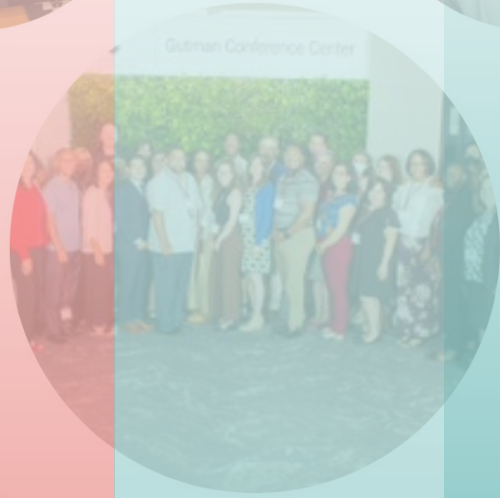# BUILDING STRONG, SUSTAINABLE BACKBONE LEADERSHIP

A Field Study of Cross-Sector Collaborative Organizations

APRIL 2023 | EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

OPPORTUNITY FOR ALL
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ABOUT THE EDREDESIGN LAB

The EdRedesign Lab (EdRedesign) provides catalytic support to the cradle-to-career place-based field to drive systems-level change and open personalized pathways to well-being, educational attainment, civic engagement, and upward mobility. To support this growing field to effect transformational change that serves the needs and talents of individual children and youth, our work focuses on talent development, actionable research, our Institute for Success Planning, and our By All Means coalition. Our mission is to ensure the social, emotional, physical, and academic development and well-being of all children and youth, especially those affected by racism and poverty. We strive for a society characterized by racial, economic, and social justice.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Judy Touzin began her career as a third-grade teacher in the Harlem section of New York City in 2003 and later became the founding principal of an elementary school in East New York, Brooklyn. Most recently, she served as the Managing Director of Principal Preparation for a rapidly scaling Texas-based charter network. In that role, she helped set the vision and strategy for leadership development and prepared over 75 aspiring principals for the principalship. In August 2016, she self-published her first book, *ExceptionAL: Black Men Leading, Living, and Loving,* to amplify the beauty, brilliance, and humanity of Black men and boys across the country. In February 2017, Judy launched The ExceptionAL Project, an extension of that book. Judy's unwavering passion for education is rooted in her commitment to ensuring that all young people live in communities and attend schools where they can learn and thrive. Her experience as a principal taught her that schools alone will not be able to achieve systemic change. She believes it will take sustained collaborative effort from all stakeholders to radically transform school and life outcomes for our kids, especially those who continue to be marginalized. Judy holds a Bachelor's degree in Early Childhood and Elementary Education from New York University, a Master's in Curriculum and Teaching from Fordham University, and a Ph.D. in Urban Education from CUNY Graduate Center. Judy is a doctoral student at the Harvard Graduate School of Education in the Ed.L.D. program and former EdRedesign Linda G. Hammett Ory Fellow.

"Current leaders should be asking, 'How am I supporting the next generation? As a field, how can we help current leaders identify rising leaders and offer them coaching and development supports?'"

– **Dr. Karen Stout**,

Achieving the Dream[1]

In the past 10 years, place-based collaborative action initiatives have multiplied across the country, bringing together the people, organizations, and sectors needed to improve the lived experiences and outcomes of young people and families in historically underserved neighborhoods, communities, cities, and counties. Backbone organizations and staff play an indispensable role in supporting place-based collaborative action work. Given that, there is a growing need to better understand the competencies required to ensure strong, sustainable backbone leadership. Developing the capacities of current and aspiring backbone leaders is critical to the work of sustaining collective impact efforts and achieving the systems-level transformations they seek. Through extensive interviews with leaders in the field about their experiences and reflections on the demands of their positions, this field study fills a gap in information about, and understanding of, what backbone leaders need in terms of competencies and skills as well as supports to effectively carry out these pivotal roles. This field study provides:

- An overview of the competencies that leaders considered of greatest importance for ensuring strong, sustainable backbone structures.

- A review of the supports that already exist for backbone leaders in developing these competencies.

- Recommendations for what additional learning and development opportunities are needed.

- Additional strategic considerations raised by practitioners across the country.

"At a minimum this work requires ensuring alignment between staff, board, partners, and funders…everyone working towards that (shared) vision."

– **Ryan Lugalia-Hollon**,

UP Partnership

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1 Note that some interviewees have transitioned from the organizations with which they were affiliated (listed in Appendix A in the full brief) at the time of the interviews.

COMPETENCIES

Throughout our conversations with local and national place-based leaders, several core competencies emerged as crucial for establishing strong, sustainable backbone organizations. These ranged from more technical skills like project management to more adaptive qualities such as demonstrating a learning orientation and resilience. Organizational leaders perceive that some competencies can be learned or developed through training, coaching, and on-the-job experience while others are akin to traits and are not necessarily trainable. It is important to note that all competencies identified are important for ensuring the success of a place-based collaboration. That said, it is not likely that any one "rock star" leader exists who embodies all of them, so it is imperative to ensure the competencies are accounted for across the backbone team. Knowing which competencies the leader brings to the work can help with building out a team with complementary (versus redundant) capacities.

COMPETENCY	DESCRIPTION
Advocate for Policy Change	Often, laws and policies must be changed to achieve transformational outcomes at the population level. Leaders who understand this consistently ask, "what existing policies are inhibiting our ability to move this work forward?" and then work with allies to change those policies.
Coalition Building	The capacity and ability to bring together and invest in a distinct group of actors from the grasstops to the grassroots to take common action to advance a shared interest or agenda. This requires the ability to understand the motivations of individual members and use that to move the group forward.
Communication	Communication that drives change must be clear, compelling, consistent, tailored for specific audiences, and honest. Communication is a foundational competency that undergirds nearly all other competencies.
Community Centered	Deep-seated belief in the inherent value and dignity of the community. This belief is reflected in how leaders talk about and work alongside the community. Others seldom if ever question their commitment to the place, the people, and the work.
Data Driven	Leaders are clear about what impact they are working toward. They determine aligned metrics and deliberately gather, disaggregate, analyze, and communicate about the data. Data is consistently used to drive decisions and refine strategy.
Equity Driven	The work is anchored in an explicit commitment to realizing racial, ethnic, and economic equity. This commitment is reflected in whose voices are engaged and centered, who leads, how data is disaggregated and disseminated, and how resources are allocated.
Fund Development & Management	The ability to consistently generate and align financial resources to support staff, sustain the work, and drive toward the vision and goals of the collective.

COMPETENCY	DESCRIPTION
Humility	To acknowledge that you do not have all the answers, apologize when necessary, and own up to missteps. Humility also looks like honoring that the community is best positioned to identify solutions to their challenges.
Learning Orientation	A belief that solving complex social problems requires continuous learning and improvement. Sees failure and setbacks as learning opportunities to inform future action.
Project Management	Organizing and driving the work of the collective to achieve its goals and objectives. This includes the ability to set clear goals, clarify roles, set agendas, facilitate meetings, integrate data, and create a sense of shared accountability.
Relational Intelligence	Backbone leaders must be able to establish and leverage strong trusting relationships to move the work forward. This requires the ability to see the world through others' eyes and ensure that key partners and stakeholders feel seen, heard, and valued.
Resilience	To recover from setbacks, disappointments, and failures while holding onto the vision for what's possible.
Strategic Thinking	Awareness of strategy options and the capacity to select appropriate, effective strategies. Thinking through which stakeholders to engage at various points in the process and knowing which levers to pull when. Can be deliberately planned and yet pivot appropriately when context and conditions call for a more emergent approach.
Systems Thinker	The ability to see the conditions/factors at play that have a direct or indirect impact on the challenge the collective is working to solve. This includes understanding enablers and inhibitors from the community level to the policy level.
Visionary	The ability to craft (or cocreate) and compellingly share a bold vision for what's possible. Visionary leaders help others to see, believe in, and then collectively work toward the future they are imagining.

"We are always looking for a secret sauce and we want to codify and replicate, but context matters. Quite frankly, context is everything!"

– **Tauheedah Jackson**,

Coalition for Community Schools

EXISTING SUPPORTS

"Backbone leadership requires you to have the 3,000 ft view, the 360-degree view, and the granular view all at the same time. You must understand the context."

*– **Chris Thompson**,*

Tamarack Institute Video

Throughout our conversations, four key types of support surfaced as the most prevalent and impactful in assisting backbone leaders in their work:

- **Networked communities**—Several national organizations provide coaching and support for a network of communities across the country, typically place-based partnerships that have demonstrated a prescribed level of readiness. Nationally, beyond open-source materials and publicly available trainings, there has not been as much support explicitly available to those who are at the beginning stages of exploring and launching a place-based partnership (and what support does exist is typically only offered on a fee-for-service basis).

- **Communities of practice**—Many of the network-based organizations offer communities of practice for their leaders. Almost all backbone leaders expressed that these communities have been the lifeline that has helped them to sustain themselves in the work. These peer-learning spaces allows leaders to share struggles, successes, and lessons learned with others engaged in similar work.

- **Open-source materials**—Organizations including the Collective Impact Forum, StriveTogether, and the Stanford Social Innovation Review offer publicly available toolkits and resources.

- **Webinars and convenings**—Most national organizations, including Communities in Schools, EdRedesign, Opportunity Youth Forum, Purpose Built Communities, StriveTogether, William Julius Wilson Institute at Harlem Children's Zone, Bloomberg Associates, and the Tamarack Institute, offer webinars and large-scale convenings to the public, for partners in their networks, on a fee basis, or by application or membership.

RECOMMENDATIONS

"At a minimum this work requires ensuring alignment between staff, board, partners, and funders…everyone working towards that (shared) vision."

*– **Ryan Lugalia-Hollon**,*

UP Partnership

We asked practitioners to share what they saw as gaps and opportunities in the field and to offer suggestions on what additional training and/or development offerings might help to close these gaps. Their insights inform the following four recommendations:

- **Provide ongoing coaching and mentorship**—Place-based work in service of driving systems-level transformation is complex, context specific, and messy. While there is a critical place for trainings and workshops, there simply is no substitute for learning by doing. Backbone leaders need ongoing coaching and mentorship while in the seat that focuses on the work and the leader, targeting the core competencies alongside the intrapersonal development required for systems-level leadership.

- **Develop the pipeline**—While acknowledging the growing investment and support in developing backbone leaders, some practitioners suggested that the field would benefit from a concerted effort to develop middle managers and functional leads (i.e., through stretch assignments, learning labs, and shadowing senior leaders). Practitioners noted time and funding barriers to implementing these opportunities.

- **Tailor learning opportunities**—Noting that large group webinars sometimes lack the focus and alignment needed and often occur as a one-off, leaders suggested that learning tracks or certificate programs that offered focused and sustained engagement would allow leaders to identify the learning opportunity best aligned to their current area of need.

- **Help new backbones and partnerships get started**—Given that several national organizations include a vetting process for membership, the field may benefit from additional coaching and support designed to help communities at the very earliest stages of coming together and planning.

STRATEGIC CONSIDERATIONS

Beyond the competencies, supports, and recommendations, conversations with practitioners surfaced several additional strategic considerations. These takeaways speak to the additional elements that must be considered when seeking to establish strong, sustainable backbone organizations:

- **Representation, proximity**, and **authentic community engagement** matter.

  Communities benefit from leaders who represent their backgrounds and interests and who can relate to their lived experience and work with their communities to drive population-level change. Attracting and retaining racially diverse, passionate, proximate leaders and ensuring that community engagement is not merely performative are key. Transformation is achieved with the community, not done to it.

- Embrace **rest, healing, and self-care** as sustainability strategies.

  Backbone leaders need to take care of themselves, and they need time and space to be in community with each other to persist and avoid burnout.

- **Communication** and **relationship building** are uber competencies.

  Communication, in all its form, undergirds many of the other leadership competencies required to build strong, sustainable backbone organizations. And trusting, committed relationships are the bedrock of collective efforts.

- Center **equity**.

  Driving toward systems-level change with and for communities that have been historically underserved and underrepresented requires an unapologetic and explicit commitment to equity.

"In the early days of collective impact, we talked about the backbone being neutral. As we have uplifted the importance of centering equity, we no longer say neutral. The backbone is the champion for equity and the co-creation is around identifying how to get there."

*– **Jennifer Splansky Juster**,*

Collective Impact Forum

"Trust is critical. Backbone leaders must have the ability to build/create trust, and the ability to hold space for the repairing of the trust that may have been broken in the community."

*– **Hayling Price**,*

William Julius Wilson Institute at Harlem Children's Zone

CONCLUSION

The past 10 years have demonstrated the potential for place-based, cross-sector collaborations to help radically improve the lived experiences and outcomes of young people and families across the country. Realizing this level of transformation calls for strong, sustainable backbone leadership. By synthesizing the accumulated expertise of a wide array of leaders, this report lays a foundation for understanding the competencies, dispositions, supports, and strategies backbone leaders need to successfully support collaborative action. The next step is to build the pipeline of leaders to carry this work forward.

Read the full report on our website.