

**PROMOTING
GRASSROOTS
LEADERSHIP**

DEVELOPMENT:

THE ROLE OF A LEARNING PROGRAM

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CHAPIN HALL CENTER FOR CHILDREN AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

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INTRODUCTION

Support for grassroots leaders lies at the very heart of the Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation (MRBF)'s mission to help build "just and caring communities" in the Southeastern United States. Grassroots leaders are the lifeblood of organizations working to address poverty and lack of access to high-quality education, affordable housing, and economic opportunity, because they know about those problems first-hand and have valuable insights into solutions. Organizations dedicated to community improvement therefore have a significant stake in helping grassroots leaders develop skills and knowledge so they can identify community priorities and needs and translate them into effective action. The engagement and cultivation of local leadership also helps organizations foster civic involvement and hold themselves accountable to the communities in which they work.

In 1997, the Babcock Foundation held a series of staff and board discussions about how best to support grassroots leadership development. The Southern Grassroots Leadership Development Learning Program grew out of those discussions

(see *Chronology*, p. 2), and between 1998 and 2002 it supported 17 grassroots organizations. The Program has generated one report that reflects on lessons about effective strategies for developing grassroots leadership and another that includes "how-to" pieces by grantees.¹ **This paper aims to capture lessons about using a learning initiative to enhance the impact of leadership development efforts. Its goal is to describe the Learning Program for an audience of foundations, intermediaries, nonprofits, and others interested in supporting, managing, or participating in a learning initiative and to identify some of the factors that contribute to the success of such initiatives.**

The paper begins with a discussion of the Foundation's rationale for investing in *learning* as well as in more direct support for the operating costs of leadership development efforts. It then describes the structure of the Learning Program, the learning outcomes it produced, and the ingredients of its success. The paper concludes with a discussion of key design questions that are likely to be important to any learning initiative.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

The Babcock Foundation defines grassroots leaders as people who:

- > Hold particular values consistent with building just and caring communities, including justice, equity, fairness, democracy/representative power, and inclusiveness;
- > Are rooted in their community, with a base of fellow residents to whom they are accountable and from whom they draw support; and
- > Are working toward results that will be realized in low-income communities.

The critical distinguishing characteristics of a grassroots organization are: (1) It serves a specific local community or set of communities; (2) the community people served by the organization also govern and operate the organization.

With the Learning Program, the Foundation had a particular interest in reaching grassroots organizations that "help people develop knowledge and skills to act on their own behalf and work to build relationships of trust and involvement among diverse partners, in order to make [the] community more just and caring." (Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation 1999 Annual Report)

WHY INVEST IN A LEARNING PROGRAM?

With the help of an Advisory Group (see below), the Babcock Foundation reviewed various approaches to leadership development. MRBF's

motivation for developing leaders was to improve the leaders' own communities, so the Foundation had little enthusiasm for programs that pulled leaders out of their communities for training. Nor did programs run by county or academic institutions seem like the right venue;

CHRONOLOGY OF THE LEARNING PROGRAM

- 1996 The Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation (MRBF) commissions a survey of existing grassroots leadership development programs in the South.
- 1997 The MRBF Board establishes an Advisory Group to develop options for investing in grassroots leadership development. Members include Foundation directors, staff, grantees, and others. MDC, Inc. is hired to help plan and facilitate meetings of the Advisory Group and the Board's Grassroots Leadership Development Committee. MDC is an intermediary that works to expand opportunity, reduce poverty, and build inclusive communities in the South.
- The Advisory Group recommends three grantmaking strategies: (1) leverage grassroots leadership development through community foundations; (2) build the capacity of grassroots leaders to influence state policy; and (3) advance the field of grassroots leadership development through training and learning. The MRBF Board approves all recommendations and seeks a partner to manage the third strategy.
- 1998 MRBF selects MDC as its managing partner for the training and learning strategy. The Foundation invites grantees of its *Just and Caring Communities Initiative* to apply to participate in the Learning Program.
- 1999 MRBF receives 35 proposals and selects 17 organizations to participate in the Learning Program. The program is formally launched at a Learning Institute in May, followed by a second Institute in July. Participating organizations develop goals and work plans.
- 2000 Program participants receive grants for implementation and technical assistance. One organization leaves the program, leaving 16 to complete the full term.
- 2001 MRBF provides additional grants for implementation and technical assistance.
- 2002 MRBF extends the Learning Program through 2002 to deepen its impact and enable participants to solidify accomplishments and includes special grants for some participants to document successful practices for sharing with other practitioners.

they were too distant from the constituencies from which grassroots leadership emerged. Instead, MRBF was inspired to focus on grassroots organizations. Leadership development in that context fit well with the Foundation's broad mission of helping people develop knowledge and skills to act on behalf of their communities.

While many grassroots organizations were interested in leadership development, however, they acknowledged that they had not addressed the topic extensively or particularly well. Some organizations were simply unsure how to translate their interest and values into practice. Others' efforts, while valuable, did not reach certain groups in the community or achieve the scale and impact that the organizations' directors desired. And some needed to expand their efforts to produce leaders who were more seasoned and better equipped to tackle the region's tough problems. **Practitioners in these organizations said that what they really needed was an opportunity to step back, reflect, and become more intentional about enhancing grassroots leadership development within their organizations and communities.** The Learning Program filled that gap.

Defining the need in this way spurred the Babcock Foundation to develop an initiative that focused on *learning* to do things better rather than on simply helping organizations do more of what they were already doing. The Foundation also decided to offer its learning initiative to its current grassroots grantees rather than mounting an exciting but untested approach with a new set of organizations.

THE LEARNING PROGRAM'S DESIGN

Three basic assumptions shaped the Learning Program: Learning goals should be supported by

WHAT ATTRACTED PARTICIPANTS TO THE LEARNING PROGRAM?

The Learning Program did not give organizations large amounts of money for staffing or projects, and it made significant demands on staff (and sometimes Board) members' time and energy. Given those constraints, what attracted people to the program? Some participants were intrigued by the opportunity to be part of a peer learning process that would help them work better or differently. Others had more specific motivations:

- > "We were floundering in trying to move from advocacy to organizing."
- > "Our outreach efforts were not working to engage our constituency."
- > "We were growing and losing track of our mission."
- > "We needed help with curriculum development."
- > "We needed a vehicle for creating energy and focus."
- > "We were always doing, doing, doing and never thinking about it."

modest implementation grants, but the grants should not drive participant engagement; **team-based learning opportunities** would prepare participants to work with colleagues at their organizations to apply new ideas and skills; and participants should play an important role in **co-creating learning** with the intermediary. The Learning Program's criteria for participation, core components, management and support system, and budget reflected those assumptions.

CRITERIA FOR PARTICIPATION

When the Foundation invited grantees to "self-select" into the Learning Program, it urged

people to apply only if their organization was (1) already working on some aspect of grassroots leadership development, (2) willing to engage in “an open-ended learning process that will result in a plan for concrete changes” in how work is conducted, and (3) committed to sharing both expertise and knowledge gaps. The request for proposals called for significant self-examination:

If you read this memo and think: *“This is great timing for us. We are at a place where we are seeing gaps in what we do and are ready to think hard about new ways of building grassroots leaders,”* we strongly encourage you to apply. If your first thought is, *“I’m not so sure what I want to learn, but we could really use \$25,000 for our program,”* then now is probably not the time for your involvement. Those of you who say to yourselves, *“We’ve had some lingering questions about our grassroots leadership work that we’ve wanted to explore, but we have a lot on our plate right now,”* should think hard about applying—weighing the pros and cons and proceeding with care.

Thirty-five organizations applied, and MRBF chose 17 (listed in the Appendix) that conveyed the most interest in a learning program and made the strongest case about how such a focus on learning fit with their current agenda and stage of development. The selected organizations were diverse in their geographic locations, size, years of operation, program focus, and experience. They included such dissimilar participants as a new environmental justice organization with part-time staff, a well-established organization that has trained leaders for many years, a County Health Department, a program operated by a community foundation, a Christian Ministry, and an affiliate of the Industrial Areas Foundation.

STRUCTURE OF THE LEARNING PROGRAM

Each organization that was selected was asked to assemble a “learning team” of three people in some combination of staff, board, and/or constituents. Having more than one person engaged in the program enabled each organization to participate in several learning opportunities simultaneously and to build a somewhat larger base of support for learning and change within the organization.

The program’s design incorporated the following components:

- > **Learning Institutes** — Large convenings of the three-person teams, held over several days, to share ideas, expose participants to new resources and perspectives, and develop ideas for advancing their grassroots leadership development work. Four Learning Institutes took place during the Learning Program.
- > **Learning Clusters** — Periodic meetings of subgroups of participants to work on one of five aspects of practice (identified by the participating organizations): community organizing, curriculum development, using data, assessment, and organizational diversity and power sharing. Each team could send two people to participate in Clusters; many teams used their technical assistance funds to send a third member. Team members could choose to participate in the same or different Clusters. Each Cluster met between three and five times during the Learning Program.
- > **Small Implementation Grants** — Grants of up to \$25,000 for 2000-2001 and \$10,000 in 2002 to seed new work, develop curricula and training materials, improve existing programs, and offset costs of hiring new staff.
- > **Technical Assistance Pool** — Grants of up to

\$2,500 in 2000 and 2001 and \$5,000 in 2002 to pay for additional technical assistance, staff visits to model programs, meetings not funded by the Program, and other learning activities.

- > **Coaching** — One-to-one assistance that occurred informally until November 2000, when the Program allocated a maximum of 10 days of coaching per year to each organization by a Design Team member (described under *Management and Support* below). In 2002, the sites could use their technical assistance funds to contract with coaches on an as-needed basis.
- > **E-Group** — A web-based forum in which participants could share information, discuss issues, link to key resources, and read the minutes of cluster meetings.

MDC viewed this array of activities aimed at supporting learning at four levels:

- > On an *individual level*, the activities helped people hone their skills in grassroots

TYPICAL ISSUES ADDRESSED IN THE LEARNING INSTITUTE AND CLUSTER MEETINGS

- > Applying adult learning principles to grassroots leadership development
- > Conducting a power analysis
- > Implementing different community organizing tools and approaches
- > Using data strategically for community change
- > Developing curricula that foster the transfer of skills, knowledge, attitudes
- > Developing and using a theory of change
- > Recruiting leaders
- > Attending to the inner work of leadership
- > Assessing changes generated by grassroots leadership development
- > Creating inclusive, democratic organizations

leadership development and prepare to support and lead the work at home.

- > On a *team level*, they fostered partnership among staff, board members, and others who support grassroots leadership development from each organization.
- > At an *organizational level*, the activities showed how grassroots leadership development fits into an organization's overall mission and called attention to the organizational changes needed to advance the agenda.
- > At the *community level*, the activities illustrated the alliances and strategies necessary to achieve the type of community change that is the ultimate goal of grassroots leadership development.

MANAGEMENT AND SUPPORT

MDC, which served as program manager, brought to the Learning Program vast experience working with grassroots organizations in the region, designing and delivering leadership development programs, and applying adult learning principles to grassroots leadership development. In close partnership with the Foundation, MDC staff administered all aspects of the program. They managed the application process, planned and conducted learning activities, administered implementation grants and technical assistance funds, and provided ongoing assistance to participants. MDC was supported by a Design Team composed of representatives from the participating organizations and other people with specific perspectives or skills. Members of the Design Team also served as coaches to the participating organizations.

BUDGET

The total budget for the Learning Program,

including the costs of the managing intermediary, was about \$1.67 million. About two-thirds of these funds went directly to the participating organizations as grants or supported various learning activities as described below. The remaining funds covered five years of MDC’s staffing and other costs, from helping to design the Program and develop the Request for Proposals in 1998 to planning, managing, and assessing all learning activities.

Grants	\$ 555,600
Coaching	130,800
Technical Assistance	43,500
Learning Institutes and Cluster Meetings	402,400
Design Team	45,000
Other Consultants	7,800
Documentation and Dissemination	5,900
MDC Staff and Management	484,600
Total	\$1,675,600

LEARNING OUTCOMES FOR PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS

Using MDC’s framework of learning at four levels, participants in the Learning Program report outcomes primarily at the individual and organizational levels, although outcomes were also evident at the team and community levels.

INDIVIDUAL OUTCOMES

Participants developed new skills, knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs that positioned them and their organizations to develop grassroots leaders more effectively:

- > **New understanding.** Participants were exposed to new ideas and new ways of thinking about many important, and potentially transformative, issues—such as

the strength of organizations’ connections to their constituencies, how race and power affect their missions, what it means to engage in a process of continuous learning, and how to share and transfer leadership. Participants were better able to articulate and strengthen the “theories of change” or logic models (often previously implicit) that guided their work.

- > **New skills and tools.** Participants had opportunities to learn and practice new or enhanced skills in such areas as community organizing, using data for planning and advocacy, assessing the impact of leadership training curricula, using technical assistance effectively, and incorporating adult learning principles into curricula for grassroots leaders.
- > **New spirit of intentionality and inquiry.** By becoming more self-conscious about their “theories of change,” participants could become more intentional about structuring and practicing grassroots leadership development. The need to think through their beliefs about how change happens and the opportunity to hear others do the same further stimulated a sense of inquiry and self-reflection.
- > **Enhanced diversity and anti-racism competence.** Issues of race and class are inextricably embedded in the development of grassroots leadership. Participants demonstrated an increased willingness to wrestle with these issues and use their new understanding to shape leadership development efforts and the organizational context in which these efforts took place.
- > **Recommitment to core values and mission.** In the process of learning to do more effective grassroots leadership development, participants reexamined and

LEARNING CULTURE INVITES CANDID EXCHANGE AND SELF-REFLECTION

- > “Every time we would go to a cluster meeting, we would have what we thought was a good framework and end up ripping it up,” said one participant who appreciated the opportunity to be challenged by MDC and peer organizations.
- > “We thought we were doing leadership development by getting people involved in helping to plan our community celebration. But now we see the difference between outreach and leadership development. Now we see that people have to have their own voice and be part of the decision making.”
- > “I don’t feel so ashamed about what I don’t know, so I’m able to be more open about asking the hard questions and challenging the ways we have always done things.”

reaffirmed the core values that guided their own commitment to grassroots work and shaped their organizational missions. They also clarified the values that were important to transmit to new and emerging leaders.

- > **Access to new resources and supports.** Through their connections to MDC, the Foundation, and each other, participants learned about new materials, identified consultants and organizations that could provide assistance, and brainstormed about potential new sources of funding.
- > **Personal development and renewal.** The time and safe forum for reflection enabled participants to acknowledge what they did not know and be receptive to “unlearning” beliefs and attitudes that were consistent with their goals. For some people, this process of self-discovery and personal growth had a spiritual dimension; for many, it generated new energy and a renewed commitment to the work.

TEAM OUTCOMES

The impact of the Program on learning at the team level involved at least two dimensions:

- > **Stronger force for change within the participating organizations.** Participants were able to bring different skills and perspectives to the task of translating the Program’s learning into their organizations. This small nucleus of people frequently became a significant source of organizational change.
- > **Enriched networks of support and learning.** Contact with other people engaged in similar work decreased participants’ sense of isolation, gave them a sense of being part of a larger movement in the region, and provided a network of peers who share common values. Some teams adopted training curricula from their peer organizations or invited members of other teams to do training at their organizations. The experience of sharing successes and challenges fostered cross-site learning and a broader perspective on developing grassroots leaders.

ORGANIZATIONAL OUTCOMES

The Learning Program did not focus narrowly on transmitting best practices in curricula, training, or other elements that operate outside an organizational context. Instead, the Program recognized that real learning would not take hold unless participants confronted fundamental questions about their organizations’ identity, mission, governance, operations, and culture. Thus the experiences of individual participants also had implications for the organizations they represented. These implications resulted in organizational change that was transformative for many, developmental or additive for some

and modest or short-lived for a few. **The organizational outcomes ranged from new programs and approaches to whole new ways of doing business.**

The way organizational change occurred also varied significantly among participants. At one end of the spectrum, some experienced learning that shook their institutions up and then transformed them, as **participants realized they**

RE-EXAMINING GOALS AND METHODS TRANSFORMS AN ORGANIZATION'S STRATEGY

Forward in the Fifth (FIF) aims to bring communities and schools together to ensure that all children in Kentucky's fifth Congressional District have the educational opportunities necessary to live full and productive lives. FIF's goal in the Learning Program was to develop and implement a curriculum for parents who wanted to become advocates for their children in the public schools.

FIF planned to train and support parents in leadership roles through its 39 county-based affiliates. Over time, Learning Program participants realized that FIF's affiliate structure lacked the capacity to engage substantial numbers of its new target group of low-income parents on a sustained basis. The affiliates typically attracted middle-class parents who recognized the problems of schools and children in the region and wanted to address them. Low-income parents, who were most in need of advocacy within the schools, were less likely to join the affiliates.

FIF ultimately shifted its focus from the affiliates to developing a range of partnerships with public and nonprofit groups that could recruit parents and support them over time. FIF also reduced its target area from 39 counties to six, after realizing that significant grassroots leadership development required deeper effort, and began looking for Spanish-speaking staff.

After FIF realigned its approach and goals, it received a substantial grant from the U.S. Department of Education to carry out the work.

would have to give up some of their organization's deeply-held assumptions and practices in order to move forward. Participants from Kentucky's Forward in the Fifth (FIF), for example, identified a mismatch between their goals and strategies (see *Re-examining Goals and Methods Transforms an Organization's Strategy*). That realization led them to a fundamental reorganization of FIF's leadership development approach and its scope of work. A similar transformation happened for Kentuckians for the Commonwealth (KFC), a statewide citizen's social justice organization. Entering the Learning Program with the goal of addressing racism and other forms of discrimination as they relate to organizing and grassroots leadership, KFC reports that by the end of 2002 it had undergone a "complete organizational redesign including...a fairly radical staff restructuring" with "leadership development as the organization's number one strategy for creating change."

In contrast, other organizations that described themselves as new to grassroots leadership development learned that a first change they needed to make in order to increase impact was to **understand better what they were already doing to develop grassroots leaders and become much more intentional about it.** For example, both Voices of Calvary Ministries and Coal River Mountain Watch entered the Learning Program with no formal grassroots leadership development program. People who first came through the door as clients, however, ended up filling many of the staff positions at Voices of Calvary. In other words, a certain kind of leadership development was already built into the organization's practice model. Similarly, Coal River provided on-the-job training to community volunteers who responded to disastrous floods or mobilized for protests against mountaintop removal mining.

Both of these organizations came to discover the power of what they were already doing. This, in turn, helped them reframe the organizational challenge from developing a separate program and curriculum for grassroots leaders to working on how to make their current leadership work reach more people more systematically and with greater community impact.

Change for other organizations involved **adopting or adapting new practices and programs** that advanced their grassroots leadership development goals. El Centro Hispano, for example, institutionalized a weekly practice of closing its doors for a few hours for staff reflection and planning and adopted a new system of simultaneous translation to help Latino leaders participate fully in the organization. Other participants adapted practices that had been modeled in the Learning Program to their own work. After having its own coach through the Learning Program, for example, Down East Partnership for Children added coaching to its three-year Community Fellows program to provide more individualized learning and support to participants. The Southern Empowerment Project, an organization that trains other organizations to do grassroots leadership development, brought together three groups (African American, Latino, and gay/lesbian) to grapple with their fears and feelings about “difference.” Taking this risk was stimulated in part by the attention that the Learning Program had paid to the importance of the inner work of leadership.

The pace and timing of organizational change also varied among participants. For organizations already on a trajectory of change, the Learning Program helped to **refine and accelerate incipient changes**. The Affordable Housing Coalition (AHC)’s readiness for change, for example, combined with the Learning Program’s carefully sequenced series of experiences and supports, gave AHC the confidence and tools needed to make significant

LEARNING PROGRAM BOOSTS CHANGES ALREADY UNDERWAY

The Affordable Housing Coalition of Asheville and Buncombe County (AHC) entered the Learning Program with a clear intent to learn how to diversity the organization along race and class lines and engage grassroots leaders. Staff members were poised to take advantage of the learning experiences after a workshop on how to conduct a power analysis, participation in the Organizational Diversity Learning Cluster, and follow-up coaching on dismantling racism.

The knowledge that AHC staff absorbed led them to make many changes in the organization’s structure and culture, leaving AHC better able to include constituents as an integral part of the organization. The changes included modifying AHC by-laws to create a membership-based structure; recruiting more diverse staff and board members, training them on issues of racism, power, and accountability, and encouraging discussion of those topics; and reviewing all policies and procedures to ensure they were consistent with AHC’s commitments to end racism and to give grassroots leaders decision-making roles.

changes in practices and operations during the life of the Learning Program (see *Learning Program Boosts Changes Already Underway*).

Some organizations experienced big changes early on, while others worked away until “something clicked” and the organization went into a phase of major growth. Often, learning and change took off because of a significant connection between the organization and its coach, as in the Center for Community Action’s case. The center’s director viewed the organization’s practice as “being ahead of its theory.” The Learning Program provided an opportunity to **step back and reflect on what they had done**—and the chance to see the whole differently. This

process was energized by a timely match with a coach who shared the center's values and appreciated its culture. The coach worked with the staff and Board to design a new, structured approach to grassroots leadership development based on the values shared on the tri-racial Board. The Board's enthusiasm about this development was reflected in its willingness to participate in three separate three-day retreats in which the values-based approach was conceived and designed.

The organizational changes described above are not finished and the work is not over for participants in the Learning Program, but the tools and commitment needed for continued progress are well established for most of the organizations. In only a few cases, the learning that was generated produced only modest or short-lived organizational changes. In these cases, individuals may have increased their own knowledge and skills, but they encountered barriers to translating this learning into practice within their organizations, due to an unresponsive executive or Board or to a competing organizational imperative.

COMMUNITY LEVEL OUTCOMES

The underlying assumption of the Learning Program is that an investment in learning will lead to changes within participating organizations, which will then be able to produce greater numbers of more effective grassroots leaders, who in turn will play an important role in improving community conditions.

Anecdotes from participants point to specific changes that grassroots leaders have made in their communities as a result of the Learning Program. Examples include **new strategic collaborations and partnerships** with other groups and organizations, **new forums for citizen engagement**, **new resources** being brought into the

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community, and **new responsiveness on the part of local policymakers** to community residents. However, community change can take many years to effect and is likely to be the product of many factors unrelated to the contributions of grassroots leaders, such as the strength of the economy or the prevailing political philosophy at the state and federal level. Therefore, while it is safe to assume that the new civic and organizational actions and assets resulting from the Learning Program will ultimately improve community conditions, assessing which specific changes may occur over time in which communities is not feasible.

KEY INGREDIENTS OF THE LEARNING PROGRAM'S SUCCESS

Initiatives to promote learning and "learning communities" are taking root in many fields.ⁱⁱ Also growing is an interest in leadership development as one element of community capacity building.ⁱⁱⁱ Deborah Meehan argues, in fact, that leadership and learning must be "intrinsically linked," that "leadership development programs must become learning communities where people closest to the problem are supported to question, explore, analyze and interact in order to develop solutions and innovative approaches."^{iv} The Southern Grassroots Leadership Development Learning Program can contribute to this growing field some valuable lessons about essential program elements and processes.

The experiences of Learning Program participants suggest that **key ingredients of successful learning initiatives include:**

- > **Multiple learning vehicles.** By offering many vehicles for learning and by promoting many types of learning, the Learning Program reached participants who had diverse learning styles. Teaching strategies included exposure to experts and readings, followed by application of the knowledge to participants' own settings; small-group exercises; peer learning; opportunities to practice new skills; team problem-solving; individualized assistance; and "homework" assignments between meetings. For many groups, the coaching relationship was a critical source of individualized support for more effective analysis, strategy development, and implementation. But the timing, agenda, and match between the coach and the organization had to be flexible to respond to the particular circumstances of each participant.
- > **Strong intermediary.** Staff of MDC, the Learning Program's managing partner, had deep substantive knowledge in both leadership development and grassroots organizations and could act as a translator, facilitator, and catalyst for learning among all the involved parties. MDC staff also possessed a wide range of skills in group dynamics, organizational development, participatory learning, and pedagogical techniques. They could model effective training styles and strategies that participants could take back to their own leadership development efforts.
- > **A culture that values and supports learning.** The Learning Program created a safe space for learning. From the program's request for proposals and first Institute onward, Learning Program activities were very intentional about giving participants permission to admit confusion, struggle with what they did not know, experiment with new approaches that might not work, revamp, and try again. The

THE INNER WORK OF LEADERSHIP – HONORING HEART AND SPIRIT

By structuring into every learning event safe and joyful ways for participants to share their thoughts and affirm each other, MDC facilitated cultural learning and growth—qualities MDC believed would help make participants more effective in developing grassroots leaders. MDC's goal was to engage the driving force and motivation (the "gasoline") behind the difficult work of grassroots leadership development. Although nobody was forced to contribute, most participants ended up singing a song, reading a poem, telling a story, making a testimonial, teaching the group a dance, or sharing a prayer. For example:

- > One participant who was very quiet for the first year or two of the Learning Program finally stood up and read a very powerful poem she had written about race and injustice, reflecting the progression of her own confidence and underscoring her personal commitment to the goals of grassroots leadership development.
- > Another told the group that "my experience has been with black folks and poverty and racism, but when I heard another participant articulate the plight of whites regarding mountain top removal in West Virginia, it changed me inside and opened my heart to a new way of understanding oppression."
- > A Latino participant explained to the group that a new practice of simultaneous translation his organization had adopted was not just a technical solution to language differences but one that honored everyone's voice, by allowing people to express their feelings and views in real time. From his perspective, the approach promoted cultural respect and the possibility of connecting across cultures as equals.

creation of a common language and consistent framework helped diverse groups connect and learn from each other.

- > **Opportunities for cultural sharing and the inner work of leadership.** Learning Program participants gained energy, fellowship, and an understanding about their peers that encouraged learning as they sang, told stories, and shared their life experiences and rich cultural traditions with each other. These exchanges encouraged and nurtured the learning process and modeled the ways in which participants could reach and activate grassroots leaders.
- > **Honest relationships among program participants, representatives of the Foundation, and the intermediary.** The Learning Program encouraged participants to view Babcock and MDC as resources and equal partners in the learning enterprise. Because the participating organizations were already grantees of the Foundation, the Learning Program could build on already positive and trusting relationships. Several participants commented that they would not have responded to similar invitations from foundations with which they feared that being candid about struggles might jeopardize future support. The ability of Babcock Foundation staff to listen well, communicate respect, and engage fully as learners contributed significantly to an authentic exchange.
- > **Patient and flexible financial support.** It is hard to “do” grassroots leadership development well. Change takes a long time to occur, and most grassroots organizations are underfunded and thinly staffed. The Babcock Foundation’s willingness to extend resources beyond the program’s original funding period enabled participants to complete a full three years of implementation, thus laying the

groundwork for more solid sustainability.

IMPROVING THE PROGRAM

In reflecting on the Learning Program’s strengths and weaknesses, both participants and MDC staff suggested two strategies for enhancing the power of the experience:

- > **Maximize the value of having teams of learners from each organization.** As expected, having each organization enroll a team of staff in the Program increased the potential that what was learned would get taken back to the organization and stimulate the changes required to mount or strengthen a successful grassroots leadership development effort. In retrospect, the Learning Program could have devoted more attention up front to developing guidelines for who should be on the team, clarifying the team’s mandate, and helping participants learn to function effectively as a team. This strategic approach to team building in real time could have reinforced efforts to infuse learning into whole organizations.
- > **Make the explicit connection between issues of race and power and grassroots leadership development early in the Learning Program.** Although the Program did sponsor a Learning Cluster on Organizational Diversity and Power Sharing, more attention to these issues for the whole group, early on, might have helped participating organizations prepare to align their internal structures and practices with their grassroots leadership development goals. For some organizations, this crucial alignment required significant changes in practices involving governance, staff diversity, organizational culture, and the role of grassroots leaders in the organization. Further, because race and power are

such important but challenging issues, MDC and the coaches needed a diverse “tool kit” of approaches to address them. While many found the Dismantling Racism approach helpful, some participating organizations felt that they might have responded more productively to other kinds of training for racial equity and inclusion.

KEY DESIGN QUESTIONS FOR A LEARNING PROGRAM

The Learning Program highlighted important design questions that are likely to apply to learning initiatives of all types. These questions do not have right or wrong answers but suggest the value of thoughtful assessment of tensions and trade-offs during design development.

1. **How much diversity among participating organizations is desirable for an effective learning community?**

Ideally, an initiative’s selection process will yield participants well suited to its goals and approach and with sufficient organizational readiness to participate fully. But even with a pool of appropriate candidates, those managing the selection process must decide how much diversity is desirable. On one hand, diversity is stimulating. It can expose participants to new ways of thinking and operating and enable still-developing groups to learn from more experienced peers, while the latter may be led to challenge some of their long-held operating assumptions. On the other hand, too much diversity can be difficult to accommodate using a single program approach (see the discussion of customization, below). Participants who use different jargon and draw from very different kinds and amounts of experience can talk past each other, with the result that less-experienced groups feel overwhelmed and stronger groups feel they have little to learn from

the others.

For the most part, the 16 groups in the Leadership Program report benefiting from the diversity of their peers, especially when there also were opportunities (such as in the Learning Clusters) for like-minded organizations to problem-solve in shared areas of interest or need. In retrospect, however, Learning Program designers and observers wondered if the Program might have held more power for a larger number of organizations if the selection process had reduced participants’ diversity slightly, by screening out organizations that were particularly inexperienced and financially unstable or had a well-established commitment to a particular leadership training model or ideology. Both of these types of organizations experienced some positive outcomes as a result of the Program but generally not as much learning as those with more readiness to engage actively in a learning process.

2. **How much does a learning program need to be customized for each participating organization?**

This question is closely tied to the question of participants’ diversity. Greater diversity suggests the need for greater individualization of the learning experience. Ideally, at the beginning of a learning initiative each organization undergoes an assessment to review organizational strengths and weaknesses and set specific learning goals. These goals may change over time, but the process is useful for tailoring learning activities to the organization’s needs and tracking progress over time. In fact, one organization that had been accepted into the Learning Program was asked to defer its participation until some critical organizational development challenges had been resolved. But the Learning Program did not include resources and time for conducting systematic assessments of all participating organizations. Most people

associated with the Program now think that might have been a helpful use of resources. Even though all the participants claimed to have experience developing grassroots leaders, some needed a basic review of the tenets of grassroots leadership development in order to take full advantage of the Learning Program's benefits.

Customizing the approach for each organization does not mean trying to "be all things to all participants." Grassroots organizations operate under difficult conditions that often are beyond their control. They constantly encounter crises, new community demands, and shifts in funding. They may need intensive help with organizational development or large amounts of gap funding, rather than the more modest resources available through a learning program. An initiative that focuses primarily on learning cannot—at least on its own—resolve these significant internal or contextual problems. Learning Program participants note the importance of recognizing the limits of the learning approach and working to identify other resources when participants need more fundamental assistance. Grappling with problems that the learning initiative was not designed to fix does not serve the interests of either the initiative or the organization in trouble.

3. How does a learning program find the right balance between learning from experts and learning from peers?

An active and vital learning community draws upon two different kinds of knowledge: formal knowledge from experts in the field and tacit or informal knowledge that is often the purview of experienced practitioners. A balance between these two kinds of knowledge is essential. A learning program dominated by experts undervalues the wisdom of experience and context and can stifle self-directed learning, while total reliance on peer learning limits a group's growth through exposure to information and ideas generated externally. Indeed, it is the dynamic interplay

between the two that can provoke creative thinking.

MDC was able to create a culture in the Learning Program that valued both kinds of learning, communicating a deep respect for the wisdom of people in communities who serve on the "front lines" while also bringing in stimulating outside experts and challenging the group to think critically about their ideas. While trying to help participants benefit from existing knowledge but also have opportunities to make their own discoveries, MDC staff sometimes hesitated to suggest that an organization's goals might be set too high in terms of how many grassroots leaders they expected to recruit or what changes or commitments must occur within the organization to support them. Such feedback was more common within the coaching relationships. Because MDC and its Design Team did not have an orthodox view about the standards of good practice for grassroots leadership development, it chose not to be prescriptive but rather to encourage groups to discover for themselves, often with the assistance of a coach, what would work and not work in their settings.

4. How does a learning program evaluate its impact?

Ongoing experimentation, assessment, and fine-tuning are standard practices for initiatives that focus on learning. The Learning Program provided frequent opportunities for feedback from participants, evaluation of each learning activity, and group reflection and self-evaluation. Representatives of MDC, the Babcock Foundation, and the Design Team regularly discussed how the Program was operating and what successes and challenges it was encountering. In 2000, a consultant interviewed participants as part of a mid-course review, provided feedback on the Program's progress and results, and made suggestions for modest

adjustments.

Evaluating the impact of the new learning on subsequent outcomes is a greater challenge. Few impact evaluations exist in the leadership development field, and fewer still for learning initiatives.^vIn the Learning Program, clear evidence exists about how new learning stimulated changes within the participating organizations and how these changes contributed to more effective recruitment of grassroots leaders, more thoughtful approaches to their growth, and the production of leaders who were better equipped to address problems in their communities. As discussed previously, it is reasonable to assume that more and better equipped leaders will contribute over time to improved community conditions. But demonstrating the impact of the learning acquired through the Learning Program on the Babcock Foundation's ultimate goal of community improvement is methodologically challenging and probably not worth the required investment of time and resources. Instead, identifying outcomes that are more proximate to the learning (such as changed organizational practices or increased numbers of grassroots leaders) makes more sense. Such an approach underscores the importance of reaching clarity and consensus among all interested parties at the beginning of a learning initiative about the realistic outcomes that will define the initiative's success. These are the outcomes to which participants in the initiative agree to be accountable and through which funders and others will be able to address the question, *Was the learning initiative worth the investment?*

5. How do learning program designers decide how much funding is needed by participating organizations over what period of time?

By keeping the size of implementation grants modest, the Babcock Foundation attracted groups interested primarily in the Learning Program's goals and ideas and secondarily in the Founda-

tion's money. As one participant noted, "money brings people to the table but relationships and useful learning keeps them there." The question for funders aiming to get the greatest impact for limited dollars, however, is how to structure their resources in a way that reaches as many groups as possible but with sufficient support, over an extended enough period to ensure sustainable results. There is no single answer to this question, but on reflection several participants in the Learning Program suggested sequencing financial resources so that they are used strategically to reinforce an organization's progress toward goals. Others countered that this approach might discourage the learning generated by risk taking, something the Learning Program aimed to foster. Still others suggested that the scale of resources available to each organization be calibrated to the size of its budget or scale of its grassroots leadership development effort. Alternatively, providing fewer resources to each organization but over a longer period of time, perhaps six to eight years, was appealing to those participants concerned with institutionalizing the "habit" of learning and sustaining new practices. All agreed that although the primary function of the grants was *learning*, some modest funds were also required for *doing* so that new activities could be piloted and revised within the parameters of the Learning Program.

Another point of agreement among participants involved the cost of the intermediary. While foundation Boards sometimes worry that an insufficient portion of their resources ends up directly in the hands of the intended beneficiaries, participants viewed MDC's costs as central to the program rather than as resources that should have gone to them. Without a strong intermediary like MDC, there simply would not have been a Learning Program.

CONCLUSION

The Southern Grassroots Leadership Development Learning Program was designed to help organizations do difficult work in more powerful ways. **Its focus was not just on doing but also on *thinking and learning*.** A diverse and broadly representative group of organizations took advantage of the experience, and they came to greater clarity about their connections to local constituents. They also gained understanding about how to better prepare their constituents to play active roles in public decision-making and community improvement. The Learning Program provided a range of supports to these organizations as they worked to translate what they were learning into new and more effective practice.

Although the Learning Program focused specifically on helping people learn more effective strategies for grassroots leadership development, many of the participating organizations ended up rethinking fundamental issues of organizational alignment, mission, race, and power. In that sense, the experience helped to transform these organizations into stronger, more responsive members of their communities, as well as settings in which grassroots leaders could be identified and nurtured.

APPENDIX

PARTICIPANTS IN THE SOUTHERN GRASSROOTS LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT LEARNING PROGRAM

AFFORDABLE HOUSING COALITION
Asheville/Buncombe County, North Carolina

BONDS (BUILDING OUR NEIGHBORHOODS FOR DEVELOPMENT AND SUCCESS)
Montgomery, Alabama

CENTER FOR COMMUNITY ACTION, INC.
Lumberton, North Carolina

CHATHAM COUNTY HEALTH DEPARTMENT
Chatham County, North Carolina

COAL RIVER MOUNTAIN WATCH
Whitesville, West Virginia

DOWN EAST PARTNERSHIP FOR CHILDREN
Rocky Mount, North Carolina

EL CENTRO HISPANO, INC.
Durham, North Carolina

EMPOWERMENT, INC.¹
Carrboro/Chapel Hill, North Carolina

FORWARD IN THE FIFTH
Berea, Kentucky

THE JEREMIAH GROUP
New Orleans, LA

JUBILEE PROJECT
Hancock County, Tennessee

KENTUCKIANS FOR THE COMMONWEALTH
London, Kentucky

NORTH CAROLINA JUSTICE AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT
CENTER
Raleigh, North Carolina

PARENTS FOR PUBLIC SCHOOLS
Pitt County, North Carolina

SOUTHERN EMPOWERMENT PROJECT
Maryville, Tennessee

SOUTHERN MUTUAL HELP ASSOCIATION²
New Iberia, Louisiana

VOICES OF CALVARY MINISTRIES
Jackson, Mississippi

¹ EmPOWERment did not participate in the final year of the Program.

² Southern Mutual Help Association withdrew during the first year of the Program.

ⁱ See 2003 publications by MDC, “Fertile Ground: Reflections on Grassroots Leadership Development” and the Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation, “Grassroots Leadership: Voices from the Field.”

ⁱⁱ See, for example, the website for the Leadership Learning Community (www.leadershiplearning.org); Sonia Ospina, Bethany Godsoe, and Ellen Schall, *Co-Producing Knowledge: Practitioners and Scholars Working Together to Understand Leadership*. Leadership for a Changing World, 2002; Tania Dobrowolski, *Learning Communities—The Wave of the Future*, The Nonprofit Quarterly, Winter 1999, p. 30-37.

ⁱⁱⁱ Deborah Meehan, *Leadership Development Opportunities and Challenges: A Scan of the Leadership Literature and the Field of Leadership Development*. The California Endowment, January 1999; Development Guild/DDI, Inc., *Evaluating Outcomes and Impacts: A Scan of 55 Leadership Development Programs*. W.K. Kellogg Foundation, 2002; Joseph McNeely, Sentwali Aiyetoro, and Prentice Bowsher, *Paths to Leadership in Community Change*, Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2002.

^{iv} Meehan, p. 4.

^v Development Guild/DDI, Inc., 2002; Jane Vella, Paula Berardinelli, and Jim Burrow, *How Do They Know They Know?* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997.