



The **NEW LEADERSHIP** NETWORK

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Contact:
Puja Sangar
(650) 210-8219
puja.sangar@gmail.com

Leading Systems Change

A Workbook for Community Practitioners and Funders

by Heather McLeod Grant and Adene Sacks

We are living in a time of systemic problems across America—from rising income inequality and the opioid crisis, to gun violence and crumbling rural communities, to entire regions facing extreme weather events induced by climate change. This has many leaders asking: Just how can we collaborate to change these complex systems? How can we re-create community that has equity at its center? And how will we need to change as leaders to get this work done?

Philanthropy and social sector experts, Heather McLeod Grant and Adene Sacks tackle these questions in a new book, *Leading Systems Change* (release date: September 24, 2019), based on two community change experiments they helped lead over the last five years in California's central valley—a region that is agriculturally abundant yet also has deep social divides, with some of the highest poverty rates in the nation.

The authors launched the “new leadership network” (NLN) in Fresno county in 2013, and nearby Stanislaus county in 2015, funded by the James Irvine Foundation. The program comprised three weekend “convenings” over six months, “designed to help cohorts of local leaders develop the skills, mindsets, and tools, needed to understand the systems at work in their communities, and begin acting on these systems collaboratively to drive greater impact.” Overall, nearly 100 leaders from both counties participated in the program.

Drawing on concepts such as network theory, design thinking, and equity, the authors implemented a radically new framework for community change that brought together leaders from a variety of backgrounds—emerging community activists, faith leaders, entrepreneurs, public administrators, business, and nonprofit leaders—to connect with each other as an energized network. Over the course of the program, participants gained self-awareness as leaders (“I”), built trusting, collaborative relationships (“We”), and began to understand the larger systems within which they operated (“It”)—all with the goal of catalyzing transformative change in their communities.

The networks were designed to cut across existing silos, power structures, and racial and cultural divides in ways that proved to be crucial for community change. In both counties, as the authors mapped the networks for each cohort, they could see a transformation—the networks shifted from being scattered or highly fragmented to a dense network, representing strong interaction and clusters of activities between community leaders.

So far, the results have been impressive. Within a year of its launch, NLN Fresno members had initiated more than 80 new collaborations, including a kindergarten readiness program in Fresno's



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low-income neighborhoods, a project that aimed to increase third-grade reading proficiency, and a grant facilitated through a NLN partnership to build a neighborhood playground in West Fresno, a highly impoverished area with high rates of childhood obesity.

In Stanislaus County, the impact includes a program launched by the Stanislaus County's Sheriff's department to redesign the police cadet training program with more community input, which is now informing police training throughout California. Other collaborations include working to close the achievement gap for first generation college students by identifying student needs, aligning community agencies, and partnering to streamline services like providing free transportation on the city's buses and access to a food pantry. Yet another NLN team is focused on a bold initiative to rebrand Stanislaus County under the tagline, "[Glorious Modesto](#)" to build civic pride, retain recent graduates and young creatives, and mobilize residents to engage locally.

The impact on participants has been equally profound. "I don't think any of us had ever been part of anything like this," reflects Scott Miller, former chair of Fresno's Chamber of Commerce and a member of NLN Fresno. "Our own orientation as individuals changed, along with our perspective about how we are in relation to each other, and our relationship to our work," says Marian Kaanon, CEO of the Stanislaus Community Foundation and an NLN member.

The authors describe their process of empowering local leaders to create breakthrough change, along with takeaways and lessons learned, creating a playbook that can be used by other communities nationwide facing similar challenges, "We wrote this workbook for the brave new wave of civic leaders on the front lines of social change looking to grow their ability to impact systems... We hope it helps fill a gap in the field, sparks a conversation about what kind of leadership is needed now, and ultimately catalyze the kinds of change needed in so many communities."

For more information about the New Leadership Network, visit:

<http://newleadershipnetwork.org/>

About the Authors:

Heather McLeod Grant is the cofounder of Open Impact, a philanthropic advising firm, and a published author, speaker, and consultant with more than 25 years of experience in social change. She is the coauthor of the bestselling [Forces for Good](#), [The Giving Code](#), and [many other publications](#).

Adene Sacks is a philanthropic advisor and social impact consultant who spends her days thinking about how networks, design, and strategy can amplify leaders' efforts at changing social systems. She happily wears many hats, including program director of the [New Leadership Network](#); senior advisor to [Open Impact](#); and founding member of the [With/In Collaborative](#).

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