

McLeod-Grant Advisors, LLC

Hawaii Community Foundation

Exploring the potential for a “network of network leaders” in Hawaii

Background

Leadership development has been an area of investment at HCF. Until a few years ago, HCF’s primary vehicle to upgrade the leadership capacity of social sector leaders was through its PONO and HELP programs, which focused on developing more traditional nonprofit management skills. The programs came to a close and, since then, the Foundation has undergone a significant shift in its thinking about how to build leadership capacity to create large scale social change. The Foundation is currently exploring the role that social change networks, and the leaders of these networks, play across Hawaii’s landscape. This interest is rooted in the belief that leaders who work at the intersection of multiple issues and organizations stand to increase their impact, and elevate the work of the field as a whole.

In July 2015, the Hawaii Community Foundation hired McLeod-Grant Advisors to explore the state of “network leadership” in Hawaii. Specifically the Foundation wanted to determine whether there is an opportunity to support an emerging group of network leaders to think more broadly about the practice of building networks as vehicles for solving systemic issues. This report seeks to describe the state of network leadership in Hawaii, and determine whether there is an interest among local leaders in the intentional activation of a learning network designed to support and amplify their work.

Context

Network leadership is an emerging practice that enables social actors to promote collaborative capacity within and across social change networks and systems, as opposed to focusing within individual organizations alone. At its core, the practice of leveraging social change networks has developed in response to growing complexity and the realization that social progress cannot happen in isolation. The interdependence and growing diversity of social actors has heightened the need for more coordination in our work.

In recent popular literature, the terms “collective impact” and “system leadership” have been increasingly cited as mechanisms to achieve large-scale social change. Collective impact purports that solving complex issues requires a highly coordinated partnership between organizations committed to a common agenda, goals, activities, and a shared measurement system. While it is a more narrowly focused and highly structured form of collaboration, the rise of this concept has only heightened interest in “networked” approaches to social change.

By contrast, system leadership is associated with [leaders that inspire collective leadership within and across a system](#). Key to the success of system leaders is their ability to energize, align and inspire diverse people across various networks. Programs like the Barr Fellows Network, Irvine Foundation's New Leadership Network and the American Leadership Forum help train leaders to align and leverage diverse networks in their efforts to attempt large-scale social change. These programs look to build connections and relationships between diverse leaders, enrich their personal leadership skills, and build their collective capacity to focus on joint problem solving rather than institution building. Efforts to enhance system or network leadership can often sit alongside and bolster collective impact efforts or cross-sector partnerships.

Whether through collective impact or through the nurturing of system leadership, the activation of networks helps make visible new leadership potential and emerging solutions across a complex system. Supporting the emergence of network or system leadership requires a very intentional cultivation of collaborative skills, and a deepening of peer relationships and support. It is this perspective that we bring to this work.

Our Research Methodology

In July 2015, Adene Sacks and Heather Grant McLeod engaged in conversations with 11 local leaders identified by HCF as leveraging and leading networks. As part of the interviews, each leader was asked to describe how their work is organized and what role networks play; if they had interest in participating in a cross-sector leadership network; what needs they would be looking to address for themselves or others; and who else they would recommend we speak with, or have participate in a potential program. We then reviewed and coded all the data, and have synthesized our key findings below.

Research Findings

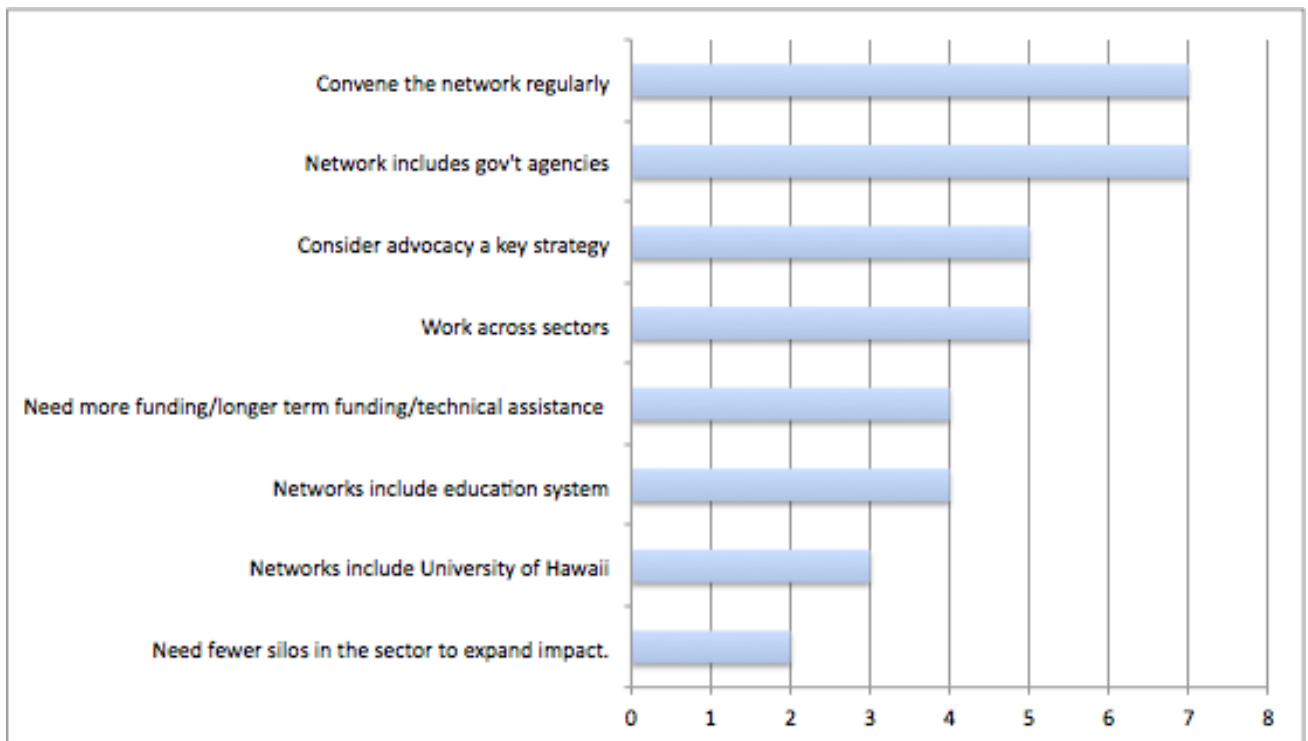
There is already a rich group of leaders in Hawaii leveraging network approaches to address system-level issues. The 11 leaders we interviewed described an environment that is already attuned to the benefits of working across sectors and geographies, and leveraging social change networks to scale impact. These leaders regularly convene field-level networks and serve as coordinating hubs for their particular issues. (There is obviously some selection bias here, as these leaders were chosen because of their network work; however, deeper analysis only affirmed how important these emerging strategies are in Hawaii, and how central to social change efforts.) The involvement of these leaders with state agencies is particularly

interesting and worth noting. Leaders at the Department of Health, Human Services and Education were cited as key collaborators by those interviewed – and the state agencies seem to dominate the organizing strategies of many of the network leaders we spoke with (i.e. many of them are focused on advocacy and/or seeking government funding support). None of the network leaders cited corporate partners as integral to their efforts, but three leaders identified the University of Hawaii as an important partner in their efforts. This focus on government and academia perhaps distinguishes these networks from mainland “collective impact” initiatives.

The graph below illustrates coded data that reflects on aspects of these local networks in Hawaii:

“Collaboration is the major strategy. We do everything in partnership. Leadership is made up of a cross section of people. Educate, collaborate and advocate is what we do.”

“The original idea was to bring people into one giant coalition pushing on one specific topic. That's not really effective. How I am thinking about it now is that we play the connector piece. We see when it makes sense for folks to come together. But you can't force alignment. It has to be a natural” connection.



These “network leaders” do not seem to be networked with one another. While our interviews were not extensive enough to determine the exact connectivity between this set of network leaders, it is still interesting to note that our interviews did not unearth *any* connections between them. Only one network leader cited the work of another interviewee. And only Rachel Wong at the Department of Health was identified by multiple interviewees as a close collaborator and key to the growth of collaborative efforts. When we pressed the leaders for peer recommendations for a potential leadership learning network, most provided names from their own organizations or fields exclusively. This suggests that, despite the rising prevalence of networks as a social change strategy, these networks are most often still confined to a single issue area or field, and leaders haven’t yet explored the “intersectionality” of some of these issues. At a minimum, these leaders all perceive their work in isolation, and don’t have a set of peers with whom they can compare notes and learn more about the *practice* of network leadership.

“There are opportunities for government, community and institutions to co-create solutions together. Tomorrow, I am going to the Dept of Education. I have never met them before. It took me ages to get that meeting. But if I don't work with them, this effort will fade with the funding. I want to learn to create big partnerships to create social change.”

There is little shared language around the “how to” of networks and network leadership. At the start of each interview, we loosely defined networks as a collection of people and/or organizations collaborating on a specific goal. Our experience in speaking with these eleven leaders is that leveraging networks for change is not yet experienced as a field of practice. Only Audrey Newman was familiar with “network” literature that has guided the work of network practitioners and funders nationally; she was mentored by Barbara Kibbe. These leaders do not seem to share a common vocabulary or framework to describe *how* they do what they do. This is likely a barrier to promoting the adoption of network strategies across the social sector in Hawaii, as well as a barrier to greater collaboration across agencies. Our experience is that shared language and frameworks can help promote intentionality and a sense of shared experience.

When we specifically asked leaders what they would like to learn in this area, a few articulated their desire to understand how networks could better promote collaboration, alignment and learning. They were particularly interested in learning more about “how” to make networks work.

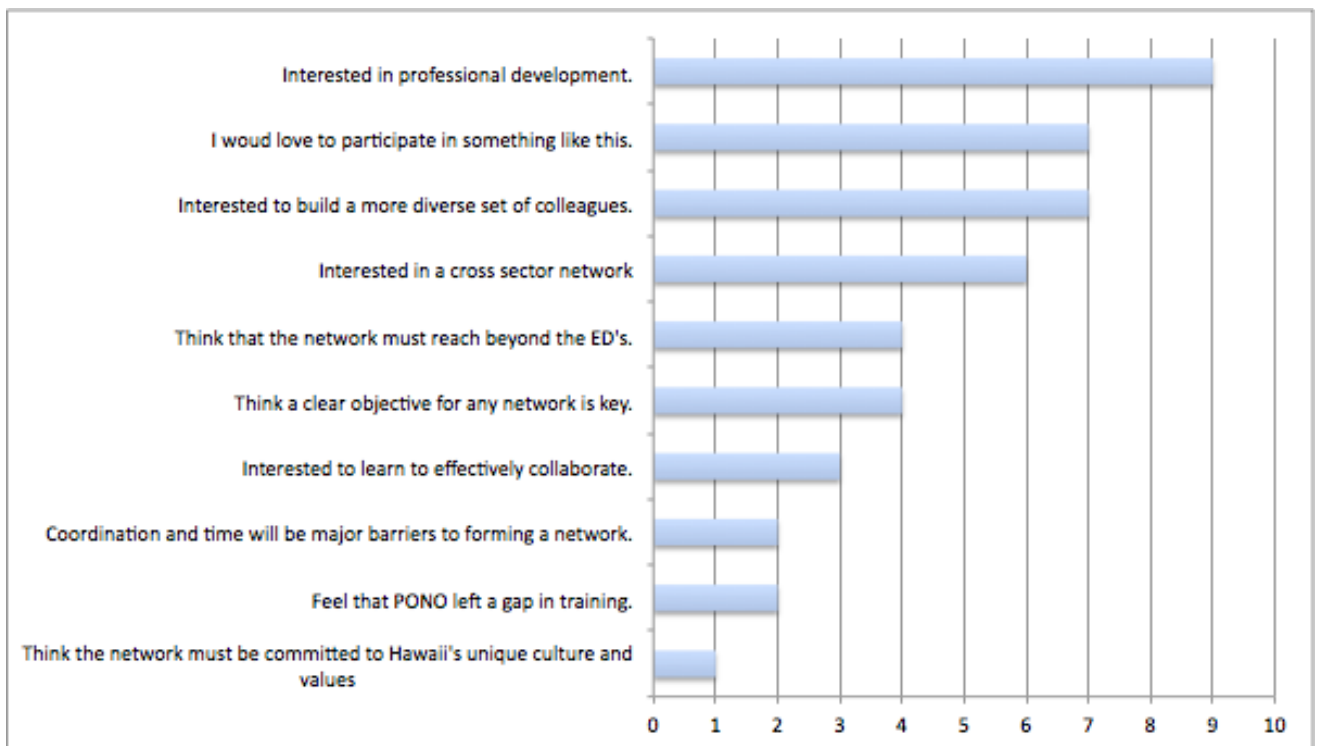
“It would be helpful to learn about how networks are formed. Are there legal issues? How do we leverage resources in network? How do we bring networks together and understand what makes networks successful? What are the necessary ingredients?”

There is a real hunger for more professional development around these topics, and for more “networking”. Nine of the leaders interviewed cited professional development as a personal need or as a motivator for engaging with HCF in this conversation. Almost all of them expressed interest in network and system leadership as a discipline; only one leader expressed interest in more traditional professional development around fundraising and volunteer recruitment. The majority of those interviewed are interested to understand how to bring more intentionality to their efforts to tackle larger scale social change. They are also interested to expand their professional networks.

We are all about partnerships. We can't do anything without them. Easy for others to say "we need more collaboration". That's the hardest thing to do. Much easier to put your head down and try get to the deliverables. We work really hard to collaborate -- and also will fund folks to just come and play with us. I wish other groups would make this a priority.

I need to be more connected to other folks who are doing this kind of work in other communities -- or maybe even here. I need more models -- and more training about how you tell other people about the effectiveness of what you are doing

This graph illustrates the frequency of some of these findings among interviewees:



The barriers to a potential network leadership effort have little to do with Hawaii and are more universal.

When asked, the issues leaders identified as barriers to establishing a cross-sector leadership network were similar to other networks we are familiar with. The leaders we spoke with described their peers as too caught up in the day-to-day, without time or resources to think beyond their own immediate institutional needs. They blamed funders, especially government agencies, for reinforcing a siloed approach to the work. A few cited Hawaii's close-knit community as one that is open to collaborative efforts. But others pointed to that familiarity as a potential barrier to innovation and change. However, none thought that these barriers were insurmountable.

"There are a number of networks in Hawaii that are doing great work and are on the cutting edge. Every leader is empowered if they have that peer network -- and they need that peer network. They need confidence."

There is strong interest in a cross sector conversation about how to make their communities more livable, sustainable and prosperous.

Almost every leader we spoke with expressed an interest in a broader conversation about how to better serve Hawaii and a desire to do that in partnership with leaders that have the power to make significant change.

Recommendations

1. **Launch a community of practice/ leadership network for these network leaders.** Based on the conversations we had, and the findings above, we believe there is strong interest for greater professional development and peer networking in the area of network/system leadership. The Hawaii Community Foundation is well-situated to be a convener and help play this role, building on its past expertise in capacity-building, and its wealth of relationships.
2. **Consider using a combination of outside and local facilitators.** We believe it's important for facilitators of a leadership learning network to be neutral and not be perceived as having a local agenda; hiring outsiders can help establish this neutrality and bring needed subject-matter expertise. However, it is also important to involve a local facilitator or advisor who understands local context and culture, and can help the network become locally "owned." It will be important to get this combination and chemistry right.
3. **Invite more than one person per organization to participate: the ED + another senior leader.** We heard many comments about the importance of modeling collective leadership, along with the necessity of expanding this approach beyond just the ED or CEO in order for it to take hold. Consequently we believe you should consider including 2 or even 3 leaders from each organization/ network. You

should also consider a separate and perhaps more condensed convening for board chairs on this topic.

4. **Hawaii has a wealth of networks; develop a set of case studies to share local examples more broadly.** We were impressed and amazed by the amount of collaborative, “networked” work already happening in Hawaii. Many of the leaders and networks we interviewed would make very interesting case studies - you could use them in a local curriculum and share them more broadly with this emerging field.

Conclusion/ Next Steps

In conclusion, our research points strongly to the need and desire for more capacity-building (training) and peer support on the topic of network/ system leadership. The most immediate next step following on this report would be to have a conversation and reflect on these findings and implications for the Foundation’s work. Once the Foundation has had a chance to share these findings internally and deliberate further then additional thought can be given to program design, development, and implementation. Additionally, HCF might want to consider interviewing or at a minimum surveying, some of the additional names that surfaced in this first round of interviews.