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## A conversation with the authors of “Leading Systems Change”

**1. *You write that many social change approaches have failed to deliver lasting change. Why do you think that is the case?***

Most social change projects are too narrow or bounded in their scope. Good people with good intentions set out to solve homelessness, for example, without really understanding the larger systemic forces at work, the complexity of the problem, what has already been tried and learned, or who needs to be engaged. We need to be smarter about how we solve these problems and use more sophisticated approaches. At the same time, we need to empower leaders to try new things and innovate to change these systems.

**2. *How did the New Leadership Network (NLN) come about? What led you to focus on California’s central valley—specifically Fresno and Stanislaus counties?***

The James Irvine Foundation was responding to what they were hearing from leaders in the Central Valley on a listening tour back in 2011-12. They knew this region had a number of complicated problems (high unemployment, high poverty rates, poor air and water quality, failing schools, etc.) but was under-invested in, compared to the wealthier coastal regions of California. Local leaders from the Valley made a compelling case that philanthropy should invest in building their capacity to begin solving some of these local and regional problems. So, in 2012, the Foundation issued an RFP to hire a consulting firm to design and run a program to invest in local leaders—which ultimately became the NLN focused on Fresno and Stanislaus counties.

**3. *Could you describe your goals in conducting these network building experiments?***

We really had multiple goals for the NLN program, which we used to construct a simple theory of change and an evaluation rubric. These goals existed at different levels (or “units of analysis”), and can be described as follows using our short-hand “I/We/It” framework:

- **“I”/ Leaders:** We wanted to help individual leaders solve local problems, so we invested in developing their mindsets, skills, and behaviors, and empowering them to act in new ways.
- **“We”/ Network:** We also wanted these leaders to connect and build relationships across the things that often divide us: issue areas and sector silos, race and ethnicity, age, gender or sexual orientation, power and status, political affiliation, etc. A big part of the program was helping these leaders form deep, trusting relationships across differences, which would enable them to collaborate more effectively.
- **“It”/ Systems:** Ultimately, we wanted to see impact on local systems, or actual progress on solving community problems. We tracked this at two levels: the first short-term level involved



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tracking local projects, or micro-collaborations that were innovative experiments; the second, longer-term level involved tracking larger collaborative projects working on entire systems, which could move the needle on important issues.

#### **4. *How was the program structured? In what ways did it evolve during the course of your work?***

There's a lot of detail about the program structure in the book. But in the simplest terms, the program was structured as follows:

- Each NLN “cohort” comprised 12-15 local leaders who represented intentional diversity and who were selected according to our criteria.
- Each of these cohorts met three times over six months, for 3-day convenings in a retreat-like setting. At each convening, the leaders were exposed to a curriculum which included relationship-building, experiential exercises, our core theoretical frameworks, and opportunities to collaborate. (Our core curricular frameworks included a focus on network-thinking, systems-dynamics, human-centered design, equity, and leadership development/coaching.)
- Between convenings, we also got the group together for check-in dinners, and encouraged local meet-ups to build relationships.
- At the end, each cohort was graduated into the larger NLN Network. We also spent a lot of time convening all the cohorts together, to weave a dense network of 50-60 leaders in each community.

#### **5. *How did you select those who were included in any given cohort?***

We had fairly rigorous selection criteria; in addition to requiring an application, we interviewed all finalists in person. We were looking for leaders who were:

- Strong local leaders with solid track records and a proven ability to get things done
- Curious learners who sought to understand their region in a comprehensive way
- Leaders who had strong local relationships in their community (i.e., “connectors”)
- Boundary-crossers who welcomed the chance to collaborate across political, cultural, economic and other differences
- Ethical individuals who held high standards and prioritized commitment to positive impact

We also wanted to make sure the network represented a diverse cross-section of the community, so we intentionally recruited leaders from different sectors, issue-areas, political persuasions, and backgrounds. While we focused on mid-career “emerging leaders,” in their 30s-40s, we also included more established leaders from each community.

**6. *How do you define a systems leader? Why are they crucial to bringing about change?***

In essence, systems leaders aren't just focused on their own power or status, nor are they just focused on their organization. Rather, they are focused on changing larger systems through their skills, influence, and networks.

**7. *What makes successful community leaders tick? How is it different from leaders in other sectors, be it the government or in the private sector?***

Successful community leaders can come from any sector, background, or issue area. In business, leaders are ultimately rewarded for their ability to manage people and make a profit for shareholders. In government, leaders are rewarded for their ability to influence others, to solve problems through policy, and to develop power through persuasion. We believe what makes community leaders successful is their ability to understand the complexity of local problems across sectors, a willingness to take responsibility for helping solve these problems, an ability to innovate and try new approaches, and the skills to work across differences and persuade others to join them.

**8. *How does your approach to leadership relate to equity?***

We believe that many of our current systems have inequity baked into them, and therefore, an equity lens is required to solve these problems and rectify injustice. For example, much of the United States economy was initially built on slavery, and we are still grappling with the consequences of that as a nation. And, many current systems serve those who have privilege and power—think of education or healthcare for example—while many others are left behind or fall through the cracks. In order to create more equitable, just, sustainable, and healthy communities, we believe leaders have to be able to bring that equity lens into the conversation and the work.

**9. *Could you describe some key collaborations (or partnerships) that emerged from your work in each county? What problems did the network leaders decide to focus on?***

As we describe in the book, NLN cohorts in Fresno and Stanislaus counties launched a range of projects to tackle issues facing their communities, from education to criminal justice reform, and boosting entrepreneurship to support for those dealing with mental health issues. Below are a few examples:

- A partnership between five NLN leaders and their organizations spawned a kindergarten-readiness program where moms in low-income Fresno neighborhoods train other moms on



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preparing their children for school. In just a few months the program led 138 parent education workshops across the city and quickly started scaling.

- Instead of teaching new police officers about community relations in the classroom, the design team brought new recruits together with college students who had a history with law enforcement for a facilitated conversation, leading to greater empathy on both sides. Based on this work, the Stanislaus County Sheriff's Department launched a project, co-led by community members, new cadets, and senior law enforcement officials, to redesign how new police cadets are trained to interact with community members. The team has presented its work to the statewide California Commission on Peace Officers Standards and Training, with the hope of integrating it into statewide training.
- Ruben Imperial, the deputy chief executive officer for Stanislaus County, launched an initiative to identify nearly 150 individuals with the highest hospital psychiatric admissions, emergency room admissions, and law enforcement contacts—i.e., those driving substantial healthcare and public safety costs. He and the assistant sheriff put together a working group to figure out how these individuals might get the support they needed, using planning tools Ruben had learned through the NLN, including empathy interviews, ideating, and prototyping. “We reached out to 10 of the identified individuals and tested our idea for two weeks, then we came back and made adjustments,” he says, “This idea of prototyping has fundamentally shifted how we are working in government.”

### ***10. How have the two communities changed as a result?***

Both communities have benefited tremendously from having an engaged network of cross-sector leaders who are working to solve local problems. These leaders have joined each other's boards, been appointed to commissions, and galvanized others to improve the local community. We've been able to measure the impact of specific innovations/ projects in each community launched by the NLN. However, it will take more time to see the longer-term impact of these projects on local issues.

### ***11. Were you surprised by the outcomes that have emerged in the two counties?***

We were most surprised by the organic collaborations that emerged in Fresno. This was an unanticipated outcome of the program, and we decided to make it a core focus of the program in Stanislaus. We were also surprised to see how many NLN leaders changed jobs after going through the program—in most cases this was because they found a new opportunity to have more impact; or because they were promoted into a position of greater influence or authority.

### ***12. In your view, can this work be replicated in other communities nationwide? What would you say are roadblocks or blind spots that come in the way?***

We do think the NLN model can be replicated in other communities, but we caution against using a cookie-cutter approach. Rather, whomever seeks to replicate this program will need to deeply



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understand their local community, and figure out which elements will work, and what might need to be adapted to the local context. We encourage others to take our open-sourced model and experiment with new ways to tweak or apply it—that’s why we wrote this workbook and chose to give away the program for free!

### ***13. What are your key takeaways for any community (led by a community foundation or a citizen-led organization) looking to replicate this model for bringing about change?***

- The program must be responsive to, and grounded in, local needs and context.
- The target community should exhibit the core characteristics we outline in the book and show signs of readiness for change.
- We believe it’s critical to bring an equity lens to this work and have a diverse training team that is experienced in working with diverse groups.
- Having funding for the program is essential; while it might be possible to execute this program for lower costs, we do believe investment is needed for success.
- It’s important to have leaders (funders, training team) who are committed to the core design principles of the NLN, and who really “get it.”
- This work is messy, complicated, and hard—don’t take it on if you’re not ready for a real challenge!

### ***14. What would you say are the takeaways for individual donors/philanthropists and foundations who invest in social change?***

- We have to think more expansively about what it will take to create lasting social change: this means thinking beyond individual leaders or organizational boundaries, and embracing networks, movements, and systems change.
- Funding is a critical resource and catalyst for this work to happen. Most funding streams reinforce the status-quo rather than disrupting it, or they just tinker around the margins. We encourage funders to be bold in their aspirations, and courageous in their commitments.
- Funders need to realize that at the end of the day, the power of change lies in the hands of leaders and their networks. Funders need to recognize that identifying the right people with the right ideas and investing in them is critical.

### ***15. How can this framework be applied to divisive issues that have polarized communities like gun control or immigration?***

We believe this framework at its core transcends the superficial divisiveness surrounding most issues. While it’s not an “issue-based” program, it does attempt to bring leaders together across differences to solve problems. So many of our differences are reinforced by our current political



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system and media—we need to get beyond ideologies, and irrational beliefs, and find ways to come together and heal our communities and nation.