

Broadened Narrative About Leadership for Social Change

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CONTEXT

Narratives are the aggregation of stories people see, hear, and experience that convey a specific interpretation of the world and how it works. They are built through environments, social networks, and lived experiences, influenced by everything from entertainment to education to family history. Narratives shape people's mindsets and what they assume to be true.

There are numerous narratives about leadership, an idea that is as complex and dynamic as the people, communities, and situations that call it into being. The inspirations and actions that drive change and dismantle structural racism are both individual and collective.

Yet, many leadership development programs, including those at Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF), have taken a more singular approach, identifying individual leaders and offering pre-determined training and support. This has been valuable for thousands of people and teams. However, it is not the only way. And it can inadvertently perpetuate a dominant-culture, "individual hero" narrative that reinforces hierarchy, white supremacy, and colonialism.

By aligning with a broadened narrative about leadership—shaped by communities—we can make our own approaches more equitable and can inspire systemic change across philanthropy, leadership development, movements, and other environments.

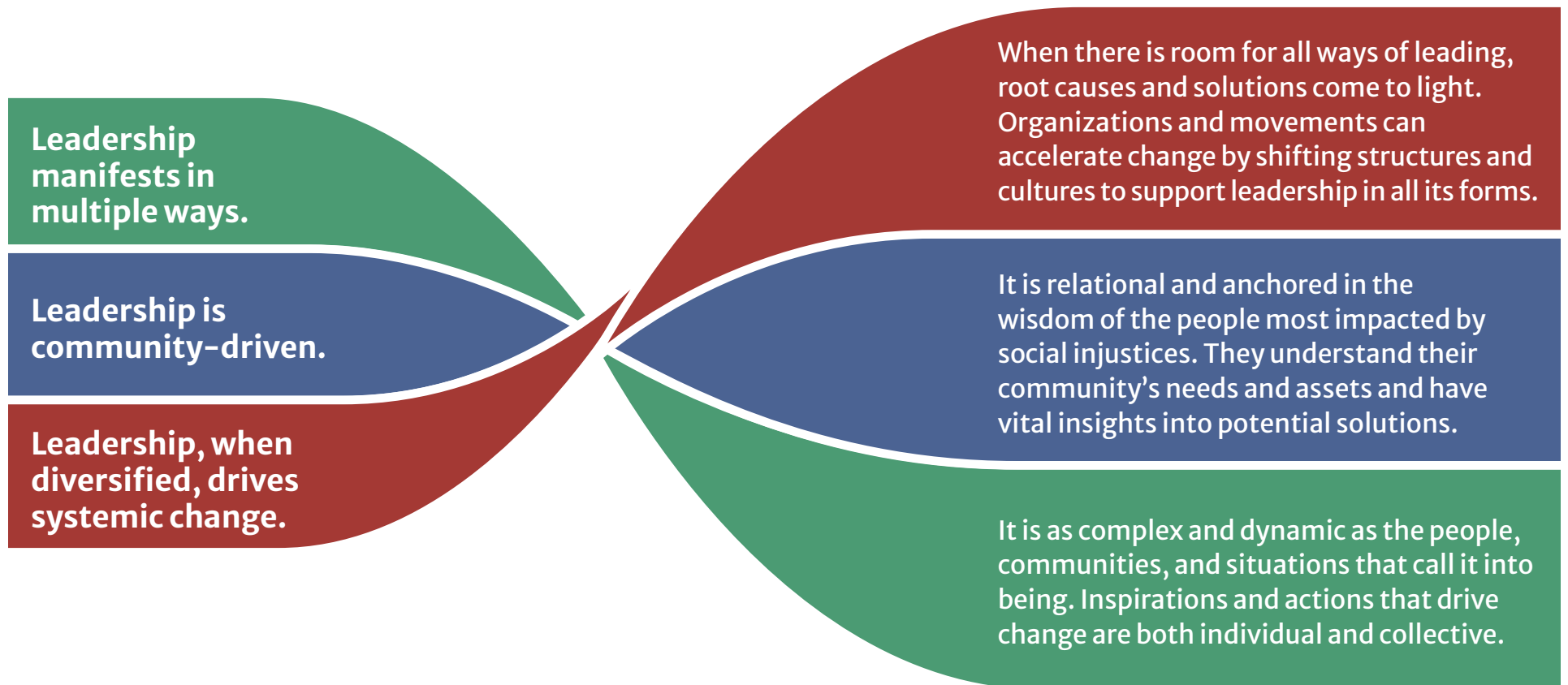
The narrative described below reflects wisdom from RWJF National Program Centers (NPCs) and other leadership program grantees, including those practicing and advancing leadership in communities and movements. It broadens the idea of leadership; rather than comparing or indicting approaches, it says that we need them all. While beautifully informed by RWJF and other funders, and Leadership for Better Health (LBH) leadership and staff, this narrative clearly emerges from and belongs to communities.

This document outlines the core elements of the broadened narrative for all who wish to join us on this journey. It provides the words to describe leadership more broadly and authentically, and provides a way to assess how programs, funding, and other actions align with the narrative.

Broadened Narrative About Leadership

NARRATIVE (the aggregation of stories and experiences that articulate the core idea)

There are three threads of the broadened narrative about leadership, each of which should be woven through all storytelling, experiences, and other expressions:



Broadened Narrative About Leadership

MESSAGING (the build-out of the narrative; the points advanced by stories and experiences)

An abundant, expansive notion of leadership

- The complexity and scope of structural racism requires a different approach to leadership. To create transformative, structural changes that ensure equity, our society needs leadership from everyone, everywhere, drawing on their unique lived experiences and cultural perspectives.
- Leadership is grounded in history and lived experience, informed by current strengths and needs, and dedicated to serve an audacious and bold vision for building the world we need.
- Leadership is a practice, not a title. It is a collective, relational process whereby individuals move themselves and others through practices of discernment, growth, and change.*
- Because leadership is not finite, it is stronger when shared and exercised collectively, creating space for learning and growth through failure and success.

The advantages of a broader view of leadership

- Just as there are multiple solutions to any problem, there are multiple ways to lead and to nurture and support leadership.
- The practice of collective leadership—ensuring multiple perspectives, listening to community, interrupting systems of inequity—has a ripple effect. Collective intelligence and leadership can handle far greater complexity than a group of brilliant individuals.
- Ultimately, when every system is infused with collective leadership, there is no room for structural racism—only for the collective wisdom and power of communities.

The action needed to realize expansive leadership for transformational change

- Effective leadership requires both individual and collective approaches and a shared willingness to challenge pervasive and systemic issues to co-design new solutions.**
- Transformative change requires institutions, movements, and systems to create and hold spaces where everyone involved can bring their diverse experiences, capacities, approaches, and work together toward a common vision.*
- Leadership that makes room for every perspective and style elevates our collective humanity and brings solutions—as well as challenges and trauma—into full light. Nurturing and sustaining this leadership demands that we center healing, restoration, and reparation.

* Language inspired by CoCreative Consulting.

** Language inspired by Health Policy Research Scholars

Broadened Narrative About Leadership

APPENDIX

In the following appendices you will find 1) the frame of the narrative; 2) a more comprehensive set of messaging; and 3) initial thoughts on stories that illuminate the narrative in action:

Broadened Narrative About Leadership

FRAME (the foundational elements of the narrative)

Values

- Equity, justice
- Collective/Common good
- Diversity (of ideas and approaches)
- Opportunity
- Abundance
- Care, nurture
- Compassionate curiosity
- Healing (reparation)
- Intersectionality

Current Conditions

- Structural racism (and all -isms).
- Dominant narratives of deservingness, individualism.
- Pervasive views and practices of leadership—hierarchical, individual—that reinforce power and dictate funding, participation, and evaluation.
- People practicing leadership in communities may not be recognized by funders, institutions, employers—and may not strive for leadership as defined by dominant culture. This creates invisibility/erasure.
- Communities are not resourced to practice leadership in the most effective ways.
- Solutions to entrenched problems are going unheeded and unfunded.

Desired Conditions

- Approaches to leadership that are broad, inclusive, and equitable.
- Conditions where multiple approaches to leadership are nurtured, sustained, and cultivated—and that dismantle systems and structures that hold racism in place.
- Funding (including unrestricted) for communities to develop, practice, and evaluate leadership as they define it.
- Leadership programs and models reimaged and resourced—with communities—to reflect this kind of leadership.
- Shifts in influence and power from foundations and institutions to communities.

Accountability

- Philanthropy, nonprofits, academic institutions, and other institutions and structures.
- Leadership development programs and funders.
- Organizations and institutions that hire, grow, and build power for people and groups practicing leadership.

Broadened Narrative About Leadership

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- Leadership is grounded in history and lived experience, informed by current strengths and needs, and dedicated to serve an audacious and bold vision for building the world we need.
- Leadership is a practice, not a title. It is a collective, relational process whereby individuals move themselves and others through practices of discernment, growth, and change.*
 - Leadership is a dynamic, transformative, relational process of change aimed at repairing damage from historical and structural injustices and oppression.**
 - Power is not relegated to a title, role, or position, but is distributed among groups of people while transcending social boundaries.**
- Because leadership is not finite, it is stronger when shared and exercised collectively, creating space for learning and growth through failure and success.

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The advantages of a broader view of leadership

- Just as there are multiple solutions to any problem, there are multiple ways to lead and to nurture and support leadership. All of these approaches and perspectives are vital to surface the innovative solutions needed to solve complex problems.
 - The seeds of innovation, resilience, and transformation needed to solve complex challenges already exist in communities and cultures (geographic, cultural, social), informed by tradition, collective wisdom, and deep understanding of strengths, needs, and solutions.
 - Yet, too often in dominant structures and systems, leadership is defined as an individual characteristic of certain people, and the development of their leadership skills follows a typical, exclusionary path.
- The practice of collective leadership—ensuring multiple perspectives, listening to community, interrupting systems of inequity—has a ripple effect. Collective intelligence and leadership can handle far greater complexity than a group of brilliant individuals.
- Ultimately, when every system is infused with collective leadership, there is no room for structural racism—only for the collective wisdom and power of communities.

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STORIES/PROOF (examples and experiences that exemplify the narrative)

- Voices, examples, experiences, and stories from the field and communities.
- Approaches that demonstrate equity, collective leadership, and systems change.
- Proof points and impact from organizations, movements, and institutions approaching leadership expansively and collectively (e.g., Leadership Learning Connection grantees).
- Examples of how organizations and funders are adapting the leadership programs they provide/fund—and their entire organizational approach and structure—to align with this narrative (e.g., We Wonder Community).
- RWJF-specific stories and proof points: Change Leadership Program participants who already reflect and model the narrative in how they approach their work and/or are self-organizing within programs/network (e.g., the Community Change Leadership Network); Leadership Learning Initiatives; Culture of Health Leadership Institute for Racial Healing; emerging collective leadership programs/initiatives (e.g., the work with CoCreative Consulting to develop a health system built on racial equity); and LBH's evolving theory of change.

What other stories exist within the programs, LBH, across the Foundation, and in the field?

Note: stories and examples are intended to demonstrate the broadened narrative and create an expansive idea of where we can go. They are not intended to criticize current work or create polarity between approaches.