

Council of Michigan Foundations Peer Action Learning Network

A Case Study from

The Power of Learning:

How Learning Communities Amplify the Work of
Nonprofits and Grantmakers

This case study is excerpted from the internal research report, “The Power of Learning: How Learning Communities Amplify the Work of Nonprofits and Grantmakers,” commissioned by Grantmakers for Effective Organizations and produced by the Research Center for Leadership in Action at NYU Wagner in 2012.

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Introduction

Grantmakers for Effective Organizations (GEO) is currently undertaking a multi-year initiative, Scaling What Works, to support the success of the Social Innovation Fund and “to expand the number of grantmakers and public sector funders across the country that are prepared to broaden the impact of high-performing nonprofits.” As part of this effort, GEO is interested in gaining a deeper understanding of “learning communities,” especially how grantmakers can employ them to support collective learning among their grantees.

GEO selected the Research Center for Leadership in Action (RCLA) at New York University’s Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service to conduct a study on learning communities (LCs). The study addresses questions about different types of LCs, their design elements, the common challenges they face and their role in helping scale effective practices as well how they define success and common elements of success in facilitating learning to change practice.

About Grantmakers for Effective Organizations

Understanding that grantmakers are successful only to the extent that their grantees achieve meaningful results, GEO promotes strategies and practices that contribute to grantee success. In 1997, a handful of visionary leaders saw a need for a place where grantmakers committed to improving organizational effectiveness could convene to share knowledge and best practices, and inspire their colleagues to act. Today, GEO is a powerful coalition of more than 2,700 individual members representing 360 grantmaking organizations committed to building strong and effective nonprofit organizations. GEO helps grantmakers improve practices in areas which, through years of work in philanthropy, have been identified by innovators in the field as critical to nonprofit success.

About the Research Center for Leadership in Action at NYU Wagner

RCLA is a research center founded at NYU Wagner in 2003 with support from the Ford Foundation. As the hub for leadership research and practice at NYU, RCLA faculty teaches courses at the undergraduate, masters and executive masters levels. In addition, RCLA works across the diverse domains of public service to build knowledge and capacity for leadership that transforms society. The Center’s greatest asset is its unique ability to partner with leaders to create collaborative learning environments, translate ideas into action and build knowledge from the ground up. As a result, RCLA contributes breakthrough ideas to the worlds of scholarship and practice. The Center does this work with the conviction that today’s pressing social problems require moving beyond the traditional image of a heroic leader to facilitating leadership in which people work across sectors and boundaries to find common solutions.

How to read the case study

RCLA conducted six case studies, half of which we refer to as “funder-grantee LCs” and half of which were “peer LCs.” In the former, the LC was a supplementary activity to a grantmaking program. In three cases, participants who received grants from the LC organizer were required to participate in the LC as part of their grant agreement. Both the grantmaker and the grantees participated in the LC. In peer LCs, participants were not grantees of any one program and did not share a relationship with any one funder. This does not mean that there was no funding sponsor. However, the sponsor did not participate in the LC as a learner. Participants in peer LCs shared a common profession or field of practice, challenge or opportunity. The distribution of the case study LCs along these two categories was as follows:

Funder-grantee LCs	Peer LCs
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Community Clinics Initiative-Networking for Community Health (CCI-NCH)▪ Schools of the Future Community of Learners (SOTF-COL)▪ Wallace Foundation Professional Learning Communities (WF-PLC)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Embedded Funders Learning Community (EFLC)▪ Council of Michigan Foundations Participatory Action Learning Network (CMF-PALN)▪ Eureka-Boston

Each case starts with a discussion of how the learning community was instigated and how it has emerged to fulfill its purpose. Then, each case is described through a three-part framework proposed by Snyder and de Souza Briggs¹ that builds on earlier work by Etienne Wenger. Snyder and de Souza Briggs find that learning communities have three key features: community – who belongs to the group; domain – the common issues or problems that members wrestle with; and practice – what members do as they learn together and what it is about their learning that is embedded in practice. Put simply, the three features are about who does the learning, what the learning is about and how the learning happens. Each case is discussed through each of these three features, which in reality are intermingled but separated here for analytic purposes.

A box titled "What Success Looked Like" offers a glimpse into how success was defined for each LC and what it looked like. When LC organizers did not have measures of success, we discern them through the LC’s articulated purpose and goals. While three of the LCs were part of larger grant programs with monitoring and evaluation systems in place, we attempt to delineate outcomes of the LC itself from outcomes of the grant program and highlight the former. We include anecdotes of success that may have been intended or unintended outcomes and that exemplify the value generated by the LC when learning was at its best. A subsequent section

¹ William M. Snyder and Xavier de Souza Briggs (2005). *Communities of Practice: A new tool for government managers*. Collaboration Series. IBM Center for the Business of Government.

teases out elements particular to each case that amplified the LC's success. Some of these may not be directly transferrable to another LC, or may not resonate with the experience of another group. However, they contributed to the success of each case. The last section of each case includes advice for designing and carrying out LCs provided by those interviewed or inferred by the researchers from each case.

Council of Michigan Foundations Peer Action Learning Network

The Council of Michigan Foundations (CMF) initiated the Peer Action Learning Network (PALN) in 2010 as part of the Transforming Michigan Philanthropy through Diversity and Inclusion initiative, which seeks to increase the effectiveness of organized philanthropy in Michigan. The overall goal of the PALN is to strengthen participant foundations' and organizations' capacity in diverse and inclusive leadership, management and grantmaking.

The Emergence of the Peer Action Learning Network

The PALN finds its roots in the CMF's vision to transform itself and its members into diverse and inclusive organizations. CMF began to address diversity issues in 2001 with a Board discussion that was followed in 2002 with a Board resolution adopting diversity as a value. CMF has continued to work both internally with its staff and Board and externally with its members and partners on issues of diversity and inclusiveness.

In 2008, CMF launched the Transforming Michigan Philanthropy through Diversity and Inclusion (TMP) Initiative with a planning grant from The Kresge Foundation, enabling CMF to work at a broader and deeper level.

The initiative is now supported by grants from the Arcus Foundation, W.K. Kellogg Foundation, The Kresge Foundation, Charles Stewart Mott Foundation and Skillman Foundation. As a six-year initiative, TMP has three main goals: 1) for CMF to become a diverse and inclusive membership association; 2) to increase member awareness and understanding and support voluntary action to become more diverse and inclusive organizations; and 3) to increase the diversity of individuals serving, leading, governing and advising foundations and corporate giving programs. PALN, the focus of this case, most directly relates to objectives 1 and 2.

Since PALN's launch in 2010, representatives from eight CMF member foundations, CMF and its partner, the Michigan Nonprofit Association, have participated in two cohort groups. A third cohort is currently being recruited. Executive-led teams, ranging from CEOs to trustees to administrative staff from these organizations, engaged in an expert-facilitated series of six seminars to increase their individual, team and organizational intercultural competency, to explore leadership and conflict management styles, and to apply change strategies to their own organizations. An assessment of intercultural competence served as a baseline for understanding where the participating individuals, teams and their organizations stood when

Purpose: The goal was to strengthen participant organizations' capacity in diverse and inclusive leadership, management and grantmaking.

Community: Members consisted of high-level staff members, including CEOs, of Michigan foundations and organizations committed to becoming more diverse and inclusive.

Domain: The group focused on intercultural competence and diversity and inclusion in Michigan philanthropy.

Practice: An 11-month training with teams from participating organizations was combined with action learning projects at each participating foundation and coaching from facilitators.

they began the program and to set them on a path for change. Each team also developed an action-learning project and shared progress along the way with their Michigan foundation peers. Participating organizations pay \$5,000 and community foundations pay \$2,500 for their first year's engagement, and if they decide to continue for a second year, they pay \$1,500 and \$750, respectively.

In designing TMP, and concomitantly PALN, CMF program managers drew on everything they knew to make sure the program was grounded in the current reality of Michigan philanthropy: commissioned baseline research into the degree to which a sample of committed Michigan foundations had formal policies on diversity and inclusion at the Board, staff and grantmaking levels; a landscape scan providing input from select foundation leaders and national experts; and a demographic survey of Michigan foundation staff, trustees, members of community foundation youth grantmaking committee members and their adult advisors. CMF convened a 90-participant, two-and-a-half day Knowledge Symposium in partnership with the Diversity in Philanthropy Project (DPP) in March 2009. At the event, CMF shared research findings and engaged the groups in considering how to advance diversity and inclusion in Michigan's philanthropic and nonprofit sectors. CMF recognized that a major driver of change would be providing demonstrable, documented examples of transformed organizations – early adopters of PALN and champions of diversity and inclusion. This assumption also stemmed from the tactical consideration that as a statewide membership association serving 350 foundations and corporate giving programs, CMF's own transformation was not enough to inform, inspire and support greater diversity and inclusion among its member foundations.

Symposium participants asked CMF to support change in a variety of ways, including through a “deep engagement” program that would provide safe space to discuss difficult issues around diversity and inclusion; expert facilitators; and action learning that would target personal, team and organizational learning and transformation. An advisory committee of nine CMF members who had participated in the Symposium provided guidance on the development of the deep engagement program.

Community – who does the learning

Six teams from ten organizations participated in the 2010 and 2011 PALN programs (two organizations sent a second team). Teams ranged in size from four to seven staff members in 2010, and four to seven staff members and foundation trustees in 2011. Each organization's CEO attended in the first-year team, and another senior staff member led those that sent a second team. Teams included CEOs, executive staff, human resources staff, communications staff, executive assistants and program officers. According to Vicki Rosenberg, director of PALN and formerly vice president for Education, Communications and External Relations at CMF, “The organizations are radically different. They include community, corporate, family and independent foundations and two nonprofit associations. And yet the common ground is really palpable. They all share a good intent and openness for being in the same room and sharing

with others. Eighty percent of that is common. Twenty percent depends on each organization's vision, age, role of the Board and other factors.”

By all means, the first two cohorts were early adopters. These participants were ahead of the curve in taking steps to become more diverse and inclusive, and CMF had bet on this notion. The “priority” invitation for the 2010 cohort read: “This special invitation is limited to the 20 CMF member organizations that have indicated a readiness to deepen their work around becoming a diverse and inclusive foundation through their participation in the March 2009 Symposium on Diversity and Inclusion in Philanthropy.”²

The group’s affinity was strengthened in part because of its members’ pioneer status and in part because they helped recruit each other. While the 2010 cohort was recruited following the Symposium, the 2011 cohort was recruited through the 2010 PALN members. Although diversity and inclusion has the potential to become a highly charged issue, PALN was depoliticized by focusing on professional development. The emphasis on organizational excellence rather than politics or ideology was more inviting for Michigan organizations to join and for recruiting other participants, and was a pragmatic way for organizations to develop the awareness and skills needed to become more inclusive.

PALN was co-facilitated by Beth Zemsky, lead designer of the PALN curriculum, and Lynn Perry Wooten, associate clinical professor at the University of Michigan’s Ross School of Business and CMF scholar in residence on Diversity and Inclusion. Although the participating organizations were diverse in terms of their missions, base of operations and other factors, representatives in the first cohort were largely Caucasian, which was regarded by interviewees as a reflection of philanthropy in Michigan and in general. As in any new learning environment, it was difficult to have conversations initially. As the group gelled and thanks to excellent facilitation, a “safe space” began to develop where participants built on each other’s comments and questioned and challenged each other’s assumptions, policies and practices. We unpack this more in the Practice section below.

PALN Participating Foundations

2012 participants:

- W.K. Kellogg Foundation
- Ruth Mott Foundation
- Grand Rapids Community Foundation
- Michigan Nonprofit Association

2011 participants:

- The Skillman Foundation
- W.K. Kellogg Foundation
- Kalamazoo Community Foundation
- Devos Family Foundations
- Community Foundation for Muskegon County
- Council of Michigan Foundations

2010 participants:

- Battle Creek Community Foundation
- Council of Michigan Foundations
- Grand Rapids Community Foundation
- Ruth Mott Foundation
- Kalamazoo Community Foundation
- Michigan Nonprofit Association

² Leena Mangrulkar and Teri Behrens. 2011. Evaluation of the Peer Action Learning Network (PALN): Transforming Michigan Philanthropy Through Diversity and Inclusion (TMP). Appendix C: 2010 PALN recruitment materials.

That a safe space was created does not mean that the group was unchallenged. Integral to the learning process was for each individual participating on a team as well as all staff of each participating organization (even those not partaking in PALN) to complete the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI). Before the first seminar Beth Zemsky spoke with each individual team member and each team as a group to share the results of their IDI and their aspirations for increasing their intercultural competency through the PALN program. This was a strategy for addressing the individual, team and organizational levels. We will discuss this component in greater depth in the Practice section, but what is relevant to describing the community is that all organizations in the cohort and most individuals in the group scored in the “minimization” stage, the third of six stages on the continuum. In minimization, people experience elements of their own cultural world view as universal, obscuring deep cultural differences. People and organizations in minimization expect similarities, and they may become insistent about correcting others' behavior to match their expectations.³ That the majority of the group fell in this stage created some dissonance, which ultimately led to growth and learning as the group progressed through the program.

Domain – what the learning is about

The domain of the PALN was intercultural competency and organizational culture change from the standpoint that embracing and leveraging difference can improve philanthropic practice. The design and content were framed in the apolitical terms of professional development and organizational excellence, yet pushed the notion of diversity beyond the numbers – the old-fashioned organizational practice of having “representatives” of different communities on board, without necessarily aspiring to create an inclusive and equitable environment.

Sylvester Jones Jr., program officer at the Ruth Mott Foundation, reflected:

The thing I loved most about the experience is that it went beyond the ‘numbers.’ So often diversity and inclusion experiences stop at having a workforce that reflects the community. PALN was about how do you allow diverse cultures to bring themselves to the space and recognize that each organization has a culture and really understand what culture means. We are conditioned to learn the unwritten rules – the ‘that’s just how we do things around here’ idea. In many cases this is very oppressive to individuals, and so recognizing what differences exist and how to look for differences and use those differences to advance your mission work is what diversity and inclusion should be about.

The curriculum and program structure addressed the individual, team, cohort and organizational levels. At the individual level, after taking the IDI each participant had a coaching

³ <http://mdbgroup.com/intercultural-development.html>

session with Beth Zemsky to discuss the results, as did each team when they received their team and organizational scores. The team from each participating organization devised and implemented an action learning project together that was meant to advance diversity and inclusion at the team's organization. This work advanced team and organizational learning. Moreover, at the organizational level, everyone on staff also took the IDI. These results were discussed with the team so its members understood where the overall organization fell on the spectrum and the gap between its current status and its aspirations. In some cases, the organization contracted with Beth to provide individual feedback sessions to all the staff beyond the team members and to all teams within their organization. At the cohort level, the different organizations' teams came together for six seminars, following a curriculum customized based on the cohort's collective position on the IDI continuum. The issues and practices are outlined in the following table.

2010 Seminar Topics	
Seminar	Issues addressed
Becoming a Learning Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Results of the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) - Self-awareness reflection tools - Describe, Interpret, Evaluate (DIE) Model - Early decisions on action learning projects
Cultural Self-Awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Organizational assessment - Cultural concepts of leadership
Organizations as Community Citizens	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Types/sources of power - Leadership styles - Intercultural skills needed for organizational change
Organization and Power Dynamics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Shared meanings of community - Intercultural conflict styles
Organizations as Employers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Intent vs. Impact; Mattering and Marginality - Stages of transformational change
Closing Seminar	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Participant-generated case studies - Action learning project presentations

Practice – how the learning happens

The PALN program included components targeting different levels (individual, team, organization and cohort) and accommodating multiple learning styles:

- Baseline Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) assessments of each team member, team, and organization; expert feedback on IDI results; and setting objectives based on results. Diana Sieger, president of Grand Rapids Community Foundation had this reaction to

the IDI: “It’s a really intense survey in the sense that you could tell it was written to really validate your answers. It left no stone unturned, which is good.”

- Customized curriculum on diversity and inclusion that responded to IDI results and was delivered in six one-day seminars for the cohort (see table above for a 2010 curriculum summary).
- CEO-only peer learning group – CMF and the facilitators strongly encouraged CEOs to lead their organization’s team in the PALN program. Lunches were used during the six one-day seminars for the CEOs to come together with Lynn Wooten as a “learning community within the learning community” to share experiences and provide peer support about leading organizational change.
- Virtual space for meeting, and access to curricular materials and a customized toolkit to extend learning to nonparticipating staff in their organizations. This component was developed in response to the emerging needs of the program.
- Team projects supported by monthly coaching, and an optional second year of support that included two one-day seminars, quarterly lunch-and-learn Webinars, the CEO-only convenings, and tools and resources. The facilitators and CMF are currently redesigning Year Two based on the 2010 pilot to include greater emphasis on building strategic plans and developing leaders for change. This effort will support each organization in having a multi-year road map and internal leaders at all levels to support the organization in becoming more inclusive.

In each seminar, participants engaged in role plays, small group activities, storytelling, and reflection exercises to deepen their understanding and apply concepts to their own organizations. “The exercises are designed to deepen understanding. They’re not just about race, but human interaction. It’s about inclusion,” commented PALN Director Vicki Rosenberg. As an example, the facilitators would ask the group to look at an innocuous image of a family watching television and each person would be asked to comment on what they saw. Diana Sieger recounted, “Every time someone said something, someone else would say, ‘I didn’t see that.’ It was a discovery process. It was a good progression of understanding that what you see may not be what it is.”

The growth and learning perspective that underpinned the curriculum development of the PALN program created a “safe space” for the participants to engage in new learning of concepts and skills. Sylvester Jones defined safe space as “the ability to bring your full self and

Examples of action learning projects

- Council of Michigan Foundations: Launching a multi-year recruitment campaign to increase the diversity of CMF membership
- Kalamazoo Community Foundation: Building a model for donor outreach that engages women from diverse communities for the purpose of creating new donors
- Michigan Nonprofit Association: Establishing an integrated work climate between Detroit and Lansing that better enables MNA to strengthen the nonprofit sector in Michigan.
- Ruth Mott Foundation: Developing an action plan to deliver a national Black Relationship to Land project (symposium) in Flint, Michigan
- Battle Creek Community Foundation: Incorporating stronger, more diverse hiring practices

the full range of your experiences into the room without fear of negative consequences” – and helping the group recognize and unpack the everyday micro-dynamics embedded in contexts of difference. The specific moments of tension that occurred in the group were used as opportunities to reflect on what it meant for their organizations. Diana reflected, “The facilitators would ask us, ‘Can you imagine how others at your organization or community may feel if you are experiencing such tension and emotion?’ The conversation was about helping one another through the different kinds of positions we are put in and making us more sensitive.” Diana was using other potentially difficult conversations about race that she had taken part in as references. Those were more about “shocking people by looking at examples of overt racism” rather than helping people through a developmental process.

The action learning project was another integral component of PALN. As one example of a project, the Grand Rapids Community Foundation decided to build on its experience participating in The Institute for Healing Racism’s annual summit on racism. All the Foundation’s staff had attended the summit, which was focused on unpacking white privilege. For this project, the team decided to codify and develop individual and organizational cultural competencies as they worked to situate the Foundation as a community model of a racism-free organization as determined by Partners for a Racism-Free Community credentialing. After a long and arduous process, and failure to pass in the first round, the foundation became the second organization in Grand Rapids to acquire the credentials. What makes the experience all the more interesting is that it was primarily led by mid-level staff and the credentialing organization was a grantee of the foundation.

What Valuable Learning Looked Like in PALN

One of the many benefits of using the Intercultural Development Inventory right at the beginning of the program is that it serves as a baseline assessment of individuals’ positions on the continuum. This way, participants can take the IDI later to see their progression. While it is still early in the PALN for individuals to retake the IDI, there are other indicators of success. For example, participants reported eventually understanding why they were in the minimization phase, and importantly the potential for personal growth, after their initial surprise at the results and going through the program.

An interview-based evaluation (Footnote 4 above) with six participating organizations reported that individuals consistently referred to how they communicate differently in their personal and professional lives thanks to PALN and how they developed a deeper understanding of the complexities of cultural competence.

Organizational-level changes were harder to make; nevertheless, there were examples. Several foundations have adopted new frameworks for screening incoming proposals as a way to become more inclusive in their grantmaking practices. Meanwhile, foundation teams also appreciated their new ability to engage in difficult conversations in a mindful yet direct way that is “not walking on eggshells.” The evaluation report cited the following changes: using the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity as the framework for their staff retreat and having two members of the PALN team act as co-facilitators; reconstituting membership committees; and creating a task force that focuses on new forms of philanthropy.

Amplifying Elements

The following discussion teases out elements particular to this case that amplified the learning.

Developmental focus. The IDI was a helpful tool, not only for the participants, but also for the facilitators in taking the pulse of the group. Its results indicated where organizations perceived themselves to be versus where they were, which was framed as a developmental learning gap rather than a deficiency. The curriculum was customized to account for the gap between where the group collectively scored on the assessment and where it aspired to be. In addition, framing the content around intercultural competence contributed to building a safe space. What made it possible to have conversations in a safe and educational way is that the facilitators provided a container for the conversations that built progressively complex analytic tools to better understand diversity and inclusion and develop more adaptive skill sets.

Providing additional compartmentalized support where needed. Organizations signed up and paid for the Year One program, but they also had the option of receiving additional services for a fee. For example, the option to continue with a second year of assistance or to have Beth Zemsky provide feedback sessions for all staff beyond the participating team made for a versatile support model.

Encouraging CEO participation. Moving the needle on a complex and sensitive issue such as diversity in philanthropy requires leadership buy-in and commitment. CMF strongly encouraged interested organizations to have their executive director or CEO lead the team. For the 2010 pilot program, this turned out to be the case. In 2011, several organizations sent a second team led by another senior staff person or executive. Once CEO commitment was secured, it was paramount to make it worth their while. The CEO coaching and sub-learning community provided added value for them.

Advice from PALN

- *Make it challenging.* What made the experience unique for participants was that “it wasn’t Diversity Training 101,” said Diana Sieger. Practitioners in philanthropy, as in other fields, are presented with hundreds of learning opportunities that often do not meet their expectations. Vicki Rosenberg commented, “There are a lot of smart people in this business who are not given compelling opportunities to learn about themselves in relation to the work.”
- *Recruit exceptional facilitators.* Beth Zemsky and Lynn Wooten were commended for their exceptional partnership, unique complementary expertise and excellent facilitation. It was part serendipity and part active looking that enabled CMF staff to find and introduce the two facilitators to each other.

- *Provide a solid theoretical framework.* The Intercultural Development Inventory and accompanying model were considered invaluable in our interviews and in PALN's evaluation. It grounded what could otherwise be an amorphous topic in something real. Combining that tool with the other components, such as seminars, action learning projects and coaching sessions, maximized participants' learning.
- *Support, or at least prepare, participants for going back to their organizations.* Having a team participate from each foundation may not have been enough to mitigate some participants' experience of going back to an organizational culture that was not as safe, diverse or inclusive. In contexts of transformative learning there is potential for participants to see what they could not before, which can inevitably raise dissonance. Facilitators and program managers need to be prepared for helping participants deal with such tensions.
- *Foster a safe environment for learning.* A safe environment is free of judgment, allows each member to speak their mind, and benefits from ground rules established early on. It is especially critical when handling contentious topics, but generally helps advance the learning.
- *Support teams of individuals, especially if the goal is organizational change.* Having teams of up to seven participants join from each foundation, along with their CEO or another senior leader with authority to effect change, helped create the critical mass needed to begin making changes at the foundation level on diversity and inclusion.
- *Continually meet, review, debrief and improve as program organizers.* Especially in the early stages of a program, it is important that program organizers and facilitators meet regularly to assess what is working and what needs adjustment. This is a form of just-in-time learning and improvement that enables program organizers to make modifications without having to wait for the completion of a formal evaluation. The faculty and lead CMF staff have continually met every other week to review progress, issues and responses to needs.