CATALYTIC COMMUNITY BUILDING ORGANIZATIONS

Learning Exchange
Ford Institute for Community Building

cat·a·lyt·ic
relating to or involving the action of a catalyst

cat·a·lyst
an agent that provokes or speeds significant change or action

synonyms
stimulus, spark, spur, impetus
Many organizations strive to be catalysts for change. What makes organizations not just effective, but catalytic? How do organizations build community as a strategy for catalyzing change? What gets in the way, and what support is needed to sustain a commitment to this way of working?

When 22 rural-based and rural-serving organizations from across Oregon and Siskiyou County convened with the Ford Institute for Community Building and the Nonprofit Association of Oregon for a learning exchange in 2017, participants explored the questions above, shared success stories and lessons, and considered values, beliefs, and behaviors that drive organizational commitment to building community and catalyzing change.

Drawing on their collective experiences and resources, participants identified four core competencies that encompass 14 organizational practices vital to building community and catalyzing change.

**About the Learning Exchange**

Learning exchange team facilitating a session on catalytic community building (left to right): Toby Winn, Neighbors for Kids; Lola Jones, Samaritan House; Laura Isiordia, Ford Institute for Community Building; Eric Johnston, Todos Juntos; Juan Carlos Gonzalez and Maria Caballero Rubio, Centro Cultural de Washington County; Gustavo Morales, EUVALCREE; Amy Carlson, Organizational Development Consultant (missing: Harv Schubothe, Greater Bandon Association)
Creating Inclusive Community

A commitment to creating inclusive community represents the belief that our work is born of and sustained by the community, and that our success is bound to the success of all of our community. Inclusive community is grounded in knowing, engaging, and working with the community to do what is needed. Inclusive community is built through living our values, tapping into diverse local assets, inspiring hope, and empowering action over the long haul.

We focus on solutions and actions, not barriers, to foster positive change in our communities. We stay mission-focused, but challenge ourselves to take risks to address community needs.

The experience of Neighbors for Kids in Depoe Bay, a nonprofit providing after-school and summer learning programs, offers an illustrative example. In 2017, 20 foster kids joined the summer program, but due to lack of bussing and resources, participation had to end in the fall.

“We decided to prioritize what was needed to include this community, and engaged partner organizations, who rallied with funding and family support. By organizing to include more of our community, we were able to launch after-school bus transportation from a new region to respond to the needs of these children,” said Toby Winn, Executive Director.

CREATING INCLUSIVE COMMUNITY Practices:
1. Sí Se Puede (Can-Do Attitude)
2. Living into We = Community
3. Engaging the Community
4. Committed to All of the Community

Sample action steps for creating inclusive community:
1. Sí Se Puede: Next time a challenge arises, shift to a “sí se puede” or “yes we can” mindset. Share and invite solutions. Take one step to begin addressing it.

2. Living into We = Community: Learn the demographic, economic, and racial history of your community. Together explore, “Who in our community is not included in our work? Why? What current and historic barriers exist? What do we need to learn?”

3. Engaging the Community: Start with participating in an activity of a community with whom your organization is not currently engaged, and support their success.

4. Committed to All of the Community: Identify a community that is underrepresented in your work. Listen to learn how your organization might adapt to respond to their needs and interests.
Practicing Principled Leadership

Practicing principled leadership requires a commitment to the essential work of building trust, which is the foundation for taking the risks necessary to lead change. We must intentionally and authentically invest in relationships and be open to what emerges. We build trust when we engage with curiosity, honesty, and care; and are accountable with a focus on results, not credit. Principled leadership empowers people at all levels of engagement to shape our organization’s work. We share ownership because we recognize the network of contributors necessary for success.

Critically, principled leadership calls on us to commit to equity and justice, and to act with moral courage for the common good. Courage, motivated by shared vision and values, is what sustains action when capacity is stunted, opposition is strong, or the odds are against us.

The Oregon Shakespeare Festival (OSF) is a world-class theatre company based in Ashland that works to make art accessible for all. Two recent examples highlight what practicing principled leadership looks like in action.

This year, OSF is producing Oklahoma with same-sex couples. “With the creation of Oklahoma! in 1943, Rodgers and Hammerstein broke so much ground that they essentially invented the American musical comedy as we have come to know it,” said Bill Rauch, OSF Artistic Director. “Three-quarters of a century later, we are privileged to try to honor and reinvent their groundbreaking spirit. This production serves above all to celebrate, in the words of another musical theatre titan, ‘Love is love is love.’”

Sample action steps for practicing principled leadership:

5. **Building Relationships of Trust**: Tap into trust with open-ended questions, such as:
   a. Get to know people: “What motivates you in this work? Who inspires you?”
   b. Discover mutual interest: “What shared opportunities exist?”

6. **Sharing Power & Ownership**: Regularly and publicly support the leadership work of a partner organization, especially one led by communities who have been traditionally marginalized.

7. **Acting with Moral Courage**: Commit to strengthening diversity, equity, and inclusion. Involve all staff and board in training, dialog, and taking action.
Bill continued, “I love musicals, and as a gay kid and a gay adult, I felt unrepresented and shut out, and that they were not about me or people like me. And so the idea that this thing that I love—that’s a classic, that has existed—could also reflect the gay community feels very meaningful on a personal level, but also in terms of social justice and the artistic boundary-pushing that is part of what OSF does.”

In 2016, OSF offered to host the Consortium of Asian American Theaters and Artists’ (CAATA) bi-annual 11-day conference. CAATA initially declined the offer. After substantial dialog and evidence of commitment from OSF leadership to learn and improve, CAATA agreed. The partnership included a dinner where the CAATA board shared direct critique of specific OSF practices with Bill Rauch. Bill listened, acknowledged mistakes, and agreed to a protocol to ensure that OSF does not humiliate or disrespect Asian communities.

“To commit to equity and justice means we must be willing to receive and learn from feedback, to remedy harmful practices and repair trust, and to commit for the long-haul,” said Bill. “And we must be transparent about that commitment and learning, so that others may learn and lead also.”

OSF Unidos leadership class from Latino Network
Building a Culture of Leadership

A culture of leadership maximizes momentum and creates opportunities for action. By engaging multiple perspectives and listening well, we co-create organizational vision and values ensuring that they are owned and embraced by the community. We translate that collective vision into collective action, and track learning and progress to ensure results.

A culture of leadership is based on the belief that leadership is an action all can take. We intentionally create space for leadership to emerge around the shared vision. We ensure that leadership is actively supported and mentored because we know our collective long-term success depends on it.

Centro Cultural de Washington County is a nonprofit with a wide-range of programs supporting Latino families in being self-sufficient, engaged, and active community members. Maria Caballero Rubio, Executive Director, shared her perspective that developing and broadening leadership is a fundamental responsibility to the mission.

“A catalytic organization is a leadership organization. It is our duty to train the next generation by providing them opportunities to learn, experience, lead, and fail. Leadership happens across a catalytic organization - the janitor, program director, and volunteer. Look for it and nurture it,” said Maria. “One of my practices is to never travel alone to meetings. I bring a leader-in-training to prepare them for the future.”

Sample action steps for creating inclusive community:

8. **Action-Oriented Leadership**: Take a goal and create a 30-60-90-day action plan. Celebrate at each milestone.

9. **Creating Shared Vision & Values**: Talk about your organizational values. How are they understood and experienced across the organization? Where are they best realized? Where is work needed to better align your work with your values?

10. **Responsive & Learning-Oriented**: Learn how to assess your impact to understand: “How has our work transformed those we serve? How can we deepen our impact?”

11. **Developing & Broadening Leadership**: Notice when someone not in a traditional leadership “role” expresses energy for change. Invite and support them to take leadership action. Consider creating a 70-20-10 leadership development plan.

BUILDING A CULTURE OF LEADERSHIP Practices:

8. Action-Oriented Leadership
9. Creating Shared Vision & Values
10. Responsive & Learning-Oriented
11. Developing & Broadening Leadership
Influencing Systemic Change

As organizations catalyzing community change, we take action at the systems level. We understand the systems we are operating within and how they are changing, so that we can take a comprehensive and inclusive approach to our work. We know that to influence systems, we must work strategically and collaboratively for mutual benefit. With a systems lens, we are better able to identify opportunities to go beyond traditional models, and adapt and innovate in response to change.

Because nonprofits are connected with both decision makers and those affected by the decisions, nonprofits have the unique opportunity to amplify the voices and stories of the community to demonstrate the impact of a proposed change (or lack of change). We must build bridges, develop strategic networks, advocate, lobby, and mobilize collective action to ensure policies and systems that support the common good. We have a responsibility to utilize our institutional platform and power in partnership with communities to drive systemic change.

A tremendous example of influencing systemic change work was achieved in 2017, when Oregon passed legislation that will extend health care coverage through the Oregon Health Plan to all kids in Oregon up to 300 percent of the federal poverty level. It also ensures enrollment through culturally and linguistically appropriate community-based outreach.

The statewide campaign, Cover All Kids, was a multi-year effort backed by a coalition of nearly 100 organizations who together advocated and built the grassroots power and political will to achieve this goal.

“Oregon Latino Health Coalition and partners from all across the state collaborated to influence policy to ensure all children have access to healthcare,” said Gustavo Morales, Executive Director of EUVALCREE, an Ontario-based nonprofit developing social capital and leadership capacity of community members, and a partner in the Cover All Kids campaign. “In addition, we helped ensure a strong future of leadership by including young people who are impacted by the policy to be the next generation of leaders in their communities.”

Sample action steps for influencing systemic change:

12. Adaptive & Innovative: Intentionally and creatively discuss a sticky challenge, using a tool such as the adaptive action framework or problem reversal.

13. Networked & Collaborative: Map your network, with your mission (not organization) at the center. Identify three strategic connections you want to strengthen or create.

14. Leveraging Institutional Power: Take a position and/or lobby on a policy issue that impacts your mission. Encourage your network to take action too..
Commitment to Catalytic Change Practices

In order to address complex social challenges, nonprofits and other organizations must commit efforts to catalyze collective action for the common good. Working to create lasting change requires a deliberate, long-term, strategic community building investment on the part of community organizations, as well as their funding partners.

“One clear message that arose in our convening is a request that our funding partners invest in the time and talent required to work in a community-based inclusive way, to engage organizational leadership, and to take on systems change,” said Janet Hamada, Executive Director with The Next Door, a nonprofit working to improve the lives of children, families, and communities within the Columbia River Gorge. “Building community is a powerful and necessary part of catalyzing long-term change. As organizations adapt to work in this way, we need our funding partners to adapt as well, and provide more flexible and longer-term funding.”

“This learning exchange helped clarify how organizations that are deeply centered in community can effectively influence change. We hope this inspires reflection and action in other organizations, including our own and other philanthropic organizations,” said Roque Barros, Director of The Ford Family Foundation’s Ford Institute for Community Building. “We are partners with rural communities for the long-haul in their efforts to lead change.”

Organizations that work and learn with communities they serve and others who share their vision for the common good can be relevant, resilient, catalysts for transformative change. Let’s support one another in making this commitment—the challenges we face and the values we hold demand it.

Engage in Further Learning

Connect in the Rural Community Builders Facebook Group: Share your questions, insights, and experiences in the RuralCommunityBuildersFacebookGroup group.

Opportunities to engage further – please let us know what you are interested in!

1. Do an organizational assessment: Work with your team to strengthen your catalytic potential.
2. Engage in peer exchange: Gather with fellow organizations for learning and support. We can help.
3. Share what you learn: Your input will shape future catalytic community building organizations work.

We have catalytic community building organizations (CCBO) resources to support your engagement, including:

- Summary of the CCBO competencies and practices
- Organizational assessment tool – plus a sample outline for utilizing the tool with your team
- Peer learning and support – plus resources for facilitating an effective gathering
- Plus, links in this article and the assessment tool will take you to additional resources

Contact Lola Jones and Amy Carlson at catalyticcommunitybuilders@gmail.com for more info and to share!
Adelante Mujeres, Forest Grove
Better Together, Redmond
Bridging Cultures, Canby
CAPACES Leadership Institute, Woodburn
Centro Cultural de Washington County, Cornelius
Chehalem Cultural Center, Newberg
City of Cornelius, Cornelius
EUVALCREE, Ontario
Greater Bandon Association, Bandon
Happy Camp Community in Action, Happy Camp
Josephine County Foundation, Murphy
MountainStar Family Relief Nursery, Bend
Neighbors for Kids, Depoe Bay
Oregon Shakespeare Festival, Ashland
Pathways to Positive Parenting, SWOCC, Coos Bay
Pineros y Campesinos Unidos del Noroeste (PCUN), Woodburn
Samaritan House Family Shelter, Newport
Siuslaw Public Library, Florence
The Next Door, Hood River
Todos Juntos, Clackamas County
Treasure Valley Children’s Relief Nursery, Ontario
Unidos Bridging Community, McMinnville

~ Written by Amy Carlson, Organizational Development Consultant and former Director of Rural Programs with the Nonprofit Association of Oregon. Edited by and based on the learning exchange and experiences of 22 inspiring organizations working in rural communities across Oregon and Siskiyou County. They are catalyzing change across a wide range of missions, with community building at the center of their approach. Learn about and support the important work of these organizations.