifiable best practices

Of the practices summarized throughout the review, we found the following to be best practices in establishing and continuing this work.

Given that the majority of the programs emphasized providing supportive and effective networks for their participants, we found **providing both bonding and bridging activities** to be most useful for participants and alumni. Participants – particularly those from populations that are historically marginalized and underrepresented in positional leadership – need both the support of a bonding group as well as the access to a bridged network to thrive. Both of these aims were most commonly achieved by providing space and programming activities: peer mentoring events for bonding, convening space for bridging. For organizational change, we found that an emphasis on acknowledging and bridging differences was most effective in enacting change (see programs 5 and 7 for examples).

On a related note, we found that **having a cross-sector focus, or a focus on a broader topic or community initiative**, was connected to positive outcomes for communities (programs 1, 3, and 6) as well as organizations (programs 4 and 7) and individual participants (programs 2 and 5). In the case of the RE-AMP Network, rallying a group of organizations around a specific place (the upper Midwest) and topic (environmental sustainability), as well as providing space and programming for those organizations to meet and define their goals, was an effective example of using a topic focus to drive the network.

# Conclusions

Network development is crucial to creating and developing opportunities for leaders of color for a variety of reasons. Increasing acknowledgement of the importance of collective leadership, and the increasing challenge to the assumed superiority and universality of individual leadership, has led to a greater emphasis on collective leadership and network-centered approaches to improving communities.

A number of programs across the country have, over the course of decades, utilized a network-centered approach, many to good effect. As organizations seek to improve the diversity and breadth of representation within their leadership, these programs will become even more vital to effectively and sustainably supporting and increasing the population of leaders of color.

## Recommendations

Options for the F. R. Bigelow Foundation to consider in order to support leaders of color are broad, given the range of effective programs identified in this review, and the scale of opportunities in the East Metro area for increasing leadership of color. The following are offered as some considerations:

1. Convene local leadership programs or groups that have a network approach to leadership development to review and discuss these findings with the Foundation's Linking Leaders Task Force. More specifically, invite the groups to provide input about how the dynamics of this region may or may not respond to the kinds of practices found to be effective elsewhere in the country. In addition, they may be able to provide more specific operational details about program elements that are most appropriate within the best practices that are broadly identified (but not described) in the literature.

2. Subject to advice from local leaders, prioritize support for programs that are already effectively serving people of color in the East Metro area from a network-centered approach. This will help channel support to programs that the community believes are truly impacting the development of local leaders of color. It will also likely include programs that have learned from experience and strengthened operational details of their programming.

3. Convene other funders and stakeholders interested in increasing both the leadership development of people of color and the opportunities for people of color to enter senior leadership positions across sectors. Share the information learned from these literature reviews, which highlight not only the best practices of developing individual leadership, but the significant impact that a collective and network leadership framework can have to create organizational, community or systems level change.

4. If there are programs already addressing both bonding activities (to strengthen peer support) and bridging activities (to broaden relationships, experiences, and opportunities), seek ways to help them expand and/or provide technical assistance to other programs to be able to provide both as well.

5. Fund capacity-building support for existing programs that are currently only doing either bonding or bridging, but are interested in adding the other component.

6. In the context of the recommendations above, prioritize programs that incorporate (or would be interested in developing) a collective focus on a broader cause or community initiative. This appears to help amplify outcomes and also helps sustain enthusiasm both among participants and non-participants who see and appreciate the results.

# Summary of literature review results: Distribution of programs studied

The following is a brief overview of the location and sector focuses of the seven programs highlighted in the literature review. The vast majority of these programs are planned and operated on a multi-state or national level, but almost all of these programs emphasize cross-sector work that is executed on a community level. None of the programs specified a focus on one particular racial or ethnic population; the programs that did emphasize leadership of color kept the categorization and membership broad.

|  | Total (N=7) |
| --- | --- |
| **Program planning location focus** | |
| Community or state | 1 |
| Multi-state region | 3 |
| National | 2 |
| International | 1 |
| **Program execution focus** | |
| Community | 6 |
| Multi-state region | 0 |
| National | 0 |
| International | 1 |
| **Sector focus** | |
| Nonprofit | 2 |
| Public sector/government | 1 |
| Philanthropy | 1 |
| Corporate | 0 |
| Cross-sector | 3 |

# Summary of network-centered programs

| ID | Program name; convening organization (year of study/ article)/Length of time that program has existed | Sector focus; population(s) served | Program goal | Network components | Outcome details | Best practices observed |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Leadership in Action Program; Annie E. Casey Foundation (2013) / Several cohorts in place since 2001 | Mid-level staff from **public, private, and community-based organizations** around particular topic areas in select states nationwide (MD, CT, VA, IN, TX, and USVI) | To gather and mobilize key leaders, managers, and residents to improve a chosen community issue | Program designed to connect individuals across industries to create "aligned contributions" – actions that complement, support, and leverage results as a collective. Alumni network also mentioned as an important component to program. | Outcomes for individual organizations/participants unclear; outcomes measured and reported in terms of successful community change | Bonding and bridging activities; cross-sector focus; community focus |
| 2 | Children and Family Fellowship Program; Annie E. Casey Foundation (2013) / First cohort (of 8 total) in 1993 | **Nonprofit and public service personnel** in human services, focused on states with Casey Foundation programs | To prepare participants to become transformative leaders and reimagine systems | Emphasis on creating bonds within each cohort and with the group as a whole (via alumni network); also encourages program alumni to act as bridges/connect with alumni from other leadership programs | Increased connections/ network growth, greater success within jobs and focus areas; continuing support for past and present Fellows through alumni network, particularly through transitions (job changes, retirement) | Bonding and bridging activities; topical focus; community focus |
| 3 | Leadership for a Changing World; NYU Wagner School (2006) / Programs 2000-2007 | Non-majority voices in a range of **public, private, and non-profit organizations** focused on social justice issues | To study "quantum leadership", or community-driven leadership | Collective networks formed via focus on community issues; peer mentoring within the program | Outcomes for individuals not specified; measured and reported in terms of community innovations and changes | Bonding and bridging activities; cross-sector focus; community focus |
| 4 | National Urban Fellows (reports in 2011 and 2013) / Range of programs in place since 1969 | Individuals interested in **philanthropy and public service** throughout the U.S. | Preparing a pipeline of prepared leaders of color; building networks where people of color and women are more broadly represented | Bonding within each cohort of Fellows through peer mentoring; alumni network also developed as an important component to the program. | Increased capacity/diversity within pipelines, particularly for philanthropic organizations; greater understanding of the importance of networks and mentorship; new connections created and facilitated due to networks, which is considered vital to continued support for leaders of color | Bonding activities |

| ID | Program name; convening organization (year of study/ article)/Length of time that program has existed | Sector focus; population(s) served | Program goal | Network components | Outcome details | Best practices observed |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 5 | Ladder to Leadership Program; Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (2013) / Several cohorts since 2007 | Early- to mid-level professionals in **health-related nonprofits** in 8 targeted communities throughout the U.S. | To develop a pipeline of leaders of color in health, with a focus on working with vulnerable communities | "Boundary spanning" networks – emphasis on multi-sector, coalitional change within the industry (focus on bridging) | Increased leadership capacity and gains in ability (and perception of ability); increased ability to leverage networks in solving problems; promotions and increased responsibilities for individual participants | Bridging activities; topical focus; community focus |
| 6 | RE-AMP Energy Network (2010) / Network began in early 2000s | 125 **environmentally-focused nonprofit organizations**/funders in 8 states in the upper Midwest | To effect systematic change through a coordinated, decentralized effort | Decentralized, non-hierarchical network structure with many hubs; intentionally shared leadership, multiple points of connection and communication between programs | Several outcomes measured within area of focus; increased capacity for effecting systematic change; increased and strengthened links between organizations, funders, etc. | Bridging activities; topical focus; community focus |
| 7 | Operation New Dawn; U.S. Government (2014) / One year of programming (2010-2011) | Members of the **U.S. Department of Defense and Department of State** involved in Iraq | To create a "team of teams" and cultivate an effective working relationship between two organizations with historical conflicts during a period of transition | "Boundary spanning" leadership and network creation; defining, then bridging group boundaries between opposing populations | Created an "ethos of collaboration" – greater capacity to manage complexity, change, and challenge of transition; understanding/acknowledging differences had an impact on the strength of connections formed between military and diplomatic staff; engendered more inclusive problem solving and collaboration between groups | Bridging activities; topical focus |

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